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14. WORKING THROUGH THE MARGINS

Liberating School Education Practice and Discourse

To what extent is the regulatory discourse of school education informed by practice-based theory and best practice scholarship? How can this discourse limit practice? What marginal freedoms can school leaders and teachers pursue despite these regulatory limitations? Should leaders and schools limit their practice by acceding to the policy and procedure dictates or should practice discourse be informed by sound teaching philosophies grounded in real practice? These questions frame the key content and arguments covered in this chapter.

My position taken in this chapter is as follows. First, the discourse underpinning the practice of secondary school education is twofold: the educational and theoretical literature and the regulatory discourse determine many aspects of school education policy and procedures, including systems, education and infrastructure. Second, it is acknowledged that evidence-based practice discourse underpins the regulations of this education and that the organisation of this massive educational system requires regulations that manage a complexity of people with diverse abilities and needs as well as the enormous volume of resources needed to address these needs and optimise the use of these abilities. However, these regulations have produced an educational program that operates along industrial or factory-model lines that are not keeping pace with changes in educational practices, teaching innovations and students' learning needs. Finally, within these innovative marginal practices lies the potential for liberation and revisioning of both core teaching and learning practices as well as the dominant educational discourse. To genuinely pursue the education of our future generations we need to listen to key stakeholders (learners and educators) and value their authentic voices.

SETTING THE SCENE

In this chapter I use the Australian secondary school system where I work, as a case study. Readers are invited to reflect on the applicability of my observations to their situation. The current system of secondary schooling in Australia was designed and structured for a different age – the industrial age. The vast majority of Australian secondary schools continue to reflect these industrial age roots, being organised along industrial or factory-model lines. The built environment and the curriculum structure provide the walls for compartmentalising and organising learning into discrete content silos; timetable structures allocate physical and human resources in an effort to organise learning into efficient time blocks; and, to

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make the most efficient use of these structures, students are organised and educated in "batches" where the most important thing about them is how old they are or their "date of manufacture" (Robinson, 2010).

This industrial model of schooling exists in a highly regulated environment. Governments, education authorities, teacher registration bodies and individual school systems mandate well-intentioned directions for schools and teachers: directions and requirements, which in the main, reinforce and perpetuate traditional approaches to secondary education. Further, school systems, schools and teachers are required to acquit and report on performance or progress against various measurement instruments. The regulated environment is the voice of the enacted mainstream discourse, which, to a large extent, exerts significant control over contemporary approaches to schooling and teaching practices. School registration authorities and teacher registration bodies, which regulate for quality learning outcomes and maintenance of professional standards, in effect become blunt instruments that restrict creativity in their endeavours to ensure that schools do not stray too far from the official discourse and regulatory specifications.

In contemporary education settings the everyday practice of traditionally structured secondary schools can be routine for students and teachers and isolating for teachers. Within these schools the voice of teachers, students and parents are largely silenced. Bells and walls separate time and space, determining when and where teaching and learning occurs. The organisation of teaching and learning is largely controlled by a timetable. The content and skills taught are determined by a mandated curriculum. A range of factors in contemporary education settings, such as compliance, teacher-isolation and disempowerment contribute to low morale and high attrition rates in early career teachers (Ewing & Manuel, 2005).

Physical architectures in contemporary classrooms predict workplace practices (Kemmis & Grootenbour, 2008) and possibilities for learning. Classroom design, furniture and the general layout of classrooms generally reflect the traditional model of educational practice where there is a distinct student-teacher hierarchy. The whiteboard, the data projector and the positioning of the furniture to utilise them, enclosed within four walls perpetuate this traditional hierarchy. This sameness of design for general-purpose classrooms presupposes that the nature of teaching and learning across the different areas of the curriculum will be uniform. It is not. Until recently, school design has largely ignored the powerful influence that physical conditions have on shaping learning and teaching. This strong, pervasive influence of physical conditions has prefigured the practices of generations of teachers and limited the potential learning opportunities for students.

Schools do have some room to move, but by and large, external authorities impose what students are required to learn, the hours mandated for the various learning areas and, in some cases how a particular subject should be taught. This high level of regulation and associated systems of accountability can make it very

The Reggio Amelia approach to education, is based on the concept that there are three teachers of children: adults, other children, and their physical environment. The environment functions as the Third Teacher and should enable both students and the teacher to express their potential, abilities and curiosity. So why do we still use the egg carton approach when building schools?

difficult for school leaders and teachers to engage in practice discourses that don't fit the prevailing discourse of the industrial model. School leaders and teachers have to be somewhat creative in balancing the enactment of the official discourse while at the same time, engaging and working innovatively in the margins to write directly into educational practices. This is essential if schools and teachers are to meet the rapidly evolving educational needs of contemporary students.

LEARNING THE DISCOURSE THROUGH TEACHER EDUCATION

Contemporary education of secondary school teachers is disciplined-based and therefore reinforces the practice of silo-ing of subject content in schools. During education and work experiences teachers are influenced by their own subject traditions. When they are not exposed to inspiring examples of interdisciplinary teaching they lack the confidence to implement practices that privilege interdisciplinary connections. Targeted professional learning for teachers that creates opportunities for them to work collaboratively to develop and teach curriculum that takes into account the needs of different disciplines is required.

Alarming attrition rates for early career teachers have been reported; based on OECD data, up to one third of graduate teachers in Australia and other developed countries leave the profession within the first five years (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). These teachers quickly realise the wide gulf between the ideal and the reality shock of practice and new graduates report feeling unprepared as students and unsupported by inconsistent in-school processes for the concerning nexus between student engagement and behaviour management (Buchanan et al., 2013). The implicit and explicit cultural rules (*the way things are done here*) that govern teachers' practice within schools and departments wear down the initiative of new graduates particularly when new practices are not widely accepted by colleagues. While support for new graduates has improved in recent years, potentially good teachers will continue to be lost to the profession in the absence of ongoing support beyond the early work phase.

LIBERATING PRACTICE

Integrated and inquiry-based approaches to learning, often implemented in primary schools are needed in secondary schools to meet increasingly complex problems that cut across traditional disciplines and there is a greater need for interdisciplinary education as identified by the National Research Council (2004). Such approaches integrate various disciplines allowing students to make meaningful and realistic connections between different subject materials. However, the curriculum landscape in secondary education is very different. Teaching and learning is generally organised into discrete subject-based silos; traditional structures, which encourage a continuation of conventional subject disciplines that create boundaries that make it difficult to develop interdisciplinary links across different subjects. In general, most students experience each subject in isolation and are not aware of links between different content and consequently are not able

to develop a systematic comprehensive view of the world around them (Banks & Barlex, 2014).

Despite the widespread constraint of educational practice in secondary schools pockets of innovative or liberated practices that successfully overcome these challenges do exist. (See box to the right.) The following examples of liberated teaching practices focus on three areas where, I would argue, education should lead the change of practice and of the discourse surrounding practice.

Enhancing engagement
Interdisciplinary teaching
Small group learning
Changing spaces
Personalised learning
Learning advisors
Restructuring the school day
Students controlling learning
Freedom for students' voices
Authentic learning communities
Time for teachers' reflection
Professional communities
Embedding research in teaching

The first example describes a different approach to practice for Middle Year Students (Years 7-9). In contemporary models of education it is not uncommon for these students to study eight to ten different subjects with as many different teachers each week. This creates an environment where learning is "episodic" and knowledge and skills are compartmentalised. Importantly, this approach fails to acknowledge the centrality of relationships to student learning and the unique learning needs of students in the middle years of secondary schooling. Extensive attitudinal survey results from the Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) project (Department of Education and Training, 2002) clearly identify that many middle years students are not engaged in their learning. As a school principal, this became a significant factor for me in redesigning schooling to better meet the educational needs of middle years students.

In response to this issue a holistic framework for best practice for the middle years of schooling was developed. The middle years became a sub-school within the school. Teachers formed interdisciplinary teaching teams planning and developing integrated inquiry-based units of work. Students spent two-thirds of their total learning time in these integrated subjects with core teachers. Learning blocks were vertically aligned to cater for flexible stage-based grouping and team teaching. Teachers spent longer periods of time with smaller numbers of students. The physical layout of classrooms, furniture and structure, was altered to support how the students and teachers wanted to use the space most effectively for learning. The landscape had changed significantly for the better. Students were more engaged with their learning. Teachers found their work to be more fulfilling. Most importantly, this approach allowed for the development of strong relationships between the middle years students and a small group of core teachers who knew them and their learning needs well.

The second example describes how the introduction of Learning Advisor (LA) and Personalised Learning Time programs changed practice in years 10-12, the senior years of schooling. Much has been written about how personalising learning can improve student outcomes (Clarke, 2003; Keamy, Nicholas, Mahar, & Herrick, 2007; Trump, 1977) and the concept has been entertained at various levels by

system authorities. There have been some flourishing pockets of innovation based on these programs, a small number of high schools that comprise the Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learning being one example (Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learning, n.d).

The underpinning philosophy of the LA program is that each student in the school is well-known by a Learning Advisor: an adult who will know the student completely, will care for them, monitor their progress and have the time and authority to take constructive action. The LA program nurtures one-to-one relationships between teacher-advisors and students supporting what Schmidt and Neville (2011) describe as the development of reflective function and with it the capacity to construct a meaningful experience of learning. The introduction of the LA program required a number of changes that had implications for the way teachers teach, the way students learn, school organisation, communication and the curriculum. Firstly, all teachers now had a dual role: they were both an LA and a subject teacher. As an LA they were directly responsible for the success of up to fifteen students in their Learning Advisor group (LA group) during their time at the school. The second change required significant alteration to the structure of the school day, the curriculum and communication. Thirty minutes of every day was set aside for the LA program: time for members of the LA group and the LA to meet to monitor and plan for ongoing success in learning. The LA would also conduct a longer interview with each member of his or her LA group once every four weeks. The LA became the contact for communication with both class teachers and parents.

The second program involved the implementation of structures to support programs for personalising student learning. The Personalised Learning Time (PLT) program provided students with the opportunity to take a degree of control about their learning. The PLT program was implemented for one timetabled day each week. No timetabled classes were scheduled on these days and students had choice about what, how and when they learnt. Subject teachers worked in teams and were timetabled to “the floor” to be available to work with and support the learning of students across the range of year levels. The LA program also supported the newfound freedom for the student voice in learning provided by the PLT program. LAs would work with each student in their group to review learning, develop goals, assist the student to set an agenda for PLT and monitor progress against the set goals.

The third example demonstrates how, through the development of an authentic learning community, a school can support both experienced and early career teachers to enhance their practice. Reflective thought is integral to the process of learning and, as described by Dewey (1916, 1933), provides a solid foundation for understanding the development of professional knowledge. Opportunities for reflection are therefore important if teachers are to better understand their practice and identify changes that will enhance those practices. For this to be effective, the school must privilege the provision of opportunities for teachers to engage in critical reflection as part of their ongoing professional learning.

The establishment of a professional learning community, based on teaching teams and embedded into their daily work enabled teachers to meaningfully contribute to the co-creation of effective practice discourse. The work of learning communities was taken a step further through the Research for Practice in Practice (RPIP) initiative. RPIP provided teachers with a way to embed research into their daily work. The aim of RPIP was to help teachers better understand practice. Enhanced understanding of the sayings and doings of practice enables the formation of new patterns - new ways of life (Kemmis, 2009). RPIP initiatives, aligned with the focus of the professional learning teams provided opportunities for individuals and teams to build practice through the investigation of practice and embed learning into the cultural practice of the school. School data gathered over a four-year period from external surveys on school improvement clearly demonstrated that the focus of the professional learning communities improved outcomes in staff wellbeing, motivation and performance. The results indicated that teachers felt well supported; had clarity about their role and the focus of the school; and, importantly took ownership of and positively engaged in teamwork and ongoing professional learning.

CENTRING MARGINAL PRACTICE

Over three decades of education experience I have witnessed new teaching practices either flourish or wither and eventually pass away. Some significant innovative practices have gained traction and become centred within individual school practices before gaining wider acceptance in the broader education context. Why is it that some innovative practices are not centred and fall by the wayside and others are centred and become part of the wider practice discourse? In this section sound educational philosophy, visionary and inclusive leadership and building teachers' capacity to contribute to the practice discourse are explored as ways to foster and centre new and innovative practices. It is valuable at this point to reflect that discourse, as presented in Chapter 3, is not just a matter of the public and typically written discourse owned by the profession. It can also be the informal "talk" of the community of practice. Influencing local discourse and local practice has value in itself as well as providing a starting point for contributing to the wider discourse of the profession and entering the core discourse space.

Visionary and inclusive leadership is critical in centring marginal practices in both the local as well as the wider community of educational practice. Visionary leaders develop and articulate a compelling vision for education and align teachers to that vision. They develop the culture of schools and influence what is acceptable and the *way things are done* (the local discourse and the local practice).

> It should be clear that education is far too important economically, strategically and socially to leave in the hands of a Department of Education, whoever the minister at the time might be … if education is to move forward quickly enough who should we now entrust it to? The global answer … seems to be: "give it back to the schools, the teachers, the parents and the children; ask them to make learning better". (Heppell, 2013)

Further, visionary leaders make spaces for their staff to be innovative; they are inclusive and supportive, creating a culture of openness and shared leadership. If this is not done, opportunities will be lost to centre practices that are emerging in the margins of the profession's practice space.

Building the capacity of teachers to actively participate in the construction and critique of the practice discourse of local and wider professional communities is essential if marginal practice is to be centred. One way to do this is to develop the research skills of teachers and build in opportunities to research as part of everyday practice. In my experience action research has proved to be very useful: it can be performed as part of everyday practice and it has a focus to support and further develop and improve ongoing practice. Building action research into the school culture empowers and encourages teachers to research practice. Within the school, the action research model provides the ongoing quality assurance and improvement framework necessary for centring and embedding innovative marginal practices. The model also has the potential to take and centre innovative marginal practices in the wider educational context. Communication of action research results at workshop presentations, seminars, conferences, and through publications in journals and newsletters, and the hosting of school visits can all contribute to the centring of innovative teaching practices within the wider practice discourse. An action research culture plays a crucial role in embedding a cycle of continuous improvement in a school. Practice is kept under the microscope and the efforts to continually refine and improve it help to centre innovative practices, and importantly, improve outcomes for teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the challenges that the highly regulated and industrial nature of contemporary secondary school education poses for the creation and implementation of innovative teaching practices and challenges to the dominant practice discourse. Supportive and inclusive school leadership is proposed as a way to genuinely value the authentic voice of informed practitioners in order to liberate and centre innovative teaching practices and discourse strategies. Action research, exploring and sharing innovative teaching practices and integrating educational theories into contemporary practices will assist teachers to innovate and work creatively in the margins to ensure the best possible outcomes for all students and to contribute to the practice discourse.

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