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Democracy and teachers: the im/possibilities for pluralisation in evidence-based practice

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we draw on policy sociology and democratic theory to illustrate how evidence-based practice not only limits teachers' capacities to exercise professional discretion and authority, but also jeopardises the democratic project of schooling more broadly. Using theoretical concepts from Foucault's discipline with Connolly's pluralisation, we argue that evidence-based practice disciplines teachers to comply with a prescribed set of criteria, which constrains their capacity to respond to the evolving and emergent needs of their students and communities. Our argument is built from two projects conducted separately, but concurrently, in Australia and Denmark. The projects involved in-depth interviews with teachers, extensive observations within schools, and the collection and analysis of policy documents and artefacts. Using illustrative excerpts from both studies, we show how teacher participants expressed and embodied inclinations to do (or be) differently, but nonetheless felt the need to adhere to what the evidence established as the right way to do or be. In our view, this points to an increasingly rigid ontological space through which teachers can do, be and become, which raises questions about the extent to which an 'ethos of pluralisation' is possible within these schools.

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As a notionally democratic institution, schools – often a site of contestation over societal values – are expected to teach *about* and operate *within* the democratic ideals that define free societies. However, scholars have pointed to marketisation, standardisation and datafication as some of the many factors (re)shaping schools in ways that undermine the democratic potential of education (see, for example, Riddle and Apple 2019; Riddle and Heffernan 2018). In doing so, they argue, schools have become sites for prioritising market ideals that (1) exacerbate problems of inequality related to matters like race and class, (2) create channels through which external actors can insert themselves into the notionally 'public' institution of education, and (3) create conditions where teacher expertise and authority are reconstituted in terms of technical and evidence-based

practice and compliance (see also Holloway 2021). With a focus on this latter issue, we use this paper to problematise the ‘evidence’ discourse that has become a key priority of most educational systems worldwide (Krejsler 2013; Wiseman 2010).

Building on previous works that have critiqued the emergence of evidence within prevailing accountability discourses (see, for example, Krejsler 2013; Lingard 2013), we draw on policy sociology and democratic theory (Connolly 2005; Foucault 1977) to argue that ‘evidence-based practice’ not only limits teachers’ capacities to exercise professional discretion and authority, but also jeopardises the democratic project of schooling more broadly. We show how evidence-based practice can discipline teachers to comply with a prescribed set of criteria (cf. Foucault 1977), which constrains their capacity to respond to the evolving and unexpected needs of their students and communities (cf. Connolly 2005). Following political theorist William Connolly, we see this as detrimental for democratic institutions, as it prevents a pluralistic ethos from developing, while stifling the institution’s capacity to evolve as circumstances inevitably require (e.g. in response to technological advances, navigating times of crisis, etc.).

This paper is the result of ongoing, lengthy conversations – or what Saldaña (2013) might call ‘shop talking’ (p. 206) – between the two of us regarding research projects conducted separately, but concurrently, in Australia and Denmark. Our respective projects involved in-depth interviews with teachers, extensive observations within schools, and the collection and analysis of policy documents and artefacts. Both studies had initial aims regarding democracy and the role of education as a democratic institution. One was a multi-sited ethnographic study of the democratic responsibility of Danish primary schooling (Author 2), and the other was a study of teacher expertise, authority and professionalism in liberal democratic societies, with a particular focus on Australia (Author 1). Through our conversations about what we were finding in terms of democratic ideals, practices and the implications of and for schooling and teachers, we found some striking similarities between the two cases.

In particular, we found that in different ways and to different degrees, our teacher participants expressed inclinations to do (or be) differently, but nonetheless felt compelled to follow the evidence-based programs their schools had implemented in recent years. We were particularly struck by what we initially saw as contradictory positioning amongst the teachers. Given our backgrounds as former teachers and now critical researchers, we struggled to reconcile our own (critical) understanding of evidence-based programs with how the teachers seemed so willing to ignore their scepticisms in favour of their respective schools’ programs. After many intense dialogic sessions of ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2013), we came to see the evidence discourse as creating an increasingly rigid ontological space through which teachers can do, be and become. We then began asking questions about whether these conditions can facilitate democratic possibilities, especially if we situate the evidence discourse within the pervasive neoliberalisation of schooling.

First, we begin by articulating our understanding and use of pluralism and pluralisation, as defined by Connolly (2005). Here, we make the ontological distinction between *pluralism* as a fixed formation of difference and *pluralisation* as the embodied acceptance of emergent changes and new possibilities for alternative ways of being/doing/becoming. Then we provide a brief description of our approach to ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson and Mazzei 2013), where we emphasise that this paper is not

a traditional empirical or comparative analysis. This is followed by a series of vignettes and interview excerpts that illustrate the rigid ontological space within which the teachers are operating in their respective contexts. Here, we think with Foucault and Connolly to theorise how technologies of discipline and normalisation produce conditions where teachers view difference as something to avoid, thereby placing limits on possibilities for pluralisation. We conclude with a discussion about the relationship between pluralisation, democracy and current schooling environments, focusing specifically on how trends towards evidence-based thinking limit schools from operating as democratic and critically responsive institutions that can evolve as circumstances require.

On pluralism, pluralisation and democracy

Pluralism is often invoked in calls for schools (or societies) to be more democratic. The narrative typically emphasises that pluralism – or acceptance of difference – sits at the foundation of democracy. While we agree with the sentiment of this position, we follow a line of argument from post-structural democratic thinkers (see Connolly 2005; Mouffe 1999; Norval 2009) that simplistic notions of pluralism can often obscure historically-fixed formations of power relations. In other words, we must move beyond simple celebrations of diversity, as ‘difference’ is still often centred on privileged understandings of what counts as ‘normal’ and ‘other’. As with these theorists, we draw on Foucauldian (Foucault 2000) terms to view the means of determining ‘difference’ as always being oriented to a category of ‘normalcy’, where the accepted form of being and doing is produced through the material (e.g. policies, institutions) and discursive (e.g. norms, beliefs) conditions of a particular time and place. That is, normalcy and deviance are constructs of logics, languages and techniques that are available and accepted as forms of knowledge and truth. Foucault (2000) refers to these as ‘dividing practices’ – e.g. the ‘... mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the “good boys”’ (p. 326). In these terms, normalcy is not a real, fixed or measurable construct, which means ‘difference’ cannot be real, fixed or measurable either. Rather, it is a product of political, social and historical conditions that construct difference in relation to an accepted norm at a particular time, and therefore is always a product of power relations.

When normality and difference are problematised in this way, then pluralism can also be critiqued as a normative and problematic concept (see also Norval 2009). Therefore, rather than pursuing pluralism in terms of ‘diversity’, Connolly (2005) argues that we should aim to cultivate an ‘ethos of pluralisation’. This allows for emergent ideas and new categories of being to always be possible, rather than defining difference against an assumed and pre-determined norm.

Specifically, if difference is conceptualised as a set of fixed categories or identities, then the system struggles to adapt, or be ‘critically responsive’ (Connolly 2005), when presented with significant challenges (e.g. political turbulence, climate change, shifting demographics), or when ‘new identities [attempt to] cross the magic threshold of enactment’ (ibid. p. 41). The system is not prepared to recognise alternative ways of being, knowing or doing that arise from these challenges, and it is therefore more likely to reject anything that deviates from the recognised and registered norm. At the same time,

the new identity, ‘at its more fragile point a new possibility of being[,] both disrupts the stability of established identities and lacks a sufficiently stable definition through which to present itself’ (ibid. p. 41).

An ethos of *pluralisation*, on the other hand, can help make an institution (or society) more robust and stable, as it seeks to be in a constant state of responsiveness, in which the space for new beings and becomings to emerge is always available (and expected). Within this environment, difference is always in a state of becoming, rather than being set against an essential state of fixed categories. While fixed categories of being and doing might be shocked by change, Connolly views fluid forms of being and doing as enabling a constant degree of responsiveness to always-shifting conditions, as well as to emergent becomings (ideas or identities). For this paper, we are interested in schooling as a site of pluralisation, and particularly how conditions produce im/possibilities for pluralisation as it relates to evidence-based practice.

Pluralisation and evidence-based practice in schools

The dramatic changes education has undergone during the last four decades are to a large extent linked with an increasingly tighter connection between the state, education and the economy (Krejsler and Moos 2021; Wiseman 2010). The acceleration of the global economy, as well as technological developments and stronger positions of transnational agencies like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the European Union have transformed nation-states into what Ball (2009) has labelled competition states. As education is assumed to be the core instrument to strengthen the economic growth and competitiveness of the state, the call for more and better scientific evidence as a basis for educational policy making, as well as the demand for evidence-based teaching practice, has increased (Krejsler and Moos 2021; Wiseman 2010).

Proponents of the idea that an evidence-based approach should have a more prominent place in education claim this will lead to dramatic improvements, similar to what (or is assumed to have) fixed ‘problems’ in fields like medicine and agriculture (Slavin 2002; McKnight and Morgan 2020). In this sense, the request and provision for knowledge about ‘what works’ has been framed as a democratisation of knowledge and a democratisation of the teacher profession – lending a presumed degree of equality across contexts.

Other scholars, however, have called for caution and have raised concerns regarding the role evidence-based approaches should have in education (see Biesta 2010; Lewis and Hogan 2019; Lingard 2013; Mockler and Stacey 2021; Wescott 2021). What many of these scholars have highlighted is that, often in the name of quality, equity and efficiency, evidence-based practice has become a compelling rationality for organising schooling systems in most parts of the world (Wiseman 2010). They also show the dangers of relying on ‘what works’ as a means for directing pedagogical decisions, which can undermine teachers’ capacity to exercise professional judgment (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Krejsler 2013; Wescott 2021). In this sense, the ‘what works’ agenda can be understood as a democratic deficit in the teacher profession.

Despite these concerns, evidence and evidence-based practice, along with their associated policy techniques – e.g. standardised testing, national curriculum, teaching proficiency/certification standards – have evolved into a ubiquitous and ‘normal’ part of

schooling (both materially and discursively). While debates around the role of evidence in education have trodden a well-worn path across fields and disciplines, we see a need to think about how the logics of ‘evidence’ intersect with the logics of democratic practice. Specifically, we are concerned with the tension between the evidence discourse and pluralisation in democratic institutions, with a starting premise that: (1) schools are increasingly organised by the logics of ‘evidence’ and ‘what works’; (2) this is inherently at odds with plural means of being and doing; and (3) pluralisation should be a non-negotiable priority of liberal democratic institutions (Connolly 2005; Mouffe 1999).

Framing *difference* in terms of Foucault’s (2000) ‘dividing practices’ allows us to think about how an evidence-based discourse can create schools where some semblance of diversity might be possible, but an ethos of pluralisation remains difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. This is because the very premise of these reform agendas hinge on establishing a set of criteria that has been accepted as fixed notions of knowledge or truth about ‘what works’ (see also Krejsler 2013). This is in the form of (now familiar) things like teaching standards, standardised curriculum, behavioural programs, and so on. These efforts have produced environments where professional discretion is constricted, which is reinforced by various incentivisation schemes, whether material or symbolic (Ball 2003; Garver 2020; Perryman 2009; Wescott 2021).

In other words, many of the policy priorities of schooling are based on establishing fixed categories of what it means to be a good student, a high-performing school, or a quality teacher (Sorensen and Robertson 2017; Berkovich and Benoliel 2020). To achieve the status of ‘good’, one must perform well against a set of normative standards, earn a particular score on a test, or perform better than a set of peers. The use of standards and assessment to determine performance and quality are often taught in teacher education and then reinforced throughout a teacher’s career via evaluation, professional development, and various incentive schemes (Cochran-Smith et al. 2018; Holloway 2021; Sleeter 2008).

Furthermore, these logics and techniques are translated into banks of ‘evidence’, which are established and authorised through different channels. For example, the OECD regularly promotes their prescribed evidence of good teacher practice (Berkovich and Benoliel 2020; Sorensen and Robertson 2017). Some countries, like the US, have federal institutions that authorise ‘best practices’ for teachers and schools (e.g. the US *What Works Clearinghouse*) – based on random control trial research. At the school level, teachers are often required to demonstrate how they are using evidence (e.g. student test scores, projected performance targets) to inform their instruction (Garver 2020; Hardy 2019; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, and Creagh 2021). Globally, teachers are subjected to stricter controls of their work, as professional judgment is reconstituted through (often externally) authorised evidence, and the complexity of education is oriented to fixed categories of knowledge and truth (Wescott 2021).

In this paper, we rely on a similar assumption – that discourses related to evidence and ‘what works’ in schooling create conditions where teachers and their practice are shaped by deterministic categories of being, doing and becoming. While this is often analysed through a lens of de-professionalisation, we are careful to make a distinction with our work. Rather than *de*-professionalisation, we see the evidence-based discourse as a *re*-professionalisation of teachers and teaching. This allows for a more nuanced view of how teachers and their work are being (re)oriented to the logics of standardisation and

evidence, as the various channels through which teachers become are simultaneously shaped by similar logics (e.g. teacher training, professional development, etc., see also, Brass and Holloway 2019; Holloway 2021). Therefore, we are careful not to use the language of ‘de-professionalisation’ because, as we hope becomes clearer throughout the paper, we do not find this framing useful for documenting the ontological shift associated with the evidence discourse. Rather than force a dividing binary (i.e. professionalism vs de-professionalism), we see the re-professionalisation framework as being more consistent with our view on pluralisation. That is, we do not define ‘professionalism’ on a normative, fixed spectrum, but rather as a fluid construct that is always being made and remade as a product of present conditions.

We now turn to our two cases that provide the illustrative material for our analysis. We begin with brief overviews of the education policy environments in Denmark and Australia, paying particular attention to the evidence discourse trends of both countries. Before doing so, however, we want to articulate more clearly how we have approached this writing project. First, this is not meant to be a comparative study. Rather than seeing Australia and Denmark as in need of comparison, or making claims about which schooling system is more or less aligned with a normative view of democracy or pluralism, we draw on various scenarios from our respective data sets to illustrate how similar tensions between evidence-based logics and pluralisation can emerge in contemporary schools in putatively different contexts.

Second, while we draw on some of the empirical material from our respective projects, we did not approach this collaborative exercise in a traditionally empirical way. Instead, we saw this as an opportunity to ‘think with theory’, or what Jackson and Mazzei (2013) describe as ‘methodology-against-interpretivism’, which ‘disrupts the centering compulsion of traditional qualitative research; . . . [it] is about cutting into the center, opening it up to see what newness might be incited’ (p. 262). As mentioned previously, this involved extensive and lengthy conversations that unfolded over the course of a year. Meeting regularly, we ‘plugged in’ our data to different theorists’ concepts (e.g. those of Chantal Mouffe, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière and Yascha Mounk, to name a few); we rearranged our data, our interpretations and arguments; we challenged each other and imagined debates between the theorists. It was messy, but it was thoughtful. For now, the ‘assemblage of our thinking’ (ibid. p. 264) has produced what we hope is a new way of thinking about pluralisation, democracy and teachers. With that, we move to the case of Denmark.

The Danish case

Danish children attend the Folkeskolen (the people’s school) from age 6 to 15/16. Folkeskolen is state-funded primary and lower secondary school, and consists of a preschool class, grades 1 to 9 and an optional grade 10 class. The Folkeskole is, since the Second World War, shaped by ideas of democracy as a practice – in particular with influence from John Dewey and Danish Theologian Hal Koch. They argued that if the school was to democratise pupils, then it needed to be democratic itself (Dewey 2007; Koch 1991/1945; Korsgaard, Kristensen, and Siggaard Jensen 2017). The Danish government has governed the Folkeskole through very broad and general preambles in the 1957 and 1975 school law. The governance was characterised by

guiding curriculum and teaching *guidance* documents, leaving large space for interpretation to municipalities, schools and practitioners (Moos 2005). Hence, Danish teachers have had a relatively high level of autonomy to exercise professional judgment.

However, from the 1980s the Danish education policy has been increasingly inspired by transnational tendencies, particularly with ideas related to ‘school effectiveness’ (Moos 2005; Krejsler 2021). Over the last few decades, various technologies of standardisation, evaluation, and measurement practices have been implemented in the school system (ibid.). At the same time, it has undergone what Gert Biesta has called the ‘learnification’ of schooling (see, for Biesta 2005, 2006), which is the discursive shift in the language of education to emphasise the orientation from the content of teaching towards student learning outcomes. The learnification is particularly underlined in the latest school reform of 2014, which was publicly labelled the ‘Learning Reform’, and where several phrases both in the school law and in the national curriculum were deliberately revised to reflect the changing culture and thinking of school as being more ‘evidence-based’ and more ‘learning-outcome-oriented’. For example, *school libraries* are now called *pedagogical learning centres* (Danish school law).

With regards to teachers, the idea of teaching as an evidence-based practice has also gained ground in Denmark. Although the Nordic countries can be said to have tilted somewhat more towards a ‘context matters’ approach that privileges qualitative research, whereas the Anglo-American approaches have tilted towards looking for commonalities and hence more often give preference to quantitative research (Krejsler and Moos 2021), it has still fostered a situation where the traditional autonomy of Danish teachers is put into question as (unscientific) subjective opinions (Vaaben 2016). To meet the increasing demand for transforming practices in schools to *evidence-based* practice, Danish municipalities seem to undertake the responsibility for this by purchasing various evidence-based concepts developed by domestic and foreign consultancies (Moos 2005). One of these programs is ‘Positive behavior, supportive learning environment and interaction in school’ (PALS), described more in the next section.

The case of a Vesterborg Elementary School

The data from the Danish case consists of observations, interviews and field notes from a three-week visit at a Danish Folkeskole; Vesterborg Elementary School (VES; pseudonym). For the purpose of this paper the data from the Danish case are chosen to illustrate examples of how teachers and members of the school management suppress feelings of ambivalence towards certain practices in an evidence-based program implemented at the school. We argue that evidence-based thinking is positioned as something taboo to challenge, consequently suppressing opportunities for pedagogical deliberation and scrutiny. The evidence-based teacher, then, is one who does not question practices that are presented as evidence-based, is not only a demand from the outside, but also a *feeling* that comes from within (cf. Foucault 1977). This happens with the construction of evidence-based knowledge as the ‘truth’, and the re-professionalization of the teacher. That is, the *re-construction* of the professional teacher subject, where teachers as individuals identify with and internalize the practices and attitudes perceived as professional.

Vesterborg Elementary school (VES) has adopted a program called ‘Positive behavior, supportive learning environment and interaction in school’ (PALS), which is a Norwegian version of the US School Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) (Danish National Board of Health and Welfare 2013). The aim of the program is to strengthen students’ social competences and prevent ‘problem behavior’ through a manual-based pedagogical model based on the principles and procedures of SWPBS (Sprague and Walker 2005), where ‘*comprehensive and intensive strategies targeting serious problems are combined with positive behaviour support and preventive interventions aimed at the majority of well-behaved students*’ (Ogden et al. 2012, 40). PALS, including the pedagogical interventions described in the program, is considered and presented as evidence-based; that is, ‘... *what is considered to be the best available research knowledge about what works in order to develop positive behavior support for all students*’ (ibid. p. 42).

Some of the core components of PALS are (1) teaching students school-rules, (2) setting clear expectations for behaviour and social skills, and (3) systematically praising and encouraging positive behaviour both with verbal praise and with reward cards (Sørliie and Ogden 2015). At VES, the reward cards are labelled Good Cards and students are given Good Cards both individually and collectively. Each week students count how many Good Cards the class has collected altogether, and when they attain a certain number of cards, the class gets a reward (e.g. watching a movie with popcorn or going to the skate park).

Illustrative examples

The six teachers of year group 4 (10-year-old students) have a weekly team meeting. The purpose of these meetings is partly planning and organizing and partly to engage in pedagogical discussions, both at a general level and in relation to specific cases of various kinds. The following excerpt is from a team meeting where the Good Card practice is on the agenda. The purpose of the discussion is to make sure the teachers align their practices, since uniformed practices by the professionals in ‘... *accordance with the developers’ and implementers’ description ...*’ (Sørliie and Ogden 2015, 203) is considered ‘high implementation quality’, which predict positive outcomes (ibid). The teachers talk about how and when they each give students Good Cards:

Ida admits that she actually does not give students Good Cards at all. She hasn’t been doing it for a while. The other teachers seem surprised, and they ask her why. Ida says: “there is just something about it, that I don’t like” and “I don’t know what it is ... (pause) ... it just doesn’t feel right”.

There is a moment of silence. I find myself expecting a pedagogical discussion about the Good Cards unfold, because I am very surprised when this does not happen. Instead, the team leader reminds Ida that the municipality has decided on PALS and that evidence shows that the implementation of the concept is crucial for it to work. Meaning, that if only some teachers adopt the practices of the concept and others do not, the promised effect (the strengthening of social competencies) will fail to happen. Ida concedes that it is a problem, and she apologises and assures the others that she will resume the practice of giving students Good Cards tomorrow. They continue to discuss when and on what grounds to give Good Cards (Notes from observation field notes).

There are two aspects we want to highlight from this excerpt. First, Ida expresses ambivalence towards the Good Card practice, she expresses discomfort; 'It just doesn't feel right'. So much that she has not been giving Good Cards to her students for a while, even though she is obligated to do so. Second, despite the explicit discomfort Ida expresses, no pedagogical discussion about the practice unfolds – even though these weekly meetings are designed for engaging in pedagogical discussions. Why does this practice of giving Good Cards to students avoid pedagogical scrutiny when the feeling of discomfort emerges within one of the professionals? One could argue that it is only one teacher who expresses discomfort, and hence most teachers feel no need to discuss the practice. However, this was not the only time ambivalence towards PALS (and towards the Good Card practice in particular) was expressed.

For example, something that came up regularly was a discomfort and/or distancing from the behavioristic character of PALS, even though the PALS programme is explicitly based on behaviorist theories (Arnesen et al. 2008). Some rejected the very idea that the Good Card is a *reward* practice, explaining that it is rather a means to help the teacher focus on the good intentions of the students. Some stressed that the Good Cards are only a minor aspect of PALS and that they do not, for example, use punishment or consequences. Some framed the Good Card as just a 'funny little artefact' in addition to the verbal acknowledgement. They affirmed that a key aspect of PALS is that students are acknowledged when they live up to the expected behavior, but they did not associate acknowledgement (neither as verbal praise nor as an artefact) with behaviorism. Almost everybody emphasised that the students love getting Good Cards, which seems to serve as an argument that the practice is positive and hence cannot be behavioristic, which they associate with something negative.

The idea of a pedagogy built on theories of behaviorism is not popular in a Danish pedagogical context, so the distancing or rejection of behaviorism is not surprising. What is surprising, though, is that the concept and its practices – precisely *because* it is built on ideas of behaviorism – is expressly adopted into the school's pedagogical ethos, and that it still avoids critique or pedagogical discussion when feelings of discomfort and ambivalence arise.

A third example of ambivalence occurred while the school was being assessed on their implementation of PALS. Systematic self-assessment procedures are a central part of PALS (Sørliie and Ogden 2015), and at VES a group of 12 Local Impact Coaches (teachers and members of the school management) collect data on a weekly basis to assess the implementation of PALS. On this particular day, the Local Impact Coaches collected data on whether students know what is expected of them and whether they feel acknowledged for their positive behavior. They did this by visiting classes and asking random students questions about the Good Cards. The following excerpt is from Charlotte and John's data collection in a 1st grade class (students age 7).

Charlotte asks a group of children if they know what Good Cards are. The children nod. Charlotte asks what they can say about it. Some children say things like: "we get Good Cards when we behave well", "we get them when we are quiet", and "we get Good Cards when we remember to raise our hands". John writes the answers in a notebook. "So, what about you?" Turning to another group of students, Charlotte asks "What do you know about Good Cards?" A boy says: "It is just something the adults give us to . . . (pause) . . . they try to lure us . . . into doing what they want us to [do]". Both Charlotte and John laugh out loud. John writes the answer.

Shortly after, we are in the hallway again and the boy's statement is mentioned. Charlotte and John laugh, and John says while shaking his head "Oh my . . . that statement sounds totally like 'the black school'. They laugh again. (Notes from observation field notes).

The expression 'the black school' is a popular expression in Danish for a teaching method and school environment based on rote learning instead of independent thinking, rehearsed with a strict and authoritarian teacher using means of praise and corporal punishment. Needless to say, the idea of 'the black school' is not what any Danish school would like to be associated with.

Although many might argue that VES is nowhere near what can be characterised as a 'black school', we see John's discomfort with the association as interesting given that, explicitly in the PALS Handbook, the Good Card practice is described as a 'positive reinforcement' (Arnesen et al. 2008, authors' translation). We interpret John's discomfort within the discussion of behaviorism and the area of tension between the positive interpretation, *positive reinforcement* and the negative interpretation, *bribe* or as the boy experienced it, *luring*. We interpret John and Charlotte's reaction (to laugh) as dismissing the boy's unpleasant interpretation of the Good Card practice. In doing so, they avoid engaging with the feeling of discomfort, while suppressing any space for pedagogical debate. Indeed, the event is not mentioned in the follow-up session regarding the Local Impact Coaches' assessment.

Furthermore, when pressed further about their feelings towards the Good Card, the following occurred during a lunch break in the teacher staff room:

I ask a group of three teachers that if giving students Good Cards is solely an effort to direct the teachers' attention towards the good intentions of the student, then why involve the students at all? I suggest that if this is merely about the teachers, wouldn't it make more sense if the school management gave teachers Good Cards when they successively managed to focus on the good intentions of the students? The response is first a moment of silence and then the teachers burst out in laughter as if I had made a very good joke. "That wouldn't exactly be well received" a teacher replies. (Notes from observation fieldwork).

What we wish to stress from these excerpts, is the apparent paradox that arises as we interpret ambivalence and discomfort towards PALS, and yet the concept of the Good Card practice is not questioned in pedagogical discussions. Though the teachers distance themselves from ideas of behaviorism, or find it unthinkable that they would accept being given Good Cards themselves, or a student experiences Good Cards as an act of *luring* the students into doing what the adults want them to, or a colleague expresses that it *just doesn't feel right*, PALS and the Good Card practice evade critical discussion. This raises important questions about plurality and whether an ethos of pluralisation is possible in this kind of environment. We look at this question more closely after presenting excerpts from the Australian case.

The Australian case

First, the Australian case must be understood in terms of the Australian education governance structure. Historically and constitutionally, education has been the responsibility of the individual states. However, the federal government's influence in education has grown steadily over the past few decades, especially in terms of setting standards, curriculum,

assessment and teacher education (Barnes and Cross 2021; Savage and Lingard 2018). Since a series of government commissioned reports argued that Australian schools were in danger of falling behind other countries (e.g. Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group 2014), the federal government established a suite of evidence-based reform policies and government bodies that were notionally designed to increase performance, equity and teacher quality (Barnes and Cross 2018; Mockler and Stacey 2021; Savage and Lewis 2018). This included, for example, professional teaching standards, national curriculum, a national testing scheme and revised teacher education accreditation requirements (see also, Rowe and Skourdoumbis 2019; Savage and Lingard 2018). As others have argued, this has had a profound influence on teachers and their work, especially in terms of limiting what is often referred to as teacher autonomy and professional discretion (Mockler and Stacey 2021).

In his recent book on the evolving state of the Australian education system, Glenn Savage (2020) argues that what he calls ‘alignment thinking’ has driven ongoing policy efforts to synchronise the various moving pieces of education across the Australian federal system. Under the banner of evidence, excellence and equality, this has led to the standardisation of curriculum, teacher standards, initial teacher training, student testing, and other similarly complex matters of schooling. He argues that the messiness, difference and disorder that policy alignment tries to ‘fix’ actually works against the democratic ideals that federal systems initially sought to achieve, especially in terms of embracing diversity and pluralism.

Savage’s argument provides a useful starting point for our Australian case in this paper. We focus specifically on the curriculum dimension, as this was a main feature of the interviews with the Victorian teachers who participated in the study. What stands out to us in these interviews is how, even though the teachers expressed sharp criticisms of the curriculum, they nevertheless made every effort to adhere to it. As we show with some of their comments, this encourages uniformity by default, while simultaneously treating difference as unacceptable.

The case of Victoria Primary School (VPS)

The teachers at Victoria Primary School (VPS) identified various challenges with the Curriculum, from feeling pressured to rush through content, to limiting the amount of time they were able to spend on more organic topics (e.g. current events, student-driven inquiry). As Sam, a Grade 6 teacher, explained:

[The curriculum] is ridiculous to try and cover everything. It is not possible to. And you don’t have the ability then to go off on a tangent, depending on what your class wants to do; because you go, “If I do that, then I’m not going to be able to cover all these other things.” And it is expected that the kids will have that curriculum covered.

This excerpt speaks to how the curriculum might affect matters like the narrowing of pedagogy and content, but it also frames potential points of departure (or ‘tangents’) as problematic and something to be avoided. This raises questions about the extent to which teachers can shape their practice in response to the needs of their students, but it also signals that difference is wrong or impossible within these conditions. Arlene, a Grade 2 teacher, described the pressure she feels to limit the focus on inquiry-based instruction, even though she sees great value in it for her students

I love teaching Inquiry. There's just not enough time in the week. I would love to do an hour every day on Inquiry but there's just no [time] . . . Not all kids like Inquiry but a lot of them, they enjoy it; because they kind of drive their own learning . . . [T]hey are [the] things that probably fall out the back because you need to make sure that you are ticking off [the curriculum]. Inquiry is very broad; and that's where we, as teachers, can lead that how we like. We can create those lessons how we like.

If we view Sam and Arlene's comments through Connolly's lens of pluralisation, then we begin to see how such constraints not only limit their capacity to exercise discretion, but also create conditions where practicing outside of the norm is impossible. Arlene goes on to explain how she 'understands' because '[the students] are not at school for very long. You want to make sure that they are being exposed to everything, but that's the hardest'.

Arlene's statement, 'but I understand', was a common rhetorical move across many of the teachers' interviews. When discussing the ways their practice was constrained, several teachers qualified such statements with similar retorts. Kindergarten teacher, Julie, made a similar concession:

Sometimes it would be nice if we're like, "Okay, let's go outside and have fun." Even just to be able to sit around and chat with them about different things. Sometimes we will throw some free time in, arts and crafts. And just to see them chatting with each other and what they are doing is really nice. But, yeah, in terms of the content, you kind of are following, "What's on the program?" (Laughs). I guess it's there for a reason; because you have to cover everything within the year; and I kind of understand that, but, yeah.

We see these rhetorical moves as a way for teachers to justify their reluctance to veer from the curriculum or to practice differently from their colleagues. In our view, this is the 'evidence' discourse at work, and it portrays an environment where pluralistic versions of teaching are unlikely to be made possible. They trust the evidence-based curriculum, even though this does not always align with what they see as best for their students. Similar to the Danish teachers' responses to PALS, the Australian teachers expressed various forms of hesitancy about the curriculum, but they qualified their ambivalence with acceptance that the evidence-based curriculum must ultimately be best for their students.

There are a number of factors contributing to the teachers' commitment to the curriculum requirements. Importantly, there are legal obligations for teachers to follow the curriculum, which is a significant reason that teachers must comply. Simultaneously, though, there are other material and symbolic ways that compel compliance, as well as shape who teachers are and what they do. For example, the increased workload regarding the curriculum's extensive scope has forced teachers to distribute their responsibilities across their respective grade-level teams. Each week, teachers have been allocated shared time to meet and plan their curriculum-aligned lessons for the following week. The various grade-level teams have distributed the work in different ways, but all have done so in accordance with the Victorian Curriculum Planning policy (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.). This policy, which requires schools to provide written documentation of the whole-school approach to teaching the curriculum at each grade level, serves as an anchor for the weekly planning sessions.

For some teams, teachers are assigned a particular subject area to plan, which they are expected to share with the rest of their team. For example, Teacher A might plan the daily lessons for Reading, while Teacher B plans for Mathematics. Then they share the lessons for teaching their respective classes, as described by Amelia (Grade 4)

Once a week, [we get a] two-hour block; yeah, we all plan together and then we discuss it before we separate, so everyone knows exactly what's happening across every subject area of the week.

While the teachers described different approaches to team planning across grade levels, the teachers described similar outcomes – specifically, that it allowed the teachers to cover more of the curriculum, while encouraging teachers to leave no ambiguity about what was to be taught. This included, for example, ‘fool-proof’ instructions should an unexpected absence require coverage by a relief teacher, as described by Tara:

The team planning allows us to all be on the same page. So, I think it's pretty essential that we have that time together. But we also need to be making sure that we plan with it in mind, if we are away, that the plan needs to be followed. It is not the case of a relief teacher coming in and doing their own thing. It needs to be in there in writing, so they can access it.

Even though the teachers saw a number of benefits with this system (e.g. increased collegiality, more consistency for students across classes), the way they described their approach to collaboration paradoxically worked *against* pluralistic ideas and practice, as illustrated by Sam (Grade 6):

Sometimes I feel like, “Whoa, I am really losing track of myself as my own teaching style” . . . sometimes it gets dictated, depending on the team leader you have. The way that they like to teach, you end up planning in that way; or the way that the group tend to like to teach, you end up planning that way. Sometimes you lose sight of the way that you would naturally teach something.

Pamela (Grade 4) described similar conditions, as well as how the distribution of responsibilities required strict adherence by all teachers:

Once a week, two-hour block; yeah, we all plan together and then we discuss it before we separate; so everyone knows exactly what's happening across every subject area of the week.

She associated the collective approach with greater accountability and professionalism:

I really like it accountability-wise. It is full-on. I feel like teaching-wise, you are all in or you are not in . . . No off-day . . . I guess it just seems more professional. Maybe that's what it is. It is just, yeah, “You are in this,” and it's - I feel like it's more than a job now. You live it, breathe it; like, it's consuming.

Pamela's equating of professionalism with the intensity of team-planning and distributed responsibility was a common sentiment across the interviews. Fidelity to the team and the curriculum was of particular importance. Jamie (Grade 2) described some of these expectations:

[We need to] make sure that we know what's coming up, what we are teaching ahead; and if we have got resources, bring those into the meetings; making sure our planning documents are completed. Because they are a team document, you can't just say, “Well, you are planning Maths,” and then go, “Oh, sorry, didn't get to it,” because the whole team is using that document.

Between the extensive curriculum requirements and the ensuing collective approach to cover it, the teachers painted a picture of unyielding boundaries around what was permissible at VPS. Some teachers told stories about their drifts from their personal teaching styles, as Lenora (Grade 6) described

This year, I found that because we tend to do everything on Google slides - so it's slide after slide, after information after link after blah, blah, blah - I sometimes find myself sitting there going, "I am literally sitting at the front of the class. Yes, we are doing activities, but it's not the way that I would normally teach. It is not as dynamic as I normally would." And sometimes I feel like I get stuck to my computer a little bit.

We see these conflicting feelings as important signals about the prevailing ethos at VPS. The teachers continually emphasised how much they enjoyed teaching at VPS, but there were ongoing tensions about what they felt was the right way to *be* a teacher or to *do* teaching. Even in moments when they wanted to do something different from the curriculum or their team's teaching style, they resisted any urge to actually do so. Thus, we are reminded about the possibilities of pluralisation, which we explore in the following section.

The im/possibilities of pluralisation

In thinking about the Australian and Danish teachers that we interviewed and observed for these studies, we see an ethos of commonality, rather than pluralisation, that encourages teachers to align their practice with what the evidence says works. In the Danish case, this is using an incentive-based program, even though the teachers reject behaviourism. In the Australian case, it is keeping in line with the curriculum and team decisions, despite scepticism that students are receiving what they need.

Across both cases, we see examples of teachers expressing ambivalence, but resisting urges to diverge from the norm. A Danish teacher admitted, 'there is just something about it that I don't like' and 'I don't know what it is (pause); it just doesn't feel right'; while an Australian teacher remarked, 'sometimes I feel like, whoa, I am really losing track of myself as my own teaching style'. If we view these conflicting feelings through Foucault's lens of discipline and normalisation, then we can see how teachers' subjectivities are shaped in relation to evidence discourses, especially given the broader accountability discourse that has steadily (re)shaped teachers' practice and souls over time (cf. Ball 2003; Holloway and Brass 2018; Popkewitz 2017).

As others have illustrated over decades now, nearly every facet of the teachers' professional life, from initial teacher education, to professional development and appraisal, has been organised by an accountability rationality that privileges numbers, metrics, standards and evidence (see, for example, Ball 2003; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, and Creagh 2021; Lewis and Hardy 2017; Perryman 2009; Pratt and Alderton 2019; Wilkins 2011). Evidence-based programs, like national curricula or student behaviour programs, fit within this milieu by establishing a system of truth and providing the material that governs teachers and their practice.

Furthermore, evidence-based programs establish a fundamental framework against which decisions and allegiance can be fixed, even in the face of scepticism. Decades of steady work on the teacher's soul has gradually chipped away at the trust in their own discretion, leaving metrics and standards as sources of truth and priority (Brass & Holloway 2021; ; Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, and Creagh 2021; Popkewitz and Thomas 2014).

We are also reminded of Carr's (1992) concept of the technical mentality, or the teacher-as-technician, when thinking about how teachers expressed feelings of scepticism or ambivalence, yet did not (or could not) act upon them. Indeed, the teacher-as-

technician does not question practices that are presented as evidence-based. Potential feelings of ambivalence or discomfort belong to the ‘private sphere’ for the technical mentality, and hence their feelings are repressed, or at least not acted upon in a professional context. The demand for the teacher-as-technician is not only a demand from *outside* (i.e. school leaders, schooling policies) but is also a *feeling* that comes from *within*. However, as Carr warns, the risk of the technical mentality is that it is ‘all too often a “servile mentality”; waiting to be told what to do by others is a handy excuse for abdicating ultimate responsibility both for our own personal and professional lives – and for the lives and development (. . .) of those entrusted to our care’ (p. 250)

To borrow from Rose (1999), evidence-based knowledge (or ‘expertise’) makes possible a certain kind of worker (and citizen) who aligns their conduct and values with the Enlightened views of the institution. To do otherwise would be irrational, and to reject the evidence would be foolish. In terms of schools, the ‘learnification’ (Biesta 2005) that arguably characterises both the Australian Curriculum and the Danish Good Card program provides the language and logics for teachers to demonstrate their commitment to evidence. As shown in our illustrative cases, even sceptics must temper their questions with acknowledgment that the evidence has the final say regarding the good way to be, do or become. We should reiterate that we are working from the assumption that evidence is always a product of socio, political and historical conditions, and therefore can never be accepted as natural or neutral.

If we pan out further, we can situate the productive power of the evidence discourse within the evolution of the advanced liberal (democratic) society, described by Rose (1999) in the following way:

Through self-inspection, self-problematisation, self-monitoring, and confession, we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided to us by others . . . we adjust ourselves by means of the techniques propounded by the experts of the soul. The government of the soul depends upon our recognition of ourselves as ideally and potentially certain sorts of person, the unease generated by a normative judgment of what we are and could become, and the incitement offered to overcome this discrepancy by following the advice of experts in the management of the self. (p. 11)

Like Rose, Connolly (1998) also draws on Foucault to theorise difference vis à vis ab/normality and as a product of late modernity. To understand pluralisation, he argues, we must first theorise identity and difference as being constructed through discourses available at a particular time and place. Operating as a ‘regime of truth’ (cf. Foucault 1976), the rational, Enlightened era problematises deviance as something to be medicated, modified or penalised, rather than something potentially valuable for society. From this premise, he critiques democratic theories that similarly rely on Enlightened visions for society, like those of Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls.

What Connolly calls for, along with other post-structuralist democratic thinkers like Chantal Mouffe and Aletta Norval, is a more explicit interrogation of power that is always central to the formation of norms and difference. In doing so, they reject the presumption that difference is necessarily bad and in need of being corrected, as ‘difference’ is *always* constructed through systems of power/knowledge (cf. Foucault 1976). In their view, scepticism towards whatever has been accepted as ‘normal’ is absolutely essential for democratic societies to evolve as the needs of the demos require. In the words of

Connolly (1998), 'the finely grained arrangements of self-regulation operative today must be countered by more sustained, organized, and multifrontal counter-pressures, pressures that interrogate established definitions and intrusions of necessity, truth, normality, utility, and goodness while they identify and strive to reconstitute the larger institutional imperatives that drive the politics of normalization' (p. 86). This pursuit requires not only embracing diversity, but also a the development of an ethos of pluralisation that treats difference not as fixed, but as always contestable, negotiable and becoming.

Returning to our analysis of VPS and VES, if teachers are compelled to follow a prescribed set of criteria, regardless of whether through symbolic or material means, then what it means to be 'good' or 'professional' also becomes a fixed set of categories that treat deviance as something to be corrected. Attempts to operate outside of this register is seen as problematic and something to avoid. In doing so, the boundaries that distinguish 'good' from 'bad' are made rigid, while space for new ways to be or become is closed off.

Here, we follow Connolly, Mouffe and Norval (amongst others) in their premise that a pluralistic democracy requires scepticism and productive critique. We must resist the urge to blindly follow the evidence, especially in places like schools where knowledge is produced, shared and consumed. As history has shown us time and again, all kinds of atrocities have been committed in the name of 'evidence', 'science' or 'expertise', from eugenics, to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, or the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Even the simple acknowledgment that evidence is always evolving as we learn more about a topic should encourage an ongoing scepticism of science.

Thus, if school environments are assembled in ways that prioritise evidence and compliance, how is it possible for teachers to question authority, challenge the evidence, and respond to the emerging needs of their students? In our studies, we see the position of the sceptic as a diminishing ideal, one that does not register within the ethos of our respective school sites. This works through the positioning of such feelings as 'unscientific' and 'un-professional'. Not only do teachers silence their own feelings of scepticism, but the collective silence reduces the space for pedagogical discord where the challenging of policy and practice can take place. Without this space, pluralistic views are censored, and an ethos of pluralisation becomes hard to imagine.

Concluding thoughts

We have used this paper to look at how conditions shape possibilities for particular types of teacher doings, beings and becomings in relation to pluralisation and democracy. In different ways, both cases illustrate how evidence-based discourses are re-professionalising teachers to resist urges to be (or practice) differently from their colleagues. In doing so, 'difference' has been narrowly defined, which has ultimately limited alternative versions of teaching and teachers to *become* within both school sites. The illustrative examples we have provided show how the material and symbolic conditions associated with the respective program directives have encouraged teachers to view difference as problematic and (sometimes) unprofessional, or even laughable.

In an ontological sense, the evidence discourse establishes a spectrum of professionalism, ranging from teachers who bases their judgements on evidence, to those who rely on their feelings. Those who question their respective program risk being seen as an 'other', or unprofessional teacher. It is important, however, to underline that we view this

construction as dynamic and conditioned differently depending on various local factors. That is, the extent to which evidence-based knowledge is constructed as the (unquestionable) truth, and hence the extent to which the professional teacher is constructed as one whose practices and judgements are (always) aligned with evidence-knowledge about what works in a particular context, vary and depend on various local factors.

Ultimately, we view scepticism and educative dissension as potentially productive and beneficial for education, as it can challenge the dangers associated with rigid compliance, and it can secure schools as socially and culturally responsive to the needs of the community (cf. Connolly 2005, Norval 2009). Specifically, we should promote conditions that enable us to see difference as a legitimate and valuable position. In Mouffe's view, 'this is the real meaning of liberal democratic tolerance, which does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents' (p. 15). In this way, teachers should be encouraged to challenge the systems within which they work, and educative dissension should be framed as something that can be productive. Following from Mouffe and Connolly, we believe debate can help achieve more democratic, inclusive and responsive environments for students, schools and communities.

Ultimately, democracy is not a stable or normative object, nor is good practice or professionalism. Rather, these ideas should always be up for negotiation and (re)negotiation. As such, we reject the idea that there is (or *should be*) a normative view of the good democratic citizen, in the same way we reject the idea that any school program – evidence-based or not – is something that should ever be immune from scrutiny. Schools should be sites that maintain a space and possibility for people to challenge the state of institutions, as well as the evidence that steers them.

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