

## Telling Stories: My work as a literacy intervention teacher

BELLA ILLESCA  
*Monash University, Melbourne*

*ABSTRACT: The following text is a “narrative inquiry” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) in which I present an account of my experiences as an English teacher working in an Australian public secondary school. I explore the ways in which my beliefs as an English teacher conflicted with my role as a Literacy Co-ordinator/teacher and how – even though I may have consciously questioned and resisted performing certain ideological work, such as administering standardised tests and sorting students into remedial groups – there was still a sense in which government policies mediated my professional practice, transforming it into something with which I remained deeply at odds. My aim is not just to provide an empirical account of how students and teachers experienced these literacy initiatives, but to capture the dominant ideology that is shaping education at the current moment. I do this by examining the Victorian government school publication, Education Times, specifically to demonstrate how the rhetoric of this official publication shaped my professional practices and knowledge as an English teacher. Through this narrative I interrogate taken-for-granted understandings about what counts as “knowledge” in an age of increasing accountability.*

*KEYWORDS: Narrative inquiry, story-telling, English language, literacy, professional identity, professional knowledge*

### INTRODUCTION

Recent managerialist reforms in public education in Australia are radically transforming the professional landscape in which we work. Schools, teachers and their students find themselves operating within a “performance management” culture that is prescribing very partial versions of what their students need to know and be able to do in order to meaningfully participate in the “knowledge economy”. Here I construct an account of my experiences as a secondary school English teacher in an Australian public school, when I was given responsibility, along with a team of colleagues, for implementing two state government literacy intervention programs. I investigate the tensions and contradictions that I felt as an English teacher when I attempted to address the literacy “needs” of students identified as “at risk” via “conduit-delivered” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) government policy. What kind of cultural and political work was I involved in when these “needs” were defined for me by education policy created elsewhere? How did students who were labelled “at risk” experience these programs?

I am calling this text a narrative because of the locally grounded nature of what I relate and the fact that it emerges out of my own experiences as a teacher. As I write this I can hear the voices of the students who sat in my literacy remediation classes and I am reminded of some of the moments that we shared as we learnt to rub along together. These are the responses of

two Year 9 students and one Year 7 student when towards the end of the program we asked them whether they would prefer to do another year of literacy remediation or return to their mainstream English class:

**Roger (Year 9)**

I want to do [this class in Year 10] because it's better than the other class and I don't do work in the other classes because I always get in trouble. I muck around. I get help here with my work so I don't muck around. It's better than other classes because I know how to do this work and I don't know how to do some of the other work. I get help. In other classes I get ignored because I get in trouble. There are a couple of others that get ignored too. Having two teachers has made a difference. It's better.

**Paul (Year 9)**

This class is good. It's helping me with my reading and writing and spelling. I would feel mad and probably try and leave school if I couldn't do this class... This is a helping class. The other normal English class... it's harder stuff – reading and writing – we read harder books and harder spelling words. The work we do in here is easy. What makes this easier? It's not too difficult – the reading and writing and stuff. Not as much people in here. You usually always get a teacher when you need one. Probably behaviour is worse in other subjects cause I'm with more people that I know and there's not as many teachers to tell you off. I really enjoyed the story writing, the résumé, the work we looked for at the Shopping Centre and *Billy Elliot* was alright and kind of fun cause you got to watch the movie and the work wasn't too difficult.

**Gordon (Year 7)**

Yes, because I like being in the small group with these dudes. Sometimes it's alright in class with friends. I like [this class] better 'cause you can get away and spend some time with these guys. Well, I like more computer work. Being on the computer. Because I don't get to do it all that much. But in here you can do it on the computer. I am not well...hard to get to school...I like to sleep in sometimes and it's hard to get to school in the morning...in here I can concentrate more and people aren't so loud. Plus with two teachers if you get stuck on anything they can help you...

Since the turn of the century, a rare consensus has emerged amongst politicians. Re-living these moments stirs up a mixture of emotions – from a sense of gratitude towards Roger and Paul, who were reputedly wayward, but in our literacy classes more often than not indulged our demands, to a profound sense of guilt as I realize that until now, I had completely forgotten about Gordon's existence. He was a small, waifish boy of delicate health, whose school attendance had dwindled away until he had ceased to “exist” even in my memory.

Yet, although “narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is obviously important because it allows teachers to author their own stories and create textual representations of their professional practices, I think it's equally important to remember that there is no such thing as just telling it like it is. As I remember these students, I am acutely aware that I cannot carry on remembering and re-writing these memories without acknowledging that this is *my* version of their lives, not theirs. And even if I have been able to capture on paper a fragment of their thoughts at one moment in time, in the re-telling I am still involved in constructing some kind of order – both discursively and through the frames of interpretation that I choose to view these experiences – which prioritises, organizes, privileges and silences (Smith 2002). I am reminded of Goodson's injunction that a “personal story” must go beyond the “individual” and connect with the larger public contexts that mediate the local and specific:

Storying is a form of social and political prioritizing; a particular way of telling stories which, in its way, privileges some storylines and silences others (Goodson, 2003, p. 41).

Story-telling is not a neutral activity. It is a deeply political act and as such raises questions about “representation” and the ways in which we see, hear and speak are shaped by our habitualised discursive practices and the ideologies that inhere within us and around us (Reid, Kamler, Simpson & Maclean, 1996).

Narrative inquiry, as it is often enacted by educators, has the potential to converse productively with imagined others in the past, present and future, but only if these “personal stories” go beyond the “individual”, and only if these accounts are located in the larger matrix of ideology and normative relationships. To abstract the “personal” from those larger contexts is to provide a false representation of experience. Even “self-consciousness” can be a form of “false consciousness” when you do not grapple with the ideological processes that shape what you think, feel and do. For me it is my commitment to confronting and exposing the ideologies that exclude, silence and privilege the voices and experiences of some over others that allows me to “see” the above student responses, not as success stories of individual teachers making education policies work and hence “making a difference” in the lives of their students, but as problematic and requiring further investigation into the ways that power is produced, reproduced and transformed through schooling. Foucault reminds us that there is no better way to understand how knowledge works than to examine the knowledge, self-understandings and struggles of those whom powerful groups in society have cast off as “the other” (Best & Kellner, 1991, pp. 34-75).

## MY PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE

In 2003 I was working as an English teacher at Redstone Secondary College, a large co-educational government school situated in a growth corridor on the outskirts of Melbourne. The students at Redstone came from diverse backgrounds representing at least 60 nationalities. I was the English Co-ordinator at the time and the Principal invited fellow English teachers and myself to take on the responsibility of implementing two government-funded, literacy programs, *Restart* and *Access to Excellence*.

The external and internal pressures (posed by government, the media, and local school authorities) to implement these literacy initiatives with their accompanying normalising practices (Popkewitz, 1998) were enormous. I found myself administering a barrage of standardised tests, arranging for the withdrawal of students considered “at risk” from their ordinary classes, and then taking responsibility for drilling and skilling them in order to improve their test scores. Yet I was committed to maintaining a critical stance on the work that I was doing, even as I implemented these programs. I was interested in seriously engaging with the “research” that underpinned these literacy initiatives, not as a “technician” (Giroux, 1999) who carries out mandated reforms unquestioningly, but as a “teacher-researcher” (Kincheloe, 2003) who was critically reflecting on my own professional practices through practitioner inquiry, and examining the pedagogical understandings that were presented as “givens” in comparison with what I had learnt through my own experiences.

I was also particularly interested in the kind of reforms that were taking place in the Middle Years (that is, Years 5-8 in Victoria) in relation to English language and literacy learning. How was literacy being constructed? What was being valued by these reforms? As an English teacher I had long been committed to a view that English should play a central role in the curriculum, as providing a space for critical inquiry and imaginative play that was not necessarily available in other subjects. Yet now I was being asked to be a “Literacy” coordinator. Was this role congruent with my own sense of professional identity? And how were students’ lives, abilities and aspirations being constructed by government-sponsored literacy initiatives such as *Restart* and *Access to Excellence*?

My aim here is firstly to construct a sense of the policy world in which we were all – the students and teachers involved in *Restart* and *Access to Excellence* – operating. A good way to do this is by examining the Victorian government school publication, *Education Times*, focusing on editions of this paper that were published at the time when I was working as a Literacy Coordinator. This publication is distributed to all Victorian public schools on a fortnightly basis, supposedly in order to keep the profession informed about latest government initiatives. *Education Times* purports to represent the “professional knowledge” and practices that Victorian teachers share and value in their commitment to implementing government reforms, conveying a sense of the master narratives that shape teachers’ work at the present moment. In fact, what it does is promote those initiatives – it was especially keen to publicize *Restart* and *Access to Excellence* in a way which is almost indistinguishable from media “spin”. Teachers working in schools would be entitled to question whether the stories and images of schools presented in this publication have any connection with the realities they experience from day to day.

## THE RHETORIC OF REFORM

*Education Times* is a tabloid newspaper published fortnightly during the school year by the Department of Education & Training Victoria (see [www.det.vic.gov.au/media/edtimes](http://www.det.vic.gov.au/media/edtimes)). It has a circulation of over 70,000 and it is primarily distributed to government-school teachers, principals, non-teaching staff and school council members, and provides information on government education policies, news, “innovations” and training opportunities in the government education sector. It can be found lying around on staffroom tables in every state school in Victoria. Teachers are dependent on it for information relating to careers, job opportunities, school vacancies, as well as for professional development, statistics and official announcements, key events, conference extracts and articles about what Victorian teachers are supposedly doing in their classrooms – from the everyday to the “special”.

At first glance, the contents of *Education Times* appear innocuous enough, and news items can range from the parochial, Samson Park High’s “Reconciliation Courtyard” (see DE&T, 2000, *Education Times*, 8(8), p. 16) to the mundane, “Budget Highlights”. You are unlikely to encounter any critical analysis of current policy directions or any serious evaluation of recent educational initiatives or the research underpinning such initiatives. The good-news stories provide idealised images of school education in Victoria that effectively support the government policy agenda. The paper is a mouthpiece for government education policy that shapes the professional discourse and practices of teachers across the state.

When you glance through the pages of *Education Times*, what strikes you first is the currency of words like “new”, “renewal” and “change”. This was initially partly to do with the fact that in 2000, Victorian voters threw out a radically conservative government and installed a Labor Government in its place. The previous government had been responsible for school closures and a ruthless attempt to streamline education along supposedly more efficient, business-like lines. With the new government, headlines such as “Bold new age for education” (2000), “A new way of learning” (2001), “New era of co-operation” (2002) reminded teachers that things in education were “changing”, supposedly for the better.

Few of us, however, were questioning the kind of “co-operation” that was being expected from teachers and other ways that the rhetoric of “new ways of learning” positioned us and our students. Looking back, it now seems to me that the rhetoric of the “new” sets up a false dichotomy in education that naturalises certain assumptions about what counts and what does not. The “new” in teaching and learning will supposedly take us into the future, while the “old” ways will remain in the past. This version of education leaves you (the teacher) feeling that your existing knowledge and experience do not count or that what you are doing is somehow deficient. We are told that we need to teach our students to “Learn how to think” in order to help them “unlock mind magic” (see DE&T, 2002, *Education Times*, 10{4}) and that our students need to put on the new “thinking caps” (see DE&T, 2000, *Education Times* 8{1}) necessary to meet the challenges of the present. We are also reminded that we need to “upskill”, work “collaboratively” and take on board the “new” in teaching and learning to achieve “success” for our students regardless of whether or not it coincides with our localised sense of the kind of “collaboration” and “co-operation” that will work in our particular school setting.

Since 2000, *Education Times* has regularly reported the state government’s “targets” for education, one of them being that:

...the State government has made a commitment that Victoria will be at or above national benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy as they apply to primary students (at Year 3 and 5) by 2005 (Michael White, Director Of Schools, quoted in DE&T, 2001, *Education Times* 9(3), p. 7).

In this particular article, White (DE&T, 2001) goes on to add that, according to “data”, the “literacy levels” of students in the Middle Years were not at “expected levels”, and as a result of this “evidence”, the government would be putting in place a number of literacy initiatives to address “unsatisfactory outcomes”. This emphasis on “outcomes” and “expected levels” and reliance on “data” took an even more decided turn in February, 2002, with the replacement of Mary Delahunty and the appointment of Lynne Kosky as the new Education Minister. In her brief time as Education Minister (after the Labor Government initially came to power), Delahunty had gestured towards the need to acknowledge the specific character of local communities in reaction to the extremes of the previous government which had radically restructured education along managerialist lines.

With the arrival of Kosky it was clear that the Labor Government was taking up the rhetoric of reform which had been a hallmark of the previous government, and that school communities were now to be judged against a common set of standards. Rather than

supporting local communities, the spectre was raised of government “intervention” in schools identified as having “performance issues”. And although the government claimed that schools would receive government “support”, the kind of “support” the government had in mind was very specifically targeted at ensuring schools met the government’s “goals” and “targets” by helping them “develop charters”, “analyse their performance”, “set goals and targets for improvement” and “lift” their overall “performance” and “outcomes” to an ‘acceptable level’ (DE&T, 2002, *Education Times*, 10{4}). This language, with its emphasis on “outcomes” and “accountability”, was barely distinguishable from the rhetoric that had characterized the previous, so-called “Liberal” Government. You could say that education had ceased to be a party-political matter, and that the Liberal and Labor Parties had adopted a bi-partisan approach of implementing neo-liberal reforms that combined local autonomy (that is, financial responsibility for running schools and hiring staff) with a continuing emphasis on “outcomes and accountability”. To quote Michael White again:

Outcomes and accountability: The Government has clearly signalled that it expects considerable improvement in student outcomes and school performance as a result of its additional investment. In this new era of carefully targeted resources, partnerships between schools, their communities and the Office of School Education will be critical. Funding from the key initiatives will be linked to outcomes and each school or cluster of schools will be accountable for its use of the resources available through the initiatives. This will be most evident in Schools for Innovation and Excellence and the Access to Excellence programs. The \$81.6 million investment in an additional 300 teachers under the Access to Excellence initiative, for instance, will be targeted to specific secondary schools where indicators suggest they require additional assistance to achieve the Government’s goals and targets. It will also be targeted to schools where Years 7-10 students may require extra teaching assistance to become more engaged in their schooling and to achieve better numeracy and literacy skills (Michael White, Director of School, quoted in DE&T, 2002, *Education Times* 10{7}, p. 6).

This rhetoric of “accountability” and “performance management” eventually culminated in the Victorian government’s *Blueprint for Government Schools* (2004) – the document containing the government’s reform agenda for government schools.

By the time the Blueprint was “unveiled” in a special supplement of *Education Times* in November 2003, these developments had already had a significant impact on my own professional experiences through my involvement in the *Restart* and *Access to Excellence* literacy programs. The irony of these reforms resides in the fact that, at the same time that the State was telling teachers that “it’s your profession” (DE&T, 2000, *Education Times* 8{8}), and inviting teachers to “join the conversation” (DE&T, 2000, *Education Times* 8{5}), it was also regulating and re-defining their work for them within a performance and accountability model for school reform, such as those enshrined in aspects of the Victorian *Blueprint for Government Schools*: Flagship Strategy 4: Creating and Supporting a Performance and Development Culture and Flagship Strategy 6: School Improvement (Department of Education and Training 2004, *Blueprint*, p. 20).

“Flagship Strategy 6” of the Victorian *Blueprint* reminds us that:

The improved Reporting and Accountability Framework announced by the Minister for Education and Training in October 2002 has already led to significant reform, such

as...extending literacy and numeracy testing to all Year 7 students in government schools... (Department of Education and Training, 2004, p. 23).

Standardised tests have widely been criticised for establishing reductive norms of “achievement”, “success” and what it means to be “intelligent”, resulting in the labelling and categorising of students, regardless of their individual circumstances, based on how they measure up against this “norm” (Apple, 2000, 2004; Popkewitz, 1998; Swope & Milner, 2000). Reforms such as these effectively mandate what teachers can teach and how they should teach it, narrowing the parameters of what counts as “knowledge” in education, and who does and does not have access to it. They also serve to undermine teachers’ professional judgment and distort schooling for millions of students. But the reservations that, as teachers, we might have about things like state-wide standardised testing do not appear to be a concern to governments that are intent on operating out of a framework of accountability which judges teacher and school performance, and apportions funding based on the outcomes of standardised tests.

The following article provides a glimpse of the way in which the discourses in *Education Times* mediate the professional knowledge and practices of teachers.

**Literacy programs put on trial**

**Students are trialling innovative strategies to boost student literacy in the middle years, writes Lorraine Miller**

Planning for the literacy needs of middle years students is challenging. It begins with establishing a clear vision for the future and is a great opportunity to work with enthusiastic and positive professional people who are seeking to improve teaching and learning.

Our aim in the middle years research and development project (MYRAD) is to keep students as equally enthused and positive in their approach to school.

Tallangatta is one of five clusters of primary and secondary schools, along with Derrimallum, Pembroke, Hampton Park and Sebastopol, involved in MYRAD’s literacy focus group. We realise that there are no quick fixes but our aim is to ensure that all students keep improving. At Tallangatta, we have met regularly to plan our direction for the next three years. Literacy intervention is our major focus for 2002. We also want to keep working closely together within our cluster and to develop consistent approaches to literacy issues in our primary and secondary schools.

A key task for the literacy focus group is to trial different assessment tools. Under the direction of Carmel Crevola, the focus group will consider how data from the reading tests can be used to drive instruction for individual students.

Students in years 5, 6 and 7 have completed newly developed TORCH reading tests, DART (Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers) reading test, and are also completing an SRI (Student Reading Inventory) – a computer-based reading test. Correlation of these results will allow us to determine the effectiveness of different programs. Professional development in the interpretation and application of results from TORCH and DART has provided useful strategies for ways to analyse the initial data.

Another exciting aspect of the project is the trial of a multi-media reading program – READ 180. Pembroke and Tallangatta clusters are using the American version of the program. These clusters are also providing feedback to Scholastic Australia, which is responsible for producing an Australian version of the program. The Tallangatta cluster is also bringing primary and secondary students together three times a week to trial new technology. They are keenly immersed in reading – using a CD ROM

with motivational video stimulus material and reading activities. They use audio books, which have a reading coach and a narrator; high interest books for independent reading and teacher-led guided tasks and activities.

Students try each of the different literacy activities and the program is proving to be a real highlight. Students are proudly recording books they have completed in their reading journals and are learning that reading can be fun and absorbing...

DE&T, 2000, *Education Times*, 8(9), p. 17

The article shows the way in which teacher professionalism is closely or even exclusively linked to “improving teaching and learning”, and how other dimensions of schooling are placed in the background. Though the author goes on to refer to students who are “enthused” and “positive” in their approach to school, there is no acknowledgement of the social realities of students’ lives that may have resulted in their being labelled “at risk” and becoming involved in the literacy program in the first place. The prevalence of words such as “program”, “data”, “trailing”, “tools”, “test results” suggests a decontextualised approach to teaching, learning and “literacy” which is evident in the reliance on the development of “packages” based on material imported from the US. Typically, these packages are then uncritically imposed on a local context without any acknowledgment of the specific character of that community.

Teachers are told that “Students are proudly recording books they have completed in their reading journals and are learning that reading can be fun and absorbing.” Language like this conveys a positive spin about the government-supported literacy program. The author reminds teachers that “positive professionals who are seeking to improve teaching and learning” are “enthusiastic” about these developments, leaving those who are reading the article with no sense of the possibility of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. The emphasis is always on “improving” and moving forward without any recognition of the need to stop and critically analyse the human dynamics behind what “improvement” might mean from one child to another.

The barrage of tests that are mentioned – “TORCH”, “DART” and “SRI” – suggests that the focus in this literacy program is not so much on the student as a social being with a range of needs, but on “test results” that make it possible to reduce the student to bits of “data” for the purposes of performance appraisal. By focussing on collecting information from psychometric tests that only measure a certain kind of “intelligence”, governments not only redefine what “good teaching” is, but they redefine what it is to be “smart” and “successful”, dismissing all the other “information” about students’ lives that is not quantifiable (Kincheloe, 1999). You could be forgiven for believing that reading tests were the only way of “boosting student literacy in the middle years”, and that teachers should reconcile themselves to being proxy administrators of reading tests and data collectors, rather than worrying about how to encourage inquiry, facilitate conversations and negotiate social relationships within the classroom.

Despite the fact that the article might initially appear to be merely a good news story about the efforts of some schools to improve the literacy of their students, the language signals a decisive intervention in the professional practice of teachers in Victoria. Such top-down, one-size-fits-all literacy reforms render invalid the complex social, cultural and political contexts in which teachers and students operate and make it clear that teachers’ professional practice

is no longer trusted. Teachers must henceforth engage in practices that conflict with their professional experiences, not least the fact that they are now obliged to label students (with a test score) rather than attempting to acknowledge and meet the individual needs of their students (cf Swope & Milner, 2000).

## **SPEAKING BACK**

The rhetoric of *Education Times* mediated my practice as a Literacy Coordinator in powerful ways. It was not simply “outside” me, something that I could distance myself from through critique. I still remain puzzled by the way that I was being “spoken” by this discourse at that time.

In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser (1971) writes: “Ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (p. 158). Through his concept of “interpellation” or “hailing” (p. 174), he shows how ideology intervenes in our material lives. It positions us, inviting us to take up and identify with certain subject positions, particular versions of ourselves. “Ideology” embodies a set of imaginary relations to the real conditions of our existence (p. 162), a story that we are invited to believe in order to live our daily lives – very much like the stories which *Education Times* invited me to believe about my role as a literacy coordinator. Crucially, however, for Althusser, ideology is not simply a matter of belief, but of doing, and doing within the context of the social relationships in which we find ourselves. Ideologies can only exist in and through practice, that is, the range of activities in which we participate in the course of our daily lives. What we “believe”, what we think we are doing, exists in a complex relationship with the practices in which we engage. In my role as a literacy coordinator, I was performing certain ideological work, enacting a set of beliefs or knowledges (administering standardised testing, sorting students into remedial groups, implementing a remediation program, drilling and skilling my students in phonics) regardless of what I might have understood myself to be doing, and despite the critical stance which I developed in the course of my work.

Although it is important to understand the ways our practices as teachers are mediated by the kinds of policy pronouncements made in *Education Times* – and by that journal itself – we also know that the way we experience the impact of those policies is in the form of the conversations and reactions of students with whom we work on a daily basis. How did the students at Redstone High “speak back” to the policies I have described above? Here is what one student said when he was asked to do a standardised test: “I ain’t doin’ another fuckin’ test for youse!” Not all the students who were yanked out of their mainstream English classes, tested, told that they were “at risk” of failing school and placed in a special literacy class, reacted as violently as this student, but the teenagers who were streamed into the literacy remediation class were understandably resentful, confused and embarrassed. And unfortunately, as their teacher, I didn’t help alleviate their fears as I was confused myself. The pressure I was feeling from the school and the government to address their needs by teaching to tests left me feeling as though I was a failure. I felt estranged from my sense of myself as an English teacher. The thought that weighed on my consciousness was: how could

I expect to help students overcome their literacy “deficiencies” if I myself hadn’t mastered the technology of gathering data and developing data-driven approaches to teaching literacy?

But was it all this negative? Despite the way that government policies were constructing my students, my most vivid memories are not the results of their standardized tests, but the sometimes ordinary, sometimes extraordinary written and oral work that these sometimes confident, loud, cheerful and sometimes awkward, lonely, sad teenagers produced in class. Once we, as teachers, remembered that we were not working with specimens in a Petri dish on which we had to methodically gather statistics, and once we appreciated anew that we were working with living, breathing human beings who laughed, cried, felt joy and pain, who desperately wanted to belong and who had given up on believing in themselves, only then was there potential for growth and progress. I’ll always remember my fellow English teacher’s response to being asked to gather data on her “at risk” students at a *Restart* professional development session, “We’re trying to build relationships. Kids don’t care what they learn until they know that you care”.

The following is the response that Damian, one of my Year 7 *Restart* students gave me when I asked him whether he liked coming to school. The question was prompted during a conversation that took place after an incident in which he was being bullied.

Nah! Two years into school I get bullied. In about Grade 4 I sucked my thumb. My best friend moved away to Queensland two, three years ago. Since then none practically except for Sean. I stayed at his Nan’s. My Dad I don’t see. Not since I was one and my Mum, she says that I’m here to learn and not worry about the kids. But it’s still hard. I first had an operation on my grommets when I was in Grade 2. I couldn’t hear the teacher. And in Grade 5 I got my glasses. I couldn’t see the blackboard. For 6 years I couldn’t see the blackboard! For 3 years I couldn’t hear the teacher! I’m getting new glasses when my father pays my sister maintenance. He’s never seen my sister Janet. I’ve seen my Dad... That’s weird I reckon ’cause she’s never seen him and I’ve seen him, but he pays maintenance....In between I got to go to Windermere in Pakenham – a place for people having problems at home. About 3 years ago I went to a psychologist thingamabobby that mum used to see and she introduced me to Doris so I use to go to Doris almost every Monday and now I see her Wednesdays. Doris helps me with homework. She brings her *Harry Potter* book and we read it out loud, like I do to you and Paul Jennings and then she has English books that you spell in. I do a couple of pages out of there for an hour. She gives me some money. \$5 each time I finish a lesson.

The more familiar I became with the family backgrounds and experiences of schooling of the students that I was working with, the more I was reminded of the ways in which we as teachers make school even more inaccessible through the kinds of textual practices that we privilege in the classroom. The ways in which students’ personal home lives interact with their public school lives, more specifically with the relationships that they form with others and texts, is significant in the development of students’ attitudes towards their school work and their perception of themselves and others.

For students like Damian, Roger, Paul and Gordon, schooling has mostly been about experiencing one kind of failure after another. Even though they had steadily “progressed” through school, they found that their literacy practices and ways of being and seeing in the world had 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. Working with these students in these literacy programs, it became obvious to me that how we construct what counts and doesn't count as learning mediates not only the students' learning experiences and relationships, but also shapes their physical working environment. Popkewitz (1998) argues that "normalising" tendencies inhere within the ways that teachers think and act toward students. Although these literacy programs were supposedly about addressing the literacy needs of disadvantaged students, it was also positioning these same students as "other" by situating them outside the mainstream and categorising their literacy abilities as deficient, "not normal".

And what was next for these students? What happened to them once they left my classroom, once they left school? How did these experiences play out in their after-school lives, if at all? It's been four years since my involvement in these literacy programs and I've had the following encounters with some of these students.

At a local cinema I ran into Paul and Roger, two colourful characters who were in my Year 9 literacy remediation class. They had just been to see *Superbad* and they seemed about as pleased to see me as any pair of 19-year-olds would be to be seen with an ex-teacher in a public space. I was bemused to find myself watching an image of the virgin Mary appearing and disappearing before my eyes (Paul, a non-Catholic had this picture tattooed on his forearm), when I learnt that they were both working as apprentices – Paul as a boiler-maker and Roger as a fibreglass moulder – each in businesses run by their fathers. When I asked them how they felt about this, they both looked a bit sheepish and Paul said that he didn't get a choice, but that it was all right. When talk turned to school they became animated: "Oh, yeah. We always talk about school", "Man, they were the best days". This last remark was from Roger who was repeatedly suspended once for "flashing" a teacher.

Alison was also a student in my Year 9 literacy class. Unlike the boys mentioned above, she had been quiet and reserved, but like them she had been equally lacking in confidence about her abilities. She lived with her mother, a single parent whom I encountered earlier in the year when she was struggling to buy her three children the school-books they needed. One of Alison's main concerns during the time that I knew her was how and when she could stop having to spend weekends with her estranged father as the courts had told her she had to do. A few weeks before she was due to attend her school's Awards night where she was to receive an award for the most improved student, she called me. Her mother had encouraged her to call me, telling her that "Miss Illesca would want to know." She told me that she was now enrolled in VCAL (the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, an alternative to the mainstream Victorian Certificate of Education which is the pre-requisite university entrance) and that she wanted to say thank you for helping her and that things at school had been better for her since that literacy class. She was now receiving an award for most improved student.

Macey had been taught by another teacher who formed part of the literacy remediation team, and I only knew her by reputation, in my role as the literacy coordinator. Macey's reputation was not good. In Year 10 she was placed in an alternative program run by a group of teachers who were willing and able to deal with this handful of difficult students who had been deemed to have reached the end of the line educationally. I recently bumped into her in a major Australian bank working as a teller. I had to look closely at the bright-eyed, attractive and confident young woman that I was watching interacted with her customer. She didn't

resemble in the least the aggressive, untidy girl that I had passed in school corridors seven years earlier.

I tell these stories, not as a way of congratulating myself, as though somehow I have been responsible for turning these students' lives around, but to remind us that government policies cannot be uniformly applied to all students regardless of their particular circumstances. The question of how these students were positioned by government policy is still the critical issue and I can't step away from the ideological work that I was doing by coordinating these literacy programs. The way that these programs were enacted was ensuring the production and reproduction of certain kinds of social and cultural advantage and disadvantage.

Yet, these stories are heartening because here we are presented with the "at risk" students reading, writing, listening and speaking as productive members of society. But, before we congratulate ourselves, it should be pointed out that for all the positive signs, any "success" these students have achieved has not been on school terms: perhaps it has been *in spite of* what we did to them at school. What good, if any, have we done to these students through unjust schooling?

For all the "success" stories, there are an equal number of students, if not more, who like Gordon and Damian have just faded away, disappeared from the professional landscape. Eventually, these students don't even exist as statistics in end-of-year performance data. They've dropped out only to be remembered by chance by someone writing a story, a story that by its content and nature exists on the fringes. Where are these students allowed to exist if they even cease to exist in our memories?

This is not a definitive account of my professional practice, but a partial and incomplete account situated in its specific socio-cultural context. There are many master narratives that claim to speak on my behalf about my professional identity and practices. Government policy and curriculum documents such as curriculum frameworks, standardized tests, professional standards, the Victorian Government's *Blueprint for Education* (2004) and *Education Times*, all contain within them normative frames of reference that interpellate teachers and mediate their practices. This narrative can be read as my attempt to challenge dominant narratives, making visible the invisible and distorting the "normal" by looking at things from an "other" perspective or, as Candraningrum (2004) writes in another teacher narrative which has been published in this journal, an attempt to work from the margins to try and challenge the centre.

In this narrative I have tried to make visible to the reader what often remains invisible when policy-makers and even teachers themselves talk about the process of schooling and educational reform – the ordinary lives of the students and teachers that inhabit public schools. I have tried to move beyond the assumption that the personal lives of children can be separated from their schooling. As I write about Gordon, Damian, Roger, Paul, Alison and Macey, I am reminded of the importance of the interface between students' social and cultural practices in the home and those that are dominant in schools. How often do we ignore one and privilege the other at the expense of the ordinary student? The voices of these students make it clear that their constant struggle to "become", to reach her/his "potential"

does not happen in a vacuum, but within the context of the totality of the complex social relationships and cultural norms within which they are situated.

I make no significant claims about what we achieved in *Restart* and *Access to Excellence*. Nor am I saying that it was a waste of time. What I can claim is that through our work we tried to remain sensitive and alert to the students' sensibilities as language learners and to provide them with curriculum opportunities that they might find meaningful enough to take up. All that I can hope for is that at some point or another they were all given the space and opportunity to feel safe and perhaps temporarily demonstrate their potential rather than their limitations. Ordinary teaching can sometimes be extraordinary.

**Alison (Year 9 Student)**

I would want to stay [in this class next year] because it's fun and I learn more out of it than normal English...It's easier because the teachers help you more and it's a smaller group and it's quieter than usual classes and I wish that all the other classes were like this class. I wish all the other classes were smaller and quieter and easy and you learned more. And there are two teachers in [here] to help all the students...and the work is much easier when you have two teachers to help you... I have friends in here and people I know. I don't really like the guys in the group actually because they're really noisy and annoying and they don't do their work most of the time...but Greg is just really nice...

## REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy* (B. Brewster, Trans.) (pp. 127-186). New York and London: Monthly Review Press.
- Apple, M. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd Edition). New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press.
- Apple, M. (2000). *Official knowledge – Democratic education in a conservative age* (2nd Edition). New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press.
- Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory*. New York: Macmillan.
- Candraningrum, S. (2004). Phases of awareness: Why I became an English teacher. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 3(1), 59-70. Retrieved January 10, 2008 from <http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/2004v3n1nar1.pdf>
- Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Connolly, M., & Clandinin, J. (1995). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Secret, sacred and cover stories. In J. Clandinin & M. Connolly (Eds.), *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes* (pp. 3-15). New York & London: Teachers' College Press.
- Department of Education and Training (DE&T). (2000-2003). *Education Times*. Victoria: DE&T. Retrieved January 10, 2008 from [www.sofweb.vic.edu./edtimes](http://www.sofweb.vic.edu./edtimes)
- Department of Education and Training. (2004). *Blueprint for government schools: Future directions for education in the Victorian government schools' system*. Melbourne: DE&T.
- Giroux, H. (1999). What is the role of teachers in critical pedagogy? Retrieved Jan 11, 2005 from <http://www.edb.utexas.edu/faculty/scheurich/proj3/giroux4.html>.
- Giroux, H. (1997). *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture and schooling*. USA: Westview Press.

- Goodson, I. (2003). *Professional knowledge, professional lives: Studies in Education and Change*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kosky, L. (2004). *Blueprint for government schools: Future directions for education in the Victorian government schools' system*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training (DE&T).
- Kincheloe, J. (2003). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment* (2nd edition). London & New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (1999). The foundations of a democratic educational psychology. In J. Kincheloe., S. Steinberg & L. Villaverde (Eds.), *Rethinking intelligence: Confronting psychological assumptions about teaching and learning* (pp. 27-50). New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press.
- Lea, V. (2004). The reflective cultural portfolio: Identifying public cultural scripts in the private voices of white student teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education* 55 (2), 116-127.
- Miller, L. (2000). "Literacy Programs put on trial". *Education Times*, 8(9), 17.
- Popkewitz, T. (1998). *Struggling for the soul: The politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher*. New York & London: Teachers' College Press.
- Reid, J., Kamler, B., Simpson, A., & Maclean, R. (1996). "Do you see what I see?" Reading a different classroom scene. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 9 (1), 87-108.
- Smith, D. (2002). Institutional ethnography. In T. May (Ed.), *Qualitative research in action* (pp.17-52). London: Sage.
- Swope, K., & Milner, B. (2000). *Failing our kids: Why the testing craze won't fix our schools*. USA: A Rethinking Schools Publication.
- White, M. (2001). Article. *Education Times*, 9 (3), p. 7.

Manuscript received: December 22, 2007

Revision received: January 22, 2008

Accepted: January 24, 2008