TITLE:

A reflective journey! Why the study of teacher evaluation?

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A reflection in a mirror is an exact replica of what is in front of it.
Reflection in professional practice, however, gives back not what it is, but
what might be, an improvement on the original. (Biggs, 1999)

This article refers to the researcher's personal interest in teacher evaluation. I strongly
believe that the arguments presented here are appropriately situated as they provide
the reader with a deeper understanding of my motives in direct relation to the
contentious subject of teacher evaluation.

I argue the fact that, although much has been written about teacher evaluation, there is
little evidence in the literature to suggest that significant efforts have been made to
address and rectify the fears, concerns and expectations of evaluation experienced by
teachers.

Further, my experiences of teaching and evaluation were characterised by autocratic
systems which deeply 'damaged' my life and the lives of many other teachers.
Towards the latter years of my teaching career, maturity and self-reflection instilled in
me a desire to champion the cause of teachers. One area of teachers' work that
warranted urgent attention above many others was teacher evaluation. I began to set
the groundwork to conduct research in this rather contentious area. Unfortunately, the
then political and economic situation did not provide an opportunity for me to
contribute to this area of research in South Africa where I had lived for a period of 38
years. It was for this reason, coupled with the fact that I was accepted to study under
the supervision of Professor John Smyth, that I chose to undertake further research of
teacher evaluation in South Australia.

My initial readings on teacher evaluation in South Australia shocked me. The
situation here, in a first world country, appeared little different in many respects from
that in South Africa, a third world country. Both countries seem to be plagued by the
same contentious issues in teacher evaluation, namely:

- Contemporary trends in education emphasising a move toward the self-managing school. Within this framework, there is a policy problem of devising a teacher evaluation system consistent with this trend.

- The absence of significant research efforts to address and rectify the fears, concerns, and expectations of evaluation experienced by teachers.

- The question of autonomy. The devolution of power to schools does not necessarily mean that schools have now become totally autonomous. There is decentralisation of authority, but it does not guarantee teacher autonomy. The powers and functions of schools are subject to many restrictions which still have very strong elements of centralisation

- The notion of a teacher. The teacher must be seen as a professional and not merely as a technician. Teaching is too important to be left to the technicians. Teacher professionalism must be reconstructed in ways that go beyond a narrow focus on skills, techniques and competencies

- Teachers' voices. Traditional educational research efforts have taken teachers' work and teachers' voices for granted. The research literature illustrates that teachers have been inadequately represented or silenced concerning their experiences and their ideas for reform of teacher evaluation

- Rhetoric and practice. Departmental policy documents contain much theory and too little focus on how to put theory into practice. As a result, interpretation of text becomes open-ended and debatable.

These contentious issues evident in South Australian teachers' work, like that in South Africa, for all its varying characteristics, are alike in that, in the past decade, they have seen changes in few sectors of their societies as great as those that have occurred in teacher evaluation. As I have mentioned previously, teachers in South Australia are also being 'damaged' by the above mentioned issues but not to the extent that South African teachers were during the apartheid regime. However, the fact still remains that the former are being 'damaged'. Unlike their colleagues in South Africa, who were subject to 'oppression', 'degradation', 'humiliation', 'brutalization', 'supremacy', and 'alienation', South Australian teachers are now subject to, amongst other influences, 'deskilling', 'an intensification of work',

'increased levels of surveillance', 'the closing down of spaces for dissent', 'an institutional silencing of teachers' voices' and 'the abandonment about "education and social justice" and affirmative action' (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000).

These issues are indeed controversial and warrant attention. All stakeholders in education must engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue in order to address these issues. Failure to do so will most certainly result in the further professional demise of teachers. Having been subject to disheartening experiences of teaching and evaluation, I sympathise with teachers who are experiencing the same. It is for this reason that I chose to uncover teachers' perceptions of teacher evaluation policy (performance management) in South Australia. The rationale for this approach is to ascertain what teachers are really saying about performance management from 'within', thereby providing a more complete understanding of teachers' work. By drawing on these views, it is hoped that this will act as a catalyst to improve teachers' work, more so in the arena of teacher evaluation.

Both, in South Africa and in South Australia, it is commonplace that progressive and 'left' analyses of educational policy and practice are strong on critique but less than convincing in presenting practicable alternatives. I am of the opinion that these imbalances can be addressed by asking pertinent questions like: What would a progressive reforming of teacher evaluation policy for the twenty-first century look like? On what principles should it be founded? How would it be developed? Pursuing critical and substantiative answers to these questions would certainly foster a much needed greater debate in the arena of teacher evaluation. This would put the focus much more in the direction of redefining the boundaries surrounding this issue. It would also serve to begin the process of providing teachers with the necessary knowledge needed to defend their stances against those controlling their work. In this instance, an inquiry of the nature described above would reveal the precise manner in which teachers in South Australia mediate the present evaluation policy of performance management currently being imposed upon them. In essence, the aim of my research endeavours was an attempt to address the issues mentioned above.

I also argue that a reformist teacher evaluation policy must also take due account of Australia's material situation. By this I mean, not only its economic and industrial needs, but its social, political and cultural dimensions. I am acutely aware of the tensions that arise in pedagogic work, as political prescriptions and budgetary responsibilities are set against educational objectives. Coupled with my observation of what is currently happening to teachers' work in South Australia, there seems to be a marked tendency to 'restrict' teachers' work. However, whilst conceding that the freedom of teachers is being restricted, this does not necessarily mean that teachers must accept narrow instrumental and human capital approaches to teacher education and the managerialist and economic rationalist assumptions associated with them. Lack of freedom should not be synonymous with lack of resistance. In fact, I advocate that teachers should resist top-down evaluation policies because:

> Resistance to change is not all bad, or always obstruction to reform. Resistance often serves a constructive purpose and is frequently an appropriate response to a situation, especially when it is a symptom of deeper problems. (Janas, 1998, p. 2)

To elaborate, it was only through resistance, for example, the Soweto Riots, that Blacks in South Africa laid the foundation for freedom. It was only through resistance that Blacks broke down the shackles of oppression. In the context of teacher evaluation, teacher resistance to autocratic and top-down evaluation policies can facilitate an ongoing dialogue between the various parties: teachers in the field, their employers and the communities of interest in which teachers have to operate. Resistance opens up possibilities for a reformed teacher evaluation policy which should encourage diversity of provision and flexibility of content and structure. Failure to resist imposed evaluation policies will only lead to the continuation of policies, like those based on narrow prescriptive Fordist lines where the desired goal is multiskilling and designed to supposedly provide flexible teachers for some form of post-Fordist future. In this situation, individual institutions have less steering power. This in turn reinforces the notion that teachers are technicians whose job it is to manage instructional materials and methods (Carlson, 1987; Apple, 1995), thereby bringing to question the purpose of teacher evaluation.

Another issue for concern is associated with policy texts. It could be argued that departmental documents contain too much management theory and too little focus on

how to put these into practice. As a result of this serious flaw, policy texts are open to a multitude of interpretations. Take, for example, the situation in South Africa: the Development Appraisal System was introduced by the newly elected democratic government as a 'progressive' form of teacher evaluation. However, the policy text was 'open' to countless interpretations. The end result was that individual schools chose to interpret the policy to their advantage. In South Australia, a similar situation exists. Brown (1998, p. 3) informs us that the performance management policy designed to evaluate the work of teachers relies on the 'extent to which those responsible for taking action are able to exercise creative agency in formulating their responses to the text of the policy'. It must be remembered that teachers are interested in acquiring informative and innovative knowledge. This starts with the idea that knowledge should be useful and that knowledge is useful in understanding issues of power. In one sense, this knowledge is organic to the teaching situation; it is ingrown in the lived experiences of teachers; its origins are the felt needs of teachers and their students. Useful knowledge begins with personal experience and the circumstances through which it evolved, resulting in empowerment. Empowerment is the effective and practical application of really useful knowledge to create better circumstances for teachers' work. I most certainly endorse this viewpoint.

It is for the above reasons that I want to contribute to research in the area of teachers' work in South Australia in a way that will enable teachers to voice their concerns and apprehensions about the contentious issues surrounding teacher evaluation. Having being a 'voiceless' teacher in South Africa, I now hope to uncover, capture and amplify the voices of teachers in relation to the issue of teacher evaluation as policy enabling them to become active participants in this process. I firmly believe that teachers in South Australia have greater avenues for redress open to them and they should exploit these to the maximum. Also, I hope to demonstrate how and in what ways teachers have been inadequately represented, or systematically silenced, in traditional research efforts in this area.

Further, I also want to try and illuminate the crisis in teacher evaluation as a democratic process, and in doing so raise consciousness to the need for significant reform in this area. I hope to achieve this through a partial critical ethnographic research method that aims to be empowering, reflective, rigorous, sensitive and

responsible, grounded in critical theory and conducive to a research process that is somewhat more accessed and easily understood.

Ultimately, I hope that my research endeavours will provide at least the beginnings with which to stimulate thinking and debate around the goals, content and methods of teacher evaluation that are more respectful of teachers.

As a point of departure, I would like to state that I use this article as a 'relay' (du Gay, 1996, p. 65). This point needs further elaboration. According to du Gay (1996), the language of enterprise has resulted in technologies of regulation that are designed to promote the concept of 'excellence' in workers. 'Excellence plays the role of "relay" between objectives that are economically desirable and those that are personally seductive; "teaching the arts of self-realization that will enhance employees as individuals as well as workers"' (Rose, 1989, cited in du Gay, 1996, p. 64). As a result, employees, in this case teachers, are now subjected to technologies of power in the quest for excellence. For du Gay (1996, p. 64), these technologies of power 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject'. My experiences of teaching and evaluation, clearly illustrate this point. These technologies of power appear on those occasions (my personal experiences of evaluation) to have been implemented primarily as a means of oppression and had little or no bearing on excellence. The present situation in teacher evaluation is somewhat different, as I will explain below.

The dramatic changes due to forces of economic rationalism has resulted in teacher evaluation being conceived as a 'policy relay' by which the state enacts its performativities. Embedded in the push for excellence, as discussed above, is the issue of 're-imagining of organisational identities' (du Gay, 1996, p. 119). If one has to argue that the school has become 'a place where productivity is to be enhanced, customers' needs satisfied, quality service guaranteed, flexibility enhanced and creative innovation fostered' (du Gay, 1996, p. 119), then the repercussions for teachers become obvious. According to du Gay (1996, p. 145), through a variety of technologies and practices, teachers are now compelled to become 'enterprising subjects: that is, as individuals who calculate about themselves and work upon themselves in order to better themselves; in other words, as people who live their lives as "an enterprise of the self"'. Thus, in conceiving teacher evaluation as being a

'policy relay' between the state and teachers, then it comes as no surprise to find teachers engaging in what Foucault (1988, p. 18) terms ' technologies of the self'. According to Foucault (1988), the new technologies of the self:

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (cited in du Gay, p. 138)

However, it must be borne in mind that these new technologies of the self are enacted differently by individual teachers. Some teachers might experience this 'policy relay' in a 'counter-hegemonic' way; others might ignore it, undermine it, sabotage it, reframe it, or even endorse it.

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