

Teachers' work and professional identity: Living a contradiction on the margin

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ABSTRACT: Currently in Victoria, the Government is spending millions of dollars on the implementation of literacy intervention programs in State Schools. This narrative explores a teacher's experiences as she implemented a literacy intervention program at her school, when she was confronted by questions about its value, nature and purpose, as well as challenges to her professional identity.

KEYWORDS: English teaching, literacy intervention programs, mandated reforms, professionalism, professional identity.

What is it about the way teachers' work, in particular, the way they teach and organise their work, that gets in the way of student learning?
(Sachs, 2003, p. 96).

We must get away from training teachers to be simply efficient technicians and practitioners. We need a new vision of what constitutes educational leadership so that we can educate teachers to think critically, locate themselves in their own histories, and exercise moral and public responsibility in their role as engaged critics and transformative intellectuals
(Giroux, 1999, p. 6).

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This afternoon I sat in the library of a secondary school in the southern suburbs of Melbourne with a group of about twenty English *Restart* teachers from different schools. We were there for the final *Restart* literacy meeting for the year. During the meeting a teacher shared with us some good news: "After two years of lobbying the school administration, I've finally got a room for my *Restart* kids."

A spontaneous round of applause. Another teacher observed: "I teach my kids in the small *Restart* group and they're terrific. However, when I teach the same kids in the mainstream English group, I have a really difficult time with them. Henry is really disruptive and I don't know what to do."

The regional representative chairing the meeting volunteered a suggestion: "Perhaps we can share ways that we can improve literacy practices across the curriculum that can help increase engagement for kids like this."

At this point I found it difficult to quell an immense sense of dissatisfaction with her response. What was all this discussion doing other than pointing the finger again at teachers? I was being made to feel that as a teacher I was individually responsible for how well or poorly students performed – as if the classroom were a vacuum unaffected by the outside world. If we couldn't produce data that showed 90% improvement by the end of the year, then it was clearly our fault. I raised my hand and ventured:

"We can talk *ad nauseum* about strategies to improve literacy practices. Yet this is never going to address the reality that our practices are dictated to us by the concrete

conditions that we work in. Instead of focussing on ways that we, experienced English/literacy teachers, can improve our literacy practices to improve student learning outcomes, why don't we take it as a given that between us we have a rich repertoire of practices to draw on and, instead, begin a discussion that really explores the factors that are inhibiting us from successfully delivering this \$81.6 million dollar project? Instead of applauding the fact that it's taken Lucy two years to get a room for her *Restart* class, why aren't we asking: Why has it taken this long? Why did she have to lobby her school administrators on her own? And instead of the regional representative pointing the finger at teachers again by asking if we can suggest 'good' literacy practices to improve engagement amongst disruptive students like Henry, as if we're doing something wrong, why can't we be honest with each other and admit that small classes *do* make a difference and that they should be the norm rather than the exception, that we need and don't have classrooms in which to teach *Restart*, and that some students are being taught in what can only be described as broom-cupboards, that we have to beg for money for resources out of Principals' 'discretionary funds', and that we haven't been given adequate professional development to support the implementation of these initiatives."

My heart was pounding, but I continued.

"Ask any Technology teacher whether it's possible for 24-plus students to make anything with less than half an inventory of equipment in working order. Let's ask the Maths teacher, who teaches three of her six periods on a Monday out of a Technology room, how she feels at the end of the day. Do any of us feel like teaching or learning when we're in fetid portables on stinking hot days or sitting in rooms with wet carpets? Let's ask the students how they feel about taking on the challenge of *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene iii, as they sit cold and damp in rooms with mouldy carpets, because roofs leak and because there's no proper shelter from the wind and rain at recess. How do PE teachers manage to carry out ball competitions on unmarked, boggy, uneven fields? How can these kids, whose parents can't afford computers, be a part of the 'Information Age' when their school's network is 'down' the first five weeks of term and when they have to pay for the right to print their work? Adolescence is awkward and uncomfortable enough without also having to cope with no soap and toilet paper in the public toilets."

After an initial deafening silence, the onslaught began. One teacher said: "We're talking about literacy practices. What you've said is very political and if that's the direction that this discussion is going, then I am going to leave."

Another teacher dismissed it all by calling out: "These are hardy perennials."

At which point the regional representative rang the death knell on the discussion: "I don't believe that this is the correct forum to consider these matters. I would be happy to discuss the difficulties you are having at your school with you in person after the meeting."

I thanked her for being generous with her time, pointing out to her that I did not believe that these problems were specific to my school setting and that I had wanted to share these difficulties with other teachers of English/literacy to try to understand them and perhaps look for practical solutions. I was then told to talk to my union. The meeting ended with the following message:

"Data, data, data... If you suspect that some kids are not going to have improved DART test results in November, please let me know in advance because I need to

know the stories behind the data that isn't good. If students are going to fail, let me know if they're students who haven't made significant improvements."

After the meeting the regional representative explained her position to me in the following way: "I'm a bureaucrat. It's my role to implement government policy, not critique it."

LABELLING

This journal entry captures my confusion and frustration, as I struggled to understand the role that I was supposed to be playing as an *English/literacy* state-school teacher in Victoria, Australia, who is part of the State Government's *Restart* initiative, a state-wide literacy intervention program aimed at addressing the issue of literacy achievement in the middle years. Millions of dollars have been pumped into schools to support the implementation of this program which has been heralded as providing funding to "schools in greatest need...to employ additional literacy teachers to help Year 7 students who are at risk of lagging behind", thereby enabling those schools to achieve "improved educational outcomes".¹

I have italicised the words *English/literacy* because it is a label with which I remain uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. This is how *Restart* names me, but it is not the way I would have chosen to describe myself when I first became an English teacher. When I first began teaching, I felt that my work was as much to do with fostering the imagination as with drilling and skilling students to pass standardised tests. I was driven by a belief that all students, whatever their "literacy" abilities, could share in the delights of exploring the complexities of language and meaning. But the longer I teach the more uncomfortable I feel about the state's version of my role. Not only do I find it difficult to reconcile the government's rhetoric with the realities that I encounter in the classroom on a daily basis. I am also increasingly uncomfortable with the expectation that I will mouth this rhetoric without asking questions. I am obliged to come to terms with the realization that my sense of professional identity as an English teacher puts me at odds with the official curriculum and policy context in which I am obliged to operate.

Over the past year I have worked alongside English teachers, and together we have fumbled our way through the planning and implementation of *Restart*. I write "fumbled" to dispel any notion that our experience of *Restart* has been orderly, cohesive, comprehensive, without incident. In fact, the word "fumbled" aptly captures the disorder, uncertainty, doubt, exasperation, disbelief, anger, surprise, delight, fun and exhaustion that I have experienced as I have worked with other English teachers, students and management, not only to make sense of my role as a *Restart* literacy teacher, but to reconcile it with what *had* been my understanding of my role as an English teacher.

There are many contradictions in government education policy about who I am as an English teacher and what my professional responsibilities entail. The policy

¹ See Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). (2001). *Education Times*, 9(20). 1. This newsletter is published by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and distributed to all state schools in Victoria.

environment in which we are operating is an extraordinarily complex one. On the one hand my professional knowledge and autonomy is being enthusiastically celebrated by the state government with the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching – an initiative which is similar to other initiatives around the globe designed, supposedly to affirm the professional status of teachers. Yet, on the other hand, I am expected to implement “top-down” reforms, such as *Restart* and *Access to Excellence* – reforms that define what I “know” and “do” as a “professional” in narrowly cognitive, psychologistic terms, and completely ignore the social context of human relationships in which every teacher operates.

What version of my professional self am I expected to apply in this instance? The self that has come to believe that English is about critical thought and the exploration of the endless imaginative and intellectual possibilities that are opened up by words and language, or the self that is being told that language is a series of abstracted “stress patterns”, “letter clusters”, “word levels” and “word recognition charts”? Why am I caught between these two ideologically distinct views of English? Perhaps most importantly, how do I reconcile the ethic of care that is part of my role as an English teacher, involving sensitivity to the needs and values of my students and the communities from which they come, with my duties as a *Restart* English literacy coordinator to test these students, tabulate their results, and reduce their aspirations and values to “improved outcomes”?

MEDIATING POLICY

At this point my narrative might easily mutate into a familiar tale about dedicated teachers banding together to give a small group of students a better experience of school than that to which they had been accustomed. This would be a story of teachers who *mediate* policy imposed from above by transforming it into something professionally palatable by drawing upon their own educational vision, professional knowledge and experience.

Towards the end of the program, when we asked those kids who participated to describe their feelings, I was struck by the positive way some of them described the program:

I hated reading in the normal English class. When it was my turn I use to say, “Can I go to the toilet?” When it came to my shot again I use to say, “Can I get a drink?” We started the first and last ten minutes of class reading. I use to be late. I still hate reading, not as much in ATEX² (*Restart*). It’s not as embarrassing. I use to be scared of computers, hate typing but now I’m better than my mum. I just use to get annoyed with them. I can’t find the letter I would scan through it and miss it and then have to go back. I prefer to write. Everyone thinks it’s cool but to me it takes too long. But I’m not scared of the computers now. I’m not embarrassed to read in here. Two teachers....it’s easier...say, if you were working with Sami, Ms Adeline can come over and help me. Better than English because if you make a mistake nobody cares. Like, no one will tease you...or if they do it’s in a funny way. Not really tease you.

² At Year 7 the literacy program was called “*Restart*”. At Years 8, 9 and 10 the literacy program was called “Access to Excellence” (ATEX). Early on in the year *Restart* and non-*Restart* students had labelled the Year 7 program the “Retard” program and because of the stigma attached to this program, the *Restart* students preferred to refer to their class as the “ATEX” class.

Being in a small group has made it easier to write and learn. It's not as noisy as other classes. It's fun cause we get to use computers a lot and now I know how to use them. If I wasn't in ATEX I wouldn't want to do English. This class is easier than the normal English class cause we don't read harder books and we don't have to do all this work in one day.

Barney – Year 7 Restart student

However, rather than treating this comment as a “good news story”, it is possible to place it in another – more critical – perspective. The distinct ways in which teachers practise and think about students and their work are important social practices because they determine what is “normal” and “not normal” in schooling and hence shape the manner in which students perceive themselves and their abilities. (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 6) The words in Barney's response convey a sense of how the *Restart* program has not only mediated his learning experiences and relationships, but has actually also shaped his physical working environment. For these *Restart* students their mainstream English class, the place where they “can't get help”, where they “get teased” for making “mistakes”, “get in trouble”, can't work because of the noise and “hate reading”, has become the “normal” English class and the *Restart* class the “not so normal” space that they now inhabit.

Popkewitz (1998) argues that “normalising” tendencies inhere within the ways that teachers think and act toward students. Although the *Restart* program is supposedly about addressing the literacy needs of disadvantaged students, it is also positioning these same students as “other” by situating them outside the mainstream and categorising their literacy abilities as deficient, “not normal”. This is evident in the words the students have chosen to describe themselves as learners.

Yes, I want to do this class next year because it's cool, because I get to learn a lot. Like, I didn't use to know how to read properly. Now I do. I didn't read as much. I don't write properly. Now I do...kind of. Before I was in ATEX I had to read *Hatchet* but I didn't understand it. I use to wag it and Barney use to hide behind this tall guy. Cause no one likes reading because you get yelled at and they tell you, “You said it wrong, repeat it, spell it properly three times and stay in at lunch!” It's interesting in here. I learn new things everyday...usually you can ask my parents that I don't read as much until I came to ATEX. I didn't do as much work until I came to ATEX...because the teachers are nice and listen to us. If you go to say something you get told to “sit!”. We're always being told to sit down, so teachers don't have enough time to listen and help us, but she's got enough time to yell at us. I would feel devastated if I had to go back to doing normal classes...in here I just come to class and I know what I have to do on the computer. If I need help, I ask. *Felix – Year 7 Restart Student*

Again, despite the positive spin that Felix gives to the Year 7 literacy program, his response still reflects the production and reproduction of certain ways of being a “successful” learner that these Year 7 *Restart* students have struggled to identify with. The words that Felix uses to describe himself as a learner, “I didn't use to know how to read properly”, “I didn't read as much”, “I don't write properly” indicate that comparatively, not only has he learnt to see himself as a “failure” at school, but that he locates the difficulties he has in the classroom with himself rather than with the mainstream curriculum or with the ways that schools operate to reproduce social and cultural advantage and disadvantage.

This is not to deny that Year 7 *Restart* students (the majority, in fact) were saying that they had “enjoyed” being in this class and cited: less students, more teachers, more teacher help and attention, “easier” work, less noise and disruptive behaviour, feeling less embarrassed, working with computers and “fun”, as reasons for wishing to remain in the program the following year. This was in contrast with our interactions with one of two individuals who initially reacted strongly to the testing regime that we were obliged to impose. “I ain’t doin’ another fuckin’ test for you!” yelled Travis, as he sat back defiantly in his chair, arms crossed over chest, legs spread-eagled in front of him. Even though these two students remained strongly resistant to the program, others obviously enjoyed the space that we provided them with.

WHAT WE DID

At the very beginning of the program we sensed that we were forming a kind of community as we wandered around the schoolyard like gypsies, our *Restart* students trailing behind us, looking for a room to teach in because the library and computer rooms were booked and the students didn’t like the room we’d been allocated for *Restart*, labelling it “the broom-cupboard” (one of the “triumphs” we had later in the semester is that we were allocated our own room).

We started off the year by focusing on language drills and grammar exercises such as comprehension exercises, spelling tests, cloze exercises, and so on, based on short stories. However, this narrow focus on literacy skills seemed to emphasise their weaknesses rather than their potential. With my colleagues, we were eventually able to modify the work the students were required to do, enabling them to experiment with multi-modal texts. This made a gradual, but significant difference to the students’ attitude towards the work they were doing, themselves and towards us. (Especially when their friends thought what they were doing looked too “cool” to be real work and started to ask us if they could “join up”.)

Having three experienced *Restart* teachers (Vince: English /Information Technology, Adeline: LOTE/Library and myself) collaborating on the Year 7 curriculum made a significant difference to the range and variety of texts we made available to students. Thanks to Vince, one of the first “cool” tasks we asked students to attempt was an instructional piece of writing using MS Word, Powerpoint and animated Clipart on “How to create a ‘*Simpsons* Powerpoint animation”. Once Vince demonstrated what we wanted them to do, students were so keen to work on the assignment that they would actively look around the school for a “free” computer room on our behalf in case we hadn’t been able to book one.

In order to successfully complete the animation, they needed to be able to negotiate different pathways on the computer by reading and following instructions on how to insert “new” and “duplicate” slides, how to insert animations from files, how to animate the images by using the “timing” function, how to create and edit text boxes, and how to include the *Simpsons* feature soundtrack so that it “scrolls” and plays for as long as their animation. Some were more successful with the technology than others, and as I was learning with and from them, I felt a sense of exploration as students produced slide shows with music that ranged from all the “animation”

packed onto a couple of slides to students who completed up to 35 slides. There was no sense of right and wrong. A lot of the time students were just becoming more familiar with technology they are supposed to know how to operate in this dot.com age, but that most of time they don't have access to from home or school.

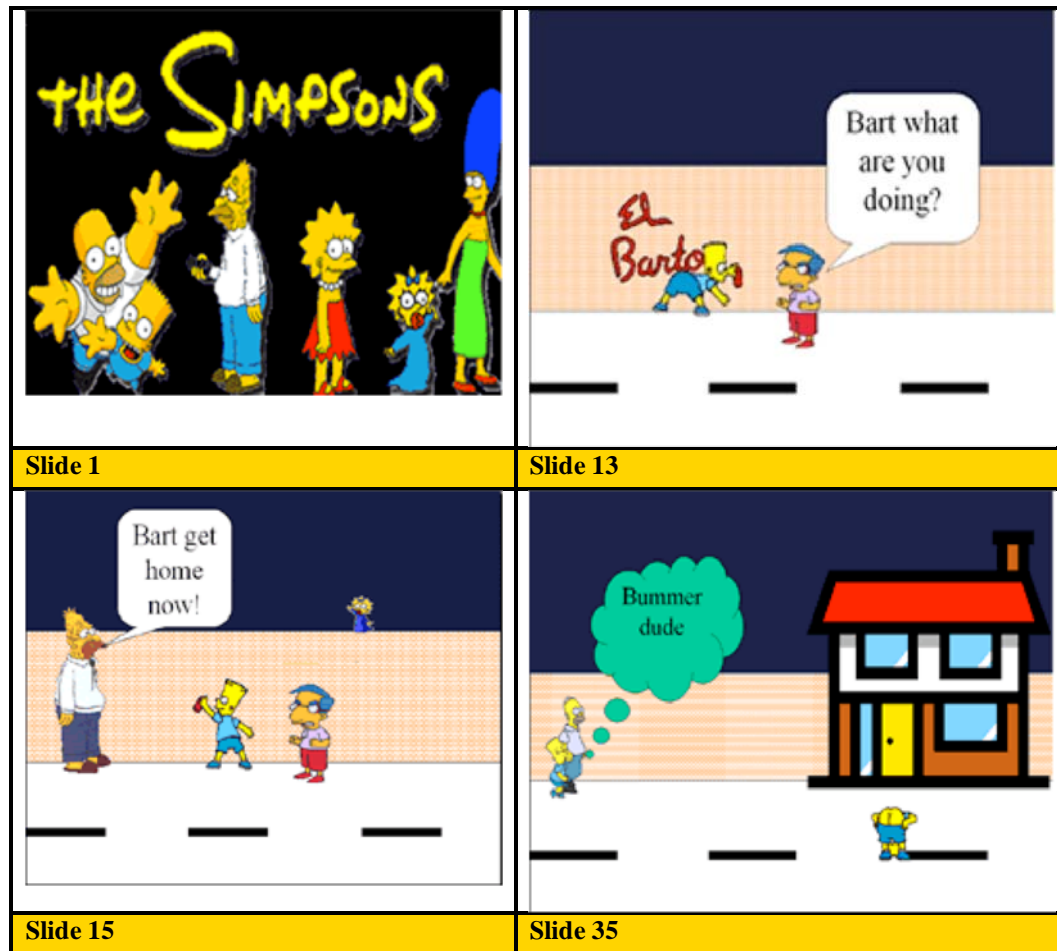


Figure 1. Copy of Slides from *Restart Student's Simpsons* Powerpoint animation

Another task that we moved onto was “The Grammar Poem”. Naturally, this exercise didn't create quite the stir that the *Simpsons* task did, but with their “media” experience behind them and encouragement to explore different ways of presenting their work, some students forgot that they hated reading and writing and quickly created some interesting grammar poems as “webpages”. Objections to using a dictionary – “Miss I can't even spell, how am I suppose to use a dictionary?” – were soon forgotten as they furiously searched for verbs, adverbs, nouns and prepositions and good places to put them in order to come up with the dirtiest “gramma” poem.





Figure 2. Copy of *Restart* student's Grammar Poems

For many of these students, schooling has mostly been about “not fitting in”. Even though throughout their years of schooling they’ve been told that they have “progressed” to the next year level, they have found that their literacy practices and ways of being and seeing in the world have become increasingly out of synch with the literacy practices that the school system values and believes they should be able to demonstrate through, reading, writing, listening and speaking. The “*Simpsons* Powerpoint animation”, “Grammar Poems”, the “*Shrek*”³ and “Kidnapped” assignments were projects that we would use in our mainstream Englishes classes. Instead of seeing their abilities as “remedial” and marginalizing them further by forcing them to make sense of schooling through conventional text exercises that focus on what they don’t know, we wanted to privilege their literacy practices, their ways of seeing and being in the world, by giving them opportunities to explore their potentials, by not “dumbing down” their work.

At the end of the program, many of the students expressed their reluctance to go back into the mainstream – a sentiment I understood, as we all knew that their “improved outcomes” (and they *were* “improved outcomes” according to *Restart* criteria) were no guarantee that they would thereafter be able to negotiate the social world of the school and all the pressures that it imposed.

CONCLUSION

However, I refuse to end with a “success story”. I continue to be haunted by aspects of the journal entry I used to launch this narrative. Why did my colleagues turn on me at the regional meeting? Why were my concerns despatched with such haste into the “too hard” basket? Is there something about teachers that means that the harder

³ “*Shrek*” and “*Kidnapped*” were two popular Year 7 English projects, that we transformed into web based assignment using MS Frontpage. These “projects” gave students the flexibility to choose their tasks, work at their own pace and to work independently or in groups. Both assignments gave students the opportunity to use a variety of programs to present their work, such as: a relationship chart using MS Inspiration; a photo album using MS Powerpoint; a brochure using Publisher; or “Wanted” posters using Word.

it is to make something work – perhaps because it is unworkable or an insult to our professionalism – the more committed we become to it and the small gains we make in adverse conditions?

The fact is, I don't want to be lauded as an expert teacher, when I'm sweating blood to make educational policies and practices “work” that, in my heart, I don't believe in. My question to those colleagues whose stance left me hurt and alienated is, Why as a profession are we allowing ourselves to be positioned as technicians. What *is* it that stops us collectively voicing our protests against the way such literacy intervention programs like *Restart* mediate our relationships with our students, and pose incredible difficulties for us when it comes to establishing worthwhile social relationships with them, characterised by mutual respect. I want to know why my concerns at the regional meeting were labelled as “political”, when my understanding of effective teaching is that it cannot be *other* than political?

Does the answer lie with the teaching profession itself, which is becoming more compliant, as professionalism becomes more and more identified with the achievement of outcomes narrowly defined and mandated by some authority or other further up the managerial chain? Or are the causes more deeply embedded in changes occurring in Australian society at large?

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