Chapter 17

Death to critique and dissent? The policies and practices of new managerialism and of ‘evidence-based practice’

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New managerialism, which is also referred to as neo-liberalism in the UK […] is a system of government of individuals invented during the Thatcher and Reagan years. […] Neo-liberalism is characterised by Thatcher’s ‘death of society’ and the rise of ‘individuals’ who are in need of management, surveillance and control.

Management, surveillance and control are not new of course. Foucault (1977, 1980) analysed the panopticon as a form of government in which ‘relatively few officials control large numbers of [workers] by foregrounding both hierarchy and visibility’ (Schmelzer, 1993:127). The new panopticon, however, that can be observed in new managerialist worksites, works quite differently. Schmelzer observes that it is invisible and operates through multiple eyes at every level - eyes whose gaze is finely tuned to the inflow and outflow of funding and to the multitude of mechanisms that have been generated to manipulate those flows. This multiplied gaze works in such a way that it seems natural and makes us blind to its effects. It enables, according to Schmelzer (1993:127):

meticulous control over the network of power relations that produce and sustain the truth claims of an institution by means of an economical surveillance. […]

Now, as Schmelzer (1993) shows, instead of … (more or less) benign leaders who could rely on our own internalised gaze to monitor our own work, we have the multiplied gaze of the workers on each other, their gaze shaped by the policies and practices emanating from management. The multiplied gaze infiltrates and shapes the way work is understood. Little or no attention is paid to the actual effects on the work that this new panopticism might have, other than to monitor the meeting of institutional objectives. As long as objectives have been specified and strategies for their management and surveillance put in place, the nature of the work itself is of little relevance to anyone. If the auditing tools say that the work has, on average, met the objectives, it is simply assumed that the work has been appropriately and satisfactorily tailored according to the requirements of the institution (and often of the relevant funding body).
Within new managerialist systems, the individual’s sense of their own value is no longer primarily derived from responsible self-conduct and competent knowledge and practice of professional knowledge. And yet, at the same time, new managerialism relies on habitual, internalised surveillance, through which the conduct of conduct is carried out to press subjects into making and remaking themselves as legitimate and appropriate members of the latest shift within their particular new managerialist systems. The requirement of ‘continuous improvement’, and documented individual commitment towards and striving for it, is one of the strategies for creating this continually changing individual.

Within the terms of the new system individuals will be presented with an often overwhelming range of pressing choices and administrative tasks for which they are responsible. But any questioning of the system itself is silenced or trivialised. The system itself is characterised as both natural and inevitable. Resistance to it by individuals (and that includes critiques such as this) is constituted as ignorance of what the ‘real’ (financial) ‘bottom-line’ issues are, as sheer cussedness, or as a sign reminding management of individual workers’ replaceability. As Hammersley (2001: 9) points out, ‘[D]emands for “transparent” accountability’ (along with many other of managerialist terms) are made into imperatives that are in turn justified as a response to severely limited financial resources. The fact that much of the resource base that was previously available to support professional work has been redirected into surveillance and auditing somehow remains invisible, or at least is generally not spoken about, or subjected to critique.

New managerialism relies on a complex combination of the two forms of morality that Foucault observed, the first requiring compliance and the second driven by individuals’ desires to shape their own directions. It works, on the one hand, to gain compliance, relying on that form of morality driven by ‘obedience to a heteronomous code which we must accept, and to which we are bound by fear and guilt’ (Rose, 1999: 97). On the other hand, it partially disguises the coercion by placing increased emphasis on ‘personal responsibility’ within the new system, an emphasis that flows in part from the abdication by government and governing bodies from their former role in taking care of aspects of the social fabric.

Dennis (1995), writing in the North American context, puts his finger on a central problem of new managerialism. He says that through an emphasis on measurable outcomes, on goals defined by management at the highest levels and on the systems through which such goals are achieved, new managerialism is always dangerously at risk of cutting its populace adrift from moral and political debate.

Given all of these negatives (the reduction in critical thought and responsible dissent, the pervasive subliminal fear and anxiety, the sense of personal pressure and responsibility combined with a devalued sense of self, the shift of value away from personal and professional considerations towards the single consideration of the economy), it is relevant to ask why so many of us have willingly worked towards the instalment and maintenance of new managerialist
systems. Individuals involved in implementing or simply caught within new managerialist systems are often seduced by their rhetoric of efficiency and accountability, and by their morally ascendant promise of a desired comeuppance for those perceived to be faulty or inadequate in conducting their own conduct. […] Feminists, for example, were drawn to the possibility of breaking up old networks of power that held them on the margins and in low-status positions. The idea of a new system that could bring about change, breaking up old hegemonies and mandating equity, was seductive and appealing.

Those working to implement new managerialism set up systems in which everyone (subtext: specifically, those who did not satisfactorily conduct their own conduct under previous systems) will have to work harder to be ‘good enough’, to meet the exacting standards required of them. What they do not anticipate is that the constant threat of external punitive surveillance potentially erodes the professional judgement of everyone (including those who have, until now, successfully conducted their own conduct). The personal dynamic that is set up is potentially exhausting and debilitating, since it is likely that no one can experience themselves as ‘good enough’ when the basis of assessment is externalised, constantly escalating, subject to change, and often at odds with the professional knowledge on which previous good practice was based. […]

Ironically, the reduction of freedom, the loss of a moral base in favour of an economic base, the celebration of the new macho individual, are presented within new managerialism as fundamental to the new morally ascendant position—the only position any reasonable person could have. That morally ascendant view has, as its fundamental tenet, survival of the imposed systems. Dissent, just like dissent amongst soldiers in times of war, cannot be tolerated. […]

It is in part because of its apparently virtuous and morally ascendant language that otherwise critical professionals may be blind to the necessity for critique of the new managerialist discursive framework through which they are about to be, or are being, constituted. They may also be drawn into the sticky net of managerialism’s agenda if they find themselves in policy-making positions where they can place their political demands, such as equal educational opportunity or gender reform, on the agenda. […]

So how do managerialist agendas play out in schools, and in particular how might the new push towards evidence-based practice be understood in this context?

**A critique of the concept of ‘evidence-based practice’**

Hammersley (2001) provides a critique of evidence-based practice, also analysing it as a new managerialist strategy. He points out that managerialism is based on an assumption that professional practice:

should take the form of specifying goals explicitly, selecting
strategies for achieving them on the basis of objective evidence about their effectiveness, and then measuring outcomes in order to assess their degree of success (thereby providing the knowledge required for improving future performance). (2001:5)

These are not, when it comes to teaching, individually set goals, but the goals of the institution, or even of the state. While individual teachers may be responsible for providing the ‘objective evidence’, and may be held individually accountable if their evidence does not provide the institution with what it needs to make an acceptable account of itself to government, the definition of what is ‘effective’, of what counts as ‘success’, will not be something they have any control over. When HTO Davies et al. (2000;2) observe that

in contrast to the preceding culture of largely judgement-based professional practice, there has risen the important notion of evidence-based practice as a means of ensuring that what is being done is worthwhile and that it is being done in the best possible way

we can be sure that it is not the teachers who are being asked to judge what is worthwhile, nor what might be regarded as the ‘best possible way’. Of course, ‘consultations’ with representative teachers may have taken place, but those consultations will have been undertaken in such a way that the representatives will have acquired the new discourse and so become party to its dissemination, the only alternative being to be marginalised or replaced. Neither the teachers, nor their representatives, will have had freedom to dispute or resile from the institution’s or state’s criteria of effectivity and success, since both their own livelihood and the funding of their institutions may well be tied in whole or in part to their satisfactory fulfilment. As Grundy points out:

Leaders will be expected to exercise control so that the objectives of the organisations, clearly defined and articulated, will be achieved. There will be a division of labour between the leader who plans (or who receives and interprets plans imposed from elsewhere) and the practitioners who implement the plans. The language of administrative planning will be ‘end-directed’, with criteria for the achievement of the objectives being articulated along with the plans. It will be the leader who is responsible for the training of the practitioners, and such training will be oriented towards the development of skills. It will also be the responsibility of the leader to motivate and enthuse practitioners to embrace the specified objectives and work for their achievement.(Grundy,1993:168)

To this end, the language of managerialism cleverly cannibalises the liberal humanist terms in vogue during the period of high modernity that seem, on the face of it, indisputably virtuous and desirable. Take ‘literacy’, for example. Who can dispute the desirability of every child achieving a minimum standard of literacy and thus achieving not only the potential to be active citizens of democracy but also the potential to survive in the new information-technology driven global world? The means of achieving this may actually be at the
expense of the teaching strategies through which critical literacy or any other critical/analytic skills are taught. They may also draw massive resources away from teaching itself and into the bureaucracy that stages and evaluates the testing and other strategies through which the ‘new’ objectives are to be achieved. Individual resistance to the strategies through which these new/old ideals are implemented is likely to be read as inflexible, or conservative, or worse, as motivated by individual incompetence or laziness. Resistance may well position you as one of those whom the systems are supposedly designed to catch out.

The proponents of evidence-based practice propose an unproblematic relationship between research and practice, and also amongst policy, research and practice. At first glance, the idea of evidence-based practice appears to be so obviously desirable (like universal literacy or continuous improvement) that it might be regarded as a truism. Who could argue against the idea that professional practice should be based on evidence? Its opposite, teaching without evidence, or against the evidence, sounds absurd. Read in this way, a move towards evidence-based practice seems impossible to disagree with. But another reading can be produced if we understand evidence-based practice as a product of new managerialism and as no more than a means of implementing managerialist agendas.

To get beyond the obviousness of the first reading it is useful to focus on the ‘based’ of evidence-based and ask, *which evidence should be the base, and who selects it*? In what ways, we might then ask, are the choices and decisions teachers make in the classroom and playground based on the evidence, not only that someone else provides, but that someone else (another someone, located in the bureaucracy) selects. Are those who produce the evidence and those who select it members of the profession of teaching? How have they chosen what counts as evidence, and how have they selected the particular evidence that is to be acted on? And, finally, how are the links to the everyday practice of teaching to be accomplished? How is the teacher to alter her/his practices of teaching in light of this ‘evidence’? Such questions immediately alert us to a possible hidden agenda—to a plan to change what it is that teachers produce through the adoption of a language and a system that guarantees its sense of inevitability. The question we might then go on to ask is: are the practices of teaching so susceptible to this kind of subterfuge?

The right to be taught is now being framed through new managerialist strategies, in terms of measured outcomes, and yet at the same time relies on the very professional base of the teachers knowing her/his subject that new managerialism potentially undermines. Instructions from bureaucrats to produce specific outcomes (instructions backed by ‘evidence’) can only (logically speaking) be interpreted/practised in terms of the teachers’ already (per)formed, and (per)forming, profession-in-practice. But that profession-in-practice is what made sense in high modernity [pre new managerialism] when there was a personal and professional commitment to the pursuit of knowledge inside mutually respectful relations amongst colleagues and between teachers and students. So the profession-in-practice-or professional knowledge - is both
relied on and undermined by new managerialist strategies such as the implementation of evidence-based practice.

So how are we to make sense of what it is that evidence-based practice sets out to achieve and its methods for doing so? There are two major considerations that I elaborate here that are relevant to this questioning of an ideal, or real, connection between evidence and practice. These relate to the interpretation and use of experimental evidence by the advocates of evidence-based practice and to the necessity for an underlying philosophy of the profession of teaching.

**Interpreting Statistical/Experimental Evidence**

As Hammersley (2001) points out, the proponents of evidence-based practice, for example Blunkett (2000), argue that statistically based, experimental research is to be preferred by evidence-based practitioners since it is less biased by the interests of the researcher. This trust in the objectivity of experimental research is embarrassingly naïve. Experimental researchers, even those gazing down a microscope, are as capable of finding what they expect to find, or want to find, as anyone else. […]

Experiments do not remove the subjectivity of researchers; they simply work to conceal it. ‘Findings’ are not guaranteed - they are more like working propositions that make sense within particular frameworks of assumptions and of practice.

Yet it is in order to give an appearance of an unchallengeable link between evidence and practice that the advocates of evidence-based practice rely on experimental research. They engage the authority of ‘hard science’ to give weight to their propositions. Although the words ‘evidence-based practice’ might be read as if there is an immediate connection between the individual practitioner and the selection, reading and interpretation of evidence, teachers are not allocated time (let alone given appropriate library resources) to read the research being produced relevant to their practice (Davies et al, 1996). Nor are they trained to interpret research evidence and to work out the relations between research and practice. There is thus an invisible sleight of hand embedded in the term itself which makes invisible the managers and policy-makers who will select what is relevant, and who will dictate how it is to be audited and deemed to have been put into practice.

An apparent (invisible) assumption is made by the advocates of evidence-based practice that bureaucrats and policy-makers do have the skills and resources to read all the possible available research, select what is relevant to particular schools and classrooms and teachers and to the particular problems they encounter, and then to assess whether or not the teachers have understood the implications of the selected research and acted accordingly. Since this is such an absurd assumption, we can guess immediately that this is not how evidence-based practice will work. Through an understanding of how new managerialism works, we can guess that the objectives will come first and that the ‘experimental research evidence’ will be generated to justify them. As long as the objectives have been met (according to the auditors), then questions about
the appropriateness of the evidence for good teaching or the capacity of teachers to act on it can be left unasked and unanswered. Critique, in this model, becomes irrelevant.

Since the desire to meet the objectives has already been generated through the systems of surveillance and management and the subliminal fear and anxiety they can generate, then there is no need to worry about how teachers managed to make the links between evidence and practice. Withdrawal of funds from schools and programmes is one of a battery of manipulative strategies to ensure that the appropriate fear and guilt, through the operation of the multiplied gaze, is generated to ensure the meeting of the objectives.

Am I being too cynical, you might ask? Is it possible that the processes of evidence based practice might lead to better teaching?

My own work with teachers would suggest that it takes years of concerted effort for teachers to learn to read research and to generate new teaching practices based on that research. I have worked collaboratively with individual teachers, often over several years, guiding them in becoming reflexive researchers who can read both the assumptions and theoretical frameworks that inform research findings, and the details of their own practices. Only after such intensive work, driven by the teachers’ own desire to develop their own capacity for critique and analysis, would I be willing to claim with any confidence that a productive link between research and practice can be established (see, for example, Davies et al, 1996; Davies & Hunt, 2000; Laws & Davies, 2000). If, in contrast, teachers are presented with ‘research findings’ and policy objectives as a guide to practice, along with a range of surveillance strategies to monitor their performance, there can be no assumption of a straightforward link between research and practice. Nor can we assume there should be - that the experimental research that is deemed to be relevant would, if acted on, lead to better teaching.

Evidence-based practice’s preference for experimental evidence reveals either a naivety about research, or a hidden, managerialist agenda that has little to do with research findings and their implications for practice.

**The Underlying Philosophy of the Profession of Teaching**

The idea that professionals can be shaped by ‘evidence’ legitimated by managers and funding bodies and by coercive policies that mandate action on the basis of that evidence belies the complexity of professional work. As Derrida points out in *Who’s Afraid of Philosophy?* (2002:69), the relations of power and the lines of force acting on teaching are heterogeneous and marked by agonistic struggles:

> The structures of a pedagogical institution, its forms, norms, visible or invisible constraints, settings, the entire apparatus … that, appearing to surround it, determines that institution right to
the centre of its content, and no doubt from the centre, one carefully conceals the forces and interests that, without the slightest neutrality, dominate and master - impose themselves upon - the process of teaching from within a heterogeneous and divided agonistic field racked (sic) with constant struggle.

The teachers who work in pedagogical institutions are multiply inscribed, subjected to discursive lines of force pushing and pulling in contradictory directions. Multiple discourses operate in a palimpsest of overlapping meanings that do not totally occlude each other. Teachers work in and through the dynamic tensions of these multiple discourses and relations of power to produce that complex set of processes that we call teaching.

Any new discourse (such as that encoded as ‘evidence-based’ and related to policy imperatives) necessarily jostles alongside these other discourses that make up the discursive field of teaching (see Honan, [2001] for teachers’ reflections on how they accommodate and resist new curricula). Many teachers tenaciously hold on to the philosophies that inform their teaching: their teaching is, in effect, the construction of that philosophy. We might even go so far as to say that their teaching cannot exist without that, implicit or explicit, philosophy. When teaching has been deserted by such philosophical bases, we find, according to Derrida, the perfect seeding ground for new managerialism: the ultimate manifestations of phallogocentric hegemony. He describes such places as ‘places that have apparently been deserted by philosophy and that are therefore occupied, preoccupied, by empiricism, technocracy, moralism, or religion (indeed, all of them at the same time)’ (2002:73–74). This occupation and abandonment comes from a belief, he says, that ‘one can no longer defend the old machine (a machine one has even contributed to dismantling)’ (2002;74). Derrida’s analysis, while based on university teaching, is compatible with the observations that I have made about the implementation of new managerialism in schools (Davies et al, 1996). But the abandonment of the philosophies that are accomplished by particular teaching practices and that are developed out of philosophical commitments are, even when one has been critical of them, not so easy to abandon, even if teachers wish to do so. New managerialism’s requirements must be managed, and held in tension with what teachers know and accomplish in their everyday practices. Teachers cannot become automatons who parrot the new practices dictated by the phallogocentric practices driven by new managerialism’s passion for empiricism, technocracy and moralism, since the teaching enterprise requires much more of them than that. The specific requirements of ‘evidence-based practice’ can only exist as one of the heterogeneous forces acting on teachers. Their philosophies of teaching, even if apparently erased, will nonetheless be visible in the palimpsest of meaning making and practices that make up classroom practice.

The importance of critique and debate is fundamental to the kind of teaching that might be called professional. This is particularly true as successive world leaderships move to the right and occupy a space devoid of any considerations other than the plays of power and economy. And while it is true that teaching exists as a palimpsest of competing and agonistic discourses, and that one
discourse is unlikely to completely dominate teachers’ thinking, the potential conflict between ethical reflections and managerialism’s agenda is a dangerous one, if only because of managerialism’s power to eclipse other discourses (Dennis, 1995) and to both normalise its practices and to silence dissent.

A first and necessary step in counteracting the force of any discourse is to recognise its constitutive power, its capacity to become hegemonic, ‘to “saturate” our very consciousness, so that the … world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, become the world tout court, the only world’ (Apple, 1979:5). By denaturalising new managerialism, by making its assumptions and mechanisms visible, we open up the possibility of new cultural narratives or collective stories with transformative potential (Richardson, 1990:25–26). […] If and when we dismantle new managerialism and recuperate the resources that are currently ploughed into surveillance and control, we will have to find creative ways to recuperate the social and our places in it. This cannot mean a return to some idyllic dreamed - of past, since the faults of the past were what we have been caught up in moving beyond. We must turn our collective minds to active contemplation of just what a post-new managerialist society might look like. Just what are the collective stories we might tell ourselves about this period of our history and about why and how it is another world that we want to live in?


References