

Can Teacher Education in Australia Meet the Challenges of the New Millennium?

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Introduction

This paper provides a brief discussion of teacher education in Australia, as it faces significant challenges in preparing teachers to take on the academic, technological and emotional demands of teaching as a career.

Attitudes to Teaching as a Career

The Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2006) synthesised recent research on attitudes to teaching as a career. The report found that the following factors led to many students not wanting to enter teaching:

- teaching is viewed as a low status job;
- teaching offers poor career opportunities in terms of promotion pathways and little reward for outstanding performance;
- teaching is difficult and poorly rewarded;
- teacher training is difficult for mature-aged students – especially financially;
- teaching is seen by some to be boring and repetitive;
- teaching is less attractive to high-achievers and to males.

Clearly, teaching is suffering to some extent from poor publicity, and one of the major challenges is to change this perception if we are to attract the best young people into the profession.

Funding

There has been a steady reduction in government support for universities over the last decade and more (Fasano and Winder, 1999; Willmott, 2002) that has particularly affected teacher education. In this general shift, school and tertiary education are considered to be part of broader social and economic policy parameters, with increased concerns with efficiency, accountability and measurable outcomes. The particular impact on teacher education includes constraints on funding for practicum, and the adverse effect of increasing workloads on the ability of university staff to collaborate and liaise effectively with teachers in schools. This development is occurring at a time when reviews of teacher education (Ramsey, 2000; Vinson, 2003) are consistently calling for greater time in schools for pre-service teachers, and greater collaboration between universities and schools.

Attracting Outstanding Teachers

Reduced funding of the tertiary sector also limits the ability to attract outstanding teaching practitioners into

universities (Houston, Meyer and Paewei, 2004). Teaching and academic salaries compare unfavourably. A teacher of demonstrated excellence will have a strong track record in schools. A temporary university placement will not necessarily enhance that track record in the view of school systems, evidenced by the refusal of some school principals to release their excellent teachers to work in the university. A permanent university appointment will mean that some degree of starting afresh on a career track will be necessary.

Poor Retention Rates

Many teachers are lost at the pre-service and early career points (Keefe and O'Brien, 2006). Thirty per cent of beginning teachers in Australia express a desire to leave within the first two years of service (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Christie, 2006; Goddard and O'Brien, 2004). A survey by the Australian Education Union reported in DEST (2006) noted that 45 per cent of beginning teachers intended to leave teaching in the next ten years and their major issues were workload, behaviour management, pay and class sizes. Historically, work overload and a lack of professional support were contributing factors to increased levels of stress and burnout, but recent research (Goddard and O'Brien, 2004; O'Brien and Goddard, 2006) has found that the conservative nature of more experienced teachers, and some cynicism towards young teachers wanting to try new ideas, have reduced the enthusiasm and energy of new teachers.

Significant losses also occur mid career and through early retirement. Mobility across professions is now a feature of the contemporary labour market. One third of qualified teachers are employed elsewhere rather than in schools (Lovat, 2006; Skilbeck and Connell, 2004). Teaching is competing with other knowledge-intensive fields for highly qualified personnel. Attrition is higher in certain disciplines (e.g. science) and for teachers with higher academic credentials.

When one examines the reasons teachers give for remaining in and enjoying a career in teaching, personal satisfaction and making a difference in children's lives are regularly cited. It is reported that intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors motivate people to choose teaching as a career (Reid and Caldwell, 1997). Many reported being positively influenced by their own teachers, which highlights the importance of having positive role models in place to inspire a new generation of teachers.

Continuing Education for Teachers

Schools and teachers are being affected by profound changes across all domains – technological, scientific and commercial. The changing nature of society, including challenges to the authority of established figures and institutions, demands teachers who have highly developed interpersonal skills, an ability to manage an ever-increasing knowledge base, who are innovative thinkers and problem solvers, and who are constant learners (Ryan, 2006; Skilbeck and Connell, 2004). A four-year preparation degree can be seen as no more than a foundation for professional practice, but teachers, perhaps because of their high-pressured and often stressful lives, do not tend to take up further retraining opportunities unless it is mandated (which may come quite soon in Australia).

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Conclusion

Over the next decade, as the so-called “baby-boomers” reach retirement age, there will be an enormous turnover within the teaching profession in Australia, with many experienced teachers being replaced by neophytes to the field who will require appropriate training. Ferguson (2005) and Dinham (2005) point out, demands to be innovative, responsive and creative are coming at the same time as increasing bureaucratic restrictions act to construct a culture that is, at least sometimes, counter to the innovation’s push. Too many government initiatives and external demands can be counter-productive, motivating teachers to leave the profession because of the heavy administrative load, over-crowded curriculum and lack of autonomy (Rossmannith, 2006). This shift away from the teaching profession is coming at a time when more rather than fewer teachers are needed to meet the shortfall.

At the University of Wollongong, we are endeavouring to attract talented young people who see teaching as a long-term career, who have a valued qualification and who have the aptitude to teach students with learning and behavioural difficulties. We present teaching as a

valued profession that has both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards and we continually promote the value of education. We take every opportunity to communicate a positive and convincing professional image and to publicise the link between a knowledgeable and innovative society and high quality teaching. Of course, these initiatives must be matched by systemic support and by policies that address the issues that many recent reports have identified. These could include the following policies: promotion of teaching as a career option to more receptive target groups such as rural and remote residents; financial incentives to teach in hard-to-staff-areas; increased administrative support for teachers; more effective whole-school/systemic strategies to manage disruptive behaviour and better career progression opportunities.

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