

'I am not a "good" teacher; I don't do all their paperwork': Teacher resistance to accountability demands in the English *Skills for Life* strategy

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Abstract

In 2000, *Skills for Life*, a new strategy for literacy, numeracy and language education was introduced in England. It included new core curricula, tough new targets for learner achievement, and significantly increased accountability requirements for teachers and colleges. Many teachers found aspects of this new system difficult. This paper analyses interviews carried out with teachers in 2002 to identify the reasons underlying their resistance. In the interviews, teachers consistently drew on a well-defined discourse which defined 'good' teaching as teaching that is responsive to the learner, negotiating teaching in response to learners' goals and characteristics, and flexible in the teaching moment. Resistance arose when aspects of the centralised strategy were perceived to constrain teachers' ability to respond to learners in this way, being driven more by external demands and advance planning than by responsiveness to learners. Teachers attempted to develop strategies to maintain responsiveness while working within the new strategy.

Introduction

Increasing accountability demands in education – often referred to in shorthand as 'the paperwork' – have been identified as being among the significant factors contributing to teacher stress and perceived to be drawing teachers away from tasks which really matter to themselves and to their students. This paper explores this issue in relation to the introduction of the *Skills for Life* language, literacy and numeracy strategy in England in 2000. Interviews with teachers carried out shortly after the strategy was introduced show that teachers drew on a very specific model of 'good' teaching, central to which is responsiveness to learners. Analysis of these interviews will demonstrate that resistance to the new system arose when it was perceived to constrain specific aspects of teachers' ability to respond to learners.

Textualisation in education

In ethnographic studies of workplace stress in education, 'paperwork' has been identified as a particularly significant factor contributing to the pressures of work intensification (Troman 2000, Jeffrey and Troman 2004). This is part of a broader social trend, in which increased 'textualisation' (Iedema and Scheeres 2003) has changed the nature of work for many.

Workplace literacy studies have revealed that workers are increasingly expected to engage in complex literacy practices, even in previously non-textual jobs (Brandt 2001, Hull 1997, Belfiore et al. 2004). This requires the re-negotiation of workers' existing knowledges, practices and identities, often in conflictual and stressful ways (Farrell 2000, Farrell et al 2000, Farrell 2001, Jackson 2000). Heightened levels of accountability are demanded, in an 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000) or 'audit society' (Power 1997) in which workers are required to record their practices in great detail.

This textualisation of education has brought difficulties. In a literature review of the introduction of performance culture in further education, Avis (2005) identifies common themes of intensification of labour, loss of control and a perceived marginalisation of 'what matters to teachers'. In higher education, Shore and Wright (2000) argue that such changes in language and practices produce new types of professional identities, transforming teachers into individuals who, in a climate of 'unease and hyperactivity', conduct themselves in terms of the norms by which they are governed. Following Power (1994), they demonstrate that anxiety and insecurity destroy commitment and loyalty to organizations, and may undermine performance. Power notes that the spread of audit 'actually creates the very distrust it is meant to address' (1994:10). As Douglas (1992, quoted in Strathern 2000:4) observes, checking only becomes necessary in situations of mistrust.

In adult education, Darville (2002:63) observes that 'in interviews with practitioners, talk often turns to "the burden of paperwork," even when no questions have directed attention to it,' as a reflection of the time and attention that such practices take up. He recounts the tensions described by teachers in Ontario when Training Plans were introduced, who struggled to reconcile the demands of the new documentation with their assessment of what students wanted. Similarly, Hamilton (2007) identifies the highly contentious nature of the particular textualised task of completing Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) to structure student learning in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL (ALNE) education. She describes conflicts between the supposedly individualising but actually globalising nature of the ILP and the primarily student-centred orientation of teachers; difficulties around the time taken to fill them in and around managing ILPs with ESOL learners; and problems with the role teachers take up as mediator between student aspirations and system requirements. In Hamilton's analysis, tutors' attempts to improve the ILP experience for themselves and their students end up co-opting them into the very system they are sceptical about.

Jackson (2005) describes a growing feeling that literacy workers have been enrolled in a project not their own, in which 'what counts' becomes shaped by the routine work of record keeping and reporting to funders. She describes how, in a range of international settings, the introduction of

centralised systems has led to a focus on 'what counts' within the system, rather than on what matters to students and teachers.

The Introduction of Skills for Life

This paper will address similar issues which emerged with the introduction of the *Skills for Life* adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL strategy in England in 2000'. This major strategy aimed to transform adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL education, in response to a review of the English field reported in *A Fresh Start* (Moser 1999). The so-called 'Moser report' proposed a completely new strategy and a major increase in national funding.

ALNE teachers welcomed increased investment in what had previously been a fragmented and low-priority area, described as a 'Cinderella' field within adult education (Hamilton and Hillier 2006). *Skills for Life* suddenly raised the profile of ALNE in hitherto undreamt-of fashion. But with increased investment came increased accountability requirements. The centralised system included new core curricula for literacy, numeracy and language, new testing and accreditation systems, new requirements and tough new targets for colleges and local Learning and Skills Councils who administrated funding.

Many teachers experienced difficulties with this new system. While welcoming the investment made in the field, most experienced ALNE teachers found that aspects of the new strategy contradicted elements of their teaching philosophies and backgrounds. In earlier periods in the UK, much of the work in this field was driven by a social justice agenda, and responding to learners' needs was the paramount concern (Hamilton and Hillier 2006). The centralised curriculum and testing regime was perceived by many teachers as a challenge to this learner-centred approach, and there was concern that the Government drive to upskill people for a competitive new economy was taking priority over the social inclusion concerns of the field.

This paper asks why this new system was experienced as being problematic. What made the introduction of such changes, ostensibly aimed at improving the system, difficult for many teachers to cope with? And what coping strategies did teachers develop in dealing with this? These questions will be addressed through an analysis of teachers' responses to these changes, as expressed by a group of ALNE staff involved with a research project which took place shortly after the strategy had been introduced.

In previous work (Ivanic et al. 2006) we have described teachers' experiences at this time as having to negotiate tensions between two different models of professionalism. The first, a commitment to respond to learners as individuals, was often informed by a commitment to social justice. The second, a requirement to meet the demands of the *Skills for Life* strategy, included delivering the curriculum, achieving recruitment, retention and achievement targets, and administering assessment. This paper will explore

in more depth the implicit model of good teaching expressed in these interviews, and draw out the reasons for the tensions teachers described at the time. This offers a snapshot of the challenges teachers faced with the introduction of the new system, and the strategies they developed to deal with these challenges. More importantly, perhaps, it articulates an explanation for the reasons such changes were often described as problematic, in terms of conflicting discourses about what it is to be a ‘good’ teacher.

Teacher interviews; data and analysis

In 2002, a team at the Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University began the 'Adult Learners' Lives' research (Barton et al. 2007). This project explored the relationship between what was going on in the classroom and learners' lives beyond the classroom, and was part of the research programme of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of the *Skills for Life* strategy.

We engaged in ethnographic research in a range of college and community sites in the North West of England. The three university-based researchers (Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting) spent extensive periods of time in classes with learners and teachers, carrying out formal and informal interviews recorded in fieldnotes and audiorecorded, and spending time with learners outside the classrooms to come to understand more about the realities of their lives. At the same time, practitioner researchers carried out focused projects to explore particular issues in learners' lives.

This research came at a point when new *Skills for Life* core curricula had been rolled out to colleges, along with associated training sessions, but these were still considered to be relatively ‘new’. Teachers were getting used to a new system. They were required to ‘map’ their teaching to the curriculum. This was the necessity that each learning aim or achievement recorded in ILPs, lesson plans and other related paperwork be ‘mapped’ to the core curriculum by labelling it with the letter and number of the appropriate section and subsection. Teachers were also expected to encourage their learners to work towards taking national tests. Every Local Learning and Skills Council had targets to work towards of numbers of students achieving success in national literacy and numeracy tests. These targets were then fed down to colleges, with associated impacts on the funding colleges would receive. While the impact of the changes associated with *Skills for Life* was not the prime focus of our study, by spending so much time with learners and teachers it quickly became clear that their experiences were being changed by the introduction of this system in some very powerful ways.

We therefore decided to include exploration of these issues to inform the broader thrust of the project. Open-ended qualitative interviews were

carried out with teachers involved with the project between April and June 2003. The interviews covered a range of areas: teachers' backgrounds and routes into literacy, numeracy and language teaching; training; planning methods; descriptions of practice; responses to the recent changes; role as a teacher, and relationship between research and practice. (See appendix for interview schedule and details of teachers interviewed.)

This article reports on an in depth reanalysis of this interviews, which explores what they have to tell us about these teachers' experiences of the introduction of new national accountability systems. The analysis was carried out using the Atlas-ti computer-aided qualitative data analysis package. The interviews were systematically coded for anything referring to changes in the system, accountability requirements and the impact that this had on people's teaching. These codes were then refined by repeatedly revisiting the data to draw out the detail of what people were talking about, recurrent patterns and themes, and significant relationships between these.

This analysis revealed broad thematic areas in the data relating to what it meant to be a 'good' teacher, the issues teachers had with the new system, and the different strategies teachers drew on to manage these issues. The discussion below is structured around these main areas, with the subheadings relating to the principal codings which emerged from the analysis.

What does it mean to be a good teacher?

Responsiveness to learners

In these interviews, teachers drew on a discourse in which the central characteristic of a 'good teacher' was to be responsive to the learner. Teachers spoke about trying to construct respectful relationships with their learners, and trying to minimise the hierarchical teacher-student relationship. Kay approached her teaching by trying to find out 'what would be useful to the person and how it would be useful to them, and to make it available to them in as equal a way as possible.' Similarly, Debbie stressed the need to have a basic respect for students.

Central to this responsiveness is a respect for learners' own goals, and for the reasons why they come to classes. As Wynne put it, 'If you're not taking into account individuals' needs in terms of their progress and what not, then you're not doing it right.' These goals were often different from the targets that the colleges were being expected to meet. Margaret, discussing the students she worked with in family learning, pointed out that students' reasons for being there were often very different from the reasons the Government wanted to encourage their participation:

In family learning, they often come because they want to help their child. And that's the government excuse for putting in this basic skills through family learning, you see, to improve their

skills. But they've got to take a while to get to that realisation that maybe, there's something in it for them.

This responsiveness to learners was reflected in the way teachers talked about planning their classes in response primarily to the goals learners brought with them. Hermione's class planning process was entirely driven by learners' goals, beginning by discussing the issues students wanted to work on, and only after the first few weeks relating these to core curriculum levels and assessment targets. The process she described was student-led, rather than curriculum-led. Student were not pressurised to stick with their original plan, and plans were changed flexibly: 'Although they have got their two or three points on a list, we may deviate, depending on how I perceive their progress, how they perceive their progress.'

Students' goals were rarely described simply in terms of language, literacy and numeracy, but were normally spoken of in broader terms. Wynne, asked to talk about the most important principles in teaching and learning, underlined the fact that there is 'more to learning' than what she calls 'the official end'.

The students are growing in lots of ways that are not just to do with whether they've learnt the past simple. Learning about themselves and the way that they learn. Learning about each other and learning to get on with things and get on with other people and growing in confidence.

Gail described these broader goals in terms of empowerment, enfranchisement, confidence and happiness. She told us that when she saw students making progress in their language, she felt they had more power in their lives generally. They changed how they felt about themselves, they had more control and more opportunities, they felt they had a role to play in life, and they were more confident in dealing with practical matters.

Responsiveness to individual learners also meant appreciating their achievements and progress in their own terms, rather than measuring them against external yardsticks. For some, this progress might happen in small steps. For example, for the students in Margaret's family learning class, regular attendance might be an important achievement that would be missed if the focus was purely on academic progression. Hermione pointed out that for a student with mental health difficulties, initial progress might consist not in academic development but in being able to come into class without their carer. It might take weeks to get to that significant point. As she said, 'progression has to be seen, not only in academic levels, but also in personal levels.'

An awareness of students' capacities as individuals was important, which meant both appreciating their achievements in their own terms, and not under-estimating their capacities. Margaret cautioned, 'never presume ...

even if you think they are only at one level, they may know how to spell words that are for level two.’ Some of Wynne’s beginner-level ESOL learners had enough previous experience of learning language to be asking for irregular verb tables before they started any work on past tenses. Teachers were therefore wary of simply categorising students against curriculum levels, which could mask such subtleties.

Ongoing negotiation and discussion

This level of responsiveness to learners could not be achieved without negotiation and communication with them, discussing their goals in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Grace felt that planning, without this negotiation, was meaningless.

You can plan a whole term’s work, in minute detail, but because your students haven’t planned it with you, because they haven’t read the books, it can be just sort of null and void after week one or two.

This negotiation and discussion required teachers to take the time to build up a good, trusting relationship with students and to discuss their goals and capacities with them. This happens in a gradual fashion. Initial assessment can only go so far. As Hermione told us, difficult personal issues could affect students’ responses in the classroom, but these might only be revealed to the teacher gradually, once a trusting relationship had been built up. These negotiations could be particularly time-consuming with ESOL students at beginner level, where the lack of a shared language complicated the issue, and made target-setting a challenging process in itself.

Flexibility

Responsiveness to learners required an attitude of flexibility, a willingness to change plans ‘in the moment’. The word ‘flexible’ was used many times in these interviews. Margaret had found flexibility to be crucial after introducing group work in her literacy classes, saying that you have to be prepared to ‘change tack quite quickly’ if the prepared task did not work as expected. Hermione’s teaching at a social services day centre for people with physical or mental health needs depended on flexibility, as students’ capacities to engage with learning fluctuated from day to day. In all of her work with adults she was prepared to change plans to respond to students’ needs, which she described as being very different from her previous experiences of teaching timetabled lessons in school.

This need for flexibility required teachers to have the confidence in their own abilities and professionalism to be able to change plans off the cuff. Teachers told us that this was something that came with experience, as Grace describes:

I'll look at their work, and I know exactly what I've got in mind for them, I know exactly what I'm going to try, and if it's pitched too low a level, I can move it up immediately. That only comes with experience.

Teachers' issues with the new system

At the time this research took place, the accountability frameworks and structures associated with *Skills for Life* were relatively new. The teachers we were working with expressed a range of criticisms of the new system, all of which can be related to the characteristics of their model of 'good' teaching described above. It was when the new strategy was felt to be constraining their ability to be a responsive, open, flexible 'good' teacher that criticisms emerged.

Constraining responsiveness

A particularly significant criticism was that the new system damaged the good relationship between teachers and learners. The amount of paperwork students were now expected to engage with in class was described as alienating and demeaning. For example, the 'work done sheet' was a written record of what had happened in each lesson, which had been introduced in this college as part of the new accountability structures. Grace said, 'When they see some of the work, they say I don't want to do that "work done sheet". [...] I also feel these are adults and we are treating them like children, you *will* do this, and you *will* do that.' Debbie found it uncomfortable to have to ask students to borrow their files to accredit their work when she felt students' reasons for being there were not adequately reflected by the accreditation process.

Targets related to assessment were particularly problematic when assessment requirements did not reflect students' goals, achievements or capacities. Teachers felt that a lot of these requirements were measuring the 'wrong thing'. Margaret felt the structure of the curriculum was inappropriate: 'Some of those segments are too big, and students only want to do tiny little bits of it. But then they can't be accredited.' Gail was concerned that where she had missed elements of the curriculum out because they were not relevant to her students, she could not then accredit that section on their college certificate of achievement, an alternative way to record and recognise achievement to the national test. The college certificate, awarded at the end of term, recorded what each particular student had made progress in, and was felt to be part of a more responsive approach to assessment for many students.

Kay was worried that students were not 'doing the accreditation' for their own reasons:

I think you still can't help feeling that mostly a lot of people are doing the accreditation to please you and really it's not really what it is about for them.

For ESOL teachers, a requirement to complete Individual Learning Plans for each student at the start of the course, to map their goals to the curriculum and to use these to plan teaching, raised particular problems. Students' goals tended to be global ones, such as wanting to achieve fluency, gaining vocabulary or improving their pronunciation. Such global skills were difficult to reflect in a system that required targets to be related to specific curriculum areas. Beginner students in particular did not have the language or the metalingual knowledge to break their general goals down into specific targets. For Gail, this was part of the tutor's role and it required their specific expertise to break these global aims down into teaching and learning experiences. She felt strongly that students could not be expected to articulate the means to achieve their broader goals in advance. The requirement to specify students' specific goals at the start of the course was in fact damaging her capacity to respond to their needs. She suggested that this led to a focus on the wrong sorts of changes, feeling that 'the paperwork' as it was constructed did not always adequately reflect learners' positive experiences and the progress they were making in relation to their broader goals of confidence and empowerment.

Similarly, Margaret pointed out that measuring progress in relation to one class did not reflect the longer-term nature of the progress shown by people she worked with. She felt that the most important changes were being overlooked by curriculum-focused assessment, such as transformations in people's desire to learn:

Of course it's difficult to track that. It's more about attitudes, I think. And that's mostly not measurable.

The requirement to assess students' capacities at the beginning of their engagement with the college had the potential to affect relationships with tutors from an early stage. Margaret felt initial assessment was particularly damaging to relationships in the family learning course. Parents joined this course to help their children to learn. But at the start of the course, she was expected to assess parents' own literacy and numeracy skills. She felt this was threatening, inappropriate, and did not reflect the amount of time it took for people to be ready to engage in learning themselves. Many of the parents she worked with needed to go through several stages *before* they could start to engage in more structured learning activities: first turning up to one or two events for their child, then learning to attend on a regular basis, perhaps doing some writing for a few weeks, and only then beginning to articulate their own needs.

Constraining ongoing negotiation

In all of these colleges, the amount of paperwork teachers and students were doing had increased substantially. This paperwork was regarded as onerous by both teachers and students. It took up time that could otherwise have been spent on discussions with learners, constraining possibilities both for negotiating students' learning goals and for building up good relationships more generally.

For many students, the paperwork was a challenging task in itself. In an adult community college, students completed Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) at the start of each term, and 'Work Done sheets' at the end of each session. While these could offer valuable opportunities for negotiating learning goals and reviewing progress, for many students these were difficult pieces of paper to deal with, and filling them in could take up a great deal of the time they were in college. As Grace explained, a perceived requirement to have the ILP completed at the start of term was an extra pressure for her students:

This great rush to get it done in the first one or two weeks, well, until they've been here two or three weeks, they don't know what they want to do. You've really got to push, well, do you want to learn to write letters? Oh yes, but they'll agree to anything because you're the teacher. I just think all this paperwork is utterly meaningless to them.

While the responsive discourse of good teaching recognises that it may take some time to draw out from the student what their learning goals really are, Grace found herself having to 'push' the students to articulate goals too early. Ironically, the format and timing prescribed here, which had the aim of encouraging negotiation with learners, was instead constraining the possibilities for teachers to engage in meaningful discussion.

Paperwork was particularly problematic when it was felt to be meaningless. It was often described as being repetitious, recording the same thing in many different ways, as with Gail's description of curriculum mapping:

On the one hand, we've got all this paperwork demanded of us. [...] All these session plans are supposed to be curriculum targeted as well. I mean, go away! It's fine if you're teaching 2 sessions, but you're teaching 7 sessions a week and you've got other stuff to do as well, and you're sort of leafing through the curriculum. I think they need to get something manageable going on here.

This paperwork seemed particularly purposeless to her because so much was being generated that nobody had the time to check that it had been done.

The increasingly onerous nature of these requirements was very tiring for teachers, as their experience of teaching became more and more about completing these tasks, and less and less about engaging with their students. Gail distinguished between the 'teaching' and the 'writing up':

It's not manageable. [...] We're all jumping through very boring but difficult hoops. And I find that very tiring, I find that the most tiring aspect. The teaching I really, really enjoy. But I've got seven courses to write up now.

Spending time in preparation or recording was not a problem in itself. It was the perceived wasting of time on tasks not directly responsive to students' needs that was at issue here. As Grace said,

I'm not saying I'm resistant to paperwork, but it is paperwork for paperwork's sake that I'm resistant to.

Constraining flexibility

The new system included more emphasis on pre-planning, more paper-based scrutiny of teachers' work and increased training requirements. One of the principal effects of this was to constrain teachers' capacity to be flexible in the moment. Gail's description of the curriculum captures the sense of threat many teachers were experiencing at this point:

The paperwork has all changed, as well. I feel that some of our flexibility is gone. [...] Now that everything has got to be curriculum referenced, I mean the whole thing has tightened up, really. So that the curriculum, it's kind of there all the time, kind of hovering in the background.

Grace felt the paperwork constrained flexibility, and that being 'good at the paperwork' could actually mitigate against being a good teacher.

I've seen beautiful paperwork, beautifully planned lessons, and I've seen this in more than one situation, where yes, somebody is red hot on paperwork, [but] they're absolutely useless as a practitioner because their focus is on the paperwork and not on the student. And I like this greater flexibility of being able to change your paperwork as your student demands it, and unfortunately, the system being as it is, it doesn't allow for that. It's paperwork, paperwork, paperwork.

The new requirements were perceived to be catering for the 'lowest common denominator', with negative assumptions about teachers' levels of

professionalism and competence underlying them. Grace equated the increased paperwork with a lack of trust:

I did four years at [this college, several years ago], and I really enjoyed it. I loved it. And it was a lot different then to what it is now, a lot different. [...] The paperwork was minimal. They trusted you to get on with the job, and you did.

She suggested that the new system was geared to people with no experience, for whom doing the job became about filling in the right forms and following the right books, while experienced tutors were more likely to be pushed away by the level of non-student-centred work required.

Most of the teachers interviewed had found the introduction of the new system damaging to their self-confidence. This was partly to do with the speed with which the changes had been introduced. When asked what training she felt she needed, Hermione distinguished between the teaching work, which she felt confident with, and what she calls the ‘husbandry’ work, dealing with all the new accreditation and assessment schemes, which she had found difficult to get on top of – to the extent that she ‘panicked’ and came to believe she might be ‘slow’ at picking things up. As Gail described it:

There is a lot of angst, I think, on lots of tutors’ minds. You know, constant self doubt about whether we’re doing it right. Even though we can see our students are learning, and growing in confidence, we’re still wondering, are we doing it right? We’re not just wondering, we’re worrying are we doing it right. And that’s such a general feeling that, you know, that can’t be right. That can’t be positive. All that energy could be being put into much more productive processes.

Positive responses to the new system

This research was carried out at a moment of change, where it is natural for people to express worries and concerns. However, I would not wish to suggest that teachers were unremittingly critical of the new system. I have argued that those things which they were negative about were all related to limiting people’s ability to be the kind of responsive teacher they wanted to be. Similarly, the aspects of the new system that were perceived as positive were those that contributed to teachers’ capacities to respond to learners’ needs.

The first of these was the introduction of more structure through the curriculum. For some, the curriculum was seen as a positive resource, providing a framework within which learners’ goals could be more closely negotiated. For instance, Hermione used the core curriculum as a way of demonstrating to students how far they had progressed, while maintaining the flexibility to deviate from planned routes and curriculum frameworks as she

felt it necessary. Similarly, Gail found it useful to have a structure with the curriculum to track students’ progress. Both of these teachers had previously worked in schools at the time of the introduction of the National Curriculum. They drew on this experience to recognise that the restrictions associated with the new system were likely to slacken off over time. This helped them to use the curriculum as a resource, rather than feel it to be a constraint.

Similarly, Wynne, who saw the ESOL curriculum as a non-prescriptive resource, spoke of it very positively.

I think it’s brilliant. I think it’s really really good, the new ESOL curriculum’s wonderful, we’ve needed it for ages. And I don’t think it’s prescriptive, so therefore you can’t say what you would do differently, because you can do anything with it.

Wynne had used the curriculum to draw up a syllabus for her college that she felt was right for them. As a manager as well as a teacher, she had to ensure that evidence was produced of responsive systems running consistently through her department. The new curriculum offered her a framework within which to do this, though she acknowledged that this led to difficulties when trying to impose a single way of approaching planning and target setting on a whole department.

So these teachers were not simply complaining about the introduction of a new system. Where they saw aspects of the system supporting their responsive teaching, it was praised. However, at this point in time, the issues at the forefront in our discussions were the problems they were having, and the strategies they were using to mediate these pressures.

Mediating the pressures

This was a relatively new system, and teachers were still in the early stages of developing strategies to deal with the things they found difficult. Nevertheless, they had already developed different ways to deal with the conflict between their model of good teaching and the new practices they were expected to engage with.

Resistance and selective ignoring

Resistance was an important one of these. Teachers with experience and confidence were willing to simply resist aspects of the new system when they felt this was an appropriate response. As Gail said:

I won’t allow myself to be restricted by it, and I do do things that aren’t on the curriculum.

Another example was Kay, who had been encouraged in the curriculum training to adopt group work in her classes, but felt that this was not right for her own students. She therefore developed a strategy of ‘selective[ly] ignoring’ this aspect of the strategy.

As Margaret explained, being a ‘good’ teacher means different things to her and to the college administration, and her own understanding of it took priority:

I am not a good teacher, in terms of the college, and I don't do all their paper work, and I don't take on board every last thing they tell me to do.

She went on to explain that while she felt learning plans were fine in theory, they simply did not work for her students in the way she was expected to use them. She managed this situation by selectively resisting some of the paperwork she was asked to do, where she did not feel this was appropriate for her students.

However, simple resistance was not possible or desirable in most cases. Instead, all of these teachers in different ways found means to mediate external pressures for their students, in order to pursue their responsive model of teaching within the new regime.

Starting from learners' goals

Teachers still found ways to take the learners' goals as a starting point and only thereafter relate them to the curriculum and accreditation targets. One way of doing this was, as Hermione described, to focus on what the student had achieved first, checking what the student had done against the curriculum after the fact, rather than to plan their work in advance. The curriculum then played the role of validating the learners' achievement rather than constraining their progress. Of course this did not address the requirement to produce an ILP in advance. Hermione did do this, but she maintained a great deal of flexibility in her approach to learning plans produced early on in the term.

Debbie's strategy of putting learners before the curriculum was central to her teaching approach. In her interview, she developed this notion in some depth:

You present the core curriculum in terms of people. You work around their hobbies and interests and what they want to learn [...] Provided you can relate what you are doing to the core curriculum, you can map it to the core curriculum.

She went on to describe how she turned a spontaneously-generated class discussion into fulfilment of the speaking and listening criteria of the curriculum. This enabled her to move from simply teaching skills to developing her teaching in response to learners' broader goals.

Minimising target pressures

In order to mediate pressures from external requirements, teachers looked for ways to minimise these for students. For example, when faced with

a requirement that students should work towards an assessment, Hermione began by facilitating students' access to an in-college certificate that recognised their achievements, where appropriate, rather than to push them to do the national literacy tests. Similarly, Kay managed the pressure to get learners through accreditation by minimising the concerns that testing might generate. She focused on getting people through it without upsetting people, by making it appear 'small and insignificant'. Again this depended on the students' goals and capacities. Kay and Hermione were both talking at this point about students who found 'tests' threatening. For others, taking and passing the level one and two tests was something they looked forward to as a challenge and an achievement. The key, as ever, was appropriateness for the students concerned.

Doing the minimum

Other strategies for minimising negative impacts of the new system included 'doing the minimum', as Gail described it, to try and protect learners from paperwork overload:

All this reviewing and self-evaluation. I sometimes think let's just get on with it, you know, using the session to the absolute maximum exposure and practice in using English in a meaningful way, that's going to support the student's development and build up their confidence, rather than dealing with all these pieces of paper.

By minimising the amount of paperwork Gail engaged in with her learners, she was able to maximise the time she was spending responding directly to their language needs.

Discussion: the roots of teachers' concerns

Far from simple resistance to change, or even resistance to an overload of paperwork *per se*, this analysis has demonstrated that teachers' mixed feelings about the new strategy were related to a conflict of discourses. Teachers expressed a distinctive model of what a 'good' teacher did, rooted in responsiveness to learners' needs and capacities, with specific characteristics which were remarkably consistent across the interviews: building egalitarian relationships, responding to learners' goals, and appreciating learners' achievements in their own terms. However, many of the practices introduced by the new strategy were perceived to be based on a different model, in which a 'good' teacher was one who controlled activities in class, planned lessons and courses carefully in advance and mapped them to the new curriculum, and assessed learners against tests and levels constructed by external authorities.

Achieving responsiveness required negotiation, investment of time, and flexibility. Teachers felt that all these were made more difficult within the new

system. New paperwork requirements were felt to alienate students and damage relationships. External targets were set which were not based around students' own goals, achievements or capacities. Time available for negotiation was eaten into by paperwork demands. Flexibility in the teaching moment was constrained by pre-planning of curriculum-referenced lessons and schemes of work. Teachers' confidence in their own abilities was shaken by feelings of being 'under surveillance', and the feeling that new requirements were catering for 'lowest common denominator' teachers rather than supporting experienced staff.

Where the system supported responsive teaching, changes were welcomed. Where it did not, teachers developed strategies for mediating between the requirements of the system and learners' needs. These strategies included simple resistance; starting with learners' own goals; minimising pressures from external targets; and 'doing the minimum' where paperwork was concerned.

Conclusions and implications for practice

These interviews represent a clash of discourses at one particular historic moment. In the time since they were carried out, the system has matured and teachers' strategies with it. New teachers have come into the field, trained in teaching to the curriculum, with a different discourse of what 'good' teaching involves. Funding structures have changed, and colleges' requirements have changed with them. But this data still has important lessons to teach us.

It is well established that changes in accountability requirements in education create stress for teachers. This article has looked in depth at the reasons why teachers find changes difficult, by examining in detail the responses of a group of teachers at the time of the introduction of *Skills for Life* in England. It has demonstrated that these teachers' resistance to increased accountability demands is not simply a question of increased workload or resistance to surveillance. Rather, the problem could be described in relation to conflicting models of 'good' teaching. Teachers experienced difficulties when specific practices they associated with 'good' teaching were made increasingly difficult by requirements of the new system they were working within.

The implications of this for practice more broadly are that teacher resistance to accountability (and other) systems should be understood not simply as resistance to change, but as a principled response of resistance to aspects of systems which challenge their teaching philosophies. When changes are introduced to a teaching situation, whether at policy level or at the level of the individual college, they are not simply imposed on a (compliant or resistant) population. Rather, changes in accountability systems enter into a relationship of dialogue with existing practices, beliefs, discourses

and philosophies, which have shaped and continue to shape teachers' approaches to their work.

Whenever changes are being contemplated, an understanding of the specific models of 'good' teaching in circulation in the field and the implications of such models for practice in the classroom needs to be developed. Only then can the impact of proposed changes be adequately assessed. Teachers' responses to changes will to a large extent be shaped by their existing commitments to models of being a 'good' teacher. Where these models are threatened by changes in accountability systems, these will not be welcomed, and teachers are likely to engage in various strategies of resistance. It is far more fruitful to work with teachers when changes are contemplated to ensure, as Gail put it above, that 'all that energy could be put into much more productive processes'.

Acknowledgements

I should like to express my gratitude firstly to the teachers who participated in this research, and secondly to Ralf St Clair and Alisa Belzer, editors of this special issue; David Barton, Rachel Hodge, Ann Wilson, Lesley Buckley, and members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Discussion Group; and anonymous reviewers, for helpful comments and support in developing this article. Errors and infelicities remain of course my own responsibility.

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Appendix:

Interview schedule

- How did you get into this sort of teaching?
- How does this compare to other sorts of teaching you do / you've done?
- What sort of training have you had? How has your training helped you? Do you feel there are any gaps you would like filled in your training?
- How do you go about planning: a term's work? a class?
- Describe what you do in a classroom during a lesson
 - individual work - group work
- How does the volunteer thing work?
- How have things changed in the past few years?
- What do you think of the core curriculum in relation to these learners? If you produced a curriculum yourself, how different would it be?
 - How is the individual learning plan / termly review / work done sheet structure helpful / not helpful?
- What do you see as being your role as a teacher? Are there things you do which go outside this role as a teacher?
- Do you have any views on the relationship between research and practice? What sorts of research would you find helpful?

Teachers interviewed

The teachers interviewed represented a range of specialisms. All were experienced teachers, most from within the ALNE field, some from other fields of education and training. They included (all names are pseudonyms):

Margaret: an experienced literacy teacher at an adult community college, who had been working for eighteen years teaching literacy both in the college and out in the community. At the time of interviewing, she was engaged in a lot of family learning work.

Grace: another experienced literacy teacher at the same adult community college, who had previously worked in schools and in prisons, mainly with beginner readers.

Hermione: had worked as a primary school teacher for over twenty years, before coming into adult literacy work relatively recently. She had been working at an adult community college for three years, initially as a volunteer, then in learning support and only recently as a tutor.

Gail: an experienced ESL teacher who had worked teaching English abroad and as a support teacher for bilingual children in schools, before working as a mainstream English teacher in schools for a while. She had returned to work with adults in a community college a few years earlier.

Nigel: a numeracy teacher with a background in engineering. He had started working in an adult community college as a volunteer support tutor and then moved into teaching numeracy part-time when he took early retirement.

Wynne: a very experienced ESOL teacher who had been working in an FE college for many years. She had in the past worked mainly with members of the local Asian community but had recently been teaching a fast-track ESOL course which catered mainly for a new population of refugees and people seeking asylum. She was also managing the ESOL team at the college.

Kay: a numeracy teacher in a large metropolitan community college, who had been teaching literacy and numeracy since 1975, working in college and in the community.

Debbie: a relatively new literacy teacher in the large metropolitan community college, who had been working there for a couple of years at the time of the research. She had previously worked in the advertisement section of a local newspaper before moving into mentoring work with teenagers and then first voluntary then paid teaching work.