‘To be strictly educated’?: Learning and teaching in an age of neo-liberal agendas

Abstract
This article inquires into the recently released report from The National Inquiry into Literacy Teaching in Australia, Teaching Reading (DEST 2005a), in the context of widespread neo-liberal agendas in education policy in Australia and other western countries. The authors, a teacher educator and an early career English/literature teacher, argue that reports such as this pose a threat to English teachers’ professionalism in Australia. They use Teaching Reading as a prompt for a professional conversation, interspersing focused critique of the report and the neo-liberal agendas underpinning it with passages of more informal but demarcated dialogue between the two authors. Ultimately, the article argues that discussion of neo-liberal agendas in education needs to move beyond critique toward proactive advocacy, and that this can be done through generating and sharing rich alternative accounts of English/literacy teaching and professional learning possibilities.

Introduction
I shall have the satisfaction of causing you to be strictly educated; and you will be a living proof to all who come into communication with you, of the advantages of the training you will receive. You will be reclaimed and formed. (Dickens 1854/1975, p. 88)

In Charles Dickens’s black comedic novel, Hard Times, the dour and humourless schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind addresses himself to the imaginative but hapless Sissy Jupe. He is convinced of her ‘wretched ignorance’ – she doesn’t even know essential information such as what a horse is! And Sissy Jupe’s background is problematic for the likes of Thomas Gradgrind. She comes from a ... a circus family – loving, yes, but oh if only they had a ‘proper’ sense of their responsibilities. Regardless of her background, Gradgrind is resolved to reclaim and form her - and in so doing, he will reject her world of experience and her imagination, and efface her identity with a number. She will undergo a regime of ‘rigid training’ and Gradgrind’s fellow teachers will implement this regime: ‘as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements’ (p. 96).

There is much of Gradgrind in Teaching Reading, the recently published report from The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia (DEST 2005a):

- the tone of a ‘social project’ underpinning bleak pronouncements of the educational problem – notwithstanding the positive news with respect to comparisons with other OECD countries (p. 26), literacy outcomes in Australia are decried as ‘unacceptable’ (p. 27) ... for the ‘psychosocial wellbeing’ of child learners and for Australia’s ‘knowledge economy’;
- the confidently avowed knowledge that supposedly supports these pronouncements – the frequently touted (albeit highly selective) ‘evidence-based research’ about literacy outcomes and quality teaching
outcomes is presented in language such as ‘unequivocal’ (p. 31) or ‘incontrovertible’ (p. 37);

• the determination that quality teaching strategies in the hands of quality teachers will prevail, regardless of learners’ family backgrounds – it is the quality teacher that matters, ‘not so much what students bring with them from their backgrounds’ (p. 19);

• the glib way in which the cause of the educational ‘problem’ is described and the solution prescribed – the cause comes down to teachers’ ‘inadequacy’ and their lack of knowledge about ‘essential skills’ (p. 37, emphasis in original), and the solution is ‘evidence-based teaching’ in the form of ‘direct, explicit and systematic phonics instruction’ (Recommendations 1 and 2) … although, it seems, parents and family background are important after all in supporting this teaching in the home (Recommendation 4); and finally

• the remarkable absence of language such as creativity or imagination with respect to literacy teaching or reading practices throughout the whole Report.¹

Dialogic inquiry prompted by a national inquiry

The two of us read Teaching Reading: Report and Recommendations: National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia (2005a), from different professional perspectives. Graham is a teacher educator situated in a faculty of education, lecturing in English Education and curriculum studies; Natalie is an early career teacher, teaching English and literature in an independent school on the outskirts of Melbourne. We first met in 2003 when Natalie was a preservice teacher in the English Education unit in which Graham was a lecturer. In the two years that Natalie has been teaching, we have worked together and co-authored in a range of collaborative settings. Neither of us works with or in early years literacy education. We are not teaching young children who are beginning to read, although we share the belief that learning to read, like all other language and literacy practices, is socially grounded and mediated by a complex dynamic of sociocultural practices and discourses (Freebody & Luke 1990, 2003; Vygotsky 1978), and learning to read does not stop after early years schooling (see NCTE and AATE positions papers). In that respect we are indeed engaged in the teaching of reading, and in Graham’s case the teaching of teachers who will be teaching reading. We see the contents of this report, if implemented, as impacting directly on the professionalism and practices of English teachers and teacher educators throughout Australia.

For all the resonances between Dickens’s Hard Times in mid-Nineteenth Century London and current neo-liberal agendas in education policy in Australia, we acknowledge that such an analogy only goes so far. Perhaps we are being too harsh on the writers of Teaching Reading. There might be cause for optimism, for instance, in a report concerned with improving students’ reading and literacy levels in Australia, if

¹ There is one reference to the pleasures of reading (p. 40), but there is no reference to the pleasures of learning to read! At one time, the report cites research in the National Reading Project (NRP) in the US: ‘The NRP further identified specific … skills, and [explained] how the integration and comprehensive approaches to literacy enable children to develop reading for both learning and pleasure’ (DEST 2005a, p. 32). The separation between learning to read and pleasure in reading (as if the pleasure is something which only comes after the learning) is telling.
this improvement were to be recognised in diverse ways in different settings. There might be potential for greater public recognition of teachers’ professionalism if a national inquiry acknowledged the value of the ‘quality English teacher’, if the notion of the quality teacher did not read like a reductive fetishising of the complex work of English teachers. Despite the fetishising of ‘the quality teacher’ and the confident belief that it is only quality teaching that makes a difference, ‘regardless of [students] backgrounds’ (pp. 8,9,12, 33), there might be hope in Teaching Reading encouraging parental support of, and ‘involvement’ in, the school-based teaching and learning (p. 40). If only this involvement were not just on the government’s terms. There might be something positive, too, in the talk of encouraging and supporting teachers’ professional learning (pp. 54-60), if the notion of professional learning presented in the report were not so antithetical to our own experiences and our reading of the socio-cultural research into professional learning. There might be. Unfortunately, as we look at the detail of this report, we see it as yet another salvo in the sustained neo-liberal attacks on the English teaching profession in Australia recently (Doecke and Parr, 2005a, p. 13, Doecke, Howie and Sawyer, forthcoming; see also Gale and Densmore 2003; Smyth 2001).

The release of Teaching Reading (DEST 2005a, 2005b), and the threat that we believe it poses to English teachers’ professionalism, has provided a specific prompt for us to resume a professional conversation that our different professional settings allow only occasionally (Parr & Bellis 2005, Bellis & Parr, 2005). In this article, we intersperse focused critique of Teaching Reading and the neo-liberal agendas underpinning it, a critique which is itself dialogic, with passages of a more informal and demarcated dialogue between the two of us. (These dialogues are presented in italics.) Consistent with other approaches to inquiry-based professional learning (Wells 2001, Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2001), we allow these more informal exchanges to extend beyond the initial focus of the report and to connect with our different professional and personal lives and settings, often in unexpected ways. These dialogues are intended to ground our critique as much as to enrich the level of critique, and we hope that the hybrid nature of the writing provides a more decentred illustration of the multi-levelled dialogue that produced this article, and which continues beyond the point of ‘signing off on it’. Sometimes the dialogue is explicit and overt – ie. we ascribe some parts of the text to one of us, which is then responded to by the other, and so on; at other times the unity of the text on the page might belie the rich dialogic tensions that inform it and which are embedded within it.

In all respects we are engaged in dialogic inquiry, acknowledging the ways in which language exists in and through highly unstable mediums and in which meaning-making happens in and through complex dynamic social practices (Bakhtin 1981, Wells 1999). What emerges from these dialogues, the stories situated within them, and from the dialogic activity of writing this article, is a sense that English teachers continue to engage in dynamic, flexible and meaningful work. We believe that such work has the potential to undermine powerful neo-liberal agendas, to help teachers negotiate some alternative practices to those mandated by these agendas, and to provide encouragement to those who look ahead to a bright future of English teaching and learning in Australia.

Shifting paradigms in neo-liberal reform strategies
Gale et al (2003) conceptualise neo-liberalism as a belief in liberal political ideals that ‘link the virtues of the free market to individual freedom’. Traditionally, this means

Neo-liberals propose the expulsion of the state from the market because they regard markets as a less wasteful and more efficient means of distributing goods and services within society, including the provision of education. (p. 21)

In such a market, individual teachers and teachers as a profession are subordinated to the free-play of economic forces, and thus their status as a profession is diminished and eroded – the stronger the market forces, the less autonomy teachers have, the further they are de-professionalised. In 1993, Osborne and Gaebler (in Caldwell and Hayward 1998, p. 165) advocated this notion of neo-liberalism in the metaphor of governments ‘steering’ while they leave others ‘free’ to ‘row’ (ie. to implement government policy). For education policy in western countries in recent years, this has meant policy makers ‘steering’ through moves to impose increasingly centralised and decontextualised standards (Sachs 2003, 2005; Fullan 2003), the provision (or cutting) of resources, and setting up frameworks for accountability (Sirotnik 2004a, Mahony & Hextal 2000), while steering clear of involvement in delivery of ‘the service’ – ie. ‘encouraging others to do the rowing’ (Caldwell et al 1998. For critique of this position, see Parr 2003, 2000 and Lee 2000. See also Goodwyn 2003, for a similar story in the English context). In Teaching Reading, it is interesting to see how the demarcation line between ‘steering’ and ‘rowing’ is blurred. Whereas in past years, neo-liberal steering tended to involve large-scale structural reform – and the impacts of this were substantial (Smyth 1993) – the strategy seems to be shifting.

Now, in 2005, consistent with the National Literacy Strategy in the UK (2001) and its subsequent add-ons (eg., Key Stage 3 National Strategy 2003, The Secondary National Strategy for school improvement 2005-6), and the No Child Left Behind policy (2001) in the US, large-scale centralised structural reform is being combined with prescriptive interventions at the level of pedagogy (eg. systematic or synthetic phonics privileged over whole-language teaching). Characteristically, decisions about how this combination is to be organised, enacted, funded and evaluated at the local level are left to implementers – schools and teachers, according to local means and so-called individual choice. The current wave of policy steering for English teachers now includes:

1. direct edicts for teaching reading in particular ways (ie. with systematic phonics), and in so doing taking professional judgement and autonomy away from English teachers;
2. the fetishising of the so-called ‘quality teacher’ and quality teachers’ technicist skills and knowledge, involving the disregarding of sociocultural context and family ‘background’ in evaluating teaching and learning outcomes;
3. a narrowing of the scope of ‘evidence-based’ research and teaching; and
4. the yoking of professional learning programs and prospects to pre-existing and unproblematic student learning ‘outcomes.’

We shall explore each of these in turn before returning, in the conclusion, to reflect on the implications for us and for the English teaching profession of what we have been discussing.
De-professionalising teachers and teaching

If voters (consumers in a ‘free’ neo-liberal market?) can be persuaded that quality teaching is about finding the recipe that ‘works’ everywhere (eg. as seen in Teaching Reading, where systematic phonics instruction for beginning readers is recommended for all), irrespective of context or setting, and regardless of student background, then neo-liberal policy-makers achieve two things: (a) they can subsume all day-to-day teacher judgements beneath a central government edict; and (b) they can centralise their control of markets such that teaching strategies (regarded as context-free ingredients, ie. commodified) can be mandated for everyone. In such a system, these commodities are then commercially produced in glossy pd ‘packages’ by independent publishers who see a great opportunity, and proceed to urge schools and teachers to use whatever funding is available to buy both the recipe and the ingredients in one! Ultimately, governments can then argue that the free markets are operating ‘naturally’ in accordance with the will of consumers.

Traditionally, neo-liberal governments have preferred to steer clear of producing and distributing these commodities themselves. It’s cheaper, ‘less wasteful and more efficient’, to construct the markets, as it were, through policy-making that creates the demand for the commodities. Increasingly, however, it seems overseas and Australian governments are financially supporting an appointed body/bodies to publish and disseminate these commodities (Luke 2004).

The ethical implications of this should be deeply troubling. And yet we read in Teaching Reading that the very commercial organisation to whom the chair of the National Literacy Inquiry is attached, The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), is also the group whose professional development package, Working out what works (WOWW): Training and resource manual (supported by Government funding), is recommended for use in the pre-service and in-service professional learning of teachers (DEST 2005b, p. 30).

Tony Petrosky, in a keynote address to the conference of the Australian Association for Research in Australia (AARE) in 2004, reported on what he described as an unprecedented level of ‘alignment’ in the US between government policy, publishers offering assessment packages, textbooks and services, and commercial organisations providing professional learning packages. If this were not the case in Australia before now, critical scrutiny of Teaching Reading suggests that the potential for this alignment in Australia is worthy of closer attention right now. In the meantime, while it is clear that neo-liberal governments throughout the western world remain focused on their steering role in educational reform, and in ‘allowing’ others to do the rowing (if we may return to our earlier metaphor), it is equally clear that they have little confidence in the rowing of these others (the teachers). Consequently, their intervention in education markets, and their deprofessionalising of the teaching profession, is becoming more and more direct. In Teaching Reading, it seems they are intent on specifying the size, weight and shape of oars, as well as providing instructions as to when, how and where to row with them!2

2 The Literature Review explicitly denies this agenda – ‘It is not possible to provide the detail of what and how teachers should implement effective teaching and learning’ (2005b, p. 31). Nevertheless, the evidence provided in this article would suggest there is a level of prescription in much of the report’s recommendations, consistent with neo-liberal policy in the UK and US in recent years.
Fetishising the quality teacher

The positioning of individual teachers in schools within this report is a now familiar paradox (Cochran-Smith 2005b, Cohen 1995, Fullan 1993): teachers are the focus of the most stringent criticism because of their ‘inadequacy’ (2005a, p. 37, emphasis in original), and yet they are the ‘driver’ that will improve reading. It is interesting to see how Teaching Reading gushes over isolated instances of quality teaching in selected schools visited in the course of the Inquiry. The language is almost religious in its fervour, effusing over the skills of an individual quality teacher – ‘Members of the Committee found it a moment of awe to observe an effective teacher’ (p. 11). It would seem that the hope of the nation resides in such moments of awe. In observing that such moments are possible, and that such moments exist apparently ‘regardless of student background’ (ie. irrespective of socio-economic status, irrespective of the physical conditions of schools and schooling), Teaching Reading is keying into the fetishising discourse of the ‘individual quality teacher’ that is so alluring to neo-liberal governments. As Cochran-Smith (2004) explains:

[I]f teacher quality, the ‘great equalizer,’ can mitigate the effects of poverty, lack of opportunity, and inequitable resource allocation … then there is no need to create public policies or programs to ameliorate them. Rather than programs that target the elimination of poverty and the redistribution of resources, only initiatives that enhance teacher quality would be necessary. (p. 199)

The keynote forum at a recent conference of the Victorian Association of the Teaching of English (VATE), called ‘Postcode or individual teacher?: How much difference does the teacher make?’ addressed these very issues. Panelists in the forum included Ken Rowe (ACER and Chair of the National Literacy Inquiry), Amanda McGraw (University of Ballarat) and Bob Connell (University of Sydney). We attended the forum and subsequently engaged in written dialogic reflection about it. 3

Natalie began:

After the forum, I was driving home, reflecting on all that had been said. I recalled Ken Rowe asking his audience to raise their hand if they could think of a teacher who had made a difference in their lives. Of course I could. I could think of several.

Teachers can make a difference. I haven’t been doing this job for very long, but I’ve seen enough to believe that. That’s why I teach.

Then, paused at the traffic lights, the faces of the students that I have taught over the past two years flickered in my mind. I thought about their lives outside of my classroom, some of which I knew more about than others. I thought about their relationships with family members and friends, book-lined or bare shelves, experiences traveling overseas, out-

3 Parts of the dialogues reproduced in this article draw on N. Bellis & G. Parr (2005) Responding to the forum: continuing the conversation, Idiom, 41.2, pp. 39-47.
of-school literacy practices, values, lifestyles, communities and cultures. I wondered how they would feel about Ken Rowe’s claim that I was the only factor that mattered in their English education!

Yes, teachers can make a difference. I can make a difference. But I am concerned about the consequences of accepting the claim that teachers are the most important factor in terms of student achievement, regardless who that student is and where they have come from. It seems to me that that would be cheating both us, and them.

What do you think?

Graham: Yes, the debate about teacher quality at the conference forum was timely: a VATE conference where feathers were flying! Wonderful. Given the almost unrelenting attacks on the English teaching profession of late, from so many different sources, it would be catastrophic if our state conference just went through its paces without generating some drama and some critical reflection about what it means to be an English teacher at this time.

I know where you’re coming from when you speak of teachers making a difference. It’s disturbing though, isn’t it, when your statement, ‘Teachers can make a difference’ and Ken Rowe’s statement, ‘Teachers can make a difference,’ mean such different things. Here we have a classic paradox of the same language being used to construct very different arguments! Bob Connell began his presentation at the forum by saying that most people engaged in education ‘act on the basis that teaching matters.’ It was interesting to see how he proceeded to speak more often of teaching than teachers. The distinction in language is very helpful, I feel, in thinking about this issue of teacher quality.

Sachs (2005) and Doecke (2006) have argued powerfully that even the notion of the ‘individual teacher quality’ is premised on a dangerous assumption, that one can pin down and meaningfully measure quality in the ‘performance’ of any individual teacher. They explain how this is done: by de-emphasising the impact of the socio-cultural context of teaching (mainly because it can’t be adequately measured), and by simplifying what Sachs calls ‘the multiple social, intellectual and relational layers of teachers’ work.’ Sachs and Doecke, like Bob Connell at the forum, speak about the ways in which an intense focus on the individual teacher, with an accompanying blindness to the impact of socio-cultural context and historical background on teaching and learning, can serve to advantage already privileged groups in society (whether they be teachers, students or schools). …

One wonders about the potential for engaging in any sort of productive dialogue with writers of a report who dismiss an alternative theoretical and methodological position as merely ‘evidence of pervasive ignorance’ (DEST 2005a, p. 56). But such is the rhetoric of this report. It has to be said that Ken Rowe, Chair of the Inquiry, has used
similarly adversarial and non-dialogic language in his own published research in a way that seems inconsistent with the richest traditions of scholarship and professional inquiry (Doecke, Sawyer and Howie forthcoming). But, of course, he is not alone. The fetishising discourse of the quality teacher (whose knowledge and skills exist independent of context and the family background of the students) has, of course, a lively (and yet rather short) history in educational research and policy. It is central to the rhetoric of school or education effectiveness, some of which is cited in Teaching Reading (eg. Hattie 2004, Purdie and Ellis 2005, Rowe 2003, Coltheart 2005).

Evidence-based research?: Narrowing down the options

As suggested above, neo-liberal governments need to prove to Jill and Joe Voter the value of the reform agendas they are proposing. Effectiveness discourses provide them with an accessible language for this, one that communicates simply and unproblematically with a wide audience. Governments also need access to uncomplicated ‘proof’ that these agendas are ‘working effectively’ elsewhere. Effectiveness research conducted in other countries provides plenty of ‘evidence-based’ findings of effectiveness policy and practices that ‘works’, although (as we will show below) these findings are rigorously challenged by other research using different paradigms and methodologies.

As in all serious inquiry, the methodology underpinning this Inquiry (including what constituted evidence and what did not) significantly impacted the way in which ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’ were gathered and presented. It is clear, from a study of the criteria for selecting research articles for consideration in the Literature Review of Teaching Reading (2005b, p. 15), that certain sorts of evidence in certain sorts of research were privileged over others, and a great deal of highly respected research (international and Australian) was all but ignored. This may have been for reasons of managerial pragmatism (decisions were taken ‘in a convenient and economical way’ – DEST 2005b, p. 15), or because the notion of ‘data-driven’ articles excluded various forms of inquiry that were perceived to be ‘theoretical or speculative in nature’ (presumably this includes much socio-cultural research). Or it may have been a consequence of the unrepresentative collection of ‘experts and researchers in the field’ whose judgements ‘informed’ the final selection of articles.

Whatever the reasons, this resulted in a substantive narrowing down of notions of evidence-based research. This narrowing down is directly contrary to recommendations coming from large-scale research into school education and teacher education, conducted by highly respected academics and practitioners working independently of the constraints of neo-liberal government-framed projects in the US and UK (see also Luke 2004, Weiner 2003). These internationally respected bodies

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4 In Rowe’s 2003 discussion paper for the Interim Committee for a NSW Institute of teachers, he derides the vast body of post-modernist inquiry into education as ‘claptrap’ (p. 1) and seems to dismiss socio-cultural inquiry into factors that impact on educational outcomes as ‘little more than religious adherence to the moribund ideologies of biological and social determinism’ (p. 1, emphasis in original).

and researchers strongly recommend that future research into teaching and learning in schools and teacher education consider a wider, not narrower, scope of what counts as evidence (ie. in student learning outcomes and teachers’ professional learning outcomes). They urge future research designs to be more intellectually imaginative about the ways in which evidence might be gathered, measured and evaluated.

The other explanation for this imperative to narrow down what is considered as ‘evidence’ might also be interpreted as crudely political. The totality of what might count as ‘evidence’, the multiplicity of ‘outcomes’ of learning and teaching, is inevitably complex, contradictory and elusive (ie. in terms of measurable evidence), and yet neo-liberal governments frame inquiries so that there are clear, simple and easily implemented recommendations. Governments need to show demonstrable paybacks for (ie. accountability and/or effectiveness of) their investment in educational reform (Parr 2004, p. 27), so reports of government inquiries need to provide unproblematic advice to show that payback. In effect, neo-liberal government inquiries provide politically savvy advice for governments to be able to claim full accountability for any successes, and a justification for them to abrogate themselves from accountability for any perceived failures.

Bottery (2005) explains the attractiveness of a traditional school effectiveness or educational effectiveness paradigm to neo-liberal politicians and policy makers:

First, it is simple and easy to understand, in outline at least, and in an age of turmoil, with too little time for too much work, a research agenda which suggests simplicity is going to be very welcome. Second, it is linear: it suggests $a$ causes $b$, and that there will be no occasions where $b$ causes $a$, or where $a$ and $b$ are interactive. Again the transparency and simplicity appeals. Third it suggests that external direction and policy control is not only possible but actually essential and this research agenda suggests that an objective and distanced look at the work of schools can and should be done. Finally, it justifies institutional responsibility for achieving results, for if the answers (ie. the key factors and the means of inserting them into a school context) are given by policy makers or their representatives to schools as a means of remediating their problems and they fail to do this, then this must be their fault, not that of policy makers. (p. 148)

We’ve found it interesting to muse over this notion of evidence of learning, whether it be evidence of student learning, evidence of teachers’ professional learning, or evidence of teacher learning leading to improved outcomes in student learning ….

**Graham:** I’m moved to think of a little boy I know well who is in his early years of schooling. Let’s call him Geoffrey. A few weeks ago I saw Geoffrey at an annual concert at his primary school. His particular challenge in this concert was to read a few sentences, on his own, to introduce his class’s performance up on stage, before joining in the singing and dancing with the whole class. With furrowed brow, clearly conscious of the gaze of the 400 or so people in the audience, Geoffrey nevertheless spoke confidently into the microphone held by a teacher: “Our class will now sing a traditional Samoan song about cats. When
European settlers first arrived in Samoa ....” And so through to the end. He got there, and he did a pretty good job, too.

This would not be so remarkable, except that Geoffrey has only recently started to read unassisted. After several years of ‘learning to read,’ he’s only just begun to gain confidence and fluency in his reading. Since he was born, Geoffrey’s parents have looked to immerse him in rich and imaginative literacy experiences at his home and in his out-of-school life. His teachers, at kinder and now at primary school, have used a variety of imaginative and more methodical approaches (including phonics) in the classroom to teach him to read and write. He has been nurtured, scaffolded and encouraged every step of the way. And yet, up to now any standardized reading test, one that tests ‘performance,’ could only judge that Geoffrey was ... not reading. The learning outcome for measuring whether he was learning to read, that he read a simple text unassisted, would not have been reached. Until a couple of months ago.

Now, I know Geoffrey’s teacher in his primary school this year, and I have no doubt that she is engaged in quality teaching. The value of her participation in teaching him to read is unarguable. I also know the teachers who have worked with Geoffrey before this year, and I am just as sure of the quality of their teaching in enabling him to be able to read ... now. And yet those who measure the ‘quality’ of teaching through individual performance data of a teacher would only give the credit for Geoffrey’s reading achievement this year to the one individual teacher. In so doing, they would deny the rich and complex learning journey of actions, interactions, experiences and relationships with Geoffrey’s teachers (plural) and with his social worlds.

Romantic and reductive notions of the quality individual teacher can be seductive. They claim to know where the credit for the teaching lies in teaching Geoffrey to read: the quality teacher (singular). They would claim to be able to give particular credit for teaching any other student any other knowledge or skill: the quality teacher (singular).

**NB:** Ah yes, the seduction of certainty. It is beguiling in some ways to think that we can define both ‘student achievement’ and ‘teacher effectiveness’ in all cases. But that would mean ignoring the value of diversity and the richness that it brings to our profession. We were talking recently, in another context, about the value of ‘productive uncertainty’. The potential for unexpected ideas to arise when one is keen to explore all the possibilities, even if one doesn’t really know where those directions might lead. I think this happens all the time in teaching. A class discussion that begins to move into unanticipated territory and you make the decision to ‘go with it’ and see what arises. An email conversation between colleagues from different teaching contexts that highlights the assumptions about teaching and learning environments that you weren’t aware you were making. Participating in a spot of cross marking at a faculty meeting that unexpectedly leads to a conversation about rethinking our assessment strategies. In a ‘one size fits all’
approach to teaching and learning, these ‘possibilities’ would never be explored.

Of course, this line of argument and the critique of effectiveness paradigms generally has a strong genealogy stretching over two decades and across the UK, US and Australia (eg. Sirotnik 2004b, Slee & Weiner 1998, Morley & Rassool 1999, Angus 1993). Increasingly, traditional effectiveness researchers are reflecting critically on some of the tenuous conceptual assumptions in their earlier work. Some are acknowledging the flaws in the ‘one size fits all’ traditions within effectiveness research (Reynolds et al 2002, Macbeath & Moos 2004, Saunders 2000). Others are recognising the intellectual dangers of the privileged position that effectiveness researchers have held with governments in the last ten years (Reynolds 2005, Harris & Bennett 2005). The time is surely not far away when this rigorous critique from both within and outside effectiveness research communities can no longer be ignored, even by neo-liberal governments and researchers working for them.

Professional learning : teachers, too, will be ‘strictly educated’

There are moments where Teaching Reading explicitly denies that it is engaged in prescribing learning approaches for students (see. p. 31). Nevertheless, it repeatedly circles back to effectiveness rhetoric, implicitly endorsing a one-size-fits all paradigm such as is central to the notion of a set of generic, context-free standards ‘for literacy teaching, initial teacher registration, and for accomplished teaching’ (Recommendation 8, p. 44). And this is continued into the framing of professional learning that should be tied to context-free standards. Teachers should be more tightly accountable for their professional learning through the results of their students subsequent to that professional learning. The response of Teaching Reading (p. 43) to the widely valued and respected Standards for the Teaching of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA – www.stella.org.au) is particularly confusing and worthy of close scrutiny.

STELLA operates as a standards site that encourages teachers to engage with (and by all means contest) its standards in their professional learning, rather than use them to measure their performance (Doecke & Gill 2001, Doecke 2006). Interestingly, Teaching Reading acknowledges that STELLA standards ‘provide a useful framework for teachers’ professional learning’ (p.43). It does not record the fact that English teachers from around Australia have reported on the value of STELLA in their professional learning as autonomous individual teachers (eg. Bellis 2004, Philp 2005) and as ‘STELLA scholars’ in a research project funded by the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA). And yet the writers of Teaching Reading glibly dismiss the relevance of STELLA in terms of their narrowly evidence-based agenda:

[STELLA standards] are neither sufficiently fine-grained nor targeted to meet evidence-based best practice requirements for: (a) accreditation of teacher education courses/programs; (b) initial teacher registration; and (c) accomplished teaching of reading for children with diverse needs at different levels of schooling. (p. 43)
They are apparently ‘useful’, they might even be valuable, but their value cannot be measured vis-à-vis the so-called ‘evidence-based best practice requirements.’ English teachers, and teacher education institutions more generally, need to be made more strictly accountable in matters of professional learning. The implication is that just as English teachers (like teacher educators) cannot be trusted in their day to day pedagogical decision making, so they cannot be trusted to know what they need to know. It seems they, too, need to be strictly educated. As Smyth (2001) says:

The unfounded and unproven claim is that the current batch of economic problems can be sheeted home to teachers who have been less than diligent in the discharge of their duties, who act in self-interested ways, are incapable of pursuing the wider national agenda, and who are, therefore, in need of careful control, auditing, and monitoring to ensure the production of acceptable educational outcomes. (p. 29)

Natalie: Recently, Graham, I spent some time trying to imagine what it would be like to teach and learn in this type of reductive policy environment. At the time, you reminded me that much of what I was trying to imagine - a scary possibility for the future - had already come into effect. It is frustrating to realise that my understanding of my professional learning and my role(s) as a teacher are so different from those who are apparently doing the ‘steering’. I have to wonder what the implications of this could be. It’s quite insidious, isn’t it? Under the guise of making teaching and learning seem ‘easy’, ‘straightforward’, and ‘unproblematic’ for time-poor teachers, policy makers actually end up undermining teachers’ professionalism, their experiences, their knowledge and understanding of their students.

When I think back over my teaching in the last couple of years, it is not difficult for me to appreciate what have been the richest experiences of professional learning. What springs to mind, however, are not ‘professional learning packages’ or occasional ‘one-off PD sessions’ at an external provider. On the contrary, I am beginning to realise that the professional learning experiences that I value the most are centred around relationships - not something that you can expect to get from a colourful package of ‘how to’ leaflets (as if teaching were as straightforward as building a coffee table or assembling a bookshelf). Conversations with colleagues that headed in unexpected directions... Blogging⁶ about my teaching and learning experiences to connect with other teachers in the ‘blogosphere’... Ongoing email conversations with colleagues working in very different sociocultural environments from my own... Not to mention interactions with students in class... I’m not sure how this style of professional learning would fit within a professional learning program with a technicist focus.

Our experiences tell us that it is misguided to try to use the STELLA standards as some sort of checklist to measure individual performance or professional learning (at

⁶ See (and contribute to!) Natalie’s blog: http://myownidentity.blogspot.com. There are links on this blog to similar blogs written and managed by English teachers throughout the world.
any ‘level’ of experience). The professional learning and renewal that emerge from working with STELLA standards (indeed, so much of the authentic professional learning experiences that teachers engage in), are not easily measured and will rarely be immediately visible. Where the writers of *Teaching Reading* see STELLA as ‘neither sufficiently fine-grained nor targeted’ (2005a, p. 43), we see a highly complex, nuanced, situated, dynamic professional artefact that recognises much of ‘the multiple social, intellectual and relational layers of teachers’ work’. Where the writers say they want ‘evidence-based guides for practice’ (2005a, p. 44) over and above what STELLA provides, we see further neo-liberal efforts to deprofessionalise the teaching profession via calls for reductive regulatory notions of professional standards. (See also Doecke [2005] in the previous issue of *English in Australia.*

**Conclusion**

It’s important to keep our critique of *Teaching Reading* in perspective. It is, after all, just one more artefact in the sustained attack on English teachers and their professionalism. The writers of *Teaching Reading* may well seek to narrow down notions of evidence (in research, in literacy practices and teaching practices). They may want to discourage, or shut down, dialogue about alternative ways of envisioning teaching, learning (students’ and teachers’), literacy, and learning outcomes. And yet, alternative, critically grounded accounts exist in the public realm of English and literacy teaching and learning, in and around classrooms. And they continue to proliferate close to home: eg. teacher narratives in the STELLA website ([www.stella.org.au](http://www.stella.org.au)); teacher narratives (including collaborations with researchers) published in journals such as *English In Australia, Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* and *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* ([http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/](http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/)); and teacher narratives and collaborations in *Writing=Learning* (Doecke & Parr 2005) and the soon-to-be-published *Only Connect: English Teaching, Schooling and Community* (Doecke, Howie and Sawyer forthcoming). Many on-line teacher blogs are also doing valuable work in this regard, in less formal but often richly dialogic spaces.

In many respects, Dickens’s *Hard Times* provides a salient analogy of the inadequacies and dangers of an agenda in education that understates the complex intellectual, social and relational work of teaching and learning, an agenda that fails to understand the powerful mediating nature of personal and sociocultural factors. In the face of such an agenda, the imaginative and caring Sissy Jupe hesitantly acquiesces, thinking ‘she should not be the worse’ for it. If only it were a matter of being ‘not the worse for it.’ Where neo-liberal agendas and ‘free’ markets continue to dominate, there will continue to be instances where the Sissy Jupes of this world (and/or their teachers) are ‘strictly educated’ and ‘kept to it’, through a regime of dull, unimaginative, reductive teaching and learning policies, structures and practices. Sissy does keep to it, and she ends up ‘low-spirited, but no wiser.’ In our own time, research that considers a rich range of learning outcomes, and that measures these outcomes in diverse ways, is revealing similar consequences for students, teachers and researchers: increasing acquiescence to the dictates of neo-liberal agendas inhibits professional learning and growth. At an individual level, this is troubling, but for an education system that values social justice and democratic participation for all citizens, the consequences can be very disturbing. In that respect, a rigorous and
imaginative research and professional learning focus on the dangers and destructiveness of neo-liberal agendas remains important.

In writing this article, we have derived great value from critically inquiring into *Teaching Reading* and various neo-liberal agendas, using our dialogue and our dialogic writing as a focus of, and medium for, our professional learning. However, the conversation has not stopped there. We believe it remains equally important for us, as for other English teachers and researchers, to advocate for the lively intellectual, social and relational work of English teachers and researchers already being enacted in and around schools and universities, in spite of neo-liberal agendas.

And, by the way, we recommend reading or re-reading *Hard Times*. It’s a salutary experience in the current times.
List of references


