

Teachers' work and gifted education

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This paper examines the perspectives of teachers and personnel working in a State Government primary school situated in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, four years after participating in the Bright Futures gifted professional development. Although the school proudly proclaims a tradition of scholarship and excellence within a friendly, caring and democratic ethos, the data from semi-structured interviews in a qualitative, single case case-study, shows considerable ambivalence towards gifted education programs. This has significant negative repercussions for meeting the individual educational needs of gifted students. Using a Foucaultian framework, I analyse the data showing that whilst teachers are striving to improve the learning outcomes for all students, they are caught within a complex reality, created by the often conflicting influences of educational policy, formal school rhetoric and their own personal beliefs, which in turn have been influenced by egalitarian principles detrimental to gifted education.

Introduction

This paper examines the perspectives of primary school teachers and administrators working in eastern suburban Melbourne as they consider giftedⁱ education programs within the broader landscape of teachers' work. The data for this presentation are drawn from a single-case qualitative case studyⁱⁱ where semi-structured interviews were held four years after the school participated in the Bright Futures gifted professional development program in the late 1990s. I develop an analysis of the context of teachers' work and professional development by drawing upon the Foucaultian concepts of power and 'régimes of truth'. Using this framework, I examine how curriculum discourses and practices associated with an outcomes based curriculum affect the education of gifted students in one Melbourne primary school, Atlas Primary School (APS)ⁱⁱⁱ.

I begin with a brief account of the wider educational and curriculum reform context at that time. This provides a mapping of the circumstances that enabled or constrained the activities and attitudes of teachers, and sets out a critique of the dominant discursive practices effected as exercises of power. This paper is thus grounded in the specific time, politics and policies of Victorian education. I then proceed to discuss teachers' attitudes and work practices and their implications for gifted programs in this school.

A Foucaultian genealogy focuses on understanding how the present came to be, which is described by Foucault (1980) as ‘the combined product of erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge’ (p. 83). The aim of a genealogical investigation is thus to identify and examine the different factors, discourses, influences and activities and so on that shape the present and which also make it feel “inevitable” and common sense (Foucault, 1984).

Policy and rhetoric: mapping the context

1995 was a significant year for policy reform in Victoria. An outcomes-based curriculum model supported by an accompanying test for all children in years three and five was mandated for use in all State Government schools; in addition, Victoria gained its first, and to date, only formal gifted education policy.

Such convergence was not the result of happenstance. By 1985 the social-democratic legacy of the Karmel Report (1973), was waning in favour of economic rationalism, and this was accompanied by a trend for greater public accountability in education (Kenway, 1990). Victoria, under the auspices of a reformist Kennett Liberal Government ‘experienced a particularly vigorous form of economic fundamentalism between 1992 and 1999’ (Seddon, 2004 p. 1). During the 1980s, curriculum, assessment, standards, teachers, educational policymakers, teachers’ unions and funding to State schools had increasingly come under critique, particularly in the print media allied with the New Right (see Kenway, 1990), plus a redistribution of power was now underway in schools. Authority devolved to principals, and, along with the sway of parents as consumers, was boosted in comparison with the diminishing influence of teachers, who, as a body became secondary to the systemic educational and curriculum reform now underway.

Central to the Victorian Government’s sweeping educational reforms was the introduction of the *Schools of the Future* (SoF) program. This delegated State responsibility to individual schools for fiscal and personnel management, school charters, computerised administrative systems and assessment of school performance through a

framework of centralised accountability and standards (Pascoe & Pascoe, 1998; Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 1999). The *Schools of the Future* initiative can be understood in Foucaultian terms as an 'architecture that would operate to transform individuals to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct' (Foucault 1977, p. 172). Whilst principals and school councils were given greater authority and power over fiscal management and staffing matters, the SoF was also a vehicle for regulating teachers' conduct and professional work. Such a practice is what Hartley (1993, cited in Smyth and Dow 1998 p. 292), terms a 'sleight of hand', for schools, although self-managing, would remain under "the gaze of the state".

Curriculum Standards Framework and outcomes based education

Based upon the discarded national frameworks instigated in 1988, the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF) was designed as the skeletal structure upon which to create curriculum for individual learning needs (Board of Studies, 1995). The CSF enshrined the principles of outcomes-based education (OBE). As Berlach (2004) observes '[B]ecause of its amorphous and nebulous nature, OBE is not easily definable' (p. 3), but it is an educational approach emphasising specific, measurable goals that focus learning and teaching towards attaining pre-determined and uniform outcomes. Students must successfully demonstrate competencies at the end of a teaching and learning period to determine whether an outcome has been achieved (see Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004). Although some APS teachers perceived an outcomes-based model as 'good for accountability' (field notes) and for keeping teachers on task (field notes) others viewed the introduction of the CSF with its outcomes emphasis as deflecting the focus of teaching and learning away from the needs of children, thus not only compromising the educational development of the students (2/44; field notes), but negating teachers' individuality (11/54). Simultaneously with the CSF, testing was introduced for all year three and five students. The test, based on CSF standards, and known as the Learning Assessment Profile (LAP)^{iv}, examined literacy and numeracy and either Science or Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) in alternate years (Pascoe & Pascoe, 1998; Yates & Leder, 1996). Through these tests, the CSF standards and the levels of achievement were made public, and, the professional concerns of teaching

moved beyond the endeavours of individual schools. The so-called “objective” results of the LAP not only provided feedback to parents thereby bypassing teachers, but also became a means of comparing the performance of schools, a process which Pascoe and Pascoe (1998), conclude ‘became another instrument of accountability when added to school charters’ (p. 7). The norms and practices associated with an outcomes-based model became the dominant “official” régime of truth about curriculum and student learning, even if it was informally resisted among teachers. According to this régime, students, in whose education parents now had a greater voice, had to demonstrate an improved academic performance ‘for the sake of the school if not for themselves’ (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999, p. 155), which echoes the sentiment of an APS teacher who felt that the CSF ‘locks our teaching into a fit with testing and reporting’ (field notes). Whilst the LAP quantified knowledge acquisition, the CSF only required an outcome to be demonstrated without any differentiation of standard, acquisition or quality and, as Berlach (2004) wryly observes, teachers can manipulate class activities to address one or more outcome statements.

Thus, teachers and schools across the state experienced the contradictions and tensions between the processes of decentralisation, self management and personal educational commitments in tandem with centralised accountability and standards. It was a process of educational restructuring that Lingard, Hayes and Mills (1999) believe was ‘*done to*, rather than *with* teachers’ (p. 7; emphasis in original). The CSF was governed, in Foucaultian terms, by a particular régime of truth which eventually became normalised as the dominant “commonsense” regulating the types of professional development sympathetic to OBE which, in turn, controlled how teachers both constructed and did their work. The choice of an OBE model for schools in Victoria during the instrumentalist and rationalist Kennett years (1992-1999) is not so surprising, considering that this was period that saw ‘a nexus between educational and economic objectives’ (Smyth & Dow 1998, p. 295). As an OBE can also be viewed as a non-differentiating curriculum approach situated within ‘the context of socialist policy-making, where equity goals are explicit’ (Hargreaves & Moore 2000, p. 27), it is a seeming contradiction that simultaneously, the Bright Futures gifted policy was also introduced Victorian schools; a

policy that sought to ‘recognise, identify and support gifted students’ (Directorate of School Education [DSE], 1995a n.p.), and as such arguably represented an attempt to differentiate curriculum.

Bright Futures

In May 1995, at the first Australasian International Conference on the Education of Gifted Students held in Melbourne, the Victorian State Minister for Education, Phil Gude, launched the Government’s Bright Futures policy statement on the education of gifted students in State Government schools. This was the first, and to date; only period (1995-1999), during which Victoria had a formal policy supporting the education of gifted students. It stated that, ‘[I]t is the policy of the Victorian Government that ALL students be given the opportunity to achieve their full potential. This policy makes a commitment to providing gifted students with a fulfilling and challenging education commensurate with their abilities’ (DSE, 1995a n.p.; emphasis in original). However, I argue that the Bright Futures policy is a broad, general philosophical statement rather than a formal policy for the education of gifted students, and that its very wording reflects the pervading tenacity of a particular form of educational egalitarianism, which is described by Gross (2004), as an Australian characteristic detrimental to the education of the gifted. As a teacher, I support the philosophy of egalitarianism in the sense that the ubiquity of educational provision is the key to equality of opportunity for our students; however, when the concept of egalitarianism is used to mitigate against any programs seen to offer support for special groups of children or those considered “elites”, the danger arises that a “lowest common denominator” approach to educational outcomes might result. The imprecise language of Bright Futures policy and its “broad brush” approach within the published Bright Futures material, appears to show that its creators were well aware of the social, rather than educational debates, that would inevitably occur in making provision for the education of gifted children, seen by so many in Australia as special groups or elites “‘unfairly’ endowed with high intellectual or academic potential’ (Gross, 1999 p. 93). Hence, the Bright Futures policy soft pedals around gifted educational provision and mitigates against the very group of students for which it was designed to offer support. The problem, therefore, is that the term “elite”

imbued with a pejorative meaning, has cast its shadow over the very real need for gifted education.

Elsewhere, the DSE described that the policy ‘has been developed within the context of a number of policy initiatives designed to significantly enhance students’ opportunities to achieve their full potential within the Schools of the Future philosophy’ (DSE, 1995b p. 2). As such, although the “context” for the policy initiatives is not spelt out in the implementation document, the education department is not reticent in declaring that its gifted policy is contained within the *Schools of the Future* philosophy, a discourse advocating what Lingard et al. (1999, p. 5) call ‘[T]he market view of school-based management’ whereby student outcomes are to be improved by the cut and thrust of competition between schools for “clients” and “consumers” of education with principals now in the role of hard selling education. Principals, by working within their new Janiform^v roles of marketing-manager and professional educator, created distance and tensions between themselves and their teachers (Lingard et al., 1999); primary school teachers were now dealing with not only their daily professional concerns, but learning to work within the new common curriculum, overlaid with the Bright Futures policy.

To assist teachers with gifted students, an annotated section of the CSF provided examples of suitable learning “activities” (DSE 1995b, p. 2). I emphasise the word activities, as proponents of gifted education are adamant that providing “activities” and/or “programs” such as Future Problem Solving, Tournament of Minds and the Maths Olympiad, whilst useful, are forms of extension and enrichment and do not adequately replace a curriculum suitable for gifted students (see, for example, Senate 2001, 3.46-3.67; Wilson, 1996). It seems incongruous, that a New Right Government, bent on addressing the so-called declining standards of education, did not provide a specific curriculum for gifted students within its gifted policy, rather leaving it to the now beleaguered classroom teachers to address the issue with simplistic “serving suggestions” within the CSF. It is also ironic that the teachers, who were the scapegoats for past deficiencies within the education system, were now to become the vectors for its improvement. Such a practice exemplifies the contradictions that arose in this particular

climate; that is, between government rhetoric and the possibilities for teacher practice, whereby the disjunctions between policy ideals and rhetoric clashed with the working reality of everyday teaching practice, particularly within the specific foci required of an OBE curriculum model.

Bright Futures professional development

Having broadly described the wider policy and political context in which professional development for gifted education was to take place, I now turn to consider the micro-political world of APS where these policy reforms and curriculum debates were played out. This particular example shows how issues of power and resistance were mobilised and how particular régimes of truth, such as those represented by outcomes-based curriculum and a somewhat confused view of educational egalitarianism, influenced the enactment of gifted education policies and programs.

In 1998, 29 of the 33 APS staff (including the Principal and Assistant Principal) participated in the Bright Futures professional development program (BFPD). I was a Phase One facilitator and a then staff member.

What did the Bright Futures policy for the education of gifted children and the associated professional development mean for the teachers themselves and ultimately, their own classroom practice? Twenty three teachers completed the course; four teachers partially completed the modules; four teachers refrained from participating, even though the first sessions were conducted on a designated student free curriculum day and, the Principal himself did not stay for the entirety of each session. Each participant, by exhibiting particular behaviours compliant or otherwise, could be seen as functioning within the micro-political mechanisms operating at APS in reaction to the gifted policy directives, the BFPD and perhaps, PD in general. The non or partial participants could be viewed as embodying resistances, ‘formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised’ (Foucault 1980, p. 142).^{vi} Foucault insisted that regardless of its intentions, all acts of power require and generate resistance. Without resistance, all power loses effectiveness or disappears rather than achieving what it intends or asserts (see Danaher, Schirato and

Webb, 2002; Roth, 1992). Interview responses of APS teachers concerning professional development (PD) ranged from resigned to ambivalent to accepting and enthusiastic. Tamsin said that “top down” PD ‘can be a difficulty’ and that ‘it’s partially wasted *but* in a way it does give a forced insight into something which must broaden your base’ (9/56; her emphasis). The Principal opined that ‘not all top down models work’ because of teacher resistance although ‘we had some teachers on at this school who had enthusiasm [for PD] and ability to drive that change’ (12/64). Others felt that PD ‘run after school is difficult’ (2/44); or that they ‘don’t mind it’ (3/43) because it is ‘helpful at the time’ (15/64); so ‘we should embrace it’ (4/49); ‘it’s great’ (6/30; 10/39) and that ‘it’s really important’ (7/27).

Some teachers at APS accepted top down initiatives within the OBE framework as a normal and natural approach. For example, Jeff thinks that ‘it’s legitimate for people to say “top down” and to say you have got to teach this and I think if the Government doesn’t do that then, or the powers that be don’t do that then I think they’re not going to be very popular’ (1/48). The Assistant Principal expressed her surprise at ‘how few people have what I consider to be a sound understanding of government initiatives – even initiatives that they’ve put in their classrooms’ (5/55) adopting what Edwards (2000, p. 3) calls the ‘colonial view of teachers’ by viewing teachers as ignorant, even if they are not change resistant.

Everyone involved in the BFPD was ‘concerned with power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 96). In the micro-political climate of APS, the school community working within the CSF and the Bright Futures is ordered and arranged into a “docile body” produced by the technology of power that is the education department. Within this inscription of power, I include both myself as the BFPD facilitator and the Eastern Metropolitan Region Curriculum Co-coordinator who assisted with the initial curriculum day. In Foucaultian terms, power suffuses the enactment of curriculum as well as professional development, and power/knowledge relations fuels both educational and social conduct. The conduct of professional

development for gifted education is no exception as relations of power and knowledge are both inseparable and integral to teachers “working knowledge”. According to Foucault, relations of power are not fixed and located in one place. Rather, power is a relatively fluid relational functioning with various points and inscriptions moving from and between the education department, regional offices, the principal, his staff and facilitating teachers such as myself enacting the new gifted policy. An “everyday” event such as a PD program, in this instance the BFPD, encapsulates the relations of micro-power and micro-politics functioning within the school. On the pupil free curriculum day, disciplinary observation or surveillance was maintained by marking a roll of attendance and certificates were awarded to attendees after completion of the BFPD. Self-surveillance was enacted, ensuring PD attendance for fear of enduring the principal’s wrath. Helen found it a threat ‘to be told that I shall be writing in the newsletter that this is what we’ve learnt and this is what we’re going to do, make sure you do something in your classroom’ (4/49). But teachers’ physical attendance and ostensible completion of the BFPD does not ensure compliance either to PD or the gifted education policy. Resistance to both can be found in teachers’ behaviours and attitudes. As a BFPD facilitator, I have observed teachers in other locations who wrote letters, read magazines, and even sat with their backs during proceedings (field notes). Helen states that ‘I’ve been to PDs where the attitude has been horrible from the participants – they’re negative and ghastrly and all the rest of it and of course everyone has their own reasons for their attitude’ (4/49).

Four years after this period of professional development, teachers reflected that the BFPD had been useful and ‘overall it was a good thing and it did make you think about it – I mean it makes you appreciate that kids can be gifted’ (16/40), but its effectiveness had been undermined by a number of factors. At a macro-level, no clear education department gifted policy guidelines were implemented to support school initiatives and a change to a Labor Government in 1999 sidelined Bright Futures 2000-2005 (DoE, 1999). At the micro-level, the Principal began to pursue another ‘directive from “Head Office”’ (11/54), in this instance the Early Years (DEECD 2002), and the operation of the “Challenges and opportunities” program [C&O], a withdrawal program APS introduced

in response to the Bright Futures but prior to the BFPD, was reduced to a part time position. Accordingly, formal support for gifted students at APS became rather tenuous.

Teachers at APS recognise that the BFPD in some small way redressed the imbalance in professional development which they saw as favouring not only professional development but provision 'for the children at the lower end of the scale' (2/44).

However, such an awareness becomes difficult to implement into practice when teachers become overwhelmed when coping with 'thirty odd children and that's very difficult; you've got thirty different personalities, thirty different abilities and it's very hard to give everyone what they need and be aware of everyone's needs' (2/44). It is far easier to say 'I don't have any gifted kids' (1/48) or that 'all children are talented' (2/43) and therefore be done with the vexing (and time consuming) needs of highly capable students; a ruse that is not unique to APS (see, for example Senate, 2001; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004).

Conclusion

In this discussion, I have utilised a Foucaultian framework to illuminate how Atlas Primary School is situated as a micro-world; an institution shaped and created from a blend of earlier social justice policies, *Schools of the Future*, outcomes-based education as embodied in the Curriculum Standards Framework and the Bright Futures gifted policy. I have used a Foucaultian approach that frames the challenging climate in which teachers engage with or resist professional development and the education of the gifted. APS proclaims that its tradition of scholarship and excellence is situated within a friendly, caring, cooperative ethos. The CSF/OBE curriculum model is congruent with this claim, being a model focused on outcomes rather than differentiated learning needs and the facility and/or degree to which these outcomes are achieved. As such, I propose that the CSF/OBE is a model suited to a régime of truth that is Australian educational egalitarianism which structures teachers' work. Despite the best intentions of many teachers, the Bright Futures policy and its associated PD had very little impact upon the contemporary landscape of teacher's work at APS beyond adding to their awareness of another category of students, "the gifted". Paradoxically, this also increased teachers'

angst when they realised that the intellectual needs of gifted students are lost within the broad spectrum of mixed-ability classrooms. Although APS claims to offer a program for gifted and talented students, the non-specificity of the program, a lack of explicit curriculum options for gifted students and the emphasis placed on students who have fallen behind and require assistance leads to the conclusion that in the interests of social justice and fairness, the gifted students of APS are also in need of unambiguous educational support.

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ⁱ I follow the lead of Ruth Cigman (2006), in my use of the words gifted and giftedness as they 'will do as well as any other' (p. 199).

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ⁱⁱⁱ Pseudonyms have been utilised throughout this paper.

^{iv} In 2001, the LAP became the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM)

^v Janus is the Roman two-faced god of doors

^{vi} To my chagrin, these same teachers declined the invitation to participate in my research study.