Hunger Artists:
Literacy, Testing & Accountability

Bella Illesca and Brenton Doecke

'I always wanted you to admire my starving,' said the hunger-artist. 'We do admire it,' said the overseer placatingly. 'But you’re not to admire it,' said the hunger-artist. 'All right, then we don’t admire it,' said the overseer. 'why should we not admire it?' 'Because I have to starve, I can’t do anything else,' said the hunger-artist … ‘because I couldn’t find any food I liked. If I had found any, believe me, I wouldn’t have made any fuss, and I would have eaten to my heart’s content, just like you or anyone else.


This article interrogates the dominant ideology that is shaping education in Victoria at the current moment. It does so by analysing the government school publication, Education Times, focusing on the years 2000–2003. During those years the Victorian Government invested a significant amount of money into improving the literacy outcomes of so-called underperforming students through initiatives such as Restart and Access to Excellence. Education Times played an important role in promoting these initiatives, and thus provides a useful vehicle for examining the ideology driving educational reform in Victoria.

During 2000–2003 Bella was working in what was described as an underperforming state school in Melbourne, and with colleagues she took responsibility for implementing the literacy remediation programs funded by the Victorian government in this particular community. At one level, she saw this as an opportunity to engage in action research, implementing these remedial literacy programs, and monitoring the effects of those interventions. However, it soon became apparent that more was involved than simply gauging their effectiveness – indeed, that the very notions of ‘effectiveness’ and ‘improved performance’ might be subjected to scrutiny. Increasingly, Bella’s thoughts and actions were driven by a desire to understand and explain to herself and others the ideological work that she was performing. For Bella, the ‘Hunger Artists’ are the students with literacy difficulties who were (and continue to be) put on display, the subject of government policy, and made publicly visible because of the rituals of streaming and establishing withdrawal classes. It is as though these flesh and blood individuals are being starved, reduced to the bare bones of statistical data and key ‘performance indicators’.

Our aim in this paper is not to explore how the students and teachers experienced these literacy intervention programs (see Illesca, 2004, 2005 for accounts of these experiences), but to find ways to understand the complex nature of teachers’ work within the world of standards-based reform (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Smith (2005) provides one lens through which we might try to look at the actualities of the world in which we are operating and to map (and make visible) the ruling relations that coordinate our lives. More is happening than the politicians, bureaucrats and media pundits are saying when they insist on the need to improve performance. To say that state schools are underperforming is not to describe reality but to construct them as below standard. No one is questioning whether such standards actually have any validity. By tracing the wider networks of relationships that stretch beyond our immediate institutional settings, we...
might begin to understand how our professional practices as teachers are being shaped by mandated government policy such as standardised testing, and – crucially – explore the extent to which it is possible to engage in critical reflection and inquiry in a climate of increasingly narrow forms of accountability.

1. Introduction

‘Teacher research’ or ‘practitioner inquiry’ usually conjures up notions of teachers researching their own practice within the institutional settings in which they work. This might take the form of ‘action research’ when a teacher implements, for example, a new curriculum or approach to teaching and then monitors the results of that intervention on the learning of her students. This then gives rise to a cycle of reflection and further action, when the initial intervention is refined in the light of what has been learnt (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

Such traditions of inquiry obviously provide very powerful ways for teachers to reflect on their practice in order to enhance their capacity to meet the needs of their students. Yet the form of teacher research presented in this article differs from many customary models of practitioner inquiry, even though the inquiry emerged out of a situation of practice, and initially involved a very pragmatic approach to implementing a whole school literacy remediation program (funds were available, and the challenge was to use the money to achieve results). The immediate practical difficulties which Bella faced, and the ‘subtle judgements and agonising decisions’ (Mitchell, Fitzpatrick Petty, & Neale, 1997; Shulman, 1992) that she was obliged to take when, as a secondary English teacher she took on the responsibility for literacy intervention at her school, are described in other articles (Illeasca, 2004, 2005).

What might have been an occasion for action research, however, developed into far more than a cycle of continuing reflection and refinement of the initiative being implemented, at least from Bella’s point of view. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the Victorian Department of Education & Training (as it was known until recently) has appropriated much of the language of ‘reflective practice’ in order to encourage what it calls ‘professional learning in effective schools’. Such learning includes ‘action research’, ‘examination of student work’, ‘study groups’, ‘case discussions’ ‘peer observations’ and ‘lesson study’ (DE&T, 2005, pp. 10–11) – all forms of inquiry that undoubtedly have the potential to open up insights into teaching and learning. We have ourselves been involved in projects that have explored the value of these types of inquiry (see Doecke, 1999, Doecke and Parr, 2005, Doecke, Gill, Illesca and Van de Ven (forthcoming)) But what kind of teaching and learning is the Victorian Education Department promoting when it recommends these practices?

Within the ‘performance and development’ culture that currently dominates Victorian schools, the answer is disturbingly straightforward. The object of teachers’ professional learning, according to a departmental document entitled Professional Learning in Effective School: The Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning, is ‘to improve student learning’ (DE&T, 2005, p. 1) as it has been neatly mapped out in the form of learning continua for each school subject. A reform agenda (known as ‘The Blueprint’) has been built on a ‘recognition of the correlation between effective teaching and student achievement’ (p. 2). This means that teachers ‘need to update their skills and knowledge continuously, not only in order to meet the challenges of a changing world but in response to new research and emerging knowledge about learning and teaching’ (p. 2). Teaching ‘is a dynamic profession and, as new knowledge about teaching and learning emerges, new types of expertise are required by educators’ (p. 2).

‘High quality professional learning’, according to this document, ‘is the most successful way to improve teacher effectiveness’ (p. 2). Teachers need to ‘keep abreast’ of the expanding ‘knowledge base’ available to them, and to ‘use it to continually refine their conceptual and pedagogical skills’, most notably with respect to ‘how students learn’ – this is ‘the field of inquiry that has had most significance for teachers and teaching’ (p. 2).

Although this document claims that it is ‘research based’ (p. 12, p. 3), the research underpinning it figures only in the form of a very selective list of references which ignores the history of the development of these policy frameworks and debates surrounding the nature of teaching and learning. It is claimed, for example, that the Victorian Essential Learning Standards ‘which define what students should know and be able to do at different levels of schooling’ are ‘based on recent research on the learning process and how students develop expertise in different intellectual domains’ (p. 3). But you need only glance at this document to recognise that it is largely an iteration of learning continua that were originally developed in the early 1990s and first published as the National Profiles and Statements (see, e.g., AEC, 1994a, 1994b). When the Profiles were originally developed, there was vigorous debate about the way they
carved up the curriculum, and especially the claim they made to represent a student’s ‘typical progression’ within each of the key learning areas (see Collins, 1994, Howes, Doecke and Hayes, 1996). That debate has receded into the past, a faded memory for those of us who were around at the time, and these frameworks are now simply taken as given. What we have left is a model of teaching and learning that occurs ‘regardless’ of students’ ‘socioeconomic background or geographic location’ (DE&T, 2005, p. 2). Learning is conceived in narrowly cognitive terms, as something that occurs in an individual’s head, and not as a socio-cultural activity that is crucially bound up with the class or community to which you belong.

That it is possible to describe ‘what students should know and be able to do at different levels of schooling’ (p. 3), that teachers should aspire to ‘progressively higher levels of performance’ in their efforts to enable students to achieve these ‘levels’ (p. 13), that ‘student outcomes data’ should provide ‘the focus of professional learning’ and be used ‘to evaluate the impact of that learning on teacher practice and student achievement’ (p. 4) – such claims have become the ‘common sense’ of our times (p. 4). For a teacher to question this language is to risk being ridiculed, as Bella discovered when, at a network meeting of teachers involved in implementing Restart and Access to Excellence, she voiced her concerns about the way performance data were blinding people to issues of social disadvantage and the inequitable funding of state education (Illesca, 2005).

Such experiences motivated her to engage in other forms of inquiry that might enable her to see beyond the mental cage in which educators are currently operating in Victoria, such as the inquiry presented in this article.

What follows is an attempt to analyse the policy language mediating the professional practice of teachers in Victoria. The focus is on Education Times, a newspaper published by the Victorian Education Department. Our analysis is limited to 2000–2003, the years when Bella was implementing Restart and Access to Excellence. Many developments have occurred since then, most notably the implementation of ‘The Blueprint’ (which is about to be replaced by an updated version). The time frame 2000–2003 will allow us to develop a perspective on the current moment, especially since significant changes occurred in the language used by policy makers during this period. Our aim is to gain a sense of how the current policy landscape has formed around us, thus disrupting any notion that current ways of thinking and talking about education should simply be taken as given. For Bella, as a practitioner researcher, the following analysis of Education Times (which she originally wrote while working as Literacy Coordinator at her school) was an attempt to think ‘relationally’ (Smith, 2005), to see beyond her immediate professional context and to understand how her professional practice was a function of a larger policy environment.

2. The Rhetoric of reform

Education Times is a tabloid newspaper published fortnightly during the school year by the Department of Education & Training Victoria (see www.det.vic.gov.au/media/edtimes). It has a circulation of over 70,000 and it is distributed primarily to government school teachers, principals, non-teaching staff and school council members, providing information on government education policies, news, ‘innovations’ and training opportunities in the government education sector. It can be found lying around on staffroom tables in every state school in Victoria. At the time when Bella was working as Literacy Coordinator, teachers were dependent on it for information relating to professional development, official announcements, key events, statistics, conference extracts and articles about what Victorian teachers are supposedly doing in their classrooms – from the everyday to the ‘special’.

At first glance, the contents of Education Times appear innocuous enough, and news items can range from the parochial, ‘Samson Park High’s ‘Reconciliation Courtyard’ (DE&T 2000, Education Times, Vol 8. No. 8. p. 16) to the mundane, such as ‘Budget Highlights’. You are unlikely to encounter any critical analysis of current policy directions or any serious evaluation of recent educational initiatives or the research underpinning such initiatives. The good news stories provide idealised images of school education in Victoria that effectively support the government policy agenda. The paper is a mouthpiece for government education policy that shapes the professional discourse and practices of teachers across the state.

When you glance through the pages of Education Times, what strikes you first is the currency of words like ‘new’, ‘renewal’ and ‘change’. This was initially partly to do with the fact that in 2000 Victorian voters threw out a radically conservative government and installed a Labor Government in its place. The previous government had been responsible for school closures and a ruthless attempt to streamline education along supposedly more efficient, business-like lines. With the new
government, headlines such as ‘Bold new age for education’ (2000), ‘A new way of learning’ (2001), ‘New era of co-operation’ (2002) reminded teachers that things in education were ‘changing’, supposedly for the better. Few people, however, were questioning the kind of ‘co-operation’ that was being expected from teachers and other ways that the rhetoric of ‘new ways of learning’ positioned them and their students. Looking back, the rhetoric of the ‘new’ clearly sets up a false dichotomy in education that naturalises certain assumptions about what counts and what does not. The ‘new’ in teaching and learning will supposedly take us into the future, while the ‘old’ ways remain in the past. This version of education leaves teachers feeling that their existing knowledge and experience do not count or that what they are doing is somehow deficient. Teachers are told that they need to teach their students to ‘Learn how to think’ in order to help them ‘unlock mind magic’ (DE&T 2002. Education Times. Vol. 10. No. 4) and that their students need to put on the new ‘thinking caps’ (see Education Times 2000, Vol. 8. No. 1) necessary to meet the challenges of the present. They are also reminded that they need to ‘upskill’, work ‘collaboratively’ and take on board the ‘new’ in teaching and learning to achieve ‘success’ for their students, regardless of whether or not it coincides with their localised sense of the kind of ‘collaboration’ and ‘co-operation’ that will work in their particular school settings.

**Teachers and accountability**

What is striking about the discourse found in some of the articles in Education Times between 2000 and 2003, is that the rhetoric of the ‘new’ was inflected differently during the first few years of the Bracks Labor Government. Initially there were signs of an emerging commitment to equity and social justice and perhaps even a larger vision of schooling than the blunt managerialism of the Kennett years. The Kennett Government had presided over the closure of government schools and the loss of many experienced teachers through voluntary departure packages. This was part of a neo-liberal agenda euphemistically called ‘School of the Future’.

By contrast, during the year 2000, and only months after Labor won at the polls, there were no less than 11 articles in Education Times that featured the government as working together with teachers and schools to redefine education in the minds of its readers, promoting a larger, more collective sense of the roles that government and schools could play in society. The Minister at the time was Mary Delahunty, a former journalist and television personality who had been recruited into Labor’s team just prior to the election. She then became the first Minister of Education appointed by the Bracks Government in 1999.

The headlines in Education Times included the following: ‘Education is a benefit, not a commodity: Delahunty’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8. No. 5); ‘Education the number one priority’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8. No. 7); ‘Education is a shared responsibility writes Delahunty….’; ‘It’s your profession’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8. No. 10). However, by the following year, except for an extract from a speech given by the Education Minister at an Australian Education Assembly, it is difficult to find articles or official announcements by government leaders that echo the views that Minister Delahunty expressed in her address, most notably a belief that as complex social structures schools needed to be understood within their historical and social contexts. It is interesting that Delahunty’s ‘vision’ of education was not given much prominence and was tucked away on page 20 of the paper:

> We sometimes lose sight of the fact that education for democracy is more than a utilitarian purpose. It goes beyond the types of functional training that is directed at basic skills or future employment. It requires us – as individuals, as members of communities, and as a nation – to understand the evolution of societies, to appreciate a range of conditions, and the richness of experiences in the past as well as the present that have contributed to the robust democracy we share…
>
> (Mary Delahunty, Education Minister 2001, in Education Times Vol. 9. No. 5, p. 20)

Delahunty’s speech reflects an alternative vision of education and schooling to that which had held sway over the education sector in the previous few years, namely the years of the Kennett Government (see Caldwell and Hayward 1998). This is not to suggest, however, that the advent of a Labor Government meant the language of the previous years was completely swept away. Instead, Delahunty’s rhetoric is forced to compete with other discourses about schooling, most notably managerial models that emphasise the importance of accountability, and accountability conceived in very circumscribed terms – as a matter of inputs and outputs. We are all creatures of a number of discourses – we live with internal and external conflicting voices and competing agendas – and the contents of Education Times give us an insight into the complex and contra-
dictory nature of the official professional discourses available to politicians, bureaucrats and teachers. Education Times provides a space in which these discourses meet and clash. The following article is an interesting example of this awkward union of seemingly contradictory discourses.

**Education a benefit, not a commodity: Delahunty**  
*By Deanne O’Donoghue*

Education was not a commodity, rather it needed to be viewed as a ‘community benefit’, Education Minister Mary Delahunty said last week.

Ms Delahunty made this comment as she addressed more than 300 school leaders at the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals statewide forum, in Melbourne.

The minister said the State Government had established a working party to seek teacher and principal input into changing the dynamic of education in Victoria.

‘Much of the discussion about education in the recent past was under the banner of a ‘commodification’ of a service – that education was like any other commodity that you could purchase,’ she said.

‘My view, and the government’s view, is that education is a public benefit. I do not believe that education is like any other commodity where you get what you can afford to pay for. If you invest in the child as a community, the benefits are there for all to share. If you don’t invest in the child, you pay for it in other ways down the track.’

Ms Delahunty said schools and government needed to pay attention to the “warning bells” such as low retention rates, truancy and high youth unemployment and examine alternative ways of keeping young people in education and training. This meant a renewed emphasis on providing excellence for all rather than an education system that left some students behind.

Increased attention to the middle years was a key plank in the State Government’s strategy to reverse the disengagement of students from school, she said.

The forum heard the working party would play a key role in nurturing a strong, constructive and well-informed dialogue with teachers and principals to help shape the next generation of public schools.

In the move towards a strong state framework of accountability and standards and a model of local self-management and decision-making by schools, it would look at innovation and excellence for all rather than a two-tiered system.

‘Strong schools getting stronger and better should not imply that other schools must wither. And within that strong state framework I don’t believe we’ll have one school model, we’ll have a series of models based on where the schools are and the demographic they serve.’

Teachers, principals and parents would play a key role in feeding in to the recommendations of the working party and subsequent policy, Ms Delahunty said.

Victorian School News (Education Times) 2000, Vol. 8, No. 5, p. 3. (Note: Victorian School News was renamed Education Times by the newly elected Labor Government in the 26 May 2000 edition (Vol. 8, No. 8).

The language of this article can be read as representing the state government’s early attempts to re-imagine and re-structure state education in more socially responsible ways. Delahunty rejects the ‘recent past’ when education came under the banner of a ‘commodification of a service’ and presents a view of education that appears to be quite distinct from the Kennett government and market driven ideology of ‘Schools of the Future’, where schooling was conceived in precisely these terms – as a commodity that consumers purchased, and not as a ‘public benefit’ (Caldwell & Hayward 1998). The language here captures a certain micro-shift within the large sweep of managerial reforms, but at the same time this binary – ‘benefit’/’commodity’ – also reflects tensions that were (and are) being played out in education.

Bakhtin (1981, p. 293) reminds us of the dialogical nature of language and the way in which words ‘lie on the borderline between oneself and the other’, ‘half someone else’s’, always ‘sparkling’ with ideology, only becoming ‘one’s own’ when a speaker imbues the word with his or her own intentions. This ideological conflict within language becomes apparent when the Minister states: ‘If you invest in the child as a community, the benefits are there for all to share’. On the one hand the Minister invokes ‘community’ against any treatment of education as a ‘commodity’, but she is still locked into a metaphor that derives from the world of business and markets – namely the idea of ‘investing’ in a child. Similarly, at the same time that the government appears to be rejecting economic rationalist constructions of education as a ‘commodity’, and promoting greater teacher autonomy, collaboration and decentralised ‘decision-making’, it is also telling teachers that these reforms will take place within the context of ‘a strong framework of accountability and standards’. The rhetoric suggests that they are attempting to imagine alternative futures for education, a ‘bold new age for
education’ (DE&T 2000, Education Time. Vol. 8. No. 1), but it is clear that these state-wide reforms are still being shaped by a managerial ideology.

An interesting semantic shift takes place in the article with the Minister being reported as initially speaking about education as a ‘community benefit’, yet by the conclusion she tells us that education means providing ‘innovation and excellence for all’. This has the sound of a corporate logo. Similarly, in 2000 the Minister announced that ‘education is a shared responsibility’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8. No. 7), the implication being that teachers would have a say in the process, but by 2001, under the guise of ‘innovations and excellence’ teachers were once again being told what their role and purpose in education were going to be, as well as the areas into which funding would be channelled:

To enable our children to develop the skills and knowledge they will need to shape their own lives in this new century, this budget gives priority to promoting innovation and raising standards in both teaching and learning ...


In 2002 ‘Innovations and Excellence’ became a major policy initiative and the Minister’s words reflect the way in which she herself, along with everyone around her, was being swept up by this discourse, in contradistinction to the language of ‘community’ in her speech to the Australian Education Assembly in 2001.

This emphasis on ‘excellence’, ‘innovation’, ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ arguably reflected a shift away from a focus on equality and social justice. We were invited to believe that ‘excellence’ and ‘innovation’ were accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic situations, if they have the motivation to develop the ‘skills’ necessary to access the ‘knowledge economy’. This discourse, with its narrow focus on the improvement of teaching and learning ‘skills’, and the acquisition of certain kinds of ‘knowledge’ in order to function effectively in the classroom, displaces discourses that seek to address the inequalities and injustices that exist and are perpetuated in schools (Thomson 2002, p. 172).

These conflicting discourses are also evident in the government’s attempts to encourage the teaching profession to become more actively involved in future directions of education. In the February 2000 issue of Education Times, the Minister announced that the Government was making a ‘serious commitment to a new era of quality education for all Victorian students’ and that ‘teachers will be part of an important period of that renewal in an education system for all students that value excellence’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8. No. 1, p. 3). As part of this ‘commitment’ to ‘bring teachers in from the cold’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 9. No. 19, p. 1), the Minister declared that the government was lifting the Teaching Services Order gag (a remarkably repressive and undemocratic measure imposed by the Kennett Government) that would once again allow teachers to speak out:

The gag on speaking out has been lifted and we want parents, teachers and principals to join the conversation with government about what is best for the next generation of Victorian students


The government also promised that it was ‘committed’ to ‘renewing’ the teaching work-force by employing hundreds of new teachers, replacing hundreds of contract positions with permanent ones and improving the status of teaching via the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8, No. 1 and Vol. 8, No. 5). This ‘commitment’ to not only establish professional standards but to listen to and actively advance the interests of the profession was repeated three months later:

We are making every effort to involve teachers in the decisions which affect their lives, directly through dialogue between the government and teachers. Dialogue with individual teachers is a central priority of this government ...


Then, in 2001 the government announced the establishment of an independent statutory authority whose purpose it was to ‘recognise, promote and regulate the teaching profession in Victoria’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 10, No. 9, p. 1).

In 2002 the front page of Education Times announced:

Teacher Institute launched ...The new Institute will be responsible for the regulation and promotion of the teaching profession from February next year. The VI demonstrates the State Government’s commitment and respect for the teaching profession’s role in building the knowledge and skills of young Victorians.


The government appeared to be committed to speaking directly to teachers, using the second person to encourage them to ‘have your say and shape your future’ (DE&T 2001. Education Times. Vol. 9, No. 6). Such language provides a sense of the way that public policy can intervene in our daily lives by inviting us to
take up and identify with a certain version of ourselves, regardless of whether this version corresponds with our sense of ourselves within our local settings. The continuous re-iteration in *Education Times* of the government’s version of teachers’ public lives – that as a teacher you can now ‘speak out’ and ‘shape your future’ – is a powerful way of encouraging teachers to imagine that their professional circumstances have changed. It was as though their professional voices would be heard and valued and that they too could become agents in bringing about educational reform. However, the strictures that teachers continued to encounter at the chalkface suggested that this official representation of teachers’ professional reality was nothing more than an ‘imaginary distortion’ (Althusser 1971, p. 164) of teachers’ working lives that actually robbed them of any form of genuine agency. Despite government rhetoric espousing the improved status of teaching, better working conditions and increased autonomy by professionalising the work force, teachers continued to encounter forms of accountability that arguably conflict with the very same versions of ‘professionalism’ that the government was advocating. The government claimed that the Victorian Institute of Teaching would be ‘the professional voice of teachers and the standard-bearer for quality education’ (DE&T 2001. *Education Times*. Vol. 9, No. 19, p. 1), yet at the same time it marginalised teachers’ voices in a series of reductive, state-wide, one-size-fits-all ‘reforms’ that undercut any recognition of the professional knowledge and practice of teachers, as embodied in the Victorian Institute of Teaching’s (VIT) professional standards. A major way in which teachers’ professionalism has been undermined has been through the imposition of standardised literacy testing as a key indicator of how schools are performing.

**Literacy and accountability**

Since 2000, *Education Times* has regularly reported the state government’s ‘targets’ for education, one of them being that:

> the State government has made a commitment that Victoria will be at or above national benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy as they apply to primary students (at Year 3 and 5) by 2005.
> (Michael White, Director of Schools, quoted in DE&T 2001. *Education Times*. Vol. 9, No. 3. p.7)

In this particular article, White goes on to add that, according to ‘data’, the ‘literacy levels’ of students in the Middle Years were not at ‘expected levels’. As a result of this ‘evidence’, the government would be putting in place a number of literacy initiatives to address this poor performance (White, 2001).

This emphasis on ‘data’ and ‘expected levels’ took an even more decided turn in February 2002, when Mary Delahunty was replaced by Lynne Kosky as Education Minister. In her brief time as Education Minister (after the Labor Government initially came to power) Delahunty had given some acknowledgement to the specific character of local communities, in reaction to the extremes of the previous government, which had radically restructured education along managerialist lines. With the arrival of Kosky, the Labor Government took up the same rhetoric of reform which had been a hallmark of the previous government. School communities were now to be judged against a common set of standards, with the spectre being raised of government ‘intervention’ in those schools identified as having ‘performance issues’. And although the government claimed that it would give schools ‘support’, this ‘support’ was very specifically targeted at ensuring they met the government’s ‘goals’ and ‘targets’. It would do this by helping them ‘develop charters’, ‘analyse their performance’, ‘set goals and targets for improvement’ and ‘lift’ their overall ‘performance’ and ‘outcomes’ to an ‘acceptable level’ (DE&T 2002. *Education Times*. Vol. 10, No. 4).

This language of ‘outcomes’ and ‘accountability’ was almost indistinguishable from the rhetoric that had characterised the previous Liberal Government. You could say that education had ceased to be a party-political matter, and that the Liberal and Labor Parties have adopted a bi-partisan approach to implementing neoliberal reforms that combined local autonomy (i.e. devolved financial responsibility for running schools and hiring staff) with a continuing emphasis on standards that applied to all communities. To quote Michael White again:

**Outcomes and accountability**

The Government has clearly signalled that it expects considerable improvement in student outcomes and school performance as a result of its additional investment. In this new era of carefully targeted resources, partnerships between schools, their communities and the Office of School Education will be critical. Funding from the key initiatives will be linked to outcomes and each school or cluster of schools will be accountable for its use of the resources available through the initiatives. This will be most evident in Schools for Innovation and Excellence and the Access to Excellence programs. The $81.6 million investment in an additional 300 teachers under the Access to Excellence initiative, for instance, will be
targeted to specific secondary schools where indicators suggest they require additional assistance to achieve the Government’s goals and targets. It will also be targeted to schools where Years 7–10 students may require extra teaching assistance to become more engaged in their schooling and to achieve better numeracy and literacy skills.

(Michael White, Director of School, quoted in DE&T 2002. Education Times. Vol. 10, No. 7, p. 6)


By the time the Blueprint was unveiled in a special supplement of Education Times in November 2003, these developments had already made a significant impact on Bella’s professional experiences through her involvement in the Restart and Access to Excellence literacy programs. The irony of these reforms resides in the fact that at the same time that the State was telling teachers that ‘it’s your profession’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8, No. 8), and inviting teachers to ‘join the conversation’ (DE&T 2000. Education Times. Vol. 8, No. 5), it was regulating and re-defining their work for them within a performance and accountability model of school reform, such as those enshrined in aspects of the Victorian Blueprint for Government Schools: Flagship Strategy 4: Creating and Supporting a Performance and Development Culture and Flagship Strategy 6: School Improvement (Department of Education and Training 2004, Blueprint, p. 20).

‘Flagship Strategy 6’ of the Victorian Blueprint reminds us that:

The improved Reporting and Accountability Framework announced by the Minister for Education and Training in October 2002 has already led to significant reform, such as … extending literacy and numeracy testing to all Year 7 students in government schools … (Department of Education and Training 2004, Blueprint, p. 23)

Standardised tests have widely been criticised for establishing reductive norms of ‘achievement’, ‘success’ and what it means to be ‘intelligent’, resulting in the labelling and categorising of students according to how they measure up to these ‘norms’, regardless of differences between their socio-economic circumstances and the cultural capital they are able to bring to school (Apple 2000, 2004, Popkewitz 1998, Swope and Milner 2000). Reforms such as these effectively mandate what teachers can teach and how they should teach it, narrowing the parameters of what counts as ‘knowledge’ in education. They also serve to create a culture of fear and culpability in schools that undermines teachers’ professional judgment and distorts schooling for masses of students. But the reservations that teachers might have about the educational value of state-wide standardised testing hardly seem to matter to governments hell-bent on imposing such dubious models of ‘performance’.

The following article provides a glimpse of the way that the discourses in Education Times had begun to mediate the professional knowledge and practices of teachers.

**Literacy programs put on trial**

*Students are trialling innovative strategies to boost student literacy in the middle years*  
writes Lorraine Miller

Planning for the literacy needs of middle years students is challenging. It begins with establishing a clear vision for the future and is a great opportunity to work with enthusiastic and positive professional people who are seeking to improve teaching and learning.

Our aim in the middle years research and development project (MYRAD) is to keep students as equally enthused and positive in their approach to school.

Tallangatta is one of five clusters of primary and secondary schools, along with Derrimullum, Pembroke, Hampton Park and Sebastopol, involved in MYRAD’s literacy focus group. We realise that there are no quick fixes but our aim is to ensure that all students keep improving. At Tallangatta, we have met regularly to plan our direction for the next three years. Literacy intervention is our major focus for 2002. We also want to keep working closely together within our cluster and to develop consistent approaches to literacy issues in our primary and secondary schools.

A key task for the literacy focus group is to trial different assessment tools. Under the direction of Carmel Crevola, the focus group will consider how data from the reading tests can be used to drive instruction for individual students.

Students in years 5, 6 and 7 have completed newly developed TORCH reading tests, DART (Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers) reading test, and are also completing an SRI (Student Reading Inventory) – a computer-based reading test. Correlation of these results will allow us to determine the effectiveness of different programs. Professional development in the interpretation and application of results from TORCH and DART has provided useful strategies for ways to analyse the initial data.
Another exciting aspect of the project is the trial of a multi-media reading program – READ 180.

Pembroke and Tallangatta clusters are using the American version of the program. These clusters are also providing feedback to Scholastic Australia, which is responsible for producing an Australian version of the program. The Tallangatta cluster is also bringing primary and secondary students together three times a week to trial new technology. They are keenly immersed in reading- using a CD ROM with motivational video stimulus material and reading activities. They use audio books, which have a reading coach and a narrator; high interest books for independent reading and teacher-led guided tasks and activities.

Students try each of the different literacy activities and the program is proving to be a real highlight. Students are proudly recording books they have completed in their reading journals and are learning that reading can be fun and absorbing …

*Education Times* 2000, Vol. 8, No. 9, p. 17

The article shows the way that teacher ‘professionalism’ as it is defined by the Victorian Education Department is closely or even exclusively linked to ‘improving teaching and learning’, and how other dimensions of schooling are placed in the background. Though the author goes on to refer to students who are ‘enthusied’ and ‘positive’ in their approach to school, we obtain no insight into the social realities of their lives. The prevalence of words such as ‘program’, ‘data’, ‘trialling’, ‘tools’, ‘test results’ suggests a decontextualised approach to teaching, learning and ‘literacy’ which is evident in the reliance on the development of ‘packages’ based on material imported from the US. Typically, these packages are then uncritically imposed on a local context without any acknowledgment of the specific character of that community.

Teachers are told that ‘Students are proudly recording books they have completed in their reading journals and are learning that reading can be fun and absorbing’. Language like this conveys a positive spin about the government-supported literacy program. The author reminds teachers that ‘positive professionals who are seeking to improve teaching and learning’ are ‘enthusiastic’ about these developments, leaving those who are reading the article with no sense of the possibility of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. The emphasis is always on ‘improving’ and moving forward without any recognition of the need to stop and critically analyse what ‘improvement’ might mean from one child to another.

A barrage of tests is mentioned – ‘TORCH’, ‘DART’ and ‘SRI’ – suggesting that the focus is not so much on the student as a social being with a range of needs, but on ‘test results’. By focusing on collecting information from psychometric tests that only measure a certain kind of ‘intelligence’, governments not only redefine what ‘good teaching’ is, but what it is to be ‘smart’ and ‘successful’, dismissing all the other ‘information’ about students’ lives that is not quantifiable (Kincheloe 1999). It is as though reading tests are the only way of ‘boosting student literacy in the middle years’, and that teachers should reconcile themselves to being proxy administrators of such tests, rather than worrying about how to encourage inquiry, facilitate conversations and negotiate social relationships within the classroom.

Despite the fact that the article might initially appear to be merely a good news story about the efforts of some schools to improve the literacy of their students, the language signals a decisive intervention in the professional practice of teachers in Victoria. This is how we now talk about language and literacy in Victoria. Such top-down, one-size-fits-all literacy reforms render invalid the complex social, cultural and political contexts in which teachers and students operate and make it clear that teachers’ professional practice is no longer trusted. Teachers must henceforth engage in practices that conflict with their professional experiences, not least the fact that they are now obliged to label students with a test score rather than attempting to acknowledge and meet their individual needs (cf. Swope and Milner 2000).

### 3. Thinking Relationally

The rhetoric of *Education Times* mediated Bella’s work as a Literacy Coordinator in powerful ways. She herself became adept at compiling and analysing the ‘data, data, data’ required by the Education Department bureaucrats who coordinated *Restart* and *Access to Excellence* at a regional level (Illesca, 2004). When Bella queried the way such data were being used, the regional representative responded by saying: ‘I’m a bureaucrat. It’s my role to implement government policy, not to critique it.’ (Illesca, 2004). Yet although Bella resisted the notion that she should unquestioningly implement government mandates, she was also aware that the language of *Education Times* was not simply ‘outside’ her, something from which she could easily distance herself through critique. She herself was speaking this language, and in speaking it she was complicit in the ideological work that it was doing.
In his essay, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ (1971), Althusser writes: ‘Ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group’ (Althusser 1971, p.158). Through his concept of ‘interpellation’ or ‘hailing’ (Althusser 1971, p. 174), Althusser shows how ideology intervenes in our everyday lives. It positions us, inviting us to take up and identify with certain subject positions, particular versions of ourselves. Ideology embodies a set of imaginary relations to the real conditions of our existence (Althusser 1971, p. 162), a story that we are invited to believe in order to live out our lives – very much like the stories which Education Times invited Bella to believe about her role as a literacy coordinator. And at this level, there is no gain-saying the professional commitment of those teachers (such as the ones involved in the initiative described in the article we have just analysed from Education Times) as they implement government policy in an effort to improve the life chances of the young people in their care. One reason why the neo-liberal ideology propagated by Education Times is so difficult to resist is that it typically takes the form of good news stories which invite teachers to imagine that they have agency, that they are in a position to make a difference to the lives of their students. Who would not want to believe that they are capable of making the world a better place? But the current rhetoric about teachers making a difference marries easily with policy which is simultaneously designed to impose more rigorous surveillance of teachers in the form of performance appraisal and standards-based reforms.

For Althusser ideology is more than a matter of belief. It is bound up with doing, and doing within the context of the social relationships and institutional settings in which we find ourselves. Ideologies can only exist in and through practice, that is, the range of activities in which we participate in the course of our daily lives. What we ‘believe’, what we think we are doing, exists in a complex relationship with the practices in which we engage. In her role as a literacy coordinator Bella was performing certain ideological work, enacting a certain type of educational ‘knowledge’ (administering standardised testing, sorting students into remedial groups, implementing a remediation program, drilling and skilling her students in phonics) regardless of what she might have understood herself to be doing, and despite the critical stance which she developed in the course of her work. She was implementing neo-liberal ideology – even though her beliefs and values may have conflicted with the way this ideology constructed her professional role. But the language she was obliged to use to account for her professional practice shows how difficult it actually was to think otherwise, to hold on to alternative views of her work as an English teacher.

We appear to be heading towards a very bleak conclusion, much like Kafka’s Hunger Artist, who, long forgotten by the crowds who once mulled around him, in awe of his fasting, was finally reduced to a bundle of bones in the corner of his cage. Bella has described the students who were streamed into the remedial classes elsewhere (see Illesca, 2005). After the students initially resisted the drilling designed to give them the skills they were supposedly lacking, they responded much better to a curriculum that allowed them to draw on their experiences in order to engage in meaningful communicative activities. This curriculum came close to being a dish that they liked, and the class began to rub along together fairly well. Paradoxically, despite the stigma of being the ‘dummies’, they began to value the togetherness and security which the remedial class offered them. The following comments provide glimpses into how they understood their situation.

In my other English class when it was my turn [to read] I used to say ‘Can I go to the toilet?’ When it came to my shot again I used to say ‘Can I get a drink?’ We started the first and last ten minutes [of the lesson] reading. I use try to be late. I still hate reading, but not as much [in this class] ’cause it’s not as embarrassing … I use to be scared of computers, hated typing. Now I’m better than my mum! I just get annoyed with them. I can’t find the letter I would scan through it and miss it and then have to go back. I prefer to write. Everyone thinks it’s cool but to me it takes too long. What do I like about being in this class now? Not being embarrassed to read. Using the computers because now I know how to use them. I’m not scared of them. Two teachers it’s easier … say if you were working with Eddie, Ms A can come over and help me. Better than English because if you make a mistake there nobody cares. Like here, noone will tease you … or if they do it’s in a funny way. Not really tease you … The small group has made it easier to write and learn it’s not as noisy as other classes. It’s fun cause we get to use computers a lot and now I know how to use them. If I wasn’t in [this class] I wouldn’t want to do English … This is not like an English class. It’s easier. We don’t read harder books and we don’t have to do all this work in one day …

Tanua (Year 7)
I want to do this literacy class again in Year 10 because it’s easier. Like, ‘cause I have problems in class. Like, I’m behind in everything … I’m slower at things than other people. I have dyslexia and it makes my words jumble up and I get behind in my writing. It upsets me because everyone is in front and I am still near the end. I just need more time to do the work. In this class everyone works at their own pace and I don’t feel behind. In this class I have done all of the work. I get along with everyone. It’s taken about 2–3 weeks in … at the start of term one I felt uncomfortable because there were so many guys in here, then it changed because everyone talked, you get to know each other and I went to Primary School with Duke and I’ve been good friends with Paul … If I had to go back to the normal class – I call it that because it’s a different class to the other class – you don’t get as much help as you do here. Like if you need help teachers come straight to you, in a normal class they just ignore you … because there are so many people in the class. It’s okay but you don’t get work done. There’s no one to talk to in here. No people that I hang out with so I end up doing my work. I’m not liking the reading because I hate reading. I’ve never liked it because I’m so slow at it … I’ve never been a reader … the best part that we’ve done is Billy Elliot because it’s a good movie. I’m into dancing and stuff. I love ‘Save the Last Dance.’

Rochelle (Year 9)

This class is good. It’s helping me with my reading and writing and spelling. I would feel mad and probably try and leave school if I couldn’t do this class. If I didn’t have to do a language it might be alright, but it still might be a bit hard. But I would try hard. This is a helping class. The other normal English class … it’s harder stuff – reading and writing – we read harder books and harder spelling words. The work we do in here is easy. What makes this easier? It’s not too difficult – the reading and writing and stuff. Not as much people in here. You usually always get a teacher when you need one. Probably behaviour is worse in other subjects ‘cause I’m with more people that I know and there’s not as many teachers to tell you off. I really enjoyed the story writing, the resume, the work we looked for at the Shopping Centre and Billy Elliot was alright and kind of fun cause you got to watch the movie and the work wasn’t too difficult.

Paul (Year 9)

Just listening to students, and learning how they are experiencing their schooling, can be a means of enacting an alternative pedagogy, even within the structures imposed by neo-liberal policy. One of the most deeply disturbing aspects of neo-liberal policy is, after all, the way it fails to acknowledge the complex situation of children and adolescents as they try to make sense of their lives. Policy makers, bureaucrats and media pundits are unashamedly full of prescriptions for young people, such as the need for their ‘literacy’ to be at a certain level by a certain point in time. They typically fail to acknowledge the way young people are struggling with issues of language and identity in a time of radical instability. They treat young people as an economic resource, not as flesh and blood individuals.

Years ago, James Britton argued that there could be no alternative to ‘total acceptance’ of the languages and experiences that young people bring with them to school (Britton, 1970; see also Britton, 1982). This means seeing their ‘socioeconomic background and geographical location’ (to return to the language of Professional Learning in Effective Schools) not as obstacles to be overcome in ‘improving the learning outcomes of all students’ (DE&T, 2005, p. 2) but as a vital context for developing curriculum and enacting a pedagogy that is truly responsive to young people’s needs. Such thinking flies in the face of neo-liberal ideology, which attempts to treat people as an undifferentiated mass, except with respect to a decontextualised set of cognitive skills that can be identified by standardised testing. To begin to understand the diverse social worlds of the young people in your classroom is a key way of thinking ‘relationally’.

The above student voices have not been included as a way of congratulating ourselves, as though somehow we’ve been responsible for turning these students’ lives around. Quite the contrary. Their words obligate us to examine our own practices and to speak the things that remain unsaid about government interventions of this kind: Bureaucrats collect their data, analyse and publish their version of the results, but what is really happening kind: Bureaucrats collect their data, analyse and publish their version of the results, but what is really happening...
that mediate professional practice. The foregoing analysis of *Education Times* has shown the way the professional knowledge and practice of teachers in Victoria, including the very way they talk about their work, has been radically transformed in recent years. The very act of identifying that language – of compiling its lexicon, of noting what it names and does not name – is to gesture towards other languages, other possibilities.

**Notes**

1 On 13 November 2003, Minister Kosky launched the Government's five-year plan for education, the Blueprint for Government Schools. Based on the principle of self-management, the agenda of the Blueprint was to ensure continuous improvement in teaching and student learning outcomes. The Blueprint outlines seven flagship strategies to help improve the quality of schools, particularly underperforming schools by building the 'skills' of students and teachers. (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/publications/policy/blueprint.htm).

2 On 7 April 2008, Minister Pike launched two Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform discussion papers – one for school reform and one for early childhood development. This latest Blueprint builds on Kosky's 'successful' 2003 Blueprint and incorporates early childhood reform into the Government's next five year plan for education. The focus of these proposed reforms are based on 'new' ways of ensuring continuous improvement in teaching and student learning outcomes. The 'new' in this case will take the form of 'stronger interventions and more intensive monitoring in underperforming schools' of both disengaged students and teachers. (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/blueprint2008/default.htm).

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