

Seeing “things” differently: Recognition, ethics, praxis

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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on the recent introduction by the Australian Federal Government of standardised literacy testing in all states across Australia (that is, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, or NAPLAN), and explores the way this reform is mediating the work of English literacy educators in primary and secondary schools. We draw on data collected as part of a research project funded by the Australian Research Council, involving interviews with teachers about their experiences of implementing standardised testing. These interviews indicate that the introduction of standardised testing does not merely constitute an additional part of teachers’ workloads, but that it is having a significant impact on their identity as language educators, their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, and the relationships they seek to maintain with their students. By introducing the NAPLAN tests, the Australian Federal Government is going down the path of other neo-liberal governments around the world. No doubt the story we tell will be familiar to readers in other countries. Our aim, however, is more than simply to give yet another account of the tensions experienced by committed language and literacy teachers as they implement neoliberal policy mandates. Key questions for us include: Why is the Australian government persisting with such policies, even when they have had such dubious consequences (teaching to the test, dumbing down, and so on.) in other national settings? How might educators resist these reforms? What intellectual resources might enable us to articulate an alternative vision of language education to that imposed by neoliberal reforms?

We present an account of conversations with a group of teachers in a primary school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, not in order to make large claims about how the profession in Australia as a whole judges standards-based reforms, but because their talk prompts reflection about the possibility of resisting such policy initiatives. Our impulse is largely a philosophical one – we are raising questions about how neoliberal reforms construct teachers and their students, what they presuppose about the nature of life and its potential, and how educators might dissent from the world view that is being imposed. And rather than simply investigating how teachers are grappling with standards-based reforms, as though it is yet again a matter of putting teachers under the spotlight, we also raise questions about the responsibility of academics and teacher educators to maintain a critical standpoint within the policy environment created by such changes.

KEYWORDS: Language and literacy education, standards-based reforms, cultural diversity, ethics and politics.

Introduction

“The human ... must be addressed in order to be capable of responding.” (Kracauer, 1998, p. 100)

“Standards”, “outcomes”, “value add”, “accountability”, “transparency” – these words have colonised the way Australian policy-makers, bureaucrats and educators talk and think about schooling. The work of teachers has been formalised into what they “should know and be able to do” by various state jurisdictions (to borrow a catch phrase associated with standards) (see Doecke, Parr, North, 2008), just as students’ learning has progressively been pegged against outcomes that they are expected to achieve at each level of schooling (cf. AEC, 1994). Now standardised literacy and numeracy tests have been implemented in all schools around the country (that is, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, or NAPLAN), and the results displayed on the *My School* Website, an initiative taken by the former Federal Minister of Education (now Prime Minister), to ensure that there is more “transparency” and “accountability” in education. This will supposedly put parents in a better position to choose the right school for their children (Gillard, 2009; see also MCEETYA, 2008).

The scenario invoked by Australian governments to justify such reforms typically involves rhetoric about the urgency of building “Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life” and “to compete in the global economy of knowledge and innovation” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). These words are taken from *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, a statement drawn up by Education Ministers around Australia that sets a framework for continuing education reform. This document initially gestures towards a more comprehensive vision of the role of schooling in society than the tables of results of standardised literacy and numeracy tests presented on the *My School* website. We are told that, as a nation, “Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society – a society that is prosperous, cohesive, and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4).

However, the key emphasis in this and other policy statements currently circulating in Australia clearly falls on the part that education should play in a globalising economy. For, according to the Melbourne Declaration, it is crucial for schools to equip young people with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to take their place in the 21st century – a program of capacity-building for the nation as a whole that translates into competition by young Australians to obtain university or vocational qualifications, that will in turn equip them to compete successfully in the jobs market. Hence, the audience of the *My School* website, which, as is stated in the Melbourne Declaration and was repeated constantly by the previous Federal Minister, provides data that allows parents and families to make “informed choices and engage with their children’s education and the school community” (MEECTYA, 2008, p. 16). On the *My School* website any notion of schooling as a public space where young people might practice the values of “a democratic, equitable and just society” and celebrate

cultural diversity is largely displaced by a view of schooling as a consumer good to be purchased by individuals as they shop around for the right school for their children.

Reforms of this type are familiar to people around the world, and they have become the subject of continuing investigation by researchers in many countries (for example, Taubman, 2009; Jones, 2010; Mahoney & Hextal, 2000; Kostogriz & Doecke, in press). This is not least because governments persist in implementing such reforms, even as evidence mounts as to their destructive effect on the culture of school communities, not to speak of the fabric of society as a whole. We are, it seems, grappling with a phenomenon that is impervious to critique by teachers and researchers, who find themselves outside the ideological space in which these reforms are located. Critique has certainly been heard (this paper is itself an effort to “speak back” to such policies), but it is also noteworthy that the Federal Government has been able to co-opt a number of prominent Australian researchers and their institutions to oversee the implementation of its agenda, thus lending its reforms the aura of scientific credibility (see, for example, the Board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]).

Just as the Bush administration in the United States privileged certain types of research in order to justify its reforms (Delandshere, 2006), so the Australian Federal Government draws on the expertise of researchers who traffic in evidence of a very narrow kind in support of its policies. Whatever the motivations of these researchers in aligning themselves with these reforms, it is clear that such initiatives embody a certain epistemology, a certain way of thinking about and acting within the world that they share as members of a particular research community. It is not that these researchers are guilty of some kind of betrayal – many have no difficulty whatsoever in identifying with the Federal Government’s agenda – but this hermeneutic division between researchers still raises questions about the role that intellectuals should play in fostering critique of government policy within a democracy.

Confronted by the mindset embodied in these reforms, it is surely naïve to entertain any possibility that the Government and its supporters might be persuaded to think otherwise, as though the merits or otherwise of standards-based reforms can be decided by reasoned debate and a scientific analysis of the available evidence. The kind of research that the Government has marshalled to support its initiatives shows how “evidence” itself is always constructed from a particular standpoint – that we cannot apprehend the “facts” outside the views and values that we bring to an analysis of them (cf. Anyon, 2009). The abstract world of performance indicators and other mechanisms for demonstrating accountability embodied in the *My School* website might nonetheless prompt educators to find ways to resist how their work is being constructed by such reforms and to articulate alternatives.

The following essay tries to capture key epistemological and ontological assumptions embedded in standards-based reforms and how they contrast with the ways teachers experience their day-to-day exchanges with young people. We draw on group discussions that we have had with teachers at a primary school in Melbourne in the course of a research project that focuses specifically on the impact of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) on their work. Standards-based reforms constitute a major intervention in how teachers think about themselves and their accountability towards others. We are, however, trying to resist adding yet

another story of gloom and doom to those that have been told by educators in the US, the UK and other countries that have implemented such policies. Our aim is to explore the possibility of seeing the world differently and enacting an alternative understanding of teaching and learning to that which prevails at the moment.

REPRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOLING

A key issue raised by standards-based reforms is how the work that goes on in schools can best be represented. The results of standardised tests, as they feature on the *My School* website, provide one answer to this question. (We shall discuss the semiotics of the website in the next section.) As researchers going into the state schools that are participating in our inquiry, we try to preserve a sense of entry into each institution when we write about what we encounter. Many of the routines that structure the day in state schools, such as the ringing of bells to mark the end of lessons and the start of recess breaks, as well as the holding of assemblies where all the students are brought together to share in the public life of the school, are familiar to us.

Yet there is a sense in which each school is its own world. We find ourselves sitting in staff meetings where the quality of the discussion reflects a distinctive ethos, because of the mix of people who are gathered around the table. We interact with young people, whose voices and appearances convey a sense of life outside their school that varies, depending on whether the school is located in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne (one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Australia) or in a “leafier”, more affluent suburb. So, although our capacity to make sense of each school community involves identifying types of schooling, and we inevitably fall back on the generalisations and clichés that inhere within language when we try to capture what we experience, we are also mindful of the specific character of the world into which we are stepping, and we try to convey a sense of the rich particularities of each site by registering quite discrepant detail that resists the generalising logic in which researchers habitually engage.

Here is how Bella Illesca describes her entry into Multicultural Primary School, one of the schools that has been part of our inquiry, where teachers have participated in focus group discussions about their experiences of NAPLAN:

I step out of my car and the sound of children’s voices from the school yard floats over the school fence. I look towards the voices and see a group of children playing on the outdoor play equipment and for a moment I stop to observe their game. The boys and girls in green and white uniform are playing a game of tag. Some giggle and scream as they duck and weave around each other, others clamber up and down the equipment, some grab and lunge at each other with real exertion. Two girls run into each other’s arms, laughing with relief. A boy runs around the play equipment at top speed. They are all trying to avoid being “tagged”. At the same time there is a cacophony of sounds as they squeal, scream, shout and call out to each other. Sometimes their sentences trail off into each other and at other times individual voices stand out, “I got ya!” “Hey!”, “You’re it!”, “I got, I got...”, “Come on!”, “Pleeease!”. And, then quite suddenly, without warning, the yelling, talking, screaming and giggling stops, and their voices are in harmony as they chant, “5,4,3,2,1. 5,4,3,2,1...[pause]... 5,4,3,2,1. 5,4,3,2,1...”, and then just as suddenly, the discordant screams and yelps begin again as the chase continues.

As Bella walks into the school, she consciously enters into a relationship with the people and things she finds there. This is not necessarily how researchers see their position, as Dorothy Smith shows in her ongoing critique of the practices of “established sociology” (Smith, 1987, p. 117; Smith, 2005). Smith characterises the stance of sociologists as one that is “outside” the social life they observe. A relationship exists between the sociologist and the people she is observing – the researcher cannot ultimately escape being answerable to the people she is writing about – but it is “hidden in the conceptual practices that externalize their activities and practices as properties of structures or systems, and reinterprets the daily actualities of their lives in the alienated constructs of sociological discourse” (1987, p. 11). Their “experienced worlds” are subordinated to the categories that the sociologist brings to her analysis of them, their voices and perspectives comprehended by her all-knowing standpoint.

By contrast, Bella’s entry into the school foregrounds her position as a visitor, as someone who occupies a particular standpoint amongst the other standpoints that she will encounter in this setting. Rather than giving her privileged access to the “truth”, her position as a researcher amounts to a desire to make sense of the phenomena she encounters and to share in the meaning-making activities that are enacted within this setting from day-to-day. By entering the school, she participates in the life that she finds there, albeit only for a short time, and with a different purpose and sense of responsibility from those of the other actors within this setting. The concrete detail she includes in her narrative evokes a world that remains richer than any account that she might give of it. The act of entering into a site, and taking up a vantage point within it, highlights the life of the world that unfolds around her, which she experiences as a flow of impressions that does not lend itself to any pat judgment about the meaning of what is going on there.

Yet, this disposition towards accepting the life she finds in this setting also involves refusing the immediacy of everyday phenomena. Bella’s recognition of others, and her commitment to describing a relation with people “that cannot be reduced to comprehension” (to borrow from Critchley’s account of Levinas’s ethics, 1992/1999, p.284), combines with an impulse towards inquiring into the social relationships that constitute this institutional setting, as well relationships that extend beyond it:

The mood at assembly is informal and relaxed, but still respectful. As I look around at the children, they seem to move and speak in unconscious ways; the majority listen to Lea (the teacher who is running the assembly) as they stand at ease near their form group teacher, some whisper things to each other, some fiddle and move about, others talk intermittently with animation: Robbie, a thin, pale boy in May’s class (I am spending the day with May), has just returned from a family trip to New Zealand, and May greets him warmly. With delight he begins to tell May that, “I brought back some Kiwi poo” (it’s a magnet) and two other children that he has shared magnets with are examining them. May shows me the magnet that he has given her and tells me that he missed the NAPLAN on Tuesday and will have to catch up at some time. Nobody appears to tell anybody else to shush up or stop talking, even though an assembly is in progress. A little girl with soft brown skin moves closer to me and smiles warmly. In her accented English she asks my name, I tell her and she tells me that her name is Nour. A heavy set boy of the same age with curly black hair has been listening to our exchange and he turns and tells me with great fluency that his name is

Murat and that he is Nour’s cousin. He also tells me that they have an older cousin at the school and points at her somewhere in the crowd. I look in the direction that his finger is pointing, but I don’t have a hope of locating her amongst this sea of animated children’s faces whose features and colours tell me that they come from all corners of the world. As I look around I see that some mothers and fathers with their children in prams are also present. They stand around the edges of the courtyard, some talking to each other, others making signs at their children and others just listening quietly. There’s a sense of ease and familiarity in this gathering. I can’t really make out what Lea is saying, something about the activities that will be on that afternoon, but I later find out that May’s children had no trouble hearing or understanding everything that Lea had said.

According to Dorothy Smith, the larger trans-local dimensions that mediate what happens in a school community – relationships that sociologists invoke by words like “society”, the “economy”, “class structure”, “globalisation”, “policy” – are not necessarily visible to people while they are participating in this social setting (Smith, 2005). They are, instead, often felt only in the form of traces or signs of a larger world, as is the case with Robbie’s return from his trip to New Zealand and the fact that Murat and Nour are cousins. The school is embedded within a community, comprising – in this case – families of struggling migrants, who are trying to find a foothold in Australia, as well as professional families, who are moving in as this inner city suburb increasingly becomes gentrified.

Smith argues that mandated educational policy should also be understood relationally, as something that operates at the “juncture between the local settings of people’s everyday worlds and the ruling relations” (Smith, 2005, p. 101). Such policy manifests itself in the form of a multiplicity of texts – in the case of the initiatives recently taken by the Federal Government in Australia, it is possible to instance *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, the NAPLAN tests, as well as the texts that comprise the *My School* website. We shall have more to say about these texts in the next section.

Our point here is that people within school settings take up these texts in a variety of ways. Despite the inclusive rhetoric of the Melbourne Declaration, it is a matter of speculation as to the extent to which school communities have embraced what it says about the “educational goals for young Australians”, even though posters presenting its key points are on display in the schools we visit. The Melbourne Declaration’s large claims about education in Australia now and into the future do not necessarily speak to people at a local level, in the sense of being what Bakhtin calls “an internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin, 1987, p.342). Yet the recommendations of this text have nonetheless had a decisive impact on the life of school communities in the form of changed work practices that are necessary to implement standardised tests (for example, preparing students for the tests, altering the school timetable in order to schedule the tests at the same time that other schools are holding them, organising spaces in which the tests might take place, distributing notices to parents). And all these practices are mediated by the other texts we have mentioned in addition to the Melbourne Declaration, not to speak of the barrage of departmental memoranda, school notices and other communications – all signs of the “juncture” between the life of the local school community and larger policy contexts.

As with the logic of “established sociology” that Smith critiques, so these policy texts discount the unique character of each local school community, judging the quality of the teaching and learning that occur within them against universal standards that supposedly apply to every setting. Smith’s understanding of how policy texts mediate the social relationships that constitute such institutions sensitises us to conflict between the generalising claims made by these texts and the everyday life experienced by people within particular school communities. The take-up of policy texts within school settings signals the way that social relationships within a school are situated within a larger network of relationships, and yet it is not as though the local merely folds into the trans-local, or that the larger social structures that determine what happens in schools are actually what those policy texts say they are. Schools are indeed complex sites, not everything is as it seems, and it takes great skill and sensitivity to interpret the signs that you encounter when you enter these settings.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO *MY SCHOOL*

If we now turn to the *My School* website, we find complexity of a different sort.¹ There is a sense in which the world, as it is constructed by *My School*, is “familiar” (cf. Lefebvre, 2008, p.15), replete with common sense nostrums about teaching and learning, accountability and transparency, all available at the click of a mouse. It is another thing to understand the complex ideological work that this website is performing and to identify the interests that it actually serves.

There is no gainsaying the powerful ideological appeal of the *My School* website (<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>), even as we question the way it “interpellates” (Althusser, 1971/2008) its readers, offering them an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of their existence that undermines any attempt to engage with those conditions in a socially critical way. The very title – “My School” – signals how it expects people to read the website and to think about the work that teachers do. An alternative title – say, “Our Schools” – would suggest a different set of beliefs and practices, one that might be more firmly anchored in an understanding of school as a public space that is open to people from a diverse range of communities and walks of life.

It is not that any notion of community affiliation has completely disappeared from the way schools are represented by *My School*. Sally, the Principal of Multicultural Primary School, was obliged to prepare a “school statement” of one paragraph for publication on the *My School* website in which we find the following language:

We continue to acknowledge and value our cultural diversity and work together to create an atmosphere of tolerance, harmony and understanding. Our school offers a friendly and supportive environment that encourages learning, personal growth and the wellbeing for all students.

¹ The following analysis of *My School* refers to the original version of the website. A new version of the web site has since been developed, but as yet this new website, including the results of the NAPLAN tests for 2010, cannot be accessed. This is partly because the very powerful private school lobby in Australia objected to the publication of financial details relating to the operation of schools.

Although Principals were instructed to prepare these paragraphs (as Sally remarked to us in conversation: “We have tight guidelines on what we can put in. It has to be vetoed and checked”) and the paragraphs largely comprise the promotional rhetoric that has come to typify self-managing schools (see Caldwell & Hayward, 1997), the use of the first person plural in this statement, including the reference to “our school”, conveys a sense of community that contrasts with the individualistic focus of the website as a whole. That community, as the statement indicates, is one of cultural diversity, as might be expected in this particular suburb of Melbourne. The area is characterised by a strong Turkish presence, as well as newly arrived migrants from other countries. This inner-city suburb, as we have noted, is now becoming gentrified, as professional families move in and more recent arrivals shift to outer areas. But overall the suburb still reflects a multi-cultural ethos.

The word “community” is used in many of the school statements and school websites that are linked to *My School*, echoing other values than simply a consumer’s right to accurate information in order to purchase the right product. Yet the word, nonetheless, resonates in a curious way within this space. There is a sense in which it cannot be contained within it, affirming the need for community affiliation that goes beyond a narrow focus on “self”. But the fact that these one paragraph statements about community are placed above tables showing the school’s performance on the NAPLAN tests, including colour coding to indicate where the school sits in relation to the average scores for schools “serving similar student populations” (<http://www.myschool.edu.au/Glossary.aspx>), as well as scores for schools across Australia, diminishes any recognition that schools might serve larger purposes than those reflected in these test results. Rather than the school statement providing a context for understanding the test results, the template imposed on schools by the website, and the prominence given to the results of the NAPLAN tests, provide the overarching context for judging what the school says about itself. Any notion of community identity is reduced to the status of one factor to be weighed up against others, when parents set about choosing a school for their children. The statistically similar schools with which Multicultural Primary School is grouped, and against which its scores are compared and colour-coded, include schools from all over the country, thus opening up the curious prospect that consumer choice might extend to selecting a rural school in Western Australia, or a primary school in suburban Adelaide, in preference to a local primary school. The selection also includes a “Christ centred” curriculum at a private school on the outskirts of a town in rural New South Wales, which has a website featuring sayings like “From Christ and for Him”, and “Community not Competition”. A Christian education is yet another option in a bag of extras from which discriminating consumers might choose.

Despite the gestures towards the notion of “community”, and the fact that *My School* is primarily directed at parents, the tenor of the language of the website can by no stretch of the imagination be described as inviting parents to join a conversation in which they are positioned as equals. They are, instead, being addressed by “measurement experts” who can vouch for the validity of the data about schools presented on each web page. We find a note from Professor Barry McGaw, the Chair of ACARA, in which he commends the value of the site as a source of information about Australian schools. He then echoes the then Federal Minister of Education’s rhetoric by declaring that “the *My School* website introduces a new level of transparency and accountability to the Australian school system”. Everything

available on the website, including links to documents about the “reliability and validity of NAPLAN”, “quality assurance” and the “expert advice” that has been obtained from “five preeminent measurement experts” underlines the status of the test results as the key indicator of school performance.

Multicultural Primary School’s *My School* web page displays the following numbers, the results of the NAPLAN tests in 2009: Reading 451; Writing 444; Spelling 473; Grammar and Punctuation 467; Numeracy 455. Links are provided to a glossary of some of the test terminology (for example, “domain”, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage [ICSEA], the NAPLAN scale score), but this information comprises simply declarative statements that brook no contradiction. We are told, for example, that the ICSEA is “a special measure that enables meaningful and fair comparisons to be made across schools”, without any acknowledgement of the fact that such a measure is open to contestation. It is merely noted that the ICSEA “should be interpreted with the assistance of the About ICSEA Fact Sheet, ICSEA Technical Paper and relevant FAQs”, thus pointing to yet another layer of texts that sit behind this acronym. Readers can also access a “*My School* Fact Sheet” that contains a “Data Interpretation Guide”. But beyond these occasional references to “interpretation”, there is no disclaimer about the limitations of the data, certainly not with reference to the tests that produced these scores. In the world of *My School*, no questions can be raised as to the validity of the way the tests construct “literacy” and “numeracy”.

What messages does the *My School* website give with respect to teacher professionalism? *My School* denies at a stroke the rich traditions of practitioner inquiry and knowledge underpinning teacher professionalism (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996) by privileging the “knowledge” of “measurement experts”. The insights that teachers gain on a daily basis into the abilities and needs of the young people they teach are completely discounted. There has always been a struggle on the part of teachers to affirm the trustworthiness of their knowledge vis-à-vis the machinery of traditional, “scientific” research. At its most generative, this struggle has raised questions about both the knowledge claims made by practitioners at a local level and those of academic researchers. *My School* ignores the history of this struggle, and in doing so refuses to engage with those who might, in a spirit of inquiry, wish to interrogate the quality of the information that it is circulating. The audience of the website, as we have said, are parents who are interested in choosing the right school for their children. Teachers are completely excluded from this exchange.

There is no doubt that teachers from previous generations sometimes found themselves struggling with a bureaucracy that turned an indifferent face towards them. We might cite A.D. Hope’s Presidential Address to the newly formed Australian Association for the Teaching of English, which shows how in the early 1960s, teachers’ burgeoning sense of their professionalism had come into conflict with existing institutional structures (see Hope, 1967). And a similar conflict remains evident in more recent attempts by English teachers to dialogically appropriate the notion of “professional standards” for their own purposes, attempting to affirm a larger sense of their professional identity, while remaining fully aware of the regulatory purpose that standards can serve when they are simply imposed by government (Doecke & Gill, 2000). The most disturbing aspect of the *My School* website is the way it does not address teachers at all. It is as though they are standing

in the corner of a room, where a larger group of people – politicians, ACARA bureaucrats, parents, journalists – are talking loudly about them, occasionally throwing contemptuous glances in their direction. What could *they* possibly be doing here? Who invited *them*? Their humanity is sidestepped, and so the *My School* website attempts to render them incapable of responding to the way their work is being constructed (Kracauer, 1998, p. 100). Such, at least, is the situation of teachers in state schools that are struggling to compete with well-resourced private schools.

AND YET...?

My School is a world of reified statistical data that has been stripped of any trace of the human activity that produced it. The industry that has grown up around the construction of tests, including decisions as to suitable test items; the work that is imposed on schools in administering those tests, including (in secondary schools) marshalling young people into halls where they must sit in single desks in serried rows in order to avoid cheating; the labour of casual workers employed in marking tests and the compilation of results for publication on the *My School* website; the establishment of the *My School* website itself, with the scores and colour coding to indicate where each school sits in relation to (purportedly) “statistically similar schools” and all schools across the country – these and other practices reflect a form of technical rationality that increasingly mediates the social relationships that constitute schooling, compromising people’s capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of others who share this social setting with them

With respect to the administrative processes within schools that have been developed around *My School*, an outsider like Bella can play a useful role in making the familiar both strange and “knowable” (cf. Lefebvre, 2008, p. 15). From the vantage point of a visitor to a school, the practices involved in implementing NAPLAN retain their alien character, prompting thought as to why things should be organised in this way and not otherwise. It is understandable that teachers who are caught up in these reforms need to do what they are told and to accept that this is how things are. The prospect is that these things will become part of everyday life in schools – this is arguably already the case in some of the secondary schools that we have visited, where NAPLAN represents merely another set of routines, in addition to other managerial structures that have been in place for some time.

And yet, as far as the teachers at Multicultural Primary School are concerned, their conversations show that they remain deeply alienated by what they are being obliged to do, even though in some respects they have become habituated to the routines associated with NAPLAN. Our conversations with them have shown that NAPLAN has had a significant impact on their working lives, including (on the part of the Principal) processing the barrage of information she has received from the Education Department with respect to the proper administering of the tests, informing the school community about the tests and then organising a mail-out of the results to parents. On the days when the tests are held, it is necessary to re-organise classes (which at this school are normally organised as composite grades) in order for children in Years 3 and 5 to do the tests, not to mention meticulously following the protocols involved in conducting a test under exam conditions. The teachers at Multicultural Primary School inwardly feel at odds with these work practices, and they have been driven by

an impulse to understand what is going on around them. They are still experiencing NAPLAN as something new, as a significant interruption in the rhythm of school life as they have known it, which prompts critical reflection about the changes that are being brought about by this policy initiative. They are striving to enact a “praxis” (Kemmis, 2005), that is, a fully knowing practice, even as they are being compelled to do things with which they disagree. This is shown by their willingness to participate in conversations with us, when, at the end of a busy working day, they have come together to share their experiences of implementing the NAPLAN tests.

They began their first conversation with us by responding to a prompt from Brenton about how they see the literacy levels of their students:

- Sandra: We’ve got some very strong students in the literacy, haven’t we? And some also very disadvantaged students.
- Lea: Quite a broad spectrum within classrooms and across the school. But are we talking about literacy specifically or ...
- Brenton: No. I bit my tongue then because we really mean your sense ...
- Lea: So we’ve got the likes of a very multi-cultural nature of the school with many children ... I don’t know how many nationalities we’ve got now. I think it’s ...
- Sally: Fifty percent of children come from a language background other than English at home. And that’s what we think is one of our strengths, too, is being a multicultural school.
- Lea: And we’ve sort of got a lot of new professional parents and families coming through, starting through the earlier grades and coming through to the senior grades now. So the demographic is changing with the students we’ve got in the school. In the past, we’ve had a high non-English speaking background percentage of families. With the nature of [the suburb] changing, that’s changing as well too. What else do we know about our students?
- Sally: And they’re coming to school now with a lot of rich experiences to share, which the children from years ago didn’t have direct experiences that they’ve been involved with their families. So they’ve had that language, that talking, vocabulary and support from their families.
- Brenton: These are the new families coming in?
- Sally: Yeah, the new wave slowly coming through. And a lot of them are coming with a love of literature. They love to read, they love to be read to. They’re used to that as a part of their daily life; whereas years ago, a lot of the homes didn’t have very much reading material and the children really didn’t know much about it at all.
- Brenton: So you’re sensing a shift of that kind.
- Lea: I think the general nature, too, the families that come in and the parents that are here, the ones that have been here for a while, there’s always been a high regard for education. So the parents are wanting to send their children to school because they see that education is an important part of their child’s life. So there’s a high respect for that too.
- Brenton: When you said before the language backgrounds other than English, what languages are we talking about?
- Margaret: Some African ones.
- Sandra: Greek, Sardinian, Arabic....

Whereupon other teachers chime in by mentioning the backgrounds of students in their classes: “Turkish, Somali, Chinese, Spanish, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Mauritian, Malaysian... The whole world” – all of whom are arriving at this school with varying degrees of English language proficiency.

As with Bella’s moment of entry into Multicultural Primary School, so when these teachers enter the staffroom in order to participate in this conversation, they convey a sense of a school community that is renewing itself from day-to-day. Through their immersion in their daily work and the multiple responsibilities that it entails, they are challenging the ways of thinking and acting embodied in NAPLAN and *My School*. They have a knowledge of their school community that the numbers on the *My School* website cannot possibly capture. This also comes across in their lively sense of how their school community is changing over time. We are reminded again of Smith’s argument about the need for researchers to preserve a sense of the moment of entry into any institutional setting as a means of disrupting any assumption that things can be fixed once and for all. This is a crucial way for researchers to resist imposing their analytical categories on the phenomena they encounter and thus to free themselves from the reifying habits of mind that have become part of their own intellectual training. Smith offers us a way of thinking relationally, with respect both to the social relationship that researchers establish with people in the setting they enter, and the relationships enacted within that setting and the larger network of relationships of which it is a part. Any social setting comprises people who are engaged in complex activities that resist being categorised in a hard and fast way. Society itself is caught up in complex change that eludes any attempt to represent it.

Through their conversations, the teachers at Multicultural Primary School similarly register a sense of the life around them, in contradistinction to the static representation of their school community on the *My School* website. Our discussions with them have revolved around a contrast between the type of judgment that NAPLAN obliges them to make and their ongoing professional learning as they interact with young people on a daily basis. One teacher, Peter, captures the issue precisely as that of recognising how children continue to learn and to grow, with the result that any judgement made about their abilities, when the NAPLAN test is held, can only provide limited insight into their needs.

The problem is, with the NAPLAN, the time that we do it until the time that we get the results, by the time we get the results, the kids have moved on anyway. And some of the kids, due to it being a test, they don’t handle tests very well, so these ones that always score high in everything else come to this NAPLAN thing and they’re not as high – they’re not really low – but they’re not as high as they would usually get if we just gave them a test sort of thing. So for me, the NAPLAN, it’s something that shows where they are, sort of thing, but it doesn’t really help much at all, because by the time we get the results, they’ve already moved on from there. I mean, we do it at the start of the year and get them virtually at the end of the year, I guess.

But, simply shortening the timeframe between when the tests occur and when the results finally become available would not address the other alienating aspects of the exercise, as these teachers experience them. Peter, in fact, returned to his concerns about the fetish that is currently made of tests (not simply NAPLAN) later in the discussion:

Yeah. And one of the children – this is not with NAPLAN but with PAT Maths and that sort of stuff – one of the kids had got several questions wrong that I was fairly certain that they would know. And I took them up to the board, gave them this question; they went through and they did it on the board, no problems, explained everything. But yet, because it was a test, they freaked themselves out, sort of thing. And to me, I don’t like tests. I know we need to give them a score and all that sort of stuff, but I haven’t done any tests since I sort of left school and uni and that sort of stuff. And to me, they only put the kid in a sort of box – they’re over here, they’re good, they’re bad, they’re wherever – and that’s all they sort of do. So do the tests because we need to give results and all that sort of stuff, but to me, that’s all they are. They’re just results of what the kid did on that day.

This sensitivity to the needs of individual children was evinced by all the teachers who participated in this focus group discussion, including the Principal, Sally, who had this to say in summing up her feelings about NAPLAN.

I think when you were saying that there’s a lot of things happening, and there are, and they might be potentially for the good of the education system. I think they’re people who have got really good intentions, but I think they’re treating us more like a corporate company, rather than an educational institution. And I think that the child is being a bit lost in this. It’s supposed to be about the child, and the child is not numbers. They’re feelings, they’re emotions. They’ve got aspirations, they’ve got joy and beauty, and they’re not just scores. And I think we just focus right in on the scores all the time at the moment, and not enough about the whole child.

All the teachers were at odds with the way the NAPLAN tests require them to classify children, continually returning to the insights they had gained into individual students’ needs and abilities through their everyday exchanges with them. May conveys a sense of the sustained observations and judgments in which she engages as a teacher, in contrast to the “snapshot” provided by NAPLAN:

... when we come to our assessments for writing, it’s not the one test we give. It’s the whole year. It’s not just one snapshot. It’s a whole year of observing, listening to these kids, getting them to read their stories, and once in a while you see it and you think, “Oh my God, I didn’t know that this kid could write like that.” And why can that kid write like that? Because you just gave a topic, for example, that they really, really loved. And something has just happened. Like, I’ve got a boy who is dyslexic, and his father came and saw me a week ago. He said, “May, I don’t know what has happened, but my kid is up to his 20th page of writing.” And I said, “I saw it the moment that question went out.” It just happened. We read the stories and stuff like that. I said, “How about if we write stories about a dragon?” And that kid just loved it. So after that, it’s just on and on and on and he wants to publish it and make a book. So maybe I wouldn’t have been lucky enough to see that in this kid this year, and I would have gone on thinking that this kid, nothing. But I saw it and I thought, “Wow!” And of course he’s got his words back-to-front and whatever, but who cares! He’s writing. And what is he going to get back from the NAPLAN? Nothing. He’s going to get nothing. Whereas, from me, at least I can say, “Look, he did this fantastic story this year.”

May also remarks on the way that the children in her class “just love the sharing and listening to each other”:

And sometimes when I think the stories are a little bit silly or not really good, the way that they respond to each other, the way that they like each other’s stories, I think, you know, I’m two or three generations older than them, so I don’t get the same interpretation. So it’s good for me to listen to what they have to say about each other’s stories, because it teaches me something. It teaches me quite a bit about, they are nine years old after all, and that’s what they’re interested in and that’s what is meaningful for them. And I’m judging it as an adult, not as a kid. That’s what is really meaningful to them. So that comes out through a discussion. So assessing kids, you’ve got to be their teacher to assess kids. You cannot be somebody else. You cannot be somebody else.

Words can never capture experience, but that is no excuse to give up on trying to use language to register moments of insight into the life that we share with others. By telling their stories, the teachers at Multicultural Primary School struggle with language and meaning in an effort to convey a sense of the full human presence of the children in their classrooms – a struggle that will always (to echo T. S. Eliot [Eliot, 1970, p. 202]) remain “a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure”. That “failure” contrasts with the certainties of *My School*, and the presumption that “measurement experts” possess the knowledge that is crucial for operating an education system.

It would be easy to treat the teachers’ anecdotes as evincing a rather sentimental view of childhood – there is a strong romantic tradition within the history of education (cf. Reid, 2003), and some of their language might be interpreted as echoing this (we need only think of Margaret Langdon’s account of what she learned when she took the trouble to talk and listen to the children in her class, showing sensitivity towards a world of experience that escapes the “shades of the prison house” [Langdon, 1961, p.3]). Yet such a judgment says more about the way these teachers are being positioned by *My School* than the quality of the insights they are able to bring to bear on their situation as teachers as they negotiate the social relationships presented to them in their classrooms. It also sidesteps the challenge of properly re-evaluating the romantic tradition to which we have just alluded. That the teachers’ talk echoes other traditions of curriculum and pedagogy, rather than simply the language of standards with which we began this essay, shows that they are living in history. Their talk might be read as registering an “irreducible remainder” that escapes “the rule of instrumental reason” as it is reflected in *My School* (Roberts, 2006, p.65), gesturing towards dimensions of experience that elude the “objectivity” of “measurement experts”.

ADDRESSING THE “HUMAN”

We have been raising questions about the way NAPLAN and *My School* construct teachers and their students, and what such educational reforms presuppose about the nature of life and its potential. Former Education Minister Gillard provocatively dismissed the critics of her education policies by saying that she did not want to see “happy illiterate children” (Gillard, 2009). This implies a binary opposition that none of the teachers with whom we have been speaking at Multicultural Primary School would endorse. But it does raise questions about the Minister’s stance, as though it could ever be possible to justify reducing children to the scores of their NAPLAN

tests. *This* is the issue, as far as Sally is concerned, that children are “not numbers... not just scores”. The crude binary logic that the Minister applied whenever she gave an account of her policies entitles us to ask of her (borrowing Sally’s words): Do we want children who are *not* capable of feeling, emotion, or sensing the joy and beauty in the world? And should we not, as educators, be receptive to the way the children with whom we are working are actually feeling and thinking about the world they find around them?

Kracauer’s observation about the need for the “human” that exists within people to be addressed in order for them to respond derives from his study of the situation of office workers in Germany during the 1920s. Like many of his contemporaries, Kracauer felt that the dominant logic of capitalist society was one that reduced relationships between people to relationships between things, an insight which he, along with contemporaries like Walter Benjamin, took from Lukács’s seminal work, *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács, 1971, cf. Marx, n.d., p. 76). This logic obviously still looms large in our lives today, as economists invite us to contemplate the rise and fall of shares on the stock market, adjustments to interest rates and “seasonally adjusted” figures showing the level of unemployment, without ever acknowledging that these “things” refer to the work in which people engage from day-to-day, as part of the collective process by which society renews itself. Kracauer saw the intensive rationalisation imposed on office workers in Germany at that time as symptomatic of a moral vacuum at the heart of society. His argument was that business leaders in Germany were incapable of responding to their workers as human beings and recognising the enormity of the spiritual malaise that the rationalisation of the workplace had created. All that they could see were statistical data that supposedly reflected their increased productivity and efficiency through the regulation of their work practices.

Kracauer’s answer to this was partly to write vignettes that captured how individual office workers experienced the rationalisation of their work, including the dreams and pleasures they were able to snatch in the face of increasing pressures to render them accountable by measuring their productivity. One of his most memorable vignettes is that of “Cricket”, “a proletarian child who lives not far from Gesundbrunnen and works in the filing room of a factory”, who distracts herself from the drudgery of her work by her extraordinary capacity to memorise the latest hit songs (“It is typical of her that, in a dancehall or suburban café, she cannot hear a piece of music without at once chirruping the appropriate popular hit [1998, p. 70]). These vignettes are combined with an account of larger social trends – Kracauer’s study also contains social and economic analyses of a more conventional type, including statistical data relating to the membership of unions and the wages earned by office staff in comparison with factory workers – but they are never collapsed within them, or reduced to a merely illustrative status. Rather, the richly concrete nature of the vignettes speaks back to those larger sociological generalisations, reminding us of life as it is experienced by the individuals whom Kracauer identifies.

The *My School* web site’s failure to address teachers as human beings is replicated by a set of practices, that likewise undermine teachers’ capacity to address the humanity of the young people in their care. Instead of recognising their presence within their lives, teachers are forced to treat their students as bundles of discrete skills and capabilities to be measured. As a microcosm of society, schools organised in this way

should prompt us all to think, not only about the implications of such reforms for providing a rich and meaningful education to young people, but of the effect that they are likely to have on the fabric of society as a whole. A proper human order cannot arise from the competition of the *My School* website. For people to behave as human beings, they must be addressed as human beings.

This is the point of the anecdotes that the teachers at Multicultural Primary School have been telling us. In much the same way that Kracauer registered the humanity of the office workers with whom he spoke by writing evocative vignettes about individual office workers, radically refocusing his observations as a social commentator in order to convey a sense of the needs and aspirations of just *this* person in *this* situation, so the teachers at Multicultural Primary School attempt to convey their recognition (cf. Honneth, 2005; Kostogriz & Doecke, in press) of the humanity of the children in their care. The “measurement experts” invoked on the *My School* website might dismiss their anecdotes as lacking any “validity”, but their generalising mindset cannot match the judgements that these teachers are able to make about the needs of the children in their classrooms.

CONCLUSION

We have used the word “praxis” to describe the way the teachers at Multicultural Primary School have been reflecting on the changed conditions of their work brought about by standards-based reforms. This word is used in “action research” and other forms of practitioner inquiry to name a capacity on the part of teachers to reflect on their practice, not just in the sense of a pragmatic assessment of the effectiveness or otherwise of particular teaching strategies, but by asking questions about the meaning of what they are doing and how their work contributes to the good of society as a whole (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Kracauer’s work, however, brings to mind other meanings of the word, “praxis”, most notably the way Marx and (following him) Lukács challenge the view that the world should be conceived in the form of a “thing” or an “object” and “not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively” (to borrow the language of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” [Marx, 1969, p. 13]). This is a vision of “praxis” that opens up the possibility of transcending the reified structures of capitalist society and the ideological forms corresponding with the production and exchange of commodities (Lukács, 1971). The contemplative stance that is privileged by “science” (and, we might add, by the “measurement experts” of the *My School* website) typifies a society where people are in thrall to structures in which they can no longer see themselves. Those structures take on, instead, a reified form, as though they exist apart from the human activity that has created them, lending themselves to classification and measurement that forestalls any interrogation of the social relationships and human activity that underpin them. In response to this situation, Marx and Lukács articulate a vision of “praxis”, whereby people might engage in social activity in a reflexive way, fully aware of their role in creating the world around them (Lukács, 1971, pp. 15-16). They thereby attempt to name a more complex, multi-faceted relationship between human beings and the world around them than that which is assumed by “scientific” forms of inquiry, that treat the world as simply an object that is external to us. The

world is not out “there” but it is a product of our own making and of the relationships that we have with others.

The assumption that complex social settings like schools, and the activities in which teachers and their pupils engage within those settings, can be captured by “measurement experts” is a crude ideological construction that must be named for what it is. Seeing “things” differently means seeing beyond the performance indicators and other mechanisms that currently mediate the professional practice of teachers. This is not to say that the teachers at Multicultural Primary School can simply abandon the ways, in which their work is currently mediated by standards-based reforms, or that they can free themselves of the language that governments require them to speak when they report their students’ progress. We are firstly trying to identify sparks of critical awareness, rather than entertaining the possibility of mass action, that might cause the ugly edifice of standards-based reforms to crumble. The kind of reflexivity that the historical moment demands of all of us involves monitoring the very words we speak, and questioning the ways that we have allowed the language of standards to mediate how we think about our work. There are, nonetheless, hints of a larger vision of praxis evident in the account that the teachers at Multicultural Primary School give of their work, and we conclude this essay by affirming their recognition of their students and the ethical commitment they enact when responding to their needs from day-to-day. They thereby address the “human” in a way that politicians and their “measurement experts” miserably fail to do.

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