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Journal of Education Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713693402>

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To cite this Article: Alex Moore , 'Teacher development and curriculum reform',

Journal of Education Policy, 16:3, 269 - 277

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/02680930110041401

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930110041401>

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REVIEW ESSAY

Teacher development and curriculum reform

Alex Moore

Teachers' Learning Project

By John Smyth, Robert Hattam, Michael Lawson and Peter McInerney, Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching/South Australia Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999.

Introduction: 'teachers' learning – new challenges in new times'

Teachers' professional lives have changed significantly in the past decade or so. With the advent of national curriculum guidelines many schools now program in accordance with nationally developed Statements and Profiles. Key Competencies have entered the educational discourse and the introduction of new assessment and reporting procedures, together with 'gifted and talented' programs . . . have all contributed to the complexity and intensity of teachers' work. In this era, professional development has largely been devolved to schools, and information technology is beginning to challenge the very nature of schools as we know them. Not only are teachers expected to work harder, but there's a lot of new learning involved in teaching. . . . We are feeling the impact of globalisation on our everyday lives, and techno-science and cyber-culture now have a deep impact on the identity of young people. (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 1)

It may surprise some UK teachers to learn that the above words are taken not from an account of the current situation for schools, teachers and communities in England and Wales, but, under the heading 'Teachers' learning – new challenges in new times', from a collection of professional development materials compiled by teacher educators in Australia entitled the *Teachers' Learning Project*. Aimed at promoting teachers' learning 'as a means to advancing school reforms', it is precisely the situation described above that the *Teachers' Learning Project* seeks to address. It does so in a critical, collaborative and proactive way, not only reminding teachers of the power they still have in the areas of curriculum and pedagogical reform, but recognizing the implications of an increased erosion of that power by central and local governments.

Though it is pitched at Australian teachers – and in particular South Australian teachers – the *Teachers' Learning Project* is, as the opening quotation suggests, sufficiently universal in its themes and purposes to be easily adapted for use just about anywhere in the world. While some of the materials require no modification at all, others will inevitably suggest some adjustments according to prevailing local conditions. Although the achievement of the 'socially-just curriculum' may still be

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some way off in many Australian schools, for example, a certain shared understanding and knowledge of the concept is likely to be familiar to large numbers of teachers working there. The same may not be true in the majority of English classrooms and staffrooms, where at best the notion may appear strange or marginalized. Here, rather more groundwork may need to be carried out before teachers feel they can collectively embark on related projects of curriculum development.

The Teachers' Learning Project: summary and rationale

Collectively and individually a model of clarity and production, the *Teachers' Learning Project* comprises a set of 16 modular booklets. Eight of these guide teachers through a series of 'investigation' topics, suggesting areas of curricular and pedagogical debate and development that teachers might carry out in their own schools, introducing supporting theory and references and offering guidance on how practitioners might most effectively organize their learning and discussion on the module in question. The other eight booklets, intended to be used in conjunction with the investigation booklets, provide support material of a different kind, offering a range of detailed case studies that show how classroom teachers elsewhere have addressed and responded to key educational issues and the ways in which they have sought to translate those studies into curriculum reform. Both sets of booklets are intended to be free-standing, as potential supports for specific action-research projects or self-organized professional development courses but also have the potential to be used together so that the modules can, if desired, form a whole course in professional development with the availability of university accreditation. Recognizing throughout that teachers are perfectly able and happy to deal with complex educational theory and to relate this to practice – but also that there are enormous time constraints involved in attempting to achieve this – the resources are perfectly pitched, showing busy teachers, in ways that avoid being patronizing or overly demanding, how they can use existing theory to support, develop and interrogate their own school-based investigations.

Putting to one side the 'companion module' to the series, *Enhancing Teachers' Learning*, which provides useful advice on how to make the most effective use of each set of materials, the titles of the *Investigation Series* booklets make in themselves interesting reading, including as they do: *School Culture as the Key to School Reform*; *Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning*; *Promoting Student Voices*; *Enhancing School-Community Dialogue*; *Making Socially-Just Curriculum*, *Developing Middle School Practices* and *Embedding Information Technology in the Curriculum*. The eight case-study titles are: *Learning About Partnerships and Reporting*; *A School as a Learning Community*; *A Culture of Reform for Social Justice*; *Learning to Teach the Virtual Class*; *Middle Schooling from the Ground Up*; *Placing Girls at the Centre of Curriculum*; *Keeping Senior Secondary Curriculum Alive in Rural Communities*; and *Rigorous Curriculum in an Isolated Community*. The intention is that the case studies – which use a 'partial ethnographic approach' as a means of portraying 'the complexity of teachers' learning' (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 5) – should be used by teachers to support the investigations prompted by and theorized in the *Investigation Series*, largely by addressing 'how to' questions (*ibid.*: 7). This recommended practice both prompts and reflects the authors' own research methodology, in which 'existing theory and our empirical work – the *Case Studies* in schools – are brought into a dialogue' (*ibid.*: 8–9: see also Lather 1986).

The importance of debate and dialogue in the conduct of professional investigations is stressed throughout the *Teachers' Learning Project*, along with the premise (Stenhouse 1975, McLaughlin 1987, Watson and Fullan 1992, Fullan 1993) that teachers are central to school reform efforts and that teacher development and school development go hand in hand (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 2–3). Inevitable corollaries of this are: that learning, be it teachers' or students', should prioritize 'a sense of inquiry and critical reflection' (*ibid.*: 19); that teachers, even in times of excessive external constraint, can still operate as transformative intellectuals who 'think critically' and 'act politically' (*ibid.*: 2–3, Giroux 1985); that the *quality* of student learning is directly linked to the quality of teacher learning (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 2, see also Sarason 1997: 34); and that the development of democratic processes and cultures in schools is best served by the development of the school as 'a critical learning community' (*ibid.*: 20). To summarize these rationales in the authors' own words:

In essence we see these materials as a means to work on the school culture with a view to developing and sustaining a culture of innovation. The content of the modules has emerged out of a consideration of the perplexing difficulties of working towards a socially-critical school – a school that we argue has a commitment to sustain a culture in which teachers can (continually) test the adequacy of their theories about teaching and learning. (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 19)

Critical reflection and effective teaching

It is a key feature of the *Teachers' Learning Series* that it does not seek to 'hand down' theories and suggestions for projects but rather supports critical reflection through providing suggestions and structures for gathering evidence, for discussing practice, and for interrogating the *status quo*. The companion volume, *Enhancing Teachers' Learning* and the module *Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning*, are particularly helpful in this respect. Indeed, with their useful advice on data collection and analysis, their very readable introduction and elaboration of a range of supporting theory, their references to real-life studies and appendix accounts of practitioners describing the impact of critical reflection on their own work and professional lives, it is easy to see how these two booklets alone might serve to support a wide range of school-based professional and curriculum development projects.

In these two modules, as elsewhere in the series, the authors summarize their methodological emphasis in a way that unambiguously associates itself with an Action Research tradition that has grown and consolidated over the past quarter-century, particularly in Australia and New Zealand (see, e.g. Kemmis *et al.* 1983: 21, Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162–5). This connection is explicitly made in the *Enhancing Teachers' Learning* module, where we are told:

Critical reflection is often referred to as action research or reflective analysis. This module provides a resource which promotes the use of critical reflection in teachers' work. It includes guidelines about the ways in which teachers can engage in reflective practice in a rigorous and collaborative manner and addresses issues such as selecting an approach to reflective practice, deciding on techniques for collecting evidence, [and] selecting a focus for enquiry. . . . (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 20)

In *Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning*, the invitation to action research is supported by straightforward, practical advice on how to begin. This includes considerations of *basic principles* (finding 'a context, a colleague, an issue'; gathering data; keeping a journal; seeking to effect change; sharing experience; and 'not blaming'), as well as suggestions on how to locate *key questions and processes*: 'What are my practices?', 'What theories are expressed in my practices?'; 'What are the causes?';

'How might I change?'; 'How do we move from "informing" (ourselves and one another) through "confronting" (our practice and the issues we have raised), to "reconstructing" (our philosophies, theories and practices)?' (Hattam *et al.* 1999: 3,6).

This module also, importantly, raises key questions and offers sound advice on the *ethical* issues of action research and school-based curriculum reform and on the need to take full account of the 'micropolitics of the school' (Ball 1987). This advice includes the sage warning that 'when you step out in ways that critical reflection invites you to do, you are exposing yourself and your teaching to some degree of vulnerability' (*ibid.*: 18). The authors' advice here – supported, again, by practical guidance that takes full and appropriate account of the lived realities of school and classroom life – that the best response is 'always to take the line that Critical Reflection is a highly professional way for a teacher to operate' will come as a welcome change to teachers more used to being told how they should be conducting themselves professionally or finding themselves more typically inhabiting a professional world in which 'competencies' or 'standards' are prioritized over personal assessment and evaluation.

Culture, reflection and social reform

By way of offering a taste – and inviting an initial exploration – of the *Teachers' Learning Project* and how it might be used by practising teachers to support action research projects or to contribute to ongoing programmes of professional development, I shall focus on what I take to be two of the most critical, fundamental and challenging of the module titles: *School Culture as the Key to School Reform* (Smyth *et al.* 1999a) and *Making Socially Just Curriculum* (McInerney *et al.* 1999) – two sets of materials which together offer hope and guidance, both practical and theoretical, to beleaguered teachers who feel that they *should* be kicking back against coercive, marginalizing public policy and practices but who are not sure how, when or with whom to do it – or, indeed, quite where to begin.

School Culture as the Key to School Reform makes no apologies for relating issues of culture to issues of power:

We believe it is not possible to talk about school culture without confronting the realities of differences in power, how these are constructed, around what specific issues, and the ways in which groups in schools relate to one another. (Smyth *et al.* 1999a: 5)

Referring to Quantz's notion of cultural and epistemological struggle in fields of power (Quantz 1992: 487), the module reminds us that

Culture . . . involves aspects of disagreement, contest, and multiple voices, all of which are not operating so much in opposition to one another, as trying to give expression to their differences. To speak of culture, therefore, is to refer not to something that is inert or static, but to a struggle among groups and individuals, all of whom are seeking to give meaning to their lives and actions. (Smyth *et al.* 1999a: 7)

This informed, upbeat and fundamentally optimistic understanding of culture may seem a far cry not only from some of the more pessimistic representations of cultural reproduction in schools and classrooms that continue to prosper in some staffrooms (Moore and Edwards 2000), but also from the particular philosophy of culture that underpins such recent developments in the UK as an ethnocentric National Curriculum for England and Wales (Davies 1998) or an overly prescriptive curriculum for initial teacher education in which fundamental issues of culture

are conspicuous by their absence. Far more in tune with Megan Boler's ideal of '[l]earning to live with ambiguity, discomfort and uncertainty' (Boler 1999: 197–8), the definition of culture given here does not *deny* the power and pervasiveness of cultural reproduction in schools, or the difficulty and uncomfotableness involved in managing or resisting it, but is still able to present and promote schools as having the capacity – and indeed the responsibility – for 'contesting ideas' rather than merely seeking to reproduce them (Smyth *et al.* 1999a: 8).

In offering suggestions as to how dominant ideas *can* be challenged – through, initially, a challenge to those ideas as they are embedded in the culture of one's own school – *School Culture as the Key to School Reform* focuses on the three major areas of curriculum, organization and leadership as a way of rendering existing practices and perceptions 'strange' and therefore open to question. In an act of resistance to the restoration of technicist models of pedagogy, management and organization in which schools are encouraged to perceive themselves as little more than 'an agency of the training state', the module's first task is to help teachers to recognize or remind themselves of the insidious development of externally imposed cultures (in particular, various manifestations of the 'enterprise culture') that seek to naturalize themselves at the expense of other cultures that may be more concerned with (for example) issues of personal and social development, spirituality and ethics, collaboration and social and global responsibility. Supported by a useful summary of recent and relevant theory of cultural production and reproduction in education, *School Culture as the Key to School Reform* does not seek to offer 'one-fit' answers or to provide the outlines of oppositional campaigns, but rather to bring teachers back to key issues (centrally, of what education is *for*), to encourage them to believe that there still is a battle to be fought and won and to point them in general terms towards the initial questions they will need to address if teacher involvement in reform is to be raised as a realistic agenda item in the local domain of their institution or education authority. The questions that teachers and schools are invited to ask themselves – suggested as a way of 'auditing curriculum culture' in the individual school – are probing and uncomfortable, even on the printed page:

Whose knowledge counts? Whose views of curriculum are listened to? How are students' lives, experiences and aspirations incorporated into what occurs in schools? How is student progress assessed and reported upon? How are the least advantaged in the school treated? How are externally generated mandates dealt with in the school? Are instances of disruptive activity by students treated as a 'behaviour' problem or as a 'curriculum' issue? Are curriculum activities meaningful for students? (Smyth *et al.* 1999a: 19)

Critical reflection and political action

In the module *Making Socially-Just Curriculum*, McNerney *et al.* (1999) push the consciousness-raising activities of *School Culture as the Key to School Reform* towards encouraging schools to engage in political action (McNerney *et al.* 1999: 3). All schools, they argue – repeating the series' emphases on student-centred learning, effective and appropriate differentiation, and the power of teachers to contribute to and to lead curriculum change – 'should be developing a curriculum response to the social inequalities in the wider society' (*ibid.*).

In what may be seen as an important challenge to the notion of prescriptive, one-fit-for-all national curricula currently in operation in countries like England and Wales (often 'sold' on the basis of equality of access and opportunity), this call to

action is linked to another fundamental philosophy informing the series' overall rationale. That is to say: 'Curriculum which does not respond in a positive way to the particular circumstances and experiences of students is unlikely to make a difference to their educational achievements' (McInerney *et al.* 1999: 1, emphasis added).

The invitation to teachers to embark proactively on curriculum reform may, of course, as the authors are plainly aware, elicit from some teachers what Deborah Britzman has called, in another context, 'statements of defense, or resistances' – reactions, that is, of the kind: 'That's all very well and good but what about this? ... It might be nice in theory, but who has the time?' (Britzman 1998: 10, see also McInerney *et al.* 1999: 27). It might equally elicit complaints, particularly in countries or districts where there is a highly prescriptive and over-managed school curriculum, along the lines of Hargreaves' poignant reminder that:

As long as the existing structures and cultures of teaching are left intact, responding to ... complex and accelerating changes in isolation will create more overload, intensification, guilt, uncertainty, cynicism and burn-out. (Hargreaves 1994: 261, see also Boler 1999: 176–7, 180).

These difficulties are not shied away from by the authors of the *Teachers' Learning Project* (e.g. McInerney *et al.* 1999: 28). At the same time, however, the project argues that schools *can* make a difference, particularly at the local level, and that they frequently do. As the authors argue with reference to points made by Kemmis (1994):

while schools may be able to do little about the distribution of material wealth in society there are plenty of examples from contemporary social movements to show how people in schools have confronted issues to do with gender, the environment, multiculturalism, disability [etc.]. (McInerney *et al.* 1999: 25, see also Moore 1999)

Treading a realistic path between the acknowledgement that school classrooms can be sites of resistance and curriculum development but that teachers are subject to ever-increasing constraints of time and the law, *Making Socially-Just Curriculum* sets out not to 'offer a panacea for the complex issues of social injustice and educational disadvantage which confront teachers on a daily basis in their work' but rather to 'engage teachers in a process of reflective learning about their classroom practices and what it means to develop a more socially-just curriculum in their school' (McInerney *et al.* 1999: 2, emphasis added).

As a modest addition to this first step towards transformative action, the module further encourages teachers and schools 'to investigate ways in which they might advance their vision of socially-just curriculum through coalitions with organisations working for justice in their local districts and the society at large' (*ibid.*, emphases added). Through these two steps, the module seeks to provide teachers with opportunities to fulfil the aim, outlined in *Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning*, of beginning to reaffirm their own views as to what constitutes best practice and to set developmental agendas that support the educational ends that they value and the pedagogies that they see as most appropriate to the achievement of those ends:

As we enter the beginning of the twenty first century, there is confusion and misunderstanding about what constitutes 'good' teaching ... being clear about what it means to be a teacher living and working in the ambiguity, perplexity and contradiction of current times is an important starting point for the reclamation of teaching. Being clear about what is going on in your work and the forces operating to shape it and make it the way it is, is an important part of moving beyond the paralysis of 'being done to' and seeing instead what the alternatives might look like. (Smyth *et al.* 1999b: 1, emphasis added)

The authors' two stages of *curriculum development* reflect the two stages of *teacher action* that underpin every module in the *Teachers' Learning Project*: that is to say, critical reflection leading to political action. In the case of *Making Socially-Just Curriculum*,

critical reflection encourages teachers away from ‘seeing the school as an hermetically sealed and completely isolated social location, dedicated to inculcating ... students into the valued and sanctioned knowledge of society’, towards a heightened understanding of how, when and where:

social inequality visits *their* classrooms and how through their practices their students can connect with the struggles occurring in the community around such issues as allocation of resources, environmental protection and universal benefits for all in education, health and work. (Hattam 1996: 4, quoted in McNerney *et al.* 1999: 22)

In the context of the whole school, such a view resists shifting responsibility for social ills ‘from structural inequalities to individuals, their families and particular social groups’ (McNerney *et al.* 1999: 10), implying a curriculum in which the pathologized are educated away from consenting to their own constructed ‘failings’. This is a view that (Giroux 1985) invites teachers to seek to move away from a paralysing ‘language of despair’ that continues to render schools defensive and reactive in the area of curriculum reform, towards a ‘politics of hope’ (McNerney *et al.* 1999: 22) that involves teachers seeking ways of ‘making hope practical’ (Kenway *et al.* 1994).

Moves towards making socially-just curriculum through this ‘bottom-up’ consciousness-raising and political action are supported in *Making Socially-Just Curriculum* by specific questions for schools and teachers to (re-)address:

- What qualities of citizenship should we emphasize in our schools?
- How can education contribute to the creation of a more democratic and egalitarian society?
- How can schools foster respect for cultural diversity?

These questions are, in turn, supported by specific *strategies* for schools and teachers, such as:

‘elevating social justice on the School Development Plan or Statement of Purpose’;
 ‘conducting an educational audit of the school [to] see how socially-just practices are reflected in curriculum, school decision making structures and classroom learning activities’;
 ‘developing more democratic practices [on the basis that] you can’t do much about injustice unless you model democratic practices (sharing power)’;
 ‘developing critical literacies in all curriculum areas’; and
 ‘developing structures and practices which support teachers’ learning about social justice’. (ibid.: 29)

Buttressing and informing these questions and strategies are three key interlinked characteristics of the *Teachers’ Learning Project* modules: the centrality of teacher, student and community involvement in curriculum development and reform (the ‘whole school’); the prioritization of *inclusiveness* (the importance of involving all voices and taking account of all circumstances in reshaping pedagogy and curriculum, in addition to ensuring that curriculum and pedagogy *themselves* are inclusive); and the emphasis on teachers’ and communities’ active and independent *learning* – that is, another form of recognition of teachers’ own *expertise*.

These three emphases are crucial if projects like the *Teachers’ Learning Project* are to avoid the pitfalls of undermining rather than enhancing teacher confidence, or of critical reflection itself becoming ‘stuck’ at the reflective stage. As Bolter has observed:

The call for ‘critical inquiry’ in the liberal tradition is easily subsumed within the hollow invocations of values of dialogue, democracy and rationality. Deeply rooted in Western conceptions of liberal individualism, this common rhetoric threatens to reduce genuine inquiry to an individualized process with no collective accountability. ... The Socratic admonition to ‘know thyself’ may not lead to self-transformation.

Like passive empathy, self-reflection in and of itself may result in no measurable change or good to others or oneself. (Boler 1999: 177–8)

Boler's recommended pedagogy, which she calls a 'pedagogy of discomfort', begins 'by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs and to examine constructed *self-images* in relation to how one has learned to perceive others'. This inquiry, Boler argues, 'is a *collective, not an individualized, process*' (Boler 1999: 176–7, emphases added).

It is precisely through its emphases on inclusive, whole-school and whole-community involvement, and on what we might call 'risky learning', that the *Teachers' Learning Project*, in an insistent, understated but ultimately reassuring way, offers teachers one means of challenging and contesting what McLaren has called the 'prevailing conceptualizations of what constitutes knowledge and truth and their pedagogical means of attainment' (McLaren 1986: 58). If, to use McLaren's configuration, the Project does this 'steadily' rather than 'vehemently', it is no less effective for that. Indeed, it is, arguably more so, since its invitations to take up a critical or oppositional stance remain firmly rooted in what is possible and reasonable at the local level of action, but that this also suggests possibilities for moving beyond individual subversions to more collective forms of transformative action.

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