Critical spirit manifestations in TAFE teachers and their work

by

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Abstract

This thesis reports on research conducted with Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers from Queensland and Western Australia. The research is located at the intersection where teachers’ identities met the discourse of new vocationalism. Scholars have highlighted the tensions that this discourse has produced in the relationships between TAFE and its teachers, and noted that TAFE teachers are pressured to change their subjectivities to reflect themselves more effectively as workers in an educational market focused on economic imperatives. This is often in contrast to these teachers’ personal notions of themselves as liberal educators, with a focus on lifelong learning, personal transformation, collaborative relationships and social responsibility. This research was driven by the possibility that the concept of ‘critical spirit’ might provide a means for TAFE teachers to stand their ground in relation to the continued reshaping of the TAFE teacher terrain produced by the adoption of the new vocational discourse.

This interpretative research was conceptualised by synthesising sociocultural perspectives of discourse as a reality building tool (Gee, 2005) with notions of critical thinker dispositions referred to as critical spirit (Siegel, 1988; Oxman-Michelli, 1992). The elements of critical spirit: openmindedness, independence of mind, wholeheartedness, intellectual responsibility and respect for others (Oxman-Michelli, 1992) were used as central components to the development of a coding framework for the explication of critical spirit from TAFE teacher artefacts and in positioning critical spirit as a discourse. An examination of 12 TAFE teacher case narrative artefacts revealed that elements of critical spirit were evident. Subsequent participant
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credibility checks and semi-structured interviews provided diverse data related to teacher embodiment of a critical spirit in relation to the building of certain teacher identities. In some cases participants expressed that their identities were bolstered by engaging in a critical spirit discourse, others cautioned its public embodiment, suggesting that deploying critical spirit made them more visible to surveillance and control. The major finding of this research was that an explicit engagement with a critical spirit discourse was of value to these TAFE teachers. Furthermore, this critical spirit discourse was seen to perform the work of a borderland discourse (Gee, 2005; Alsup, 2006). It afforded a means to traverse the terrain “between disparate personal and professional subjectivities” (Alsup, 2006, p. 5).

The research also uncovered other discourses pertinent to participant artefacts. These were identified as a test of fortitude discourse and a community of support discourse. It was postulated that these would extend the critical spirit discourse by adding to Oxman-Michelli’s (1992) five elements of critical spirit. The findings suggested little evidence to support this position.

The significance of this research was in: (a) the production of a methodological construct for explicating particular notions of critical spirit; (b) its contribution to furthering understandings of the professional lives of TAFE teachers and their work world; and (c) the value that a critical spirit discourse had in strengthening these TAFE teachers’ notions of themselves and their effectiveness. Its contribution to substantial knowledge was in its expansion of our understanding of teacher identities within the Vocational Education and Training sector in Australia.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated with love and affection to my loving mother Margaret Edith Tyler (née Murphy), whose undying love for me has always shone brightly, and without whose efforts I would never have attained such an educational opportunity.
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Declaration

I declare that the main text of this thesis is entirely my own work and that such work has not been previously submitted as a requirement for the award of a degree at the University of Southern Queensland or any other institution of higher education.

Mark Anthony Tyler
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Endorsement

Associate Professor Patrick Danaher
Principal Supervisor
21 July 2009
Selected Publications Related to This Work


Queensland, Australia 13-16 June 2006: Hosted by Central Queensland University (pp. 318-324). Rockhampton, Qld: Lifelong Learning Conference Committee, Central Queensland University Press.


