
Safety in numbers? Teacher collegiality in the risk-conscious school

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Introduction

Teacher collegiality comes with the friendliest of epithets. This is the case despite the widely disseminated concerns of Andy Hargreaves (1994) about the pernicious effects of what he calls ‘contrived collegiality’, and the warnings of Milbury McLaughlin (1993) that more apparent collegiality does not automatically translate into more effective teaching practice. The driving logic of contemporary discussions of teacher culture, in general, still appears to be that teacher collegiality is an essential ingredient of any school that claims to be an ‘emotionally healthy workplace’ (Jarzabkowski 2001, p 4). It is, *ipso facto*, a *good thing*. In this paper, we cautiously attempt to write against the grain of this prevailing moral-ethical tale about teacher collegiality, at the same time working to undo the binary formulation of ‘positive’ as distinct from ‘negative’ collegiality that Andy Hargreaves finds useful.

Our thesis is that, for better *and* worse, risk consciousness is an organisational rationality that produces in individual teachers the desire *not* to be physically isolated from other teachers. Put another way: teachers *want and need to be physically near to each other* in order to minimise risk for themselves individually and collectively. At a time when there is unprecedented anxiety around the vulnerability of the child – what Joanne Wallace calls ‘child panic’ (Wallace 1997) – one effect on teachers has been a heightened sense of their own vulnerability to allegations of impropriety, and this is particularly true for male teachers of young children. Put bluntly: one teacher alone with one child is just not on.

The ‘collegiality’ of ‘safety-in-numbers’ produced by the imperative to minimise risk is, we argue, a phenomenon that cuts across the binary logic of a ‘contrived-or-genuine’ set of social conditions for enacting teacher work. It is a pervasive logic for self-management and sense-making that resists neat separation into top-down (negative) or bottom-up (positive) categorisation.

In fleshing out this argument, we undertake three tasks. The first is to elaborate risk-consciousness as an organisational imperative, and its implications for the school as a workplace in which duty of care for minors is a key responsibility. The second task is to analyse research we have conducted into the ways in which risk management is impacting on teacher work and identity in Australian primary schools. The third and final task is to indicate how our analysis of these research data challenges and augments current literature about the nature and purpose of teacher collegiality and/or collaboration.

The risk-conscious school

All social organisations, including schools, are risk organisations. This is because all organisations must, of necessity, focus on guarding themselves against the threat of failure to deliver the services that the organisation was established to deliver; whether those services are educational, spiritual or material. In her anthropological studies of social and cultural life, Mary Douglas argues that, in modern society, risk is no longer about the probability of losses and gains – risk simply means *danger*. She states:

The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against encroachments of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the type of individualist culture which sustains an expanding industrial system. (Douglas 1992, p 7)

Organisations in a ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992) must be alert to potential danger – the danger of not performing in ways that are morally and politically acceptable, as well as economically viable. As Beck (1992) argues, a risk society is characterised by negative logic; a shift away from the management and distribution of material /industrial ‘goods’ to the management and distribution of ‘bads’; ie the control of knowledge about danger, about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility. For a publicly or privately funded school, this means guarding against the danger of waste (of resources), of failure (of students), and of declining standards (intellectual, ethical and moral).

The professional management of risk demands knowledge of risk, and knowledge of risk produces new risks for the school and its personnel. As Ericson and Haggerty (1997) point out, the risk society is a knowledge society ‘because scientific knowledge and technologies are sources of major risks and the primary basis of security efforts aimed at controlling such risks’ (p 88). In Beck’s (1992) terms, ‘the sources of danger are no longer ignorance but knowledge ... Modernity has become the threat and the promise of emancipation of the threat that creates itself’ (p 183).

So, knowledge about risk (to children or anyone else) is not a means of escape from danger. Indeed, such knowledge *is itself dangerous*. It threatens all professionals because it gives them processes for deciding what action to take and at the same time provides the means by which they can be found to have done the

wrong thing (Ericson & Haggerty 1997, p 89). Thus, it is not simply the case that 'child panic' (Wallace 1997) has 'caused' a heightened vigilance in the school sector, just as the identification of another instance of child abuse does not simply 'cause' teachers to become more accountable for their practices. As necessary professional expertise, risk knowledge possesses within it the seeds of its own proliferation, because it is a means to manage danger and is a danger to professionals everywhere.

Central to the 'negative' logic of risk management, as indicated above, is the idea that there must be more self-scrutiny, regularity and control within and across an organisational sector. For some time now, the introduction of audit mechanisms – whether as measurements of 'teaching effectiveness', 'quality control' or 'accountability' – has been a feature of educational institutions, particularly in post-welfare nations (Shore & Wright 1999). Whether or not the appearance of these mechanisms heralds 'a new form of coercive and authoritarian governmentality' (Shore & Wright 1999, p 1), the fact remains that managing the diverse populations that now engage in schooling requires knowledge and activity that is outside the 'unique, informal culture' (Ericson & Haggerty 1997, p 57) of teachers' traditional work. Thus, the craft knowledge of teaching is being reshaped by administrative interventions that work to achieve fair and efficient institutional practice.

Traditional classroom 'know-how' is not being displaced altogether. Rather, it is being made over as 'professional expertise', through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

[P]rofessionals obviously have 'know-how', [but] their 'know-how' does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p 104)

By 'plugging in' to the school's approved systems, policies and practices, the professional teacher may be understood to serve the 'forensic needs' (Douglas 1992) of a new and expanding global culture in 'politicizing and moralizing the links between dangers and approved behaviours' (Pidgeon et al 1992, p 113). Thus, risk consciousness works as a logic or rationality producing certain sorts of labour; particularly the labour of closely monitoring and evaluating professional performance to guard against danger. In a risk-conscious organisation, this monitoring activity reaches its zenith where such activity is as important to individuals as to the organisation. All individuals come to believe in its worth – it becomes synonymous with 'being professional'.

The idea that teaching is being made the subject of 'routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions' is open to interpretation as a sinister, Orwellian development. Our point is not to pursue this ideological position, but rather to draw attention to the fact that teaching, as a sub-set of the organisational activities of schools, cannot exist outside risk management as 'a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how' (Hood et al 1992, p 136). For better *and* worse, teachers are now being required to 'plug in' to audit technologies; those 'supremely reflexive' practices through which the school

can make sense of itself as a risk-responsive organisation, ie can 'perform being a [risk-conscious] ... organization through the act of self-description' (Strathern 1997, p 318).

Guarding against unacceptable standards of morality is an imperative whose impact is exacerbated for professional caregiving by an atmosphere of 'child panic'. At a time when there is unprecedented anxiety around the vulnerability of the child (Wallace 1997), the imperative to risk minimisation has meant a burgeoning of legislation around child protection and an increase in professional development programs targeting teachers. The logic is that teachers must learn to manage themselves in accordance with policy directives designed to protect the child from potential danger. Thus, teachers are enrolled as risk managers who understand how to manage the child and themselves in relation to the child.

Managing physicality

As risk managers, teachers must anticipate potential dangers and respond to them in appropriate (ie professional) ways. In doing so, teachers as risk-conscious individuals come to 'see' dangers that others may not. In a paper called 'Playing doctors in two cultures' (1997), Joseph Tobin demonstrates this principle at work by carefully documenting the reactions of pre-school teachers in the USA and Ireland to a 60-word description of the behaviour of a fictional child, Emily. The passage read:

Emily touches herself a lot. When she's excited, she keeps touching herself with one hand. During story time, she rubs her legs together with a sort of far off look in her eyes. Even at lunch she'll have a hand in her pants sometimes. I don't mean she's doing it every minute, but it's not like it's only now and then, either. (Tobin 1997, p 130)

Tobin indicates the dramatic difference he found in interpretations of the passage; the 12 American focus groups 'detect[ed] the tell-tale signs of child abuse', while not one of the eight Irish groups saw the signs of abuse in this case. Tobin comments:

Because Emily is a fictional character who appears in a text barely sixty words long, we cannot say she was or was not abused. Nor can we know how these teachers would react to the reality of a girl masturbating in their classroom. Presumably their reaction in real life to a girl like Emily would be based on intuition and contextual knowledge that they cannot bring to a vignette. Still, it is striking that eight of the twelve American focus groups brought up sexual abuse as a possible explanation of Emily's masturbation. (p 133)

We would argue that the diagnosis made by the American teachers in this case is a product of risk-consciousness as a logic for informing what it means to do teaching properly. The American teachers' determination that this may be a case of potential abuse is not the product of irrational moral panic, but of forensic work conducted in the interests of the fictional Emily as a potential case for therapeutic treatment. In discharging their duty of care differently from the Irish teachers, they may or may not have been better teachers, but they were 'professional' in their risk-

oriented response. Put another way, 'seeing' Emily as a possible case of abuse was an appropriate way for a risk-conscious teacher to interpret this scenario.

A study we are currently conducting into the work of teachers in Queensland primary schools (McWilliam, Singh & Sachs 2002) lends support to the idea that teachers are 'seeing' more dangers in their work and responding in ways that they understand to be appropriate for minimising that danger. As in the Tobin study, the teachers in our study were asked to respond to pre-designed scenarios (brief, ambiguous stories about schooling designed to elicit their teacherly judgments). It is clear that the physicality of teaching – the bodily sights, smells, tastes and touches – is a focus of anxiety for many of these teachers, and of scrupulous professional attention.

A key feature of their responses to the scenarios was the extent to which they spoke of their reliance on each other to manage physicality – risk-managed teaching becomes increasingly a matter of 'we', and not 'I':

Well, it's funny we had a situation today with a little girl in year one – was – spent most of her morning masturbating and you know *I'd been watching for a while and I mentioned it to M ...* [her colleague] and I just called [the girl]... over quietly when the kids were doing something else and I said, "You seem to be scratching a lot in your pants today. Have you got an itch or are you sore?" And she said, "I think I might have a mosquito bite". And I said, "Well, if you are fiddling and itching and you do think it's a bite try and keep your hands in your lap because you'll just make it worse". So *we've done step one*. We've acknowledged the fact that we noticed that she is doing it and *we'll watch from then on*. So we're not sort of leaping in and thinking there's something dreadful going on but ... (School 1 Focus Group, 10 October 2002)

We suggest that it would be appropriate to describe this collaboration as important to the management regimes of these teachers, but that it resists categorisation into either top-down or bottom-up collegiality. It is entered into willingly, but is at the same time responding to a shared and expanded duty of care for a particular child. Together, these two teachers are able to resist the knee-jerk reaction of 'leaping in and thinking there's something dreadful going on'. Through their joint monitoring and shared responsibility, they can be more considered 'professional' caregivers.

For some, like the male primary teacher cited below, anxiety around physicality is accompanied by a sense of loss:

Well, sadly [physicality has] ... become a huge issue and it's a frustrating issue ... I taught year 2 a few years ago and I found that that the younger kids naturally are a little bit more physical and – you know – and I think they probably also require – you know – that sort of touch sort of thing a bit more ... You know you often ... more infant teachers – I guess – putting their arm around a kid or holding their hands and so on. So I – yeah, *I actually found that a little bit tricky* at times because ... you're sort of caught in two minds ... the poor little kid just wants to hold your hand and so really what's the big deal? And then – well, then you're sort of – you're then *starting to get a bit uncomfortable* and you think, "No – well we'll have to sort of ..." After a certain amount of time say, "No. Look you'll have to go and play with your mates now." (School 3 Focus Group, 31 October 2002)

In order to minimise the dangers that the ‘tricky’ matter of teacher-student physicality poses to himself, this teacher makes a deliberate move to ensure that his body is available to be seen by his peers in the school:

I am aware of the fact that obviously there’s a greater chance, being a male, that you can I guess get into a situation where – yeah – accusations could be made against you, sort of thing. You know – but although I don’t get too uncomfortable or stressed about it. I don’t ... go about my day to day duties – sort of worried. I just – I guess just *take very simple precautions* – day to day. Just little things like ... suppose in the morning say, for example, before school – if you know a girl gets to school a little bit earlier and you might be – you know – sitting there at your desk doing a bit of work. Like if they just come in and they say, you know ... “Can I grab my homework and can I grab a couple of books from my desk?” I mean “Yeah sure” – I mean I’m not going to sit there and continue but obviously if they sort of come in and they want to come to your desk and have a yarn about whatever else *I will actually physically – I’ll get up and sort of stand at the door* ... you know – just *make up some sort of reason to move probably to the door* or something like that. (School 3 Focus Group, 31 October 2002)

Here we see evidence that a teacher is choosing ‘simple precautions’ over ‘getting too uncomfortable or stressed’. The precaution is to ensure that he can be physically seen by other members of the school community. ‘The door’ becomes a crucial space for teacher-child engagement because of the access it gives this teacher as a manager of an individual child.

The matter of teacher visibility has implications not just for male teachers. It would seem that female teachers – even those who are more sanguine about their right to touch children – also share a concern to make themselves visible to peers in a way that runs counter to the highly individualistic tradition of ‘Gulliver among the little people’ that has characterised the pedagogical past:

Well, I just feel a sense of loss more for the male teachers. I really and truly do because ... it’s socially more acceptable for me to take a child under my wing and cuddle them. You know what I mean? And I feel quite comfortable ... – if a child comes out and you can read in their body language that they need that, I’ll hug them back. It’s not a problem for me. I don’t have an issue with anything like that but, however, I will make myself visible now if I speak with a child one to one. We had an instance the other day I needed to speak to a child and I probably years ago wouldn’t have even thought about that but *I made sure that I was where the windows were open, the doors were open*, people would go backwards and forwards but I needed to speak to this child privately. (School 3 Focus Group, 31 October 2002)

Female teachers at another school are likewise convinced that ‘open doors, open windows’ speaks of professional propriety:

Well, this [isolation with a child] happens to me all the time and I always – I always have to be sure that I have open doors. I always – *you never ever see me with a closed door*. You always make sure – see me with windows open and I always [am] visible – as best possible I can be ... Because I am always in that situation where I am working one to one with kids testing or doing other things, talking to kids and *it is really scary*. It is an issue that really concerns me. (School 1 Focus Group, 10 October 2002)

Being visible to others clearly presents some problems in terms of student management around the liminal spaces of toilets and change rooms, as indicated in the following exchange at a different school:

Male B: You don't want to isolate yourself.

Female C: It's difficult sometimes – like sometimes you hear them screaming in the change room and you're thinking, "Well, what's going on?" you know – and you think – you're looking around for somebody so there is – sometimes there is a risk ... Well ... I go in the entrance and I blow a whistle and I go, "Boys you will be in trouble" ... like you will be in trouble ... But that's all you can do. But sometimes it's a bit more because you think – sometimes the boys have been climbing up drain pipes inside.

Female D: Mmm. Trying to look over the rafters.

Female C: Well, I have a whistle and I blow it ...

Female D: I stood at the door and said, "Boys if you do not hurry up and make less noise in there. I will come in. I am counting to five, "One, two, three, four, five" – when a man walked out.

Female B: [laughs]

Female D: And he said, "I'm going". And I thought, "Ohh". (School 2 Focus Group, 16 October 2002)

While teachers can and do see the humour in such situations, they are nevertheless keenly aware of the constraints such regimes of self-management impose on their teaching – constraints that they identify as different from even their recent teaching past:

Female D: I don't go into the change rooms when we go to swimming now.

Male: Neither do I.

Female D: I used to. I have been teaching for over 30 years and we were always in the change rooms to make sure the behaviour was appropriate. Girls or boys – it didn't matter – but now I would not even go into the girls change rooms. (School 1 Focus Group, 16 October 2002)

When asked to identify how recently they have changed their practices in this respect, these teachers appeared to agree to having changed their conduct within the last five years. This means that some quite profound changes have been wrought in teachers' conduct recently, despite the fact that teachers have a strong reputation for being highly change-resistant. The imperative to self-protection is clearly a powerful mobiliser of change.

If, as seems evident, these teachers see value in being 'out in the open', it seems that they may be less likely to move out of the relative safety of classrooms when doing the daily work of teaching, and this has important implications for preferred pedagogical processes. But this new preference comes at a price. Such

'risk aversion' is likely to be experienced by teachers as a loss, especially in an older generation of teachers who remember a time when teaching was less risk-conscious:

Male A: [You protect yourself] ... but then you take something out of your profession – *you're losing something*.

Female B: You feel as though you're between the four walls all the time.

Male A: Yeah.

Female C: ... on the oval I had one [child] that had a nose bleeding and the father was really irate ... she just bumped into another little boy. ... And – you know – this is disgusting and all this – he was really off and it just – I thought, "I'm not going out next week". You know – and with all the bats and balls – *I think I'll stay in and do something – you know worksheets or something*.

Male A: Yeah. Cut and paste.

Female C: Yes. Yeah *I'm back again now* – I'm all right again. I'm back again now but there was a couple of weeks I didn't want to go out.

Female B: My grade 6's up until now have just been – their behaviour – they won't be in two lines – but *I'm even too scared to take them across to the art gallery*. 32 kids and two teachers, I wouldn't be game to. (School 2 Focus Group, 16 October 2002)

What we see here is a temporary mawkishness in relation to risk-taking that is once again focused on the dangers posed by 'the physical' for a teacher. While one teacher was able to recover the desire to 'go out', another teacher remains 'too scared' to utilise the learning facility that is just across the street, even when accompanied by another teacher.

Against isolation

So how does the above discussion 'talk back' to the literature about teacher collegiality?

It is clear that there is now a broad consensus around the idea that isolation is death to the teacherly enterprise (Westheimer 1999). (Despite this, many schools continue to be organised around the industrial model of one teacher per class.) There is a sense that we are reiterating a meta-theme of the literature: the danger of teacher isolation. However, our focus is somewhat different. Where scholars like Nel Noddings (1996) write of 'the dangers of insularity', they tend to be focused on the struggle of individual teachers to solve instructional, curricular and classroom management problems on their own, and the psychic rewards that come from doing these tasks in collaboration with other teachers (Inger 1993). By way of contrast, we seek to foreground the personal and professional risk to the teacher of *not* desiring to be collegial, whatever the value of collaboration for pedagogy as a social process of knowledge production (Lusted 1986).

We note that the call to end teacher isolation comes at a time when risk minimisation is such a crucial issue for all social organisations. Our point is not that we need a conspiracy theory to explain this phenomenon; merely that ‘truths’ like the undeniable value of collegiality are historically constituted and discursively organised to do a particular kind of work (Foucault 1985). The work of the discourse of teacher collegiality, we suggest, is to render teachers *calculable* to themselves and each other as risk-avoiding subjects. The teachers quoted above appear to be engaged in a process for making themselves over as risk-conscious professionals, to the point where the term ‘risk-conscious professional’ becomes a redundancy. This involves teachers in new forms of conduct involving self- and other-surveillance.

To illustrate the charming absurdities that can be produced as effects of teacher self-surveillance, we draw attention to Alison Jones’ (Jones, forthcoming) study of touching policies and practices in New Zealand schools. In it, Jones cites a teacher who ‘reported herself’ for disciplinary action after showing spontaneous affection towards a child:

I also recently had an incident where I was in a school and had been working hard to motivate a child at work. I was roving around the class and noticed he had completed heaps of work and I spontaneously *kissed him on the top of his head*. Then I quickly stunned myself with that reaction and *reported myself* to the Assistant Principal. (Jones, forthcoming – emphasis in original)

What we see here is a trainee enacting herself as the proper object of suspicion. In Foucauldian terms, she has turned herself into a risk-conscious pedagogical subject, on guard against herself and her potential for wrong-doing. Lacking the presence of a colleague who can share the work of her own surveillance, she moves quickly to involve another individual – a person in authority. Our argument is that such conduct is not usefully categorised as either ‘positive’ nor ‘negative’, but rather a product of rationalities of risk that are now so well incorporated into the thinking of teachers as professionals.

So how might this analysis speak back to Andy Hargreaves’ (1994) notion of ‘contrived collegiality’? First, we need to be clear about what Hargreaves means by this term. According to Hargreaves, ‘contrived collegiality’ arises out of the reconstitution of ‘the co-operative principles of human association among teachers in administratively regulated and predictable forms’ (1994, p 208). It is characterised by compulsion rather than voluntarism; by fixity rather than flexibility; by an orientation of implementation rather than development; and by a high degree of predictability in terms of outcomes. He distinguishes this sort of administratively regulated activity from cultures ‘that build collective strength and confidence in communities of teachers’ (1994, p 195) – the latter being, in his view, properly collaborative in the sense of being genuinely enabling for teachers as professionals. His treatment of these two notions of collaboration is not a simple binary, but rather a continuum, from highly empowering to highly repressive in effect.

Our argument is that, whether viewed as a simple binary formulation or a continuum, the term ‘collaborative cultures’ – as distinct from ‘contrived

collegiality' – is not a meaningful way of representing a teacher's desire not to be physically isolated from other teachers in the interests of their own risk management. Risk-conscious togetherness is both and neither contrived nor collaborative. It is contrived in the sense that 'proper' risk-conscious responses are constituted, at least in part, out of risk-management policy and professional development processes and materials. However, it is 'genuine' in the sense that the 'desire not to be alone with a child' is the 'real' desire of the non-pederast. As Foucault (1985) indicates, such desire may be better understood as a product of the prescriptive texts available for constituting oneself in terms that are socially meaningful and acceptable, not a spontaneous 'bursting forth' from within individuals. It is a product of training and 'feeling'.

Of course, being with other professionals does not eliminate professional risk. While it may minimise the risk of certain sorts of allegations of impropriety, it can and does make for other risks. The more populated an environment, the more opportunities there are for surveillance. And the more opportunities for surveillance, the more possibilities there are for being suspicious of the conduct of others. Collegial surveillance is one of the more interesting oxymorons thrown up by risk-consciousness as an imperative within teaching. While there might be safety in (adult, professional) numbers, retreating to safe 'collegial' spaces is not in and of itself a move towards good pedagogic practice. Rather, we suggest that teachers as professionals need to question how their pedagogic work is being reshaped by these new 'risk management' techniques. What gets constituted as safe curricula and pedagogy? Who benefits from these constructions, who loses, and what types of pedagogic identities are constructed for teachers and children?

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