Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Teacher Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

A market-driven model for in-service teacher development can potentially place the sustainability of professional learning initiatives at risk. As schooling improvement contracts become increasingly student outcome driven, we question whether this could compartmentalise processes of teacher learning. With an emphasis on fixed fiscal input and resulting student outcomes, in-service teacher educators (ISTE) and teachers are in the middle charged with making a significant difference. What are the practices that make this space in the middle a place where agentic learning takes place? Adopting a polemic stance, we invoke the 'between a rock and a hard place' metaphor to illustrate the way teachers and ISTE are currently politically positioned.

INTRODUCTION

If teachers can make a difference to the quality of student learning (Hattie, 2003) it follows that the nature of the input from teacher educators makes a difference for teachers. However, there is a dearth of research around the role of in-service teacher educators (ISTE) in New Zealand. With signalled changes to service provision it is timely to explore what constitutes 'effective' in-service teacher education. This paper highlights the need for robust ISTE practices which value teacher professionalism and the experiences of teachers as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge. This contrasts to an approach which positions teachers as passive absorbers or recipients of knowledge constructed elsewhere in the system.

THE ROCK – THE PRIVATISATION OF EDUCATION

Currently the Ministry of Education is addressing the economic concept of provider capture through promoting a contestable funding model for professional learning and development. This process could be viewed as governmentality (Foucault, 1984); an expeditious way of ensuring policy is disseminated in a participatory way to its target audience. Discourses position and define communities of practitioners. We have noted in light of a political shift to the right that there has been a change in the discursive language used in New Zealand educational policy. This shift is evident in use of terms such as

'trainers' and 'training'. In addition, learning, a public good, is described as 'core business', a technicist term that implies education is a commodity that serves a private good (Ministry of Education, 2010a). 'Inquiry' (Ministry of Education, 2007) is another term that may be accepted unproblematically. We view that this term also requires exploration to unravel where it is discursively positioned. Are we talking about critical or instrumentalist inquiry?

With a nationally narrowing gaze on quantifiable student achievement outcomes, teachers are in the unenviable position of frontline pressure to perform. Ironically, a performance orientation in an environment of high stakes accountability can lead professionals to focus on *proving* rather than *improving* practice. Conversely, a learning orientation can impact positively on performance (Dweck, 2006).

The policy for the purchasing of professional development outlines explicit outcomes. The process of teacher learning and the dispositional nature of what it means to be an effective learner, for teachers and ISTE, are diminished in emphasis. Therefore teachers are currently positioned between a rock and a hard place. Highlighting the need for a key shift from programmes that attempt to change teachers, Lom and Sullenger (2010) advocate that we position teachers as active learners, shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in professional development sited in their practice. In this paper we advocate for professional learning and development that promotes teacher agency.

QUESTIONING 'WHAT WORKS'

New Zealand education policy appears to be shifting in ethos which could be likened to the climate of performativity, as in the United Kingdom. Deakin Crick (2007) describes how 'both the curriculum and assessment arrangements tend to favour performativity – the public and summative, with validity and reliability criteria appropriate for quantitative public accountability' (p. 152). The NZ Ministry of Education 'are purchasing the expertise of high-quality culturally responsive providers who exemplify the principles of effective teacher professional learning and development practice' (Ministry Education, 2010b). What constitutes a 'high-quality' provider facilitator and what is the measurement of this service? It appears to be a hierarchical chain of performativity; performativity of teachers, performativity of school leaders and performativity of providers.

As educators strive to 'get it right' in a performative culture, they are marketed research to both define quality and shape practice. These are often large scale, quantitatively weighted studies that are deemed to have high reliability. Embedded in this technical rational approach to schooling improvement and reform is the New Right mantra espoused by academic capitalists and educational entrepreneurs – 'what works will work.' However, research can only show us what has been possible; it can only tell us what has worked but cannot tell us 'what works' generically (Biesta, 2007). According to Wiliam (2006), some researchers have underestimated the complexity of what it is that teachers do, and in particular, have failed to understand how great an impact context has on teachers' practice:

> That is why 'what works?' is not the right question, because everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere. (p. 8)

Research and evidence can be used to shape the practice of teachers and teacher educators. This transformation of discourse and social practices is termed 'technologisation of discourse' (Fairclough, 1995 in Fairclough 2010). Fairclough (2010) describes this as 'instrumental rationality applied to the shaping and reshaping of discursive practices … [It occurs] within more general processes of engineering institutional cultures to enhance their performativity' (p. 552). We see examples of this in national standards, curriculum documents and governmental websites. The authority of research discourse is evoked and the discourses themselves become commodified (Fairclough, 2004). Fairclough, (2010) observes how this technologisation sanitises difference in its introduction of an audit culture:

> Technologisation of discourse produces general formulas for change which tend to ignore differences of context, so that one effect of such cultural technologisation is normalisation, homogenisation and the reduction of difference – for instance the imposition of a standardized audit culture and the discourse that goes with it (the discourse of 'quality control') throughout the public domain, including education. (p. 552)

While the increasing marketisation of in-service teacher education is highly visible to teachers, school leaders and ISTE themselves, discursive shifts which support social and cultural change are typically not transparent for the people involved. Nor is technologisation of discourse (Fairclough, 2003). A further example of technologisation is the ISTE resource 'Ki te Aotūroa'. As a set of learning materials for ISTE, Ki te Aotūroa was developed through a Ministry of Education, New Zealand-wide, research and development initiative, the Inservice Teacher Education Practice (INSTEP) project.

Alongside the increased commodification of teacher learning, Ki te Aotūroa, promotes uniformity of practice. As a form of governmentality, this initiative is a calculated intervention to shift discursive practices as part of the engineering of social change (Fairclough, 2010). The document itself reveals its focus on uniformity and scientism. Ki te Aotūroa,

> … is a response to Elmore's (2003) challenge for educators to develop a common theory of improvement … It attempts to capture what's involved in the deep learning that leads to improved ISTE practice, which, in turn, can lead to deep learning for teachers and students. Note that the theory is not presented as conclusive or definitive; rather it is offered for ISTEs to adapt and use with the expectation that it will change and evolve as it is tested and further developed. (Ministry of Education, 2008, online)

Ki te Aotūroa promotes greater homogeneity in the interests of coherence and increased ease of marketisation of professional development provision.

INQUIRY, IDENTITY AND AGENCY

An over reliance on a narrow view of what constitutes student achievement and research evidence can lead to an instrumentalist approach to inquiry. Inquiry under these circumstances becomes more about compliance and less about reasoned teacher judgment, informed by rich and varied sources of evidence. This reductionist approach to inquiry could be described as a 'velvet cage' (Schutz, 2004, p. 16) where professional learning and development is targeted explicitly for policy compliance and generated outside school contexts where teachers are solicited for their 'buy in'. Schutz (2004) describes how 'pastoral control' differs from traditional top down forms of 'disciplinary control' (p. 16). Organisational systems seek to transform ISTE and teachers into committed 'partners' who engage in meaningful activity, fully understand and control their work and supervise themselves.

> 'New capitalism' operates through these postmodern processes of pastoral control. Workers are asked to invest their hearts, minds, and bodies fully in their work. They are asked to think and act critically, reflectively, and creatively. (Schutz, 2004, p. 16)

'Pastoral domination' as a process of governmentality focuses on disseminating the locus of control. Governmentality is evident in pedagogies, leadership styles and policies espoused and in use by educators throughout New Zealand. Schutz (2004) views that while this new pastoral capitalist vision offers a less alienating view of work and labour, it can also amount to a form of mind control and high-tech, but indirect, coercion. Hierarchy is not eliminated in these new forms of control. Instead, it becomes non-authoritarian, as workers participate in 'distributed systems where control is distributed throughout the system and not in any centre that monopolises power, knowledge, or control' (Schutz, 2004, p. 16). Arguably, a key mechanism in this process of disseminating the locus of control is 'Teaching as Inquiry' (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Nevertheless, inquiry, a core mechanism for teacher learning (Ministry of Education, 2007; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung, 2007), can be integral to critical reflection. From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is situated and mediated in complex socio-cultural environments. When teachers become critical consumers of research and policy, brokering interpretations that are appropriate to their localised contexts, they make informed professional decisions. Inquiry with a critical edge shifts the focus from *how* to implement initiatives to *questions* that explore implications for practice from an evidence informed perspective.

Gordon, Smyth and Diehl (2008, p. 192) pose questions that could assist critical inquiry:

- Why (is this important) now?
- Who benefits?
- Who gets excluded?
- Who gets damaged?
- What view of education is being perpetuated?
- What view of society is being endorsed?
- How is equity and democracy being advanced?
- What kind of mindset is being advanced? and,
- Where to from here?

There is a tension in mandating inquiry through schooling improvement models and curricula as teacher and ISTE learning is a process of forging identity. Ben-Peretz, Kleeman, Reichenberg and Shimoni (2010) deemed it 'difficult, almost impossible, to teach a teacher how to teach, the only way to promote professional development is through self-discovery of one's professional identity' (p. 125). Barak, Gidron and Turniansky (2010) view professional development as a holistic process interwoven with professional life where the central issues are not only questions about what we, as teacher educators should know and be able to do, but also questions regarding who we, as teacher educators should be and the professional identity we are developing. Hoffman-Kipp (2008) sees teacher identity as the intersection of personal, pedagogical and political participation and reflection within a larger socio-political context.

Agentic inquiry can only be learner-initiated and engaged through learner curiosity and ownership. Teacher agency is a significant factor in the sustainability of professional development and learning initiatives. This requires a long term approach to professional learning that hinges on relational trust and the growth of relationships that focus on 'pedagogical work' (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009, p. 201). For teachers to take up this pedagogical work to inquire into their practice, there needs to be intentionality or agency; a situated concept afforded or constrained by the nature of the relationships in the social space. Wagenheim, Clark and Crispo (2009) describe the impact of transformational inquiry on the identity of teachers:

> Through a regular cycle of reflective inquiry – surfacing and challenging assumptions – teachers seeking improvement seek transformative change; change in their 'way of being' as a teacher, not just in their 'way of doing'. Becoming a better teacher is about reflecting on and questioning deeply held assumptions in an experiential cycle of inquiry, developing new strategies, testing in action, and learning. It is through reflection and resultant self- knowledge that one can leverage greater awareness of others and course content in the journey toward becoming a better teacher. (p. 504)

CONCLUSION

It is timely, as in-service teacher education shifts to a contestable funding model, that we consider the practitioners; teacher educators and teachers who inhabit the space in between the contestable contracts and the mandated student outcomes. This is the space between a rock and a hard place. In-service teacher educators are a means to an end – charged with the task of making a difference to student outcomes. If teachers are to engage in professional learning in a meaningful way there is a need for 'psychological spaciousness' (Kegan, 1998 as cited in Garvey-Berger, 2004, p. 221). The most promising forms of professional development engage teachers in the pursuit of investigating genuine problems over time, in ways that significantly affect their practice (Lom & Sullenger, 2010). As the body of research into teacher professional learning grows, 'newer visions of professional development have emerged, seeking to create and support teacher learning experiences that are ongoing, are self-directed, occur within collaborative communities of learners and connect to the daily lives of teachers as they are teaching' (Lom & Sullenger, 2010, p. 4).

Power in modern societies is present at all levels and does not lie outside society in some umbrella-like, overarching way (Foucault, 1984). Therefore, inquiry with a critical edge has the potential to engage and empower teachers through critique. These critical forms of inquiry are centred on a commitment to equity and social justice (Reid, 2004). We advocate professional learning which promotes critical inquiry so that teachers make informed decisions about their practice, constructing, interpreting and drawing from a rich, robust harvest of evidence. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the complexity for ISTE and teachers in finding this critical space between the rock and the hard place.

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