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In celebration of teachers

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In celebration of teachers

Jenny Overton reports on data gathered from early childhood teachers about changes in education. While highlighting issues of concern with regard to power-based relationships in schools, it also celebrates the positives.

Teaching is the best and worst of jobs. Tony Robinson's TV series about *Worst Jobs in History* springs to mind. No seriously folks, as teachers we know those good and bad days, and years. It's the celebration of what's great that keeps our noses to the grindstone. We need to celebrate ourselves, our successes and our potential for greatness. The 'greatness' of our teaching, of the positive influence we can have with our students and the 'greatness' of our students.

It struck me when analysing data from my recently completed PhD—interviews with early childhood teachers on the effects of ongoing educational change in Tasmanian schools—that teachers are seriously concerned about a huge range of issues. The major ones that repeatedly surfaced in my data included:

- concerns about policies, programs and documents that are developed
- changes in expectations—what and how teachers are supposed to perform and the associated merit pay issues
- age, aging, and length of teaching service
- transfers
- leadership—in schools and the department
- changes in professional support structures
- societal changes
- behaviour management issues.

There were more but these were the most significant.

As data analysis continued, the nature of the teachers' relationships with the agents of the education system itself—senior staff, principal, district and branch personnel—became more striking. These relationships, although based on unequal power bases, provided insights into the ways that teachers manage and cope with the system and its representatives. There were also the supportive and empowering relationships with fellow teachers. Teachers negotiate and work with and around amazingly complex sets of contexts. They have a strong sense of who they are, what they will and won't tolerate, what they understand, know, believe and value in school, education and students. Their sense of personal and professional identity, although seriously challenged in many contexts, remained one characterised by professional integrity and dedication.

There were a range of incidents and examples used by the teachers in this study that evidenced the existence of strong networks of power in schools. These came in the sense of:

- imposed power—the education system's explicit and implicit expectations or actions and attitudes about teaching practice
- disempowerment of teachers—intended actions or inadvertent implications that resulted in teachers sensing their inherent powerlessness against the educational system and its decisions
- and empowerment of self (teachers) and others—the ways in which these teachers sought empowerment for themselves

and their colleagues.

Power issues created conflicts for these teachers, but the data provided no evidence about overt confrontations. Rather, these teachers were quiet in their acceptance of the power-based contexts and when driven to action did so in non-confrontational ways.

Teachers living in the environment are often unaware of the three levels or dimensions of power.

Imposed power

Teachers stated they were required by the education system to act or behave in certain ways in the course of their employment as teachers. This imposition of power was usually implemented through senior staff or the principal, through the system's expectations of the teachers, and through the use of 'research' and 'statistics' as a mechanism for accountability. The teachers also acknowledged the political nature of the imposition of power, not necessarily blaming the education system itself, but seeing the bigger, political and societal connections as well.

Disempowerment

Incidents of disempowerment took several forms. There was the more passive devaluing and lack of appreciation of the teachers and their work. This was a matter of degree, with some incidents being more obvious in their disempowering effects than others. There was evidence that teachers were disempowered because of the lack of teaching experience, which subsequently affected their level of confidence about tackling issues of power. This was not always in the form of tightly imposed power, but certainly in forms of power about which teachers were conscious. There were intentional and sometimes unintentional incidents that actively undermined teachers, and the sense of value that they attributed to their work, through the specific actions of persons in power. The lack of provision of resources—material or personnel—to support teaching and learning was another way in which teachers felt they were disempowered. Without the support of tangible resources or personnel, teachers experienced a sense of disempowerment. Finally, there was the lack of support from the principal or senior staff within the school that caused teachers to feel disempowered. These aspects of disempowerment were closely linked to the issue of how worthwhile or valued these teachers felt.

Empowerment

These teachers indicated a strong desire for greater levels of support. They talked about a range of mechanisms and strategies that were used in this quest. It would be difficult to determine from the data whether these teachers were reacting in a defiant way: there was an element of resistance and defiance, but not a pervading sense of it. For the most part, these teachers' desire for empowerment appeared to emanate from their response to treatment by the educational system. It had a self-protective and reactionary element to it. They were able to provide measured educational explanations for what they considered should or ought to be happening. In order to affect changes to what they saw as intolerable situations, they needed to act. In seeking redress in certain contexts, they used mechanisms through which they anticipated greater empowerment in their working lives. Few of these instances were overt conflicts. They were generally conflicts about an individual's opinion or position on educational matters, about which the education system had acted or failed to act. Their response usually took the form of more passive and subtle strategies to work around the conflicts rather than utilising a direct, confrontational style.

What can we celebrate about these power-related observations?

Firstly, I am heartened that teachers are concerned about a wide range of changes and contexts in their teaching lives. I want to acknowledge and encourage those who are professionally and personally challenged by such contexts, and celebrate that teachers are thinking, critically reflecting on and hopefully being proactive in their concerns. Concerns without action amount to whinging; concerns with a plan of action, no matter how seemingly small, amount to potential for positive change.

Secondly I want to celebrate the 'professional' way in which these teachers approached their issues and concerns. These concerns were not mere whims or flights of fancy. Teachers were able to clearly articulate their concerns in professionally and educationally sound terms. They were also clear about their personal and professional boundaries—things that they would and would not tolerate about the terms of their work lives.

And thirdly I want to acknowledge and celebrate those teachers who were empowering those around them. The raft of forms of collegial support—personal, spoken encouragements, social support networks, supporting professional organisations and union engagement—demonstrated a positive level of personal and professional encouragement that countered the potentially damaging effects that teaching can have for some teachers in some contexts. This empowerment—for teachers

themselves or for those around them—acts in some small way as an inoculation against some of the disempowerment that teachers can be exposed to in and through the actions of the educational system.

So raise a glass and celebrate the greatness of the teaching that we do, the greatness of our colleagues and the support they give, the greatness of the challenges and our professional responses to those challenges and remind ourselves that it is a great job—most of the time!



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