



The degradation of teachers' work, loss of teachable moments, demise of democracy and ascendancy of surveillance capitalism in schooling

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that teachers can and therefore must 'accelerate' learning, progress, and achievement for 'priority' groups of students has become something of a crusade in official schooling policy discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last couple of decades (e.g., Education Review Office, 2013). The New Zealand sociologist Roy Nash once scathingly referred to this achievement ideology as 'state-sponsored possibilism' enacted through 'bureaucratic fiat' and fuelled by "impatient political insistence that schools must demonstrate almost immediate 'equality of results'" (Nash, 2003, p. 187).

Hartmut Rosa (2013), a German sociologist and critical theorist, argues that the temporal structure of our societies and institutions today is characterised by social acceleration across three domains: (i) technology and communication; (ii) cultural and personal relations; and (iii) the pace of work and social life in general. New technological applications that automate routine aspects of teaching, learning, administration, and reporting bolster the impression that the schooling experience can itself be accelerated, that more and more curriculum content, units of work and their continuous assessment can be crammed into the same timetable. But it also feeds the trope that all students can achieve without limit because learning outputs may now be continuously monitored, and teaching inputs continuously adjusted through virtual feedback-feedforward algorithms.

These, together with exponential increases in data storage, transfer and mining capabilities, encourage the belief that big data and artificial intelligence (AI) will provide more rapid, sophisticated, and precisely targeted 'solutions' to ensure that all teachers and students are constantly 'achieving' and 'improving'. In doing so, the promise is that enthusiastic adoption and mastery of these integrated digital tools and data repositories will enable the schooling system, finally, to overcome the structural socio-economic pathologies that impair achievement. And all this despite the reality that these pathologies have proven largely immune to the efforts of flesh and blood educators in classrooms and workgroups since the advent of mass state schooling in the 19th century.

No doubt there are many gains in effectiveness and efficiency to be had through the judicious and critically informed use of educational and administrative technologies, and no doubt this explains much of their appeal to

schooling officials, those in school leadership positions and teachers all of whom are constantly exhorted to deliver more — in more complex, diversified and targeted ways — with less time, resources and energies to do so. But what might be some of the potential downsides of placing too many of our schooling policy and operations efforts in so-called ‘education analytics solutions’? Two spring to mind immediately. First, the risk that schools as organisations continue to degrade the capacity of teachers to collectively participate in, frame and take decisions about their work. And second, that students will not spend enough of their schooling experience developing the habits of collectively participating in, framing and taking decisions through thoughtful engagement with the existential challenges that their parents’ and grandparents’ generations will bequeath them. These challenges include (i) climate change and sustainability; (ii) technology and work; and (iii) population growth, inequality and living harmoniously (O’Neill, & Snook, 2015).

According to the German political philosopher Axel Honneth (2023), it is possible to mitigate both these risks by nurturing a commitment to democratic forms of schooling as an ethical form of life. Yet this second basic purpose of mass state schooling seems, worryingly, to have all but disappeared from contemporary education policy discourse (Kitcher, 2023). Here, I offer some very preliminary reflections on the ongoing process of dehumanising teachers’ labour in Aotearoa New Zealand, the accompanying loss of teachable moments that channel children’s innate curiosity about their natural, social and cultural worlds, and the consequential decline in our ability even to imagine the possibility of democratic forms of public schooling. In terms of the provocation for my reflections here, I also comment on what appears to be a foreshadowing of the “rise of digital technology and the creation of elaborate data architectures within and across organizations” (Power, 2022, p. 4), using the example of our national English medium schooling system and, specifically, the proliferation of Microsoft’s Office 365 Education software suite.

CORPORATE EDUCATION ANALYTICS

In June 2023, Radio New Zealand used email correspondence released under the Official Information Act (OIA) to report on confidential ‘lighthouse project’ discussions between Microsoft and the Ministry of Education about the delivery of personalised digital teaching and learning to students. The discussions had taken place for several years under a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2017 between Microsoft and The New Zealand Government Chief Technology Officer (Pennington, 2023a). According to the reporter’s opening sentence, Microsoft “pushed the Education Ministry to adopt an Artificial Intelligence (AI) programme for continuous live reporting on children and teachers in the classroom” (Pennington, 2023b, n.p.). More specifically, Microsoft had proposed that:

This opportunity will leverage Microsoft’s new education analytics solutions. These solutions provide continuous live reports on the digital learning activities of students and teachers across all schools in the system based on app usage and activity in Microsoft O365. Reports will show patterns of digital learning activities during the pandemic

and as systems re-open. Schools will be able to see how digital learning activities have supported the continuity of learning, where there are gaps (e.g. identify equity barriers), and how engagement patterns are changing over time. Schools can use this data to see where teachers may need training and professional development, and where students may need additional supports to access learning remotely. (deidentified email to MoE official, 9 September 2020)

This kind of entrepreneurial advocacy of data analytics and AI as systemwide, real-time public policy 'solutions' is only the latest development in a seemingly inexorable intensification and degradation of teachers' craft work and professional freedom since the transition toward greater central control of the teacher workforce in many Anglosphere countries. The transition has been described as a shift from licensed to regulated autonomy, that is the belief that teachers need to be subjected to a periodic 'warrant of fitness' assessment, which gained momentum in the latter part of the twentieth century (Dale, 1989). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this transition has been marked by milestones such as: (i) the coupling of professional recognition with acceptance of individual accountability for ensuring successful student outcomes; (ii) occupational standards and practising requirements that specify desirable teacher quality in the form of behaviours and dispositions; and (iii) the normalisation of curriculum and assessment student cohort monitoring by data 'dashboard' and 'traffic light' triage of priority support within and across teacher workgroups (i.e., syndicate, department, school, *kāhui ako*).

Intriguingly, throughout the 2000s and 2010s, individual teachers in classrooms and groups of teachers in workgroups and schools were intentionally positioned at the centre of official 'best evidence' led policy discourse as the solution to student underachievement and disengagement. The ideal teacher had 'adaptive expertise', a repertoire of 'high impact pedagogies', emotional intelligence and cultural responsiveness. Arguably, this idealisation reached its high point with the Ministry of Education's decision to fund a five-year pilot of exemplary postgraduate initial teacher education programmes that were designed to ensure all beginning teachers were 'classroom ready' and had acquired all these professional competencies at the point of entry to the profession (Martin, Jenkins and Associates Limited, 2018).

In contrast, perhaps, as the analogue education world is increasingly displaced by the digital, Microsoft's data analytics discourse promises chronically overworked and under resourced officials something quite different: a direct, system level, usable return on investment from the Ministry of Education's decision to fully fund the cost of Windows OS, Microsoft Office 365, M365 apps, Enterprise Mobility & Security, Minecraft Education Edition, and Microsoft Windows server 'productivity software' licences for all schools. The system level return here comes in the form of real time data delivered to officials via the cloud. The datasets, one imagines, would comprise teachers' and students' keystroke, mouse and touchscreen mediated participation in digital learning activities, as distinct from their multisensory embodiment in the interactional framework and relations of the classroom. At present, the latter are commonly only available to the Ministry of Education in heavily attenuated, narrative form through Education Review Office school and national reports, published after the event. Crudely put, the productivity dividend on offer here is a new form of teacher-

proofing of official policy enactment (which is notoriously haphazard at the best of times) in schools and classrooms. It exemplifies the emergence of schooling system policy levers and strategies in and through which “human activity, materiality and digital spaces are entangled” (Koole, 2020, p. 1052). It was not always like this.

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Teachable moments are the “high moments of successful teaching, fully endorsed by the rewards of pupil accomplishment, often of a radical and unexpected order” (Woods & Jeffrey, 1996, p. xi), which participants described in Woods’ and Jeffrey’s primary school classroom studies of teachers’ adaptations to the challenges of a new National Curriculum that was introduced alongside the English and Welsh equivalent of the Tomorrow’s Schools reforms in the late 1980s. In combination, these reforms ushered in what the authors described as a ‘discourse of managerialism’. Teachers’ responsiveness to and enactment of the policy demands were complex, diverse and varied but one of the consistent fears reported by them was that an overloaded curriculum and tick-box approach to documenting pupil attainment would lead to a loss of teachable moments through marginalisation and erosion of the creative teaching conditions that are necessary to generate and take advantage of such moments. The researchers identified individual differences and commonalities across the group of creative teachers they studied. Commonalities included:

independence, a humanistic approach, strong moral purpose, a concern for equity, teacher- as well as child-centredness, firm control and strong investment in teaching. (p. 23)

The term ‘teachable moments’ also captures the occupational room for manoeuvre that good teachers develop in order to be responsive to the needs, aspirations and interests of their students in the moment in ways that are not predictable by abstract data analytic terms like ‘continuity’, ‘gaps’ and ‘engagement’ in learning. We might usefully capture the inherent limitations, and potential harms of a naïve, unquestioning belief in the pedagogical potential of data analytics solutions by quoting Woods and Jeffrey again, when summarising the challenges faced by the teachers in their study:

Strong moral and political values underpin their practice, and they feel passionately about their work. Their fully committed, all-embracing practice – moral, technical, political and emotional – is mentally and physically challenging. These teachers, despite – indeed ironically because of – their strengths, are particularly vulnerable to marginalization through creeping bureaucratization. This delimits the all-embracing practice, affects the quality of their teaching and leads to heightened stress. (p. 31)

Of course, these words were written over a quarter of a century ago, when most classroom teachers of the day had personal experience, occupational memory, exemplar colleagues and craft folklore about teachable moments to draw on. This

made it possible for creative teaching to be described and aspired to in such terms. The teachers in the study shared an appreciation, as the authors describe it, of the high emotional content in both teaching and learning, caring, valuing the child as a person, attending to atmosphere and tone in the classroom, the importance of narrative, stimulating the imagination through story, and tireless talk, “a form of teacher talk that is constant and generally positive and thoughtful. It can be comforting, challenging, imaginative and enthusiastic” (p. 109). Put another way, creative pedagogical attention to the conditions that are generative of teachable moments represents an essential deceleration not an acceleration of classroom social discourse. This deceleration has to do with developing ‘resonance’, as Rosa puts it, or making deeply meaningful connections in our relationship to the natural, material and social worlds:

Educational processes are characterized as successful when they make some specific segment of the world ... “speak,” establishing a responsive relationship between subject matter and learner. (Rosa, 2019, p. 40)

It is difficult to imagine how any of this can properly be captured or nurtured by analysing ‘patterns of digital learning activities’ and interactions using Microsoft’s self-described ‘new education analytics solutions’. More worryingly, we have to countenance the possibility that thirty years after the New Zealand Curriculum Framework was gazetted, the ability to describe or even wanting to describe teaching and learning in these terms is becoming all but lost from the storied language, practices and relations of the current teacher workforce, or at least from its English medium overwhelming majority.

By the end of 2021 the momentum of the Microsoft-Ministry of Education lighthouse project had stalled. As one of the senior officials involved observed to another, “it fell into a black hole because many hands wanted to be on the steering wheel but nobody had the time to do any work, or even get to a meeting to take the next step... so nothing further happened” (email between MoE officials, 3 November 2021, n.p.). Nevertheless, Microsoft has had renewable licensing agreements with the New Zealand government since the early 2000s, and the trail of correspondence released under the OIA request revealed that AI and data analytic solutions remain an integral part of cross-government agency conversations about how to design the ‘architectures’ of future public services as data-led machine learning systems that provide a continuous feedback loop to government policy shops (and their corporate partners) on the strengths and weaknesses of digitally mediated front-line services delivery.

Such architectures can be defined broadly as apparatuses which intermingle data, technologies for the production and diffusion of data, and the algorithms and analytics by which data is made to matter to organizations... (Power, 2022, p. 4)

THE TEACHER AS WORKING SOVEREIGN

It is a truism that teachers are influential role models for their students. Modelling is apparent in how teachers enact their craft and relational work in the classroom, how they speak about and interact with colleagues and families and whānau, the extent to which they incorporate exploration of real political, economic, social and environmental issues of the day in the curriculum, and how they spend their non-school time. All these convey to students a sense of what is of value in society at large, the particular local school community, and to the preferred teachers who are their most familiar moral exemplars.

The key point I want to make in the remainder of this reflective article is about the importance of teachers, individually and collectively, modelling democratic forms of teachers' work and the rewards to be gained from this. The argument goes like this: if students see these kinds of collaborative will-formation and decision-making championed, practised and normalised by teachers, and if these are mirrored in the discursive practices and relations of the curriculum, classroom and institution as a whole in which students are immersed, then students are more likely to value them and want to see them practised and normalised in their own lives outside school. Conversely, if what they see practised and normalised in schooling are: (i) introspective, technicist forms of teaching and learning; (ii) characterless, predictable 'common practice' pedagogies; (iii) the reification of achievement outcomes and benchmarks over holistic personal development, shared learning and respect for difference; (iv) competitive forms of grouping, ranking and streaming of students; and (v) teachers appearing to be dutifully following scripts that have been written for them elsewhere, then students are less likely to appreciate self-determined, collaborative will formation, political engagement and decision-making about what really matters in learning — as opposed to 'learnification' (Biesta, 2010).

Honneth recently coined the term 'working sovereign' (Celikates, Honneth, & Jaeggi, 2023). The term is intended to capture a fundamental tension in the social world of work today. On the one hand, widespread, active participation in 'political will formation' is essential to the health of any social or liberal democracy. Moreover, this practical form of collaboration and decision making needs to be reenacted daily in our institutional workplace norms if it is to retain its normative value and act as the basis of 'how we do things around here' as a community. On the other hand, the reality of contemporary forms of life is that intensification and precaritisation of work mean that people have less time, confidence and motivation to participate in political will formation, in everyday society or at work. Consequently, such decisions are increasingly being taken by an elite political and professional polity in the former sphere and by a cadre of professional managers and executives in the latter.

In state schooling, specifically, this tension is replicated at system, school and teacher workgroup levels. As the non-teaching, planning, monitoring, reporting, compliance and audit components of teachers' regulated autonomy have become ever more demanding and bureaucratised since the 1980s, the time teachers have available for collaborative, deliberative, political will formation in schooling has withered. Equally, as the psychological and psychic challenges that students present with in classrooms have ballooned, and the expectations of universal student success among parents have become more vocal and demanding, teachers as a workforce have become overloaded, exhausted and

their creative energy inevitably dissipated. Teacher recruitment and retention are major issues here in Aotearoa, and in many OECD jurisdictions overseas. More than likely this has to do both with the deteriorating material conditions of teachers' work (O'Neill, 2017) and the declining opportunities to be creative in their craft, to enjoy the freedom to exercise professional judgment without fear of reproof or sanction, and to experience resonance with their students, colleagues and other dimensions of their occupational worlds. As Amy Gutmann has written in the American context,

Even in many of the best schools, the workload of full-time teachers is so great as to require them continually to compromise their judgment of what constitutes good teaching. Far more than doctors or lawyers, teachers make compromises in their professional standards for causes that are often entirely beyond their personal control: too many students, too little preparation time for teaching, too much administrative work, too little money to support their families. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 79)

In the European context, Honneth recently argued in an interview with Robin Celikates and Rahel Jaeggi, that a new political theory of labour is needed to reflect the shifts that have occurred over the last forty or fifty years away from progressive efforts to humanise and democratise work within the period of the social or liberal democratic sentiment. During these decades (roughly the late-1940s to the early 1980s), employment relations and organised labour were an important constituent of what Honneth calls "the political prospects of democracy" (Celikates, Honneth, & Jaeggi, 2023, p. 319). Over the last forty years, however, the focus on work and workplace relations has been replaced by other political priorities, notably the environment and multiculturalism. Alongside this, and despite their relatively high levels of union membership (traditionally organised on democratic principles in education) significant fractions of public sector work and workers have become de-professionalised and precaritised under the combined forces of market liberalism and, in our context, new public management, the audit society and, most recently, the kind of surveillance capitalism (Power, 2022) that underpins Microsoft's confidential lighthouse project pitch to the Ministry of Education. Now and then comparisons of the right of teachers and their elected representatives to participate in education policy in New Zealand show similar declines in democratic norms from the 1980s onward (albeit partially alleviated under the Sixth Labour Government's education programme between 2017 and 2023). Honneth asserts that from the 1960s, democratic theory "stopped to regard proper working conditions as a necessary part of democratic societies" (p. 320). Also lost were a sensibility towards what he calls "the essential value work holds for the constitution and reproduction of society" (p. 320). In this context, work means co-operation in the maintenance of the social division of labour:

Everyone contributes their part to the preservation of the community, which one desires to be organized in democratic and fair ways. And this precondition, meaning the anchoring of political justice in fair cooperation, was no longer considered at all. (p. 321)

For Honneth, solidarity and co-operation (both explicit and tacit) are essential component practices of the struggle to exercise political rights in and through work. They are also “all learning processes in democratic will-formation” (p. 324). Honneth is therefore proposing that democratically organised workplaces are a prerequisite for modelling and enabling democratic participation in societal politics at large. Understood and undertaken in this way, teachers (as workers) have a responsibility to model to students (as workers) the performative ethic of collaborative workplace organisation, the purposes of which, for Honneth, are: (i) satisfying needs for economic independence; (ii) providing workers with a say in their workplace; (iii) encouraging teamwork as a norm; (iv) ensuring that work is engaging and encourages workers to take initiative; and (v) creating a social environment that esteems and recognises work irrespective of its intellectual challenge (Celikates, Honneth, & Jaeggi, 2023). It also means the responsibility to ensure an intimate alignment between the ways that teachers and students’ work and relations are organised in schools.

THE DEMOCRATICALLY HABITUATED STUDENT

So, more than modelling alone, this ethic requires that students too are actively and progressively engaged in learning how to practise democratic will formation through the shared language, practices and relations of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, day in, day out. On this line of argument, schooling is an essential site for the ‘democratic habituation’ of children and young people (Honneth, 2023). “[T]he idea that the primary aim of education is to prepare future citizens for membership of a democratic society” (Carr & Hartnett, 1996, p. 199) is not new by any means, either in its own right or as a cornerstone of radical thought and action in the progressive schooling tradition (e.g., Apple & Beane, 1999, Fielding & Moss, 2011). Indeed, Honneth draws heavily on Kant’s and Dewey’s philosophies of education in making his argument that “a thriving democracy must continually reproduce the cultural and moral preconditions of its own existence by way of general educational processes” (Honneth, 2023, p. 128). Schooling, of course, can exert both benign and malign cultural and moral influences on students’ self-formation through the experiences they offer and the pedagogical and organisational signals they give about how students are expected to understand themselves through these experiences.

The type, methods, and contents of school education may affect democracy either in positive ways – for example by fostering cooperativeness and individual self-esteem – or in negative ones, gradually undermining democracy by teaching moral conformism and unquestioning obedience to authority. (p. 129)

In other words, democratic habituation of students is properly about what they actually get to do, individually and collectively, in the present in classrooms and schools, as opposed to their preparation for an imagined citizenship future beyond school:

[T]o prepare for the role of citizen is less a matter of acquiring the right kind of knowledge than it is a matter of acquiring certain practical

habits. What the pupils should learn in school is not primarily testable knowledge of political or historical facts, but rather modes of conduct that enable self-confident action within a cooperative community. (pp. 135 & 136)

CONCLUSION

Many of us today lead work- and life-styles that are shaped, informed, scheduled, facilitated and socially accelerated by the apps we download onto our portable, handheld devices. We have only some vague, peripheral awareness that every time we use the keyboard, search the internet, click on a URL, or communicate via social media, our actions and choices are continuously being recorded, archived and mined for monetary purposes, and decisions made by commercially-driven algorithms about what is then fed back to us, for our consumption. When we download and sign-up, how often do we interrogate the manual of terms and conditions of use to know the contract we have entered into? Most of us, pragmatically, simply click away our 'data sovereignty' for the apparent conveniences of time, effort, and opportunity that digital solutions supposedly grant us. As a consequence, we often simply take for granted that our activities and relationships will increasingly be digitally mediated in the years ahead, that they will continue to accelerate our lives, and that this is a progressive development.

In an era when it is logically and empirically impossible for students, families, teachers, schools and system level officials to respond meaningfully to all the schooling demands made of them by government, so-called data analytic solutions become seductive in their capability and capacity to automate many of the transactional tasks that make possible contemporary schooling as we now understand it. However, precisely because schooling is so influential in the self-formation of children and young people and because teachers, individually and collectively, are such significant role models for their students in learning how to conduct themselves and what to trust in the social world outside the household, we should be wary of any education policy developments and enactments that are presented as unqualified 'solutions' to the problems faced by a chronically under-resourced state schooling system.

There simply are no silver-bullet schooling solutions to the structural socio-economic problems that are now deeply entrenched, and largely taken for granted, throughout our very unequal society. However, the phenomenon of social acceleration has helped create the impression that technological affordances can remedy, in real time, many of the frailties of the pedagogical relationship. This may be accurate in respect of the most routine of teaching and learning's peripheral tasks, but it is difficult to make a plausible case that the so-called new education analytics solutions can help generate the conditions in which creative teaching and democratic habituation flourish within a collaborative community of classroom practice.

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