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Australian Journal of Education 2013 57: 91

DOI: 10.1177/0004944113485840

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Australian Journal of Education

57(2) 91–106

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DOI: 10.1177/0004944113485840

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Abstract

There has been a major and growing international focus on improving the quality of teaching for decades. In Australia, there have been numerous key national initiatives introduced since 2007 with the aim of improving school, teacher and student performance. These include national testing and reporting of student achievement, national professional standards for teachers, a national curriculum, national accreditation of teacher education courses and a national framework for teacher development and performance. However, there are growing concerns over Australia's performance on international measures of student achievement and growing criticism of teacher education, teachers and schools from various sectors. Educators themselves, however, have largely been silent. Various simplistic solutions to the perceived problem of teacher quality have been promulgated, yet these have not been successful elsewhere. The paper calls for educators to find their voices in this current debate and to argue from a position of evidence to counter the misinformed and misguided views that currently predominate and influence government policy.

Keywords

Quality teaching, international testing, teacher development, teacher assessment, teacher standards

Overview: concerns over teacher quality

Concerns about teacher competence have abounded for decades. In Australia, there has been, on average, one major state or national inquiry into teacher education every year

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for the past 30 years (Dinham, 2006, 2008b). No other program of professional preparation has been thought to warrant such scrutiny.

Recently, there has been a growing chorus of criticism of teacher education, teachers and school performance. Data from international surveys and reports have been selectively used, both to paint a grim picture of the problem and to prescribe remedies. Many journeys have been made to and from Finland, and more latterly Asia, to learn the secret of student success.

'Experts' from business, government and the field of economics in particular have weighed into the debate over the issue. There has been a concerted push by state and federal governments and educational systems to enact policies and processes to drive improvement in teacher quality. As part of this agenda, it has been determined that all teachers will have to undergo annual performance reviews (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2012).

However, there are signs that the gains made since the agreement and introduction of key national initiatives in 2007 are at risk because of the pursuit of other agendas and a failure to heed the lessons from decades of empirical work.

Australia's increasing fixation with international measures of student achievement and our seeking to emulate the current star performers are having dysfunctional consequences, not the least of which is an erosion of our self-belief and confidence as educators.

The lowering of standards for entry to teacher education and the oversupply of teachers in some areas are combining to work against teacher status and quality. The persistent and increasing 'battering' of the teaching profession is cause for concern and the paper calls for educators to find their voice in the current debate and policy context.

The Quality Teaching Movement: danger signs

There is now a significant international emphasis on improving teacher quality through bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as well as through various reports on the 'best' performing schools and school systems (see Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

In Australia, developments such as the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN), the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), National Partnerships, the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) have all played a part both in reflecting and strengthening this focus on the teacher.

However, there are growing and worrying signs in Australia that the quality teaching movement, recently so promising, is in danger of being diverted and disrupted (Dinham, 2012a, 2012b).

The recognition of teachers as the biggest 'in school' influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2009) led to a reasonable expectation that there would be an increased focus on and investment in teachers' professional learning. However, it is apparent that rather than being seen as education's most important asset, teachers are now being blamed when students fail to learn or to reach the standards set for them individually and collectively.

When teachers are subject to criticism, there is an understandable tendency to defend, rationalise and deflect. Rather than mutual understanding and collaboration, this can lead to finger pointing and blame. The effects of socio-economic status (SES) in Australia are cited

by some as being too powerful to overcome and, as will be noted, there is panic over international league tables of student achievement. Confused thinking thus abounds.

There has been a growing raft of ill-informed solutions to the ‘problem’ of teacher quality. These measures have included:

- sacking the ‘bottom’ 5% of teachers (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012), whoever they are, and somehow replacing them with better teachers;
- paying teachers by ‘results’, however these are determined and measured;
- punishing and rewarding schools on the basis of ‘performance’, whatever this means;
- giving principals more autonomy and power to hire and fire;
- bonus pay for the ‘top’ 10% of teachers, if they can be identified;
- raising entry standards for teacher candidates;
- exit tests for teacher graduates; and
- allowing non-educators to become principals.

At the same time, there have been substantial cuts to state education budgets, including in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. In essence, the message is ‘do better with less, or else’.

All this is happening in spite of the fact that Australia still performs well on international measures of student achievement such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), although we certainly cannot rest on our laurels. There are signs of slippage and the achievement gap, influenced by SES in particular, remains an issue. We are however well ahead of the USA on PISA, to use that one measure, yet we still heed the recipes and exhortations of US economists, educators and politicians to be more like the USA.

Recently released Year 4 achievement data, as revealed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), is however, of concern (Thomson et al., 2012). Why do Australian students – based admittedly on two different measures – appear to be ‘behind’ in the primary years, yet do ‘better’ in the secondary years? (see Dinham, 2007b). Are the poor Year 4 results the precursor of falling NAPLAN and other standardised test results for this cohort, and possibly those who follow, or could these results be an aberration? These phenomena need careful investigation, not blame, panic and knee-jerk reactions.

Nowhere in any of these proposed solutions is there recognition of the need to provide ongoing effective professional learning for teachers to enable them to continue to develop and upgrade their skills, and to be recognised and rewarded for this growth. Everyone assumes someone else will fund and provide this. Nowhere is there the means to provide educational leaders *en masse* with the knowledge and skills they need to be true leaders of learning (Dinham, 2007a, 2008a; AITSL, 2011b). What is apparent is a blanket stigmatisation of teachers, principals, teacher educators and education system leaders. There is an assumption in these criticisms, for example, that all teachers, teacher candidates and teacher education courses are equally ineffective. Reality is quite different, as will be pointed out.

The work of John Hattie in particular has been misinterpreted and used to criticise teachers, teacher education and teaching. His recognition of teachers’ importance (Hattie, 2009) has been misused to imply that it is the teacher’s fault when students fail to learn. The words ‘in school’ have been mislaid, by accident or design, and we now frequently hear of the teacher being ‘the biggest influence on student achievement’, which is untrue.

Instead of a collegial opening up of classrooms and professional practice, what follows is a view that because of their importance, we need greater control over and surveillance of teachers, to the extent that some principals are said to engage in a growing practice of snap inspections of classrooms, sometimes accompanied by video-taking, to ‘catch’ teachers performing badly. As we tend to mimic what others do overseas, this practice is not only confined to Australia:

One of the more dubious practices in US schools is administrators dropping into classrooms with clipboards, laptops or iPads, filling out checklists or rubrics, and sending them to teachers without any human contact. This kind of one-way feedback is superficial, bureaucratic, annoying and highly unlikely to make a difference. Another ineffective practice is giving teachers a score on each short observation ... This increases the teacher’s anxiety and is the opposite of good coaching (Marshall, 2012, p. 21).

Rather than careful, collaborative planning and constructive, improvement-oriented feedback, we see arbitrary, unfocussed, impressionistic teacher ‘assessment’, with an overall demand to lift performance, while simultaneously cutting education budgets and removing specialist assistance provided by people such as literacy and numeracy coaches and regional network staff.

Hattie’s position on direct instruction has been misconstrued as advocating didactic, ‘traditional’ teacher-centred ‘chalk and talk’ approaches rather than its intended meaning of teachers having clear intentions of what they are trying to achieve with every student, and planning, orchestrating and assessing learning in their classrooms accordingly (2009, pp. 204–207).

Similarly, the role of professional standards for teachers (AITSL, 2011a) has been twisted by some to be more about standardising, judging and dismissing teachers than developing and recognising them i.e., judgemental instead of developmental. Rather than being done *with* and *for* teachers, many measures advocated and being hastily and poorly implemented in the quest to improve teaching and learning are essentially being done *to* teachers and *without* their involvement, almost guaranteeing resistance, minimal compliance and inefficiency.

The biggest equity issue in Australian education is a quality teacher in every classroom (Dinham, 2011b). However, to achieve this we need to address teacher quality at every key point of potential influence or ‘leverage’ (Dinham, 2008b). Simplistic, quick-fix, populist solutions promulgated by economists, business representatives, educational advisers and politicians who are out of touch with teaching and the extant body of research on teaching and learning, capture the headlines, feed the panic and reinforce misconceptions while providing little guidance or positive substance for the profession.

Australia’s growing infatuation with Asian education: the problem of PISA envy

A fixation with the performance of other countries represents the worst form of cultural cringe. We need to recognise and build on the strengths we have rather than attempting to ‘cherry pick’ what appear to be recipes for success from vastly different contexts. In the 1990s Japan was a focus of attention because of the strength of the Japanese economy. We were encouraged to emulate the educational and business practices of Japan, and Australian students were urged to learn Japanese. No one talks about copying Japan now.

For a time the world's focus was on Finland, but our new infatuation is with Asia (Dinham & Scott, 2012; Jensen, 2012). Dr Pasi Sahlberg, Director General, Centre for International Cooperation and Mobility, Ministry of Education, Finland, believes the rest of the world has got it wrong, with what he delightfully terms the 'Global Education Reform Movement' (GERM), mistakenly emphasising competition, standardisation, school choice and test-based accountability as the means to higher performance, whereas Finland has long emphasised collaboration, individualised teaching, equity and the building of a trust-based, well-educated profession (Sahlberg, 2012).

In the PISA 2009 survey results (OECD, 2011),

- the top places in Reading were taken by Shanghai and South Korea with Hong Kong in 4th place and Singapore in 5th. Australia came 9th;
- in Mathematics, Shanghai topped the league with Singapore in 2nd, Hong Kong came 3rd, South Korea was 4th, with Chinese Taipei 5th. Australia was rated 15th; and
- in Science, Shanghai was again top, followed by Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and Korea. Australia filled 10th position. Chinese Taipei came 12th.

When we consider the emerging Asian 'PISA powerhouses', a number of things become apparent. The first is that, in the main they are not nations at all, but cities, city states and in the case of South Korea, arguably half a country. They are also predominantly authoritarian in their governance, have a tradition of rote learning, cramming and testing and all have placed a major premium on improving their PISA rankings. On that measure, they have been successful.

In Australia's case, as noted, there is concern over both ladder slippage and the SES/equity gap. However, a more meaningful comparison would be not with these cities and city states but with whole countries. For example, data on student performance in China as a whole would be nowhere near as impressive. In the same manner, data on Canberra alone would paint a favourable, though distorted, picture of Australian educational performance generally. Zhang Minxuan, a Chinese education expert, oversaw PISA assessment in Shanghai. Zhang is quoted:

'We have a lot of things to study from the rest of the world', Zhang said. 'We know much more about recent developments in education research than the people in the other countries themselves. If we think it may be useful, we'll introduce it to our students, no matter what country it's from. We are very, very open-minded'.

But Zhang also pointed out the implied embarrassments of the examination results: The Shanghai students who triumphed in the tests enjoy the very best China's uneven schools can offer. Their experience has little in common with those of their peers in rural schools, or the makeshift migrant schools of the big cities, not to mention the armies of teenagers who abandon secondary school in favour of the factory floor (Stack, 2011, n.p.).

When we consider Australia's performance against similar nations such as the USA, the UK, New Zealand, Canada, France and Germany, a different picture emerges. In Reading, Canada and New Zealand are just ahead of us on 6th and 7th, respectively, to Australia's 9th. The USA comes in at 17th, Germany at 19th, France at 21st, whilst the UK languishes at equal 25th, just above the PISA average.

In Mathematics, Canada and New Zealand are again ahead of us at 10th and 13th compared to our position of 15th, closely followed by Germany in 16th position. France

is at 22nd place, whilst the UK is below the PISA average at 28th, with the USA bringing up the rear of this group in 31st place.

In Science, New Zealand and Canada are again just ahead of Australia in 7th and 8th position compared to our 10th place. Germany comes in at 14th, the UK is at 16th, with the USA just above the PISA average in 23rd place.

Thus, in this group of like nations, we do well. Whilst both Canada and New Zealand are ahead of Australia, the gap is quite small. Should we be satisfied with this? No, but we should not 'beat up on ourselves', as the saying goes, either.

What really are the lessons from 'the best'?

As Catherine Scott and I have noted (Dinham & Scott, 2012), just what we have to 'learn from the best' is moot. Despite their chart-topping performance, the Chinese have not been triumphant over their students' attainments, as Zhang Minxuan noted above; quite the contrary.

'I carry a strong feeling of bitterness', Chen Weihua, an editor at the state-run China Daily, wrote in a first-person editorial. 'The making of superb test-takers comes at a high cost, often killing much of, if not all, the joy of childhood'.

In a sense, this is the underbelly of a rising China: the fear that schools are churning out generations of unimaginative worker bees who do well on tests . . .

'We have seen the advantages and the disadvantages of our education system, and our students' abilities are still weak', said Xiong Bingqi, an education expert at Shanghai's Jiao Tong University. 'They do very well in those subjects the teacher assigns them. They have huge vocabularies and they do math well. However, the level of their creativity and imagination is low' (Stack, 2011, n.p.).

As Ravitch (2012) has pointed out, Chinese citizens who can afford to do so send their children to schools in the USA, or, if that is beyond the family means, to 'American' schools within China. The post, below, from a Chinese mother explains both why Chinese cities are scoring well on PISA and why, paradoxically, those who can, have their children educated elsewhere.

'Since my daughter began 7th grade (first year of middle school), she has had extra evening classes. At that time, the class ends at 18:50 and I accepted it. But ever since she entered 9th grade, the evening class has lengthened to 20:40. For the graduating class, the students have to take classes from 7:30 to 20:00 on Saturdays. There are also 5 weeks of classes during the winter and summer school vacation. All day long, the students do not have any self-study time, or physical education classes . . . This is not the end. After coming home after 10 pm, she has to spend at least one hour on her homework. She has to get up at 5 am. She is still a child. May I ask how many adults can endure this kind of work?' (Zhao, 2010, n.p.).

Children also comment on the effects of the high-pressure educational environment:

'I am exhausted and have become stupid, even before I graduate from middle school', says one student. 'You adults work from 9 to 5, but we have to work 18 hours a day', says another student (Zhao, 2010, n.p.).

The success of nations and cities is thus arguably bought at high cost to the individual children involved. Research on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results found a negative correlation between TIMSS scores and how much children enjoy mathematics and are confident in their abilities (Zhao, 2012a). The push for high test scores can harm both enjoyment and self-belief. It is doubtful that Australian parents would want this for their children. The narrow focus on success on a limited curriculum has real world consequences, beyond the possible harm to children's well-being and physical health.

The drive and capacity to be innovative are behind the sort of international competitiveness so beloved of governments everywhere. Yet somehow performance on PISA has been conceptualised as *the* proxy or predictor for innovation, economic development and achievement. However, when we look at the economic performance of the Asian nations and city states frequently cited as exemplars, it can be seen that their industry is frequently built upon emulation and improvement of ideas and products imported from elsewhere rather than innovation.

This leads to the important question of whether are we using the wrong measures to compare national performance. For example the 'Melbourne Declaration' (MCEETYA, 2008) mentions academic, personal and social development and achievement. Whilst China (i.e., Shanghai, Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong – Macao is also part of the Chinese suite of urban PISA sites) might score well on some measures of academic achievement, the degree to which Chinese students would demonstrate personal and social development under the conditions in which they learn is questionable. The evidence suggests that cramming and test preparation have been taken to new extremes including long hours, extra tutoring out of school and work on weekends and in school holidays.

This type of information saturation can actually work against motivation for learning and result in dispirited and quite possibly disappointed learners who fail to gain the grades and entry to universities they had aspired to. This type of education does not teach one *how* to learn, just *what* to learn. The question of the reasons for learning is not even considered, beyond the imperative of the test. This does not encourage creativity and innovation or for that matter enjoyment, just a narrow form of problem-solving with questions to which the answers are already known.

PISA, TIMSS and the like are not, however, the only international testing programs. Since 1999, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2012) has been used to make an annual assessment of entrepreneurial activities, aspirations and attitudes in over 50 countries. Comparisons between the 23 countries participating in both PISA and GEM reveal that there is strong negative correlation on scores for the two measures: high on PISA predicts low on GEM and vice versa. Thus, learning from 'the best' may also mean learning to lose an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit and capability. Surely this is a lesson no-one would wish to learn.

The US researcher Dr Kyung Hee Kim has documented the decline in creativity among American students, which, she maintains, has accompanied an increasing emphasis on doing well on standardised tests as the sole measure of educational excellence (Kim, 2012). Using results on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1974), Kim has demonstrated that levels of measured creativity in the US have been declining since 1990. This is the case for all age groups but particularly so for young students.

Kim's findings are highly significant. The Torrance test was developed in the 1960s and longitudinal studies have shown that it predicts individuals' lifetime creative achievement more accurately than intelligence tests (Kim, 2008, pp. 111–122). A major decline in

creativity predicts a decline in innovation and invention. This is – once again – a very high price to pay for concentrating upon performance on standardised tests.

As Zhao (2012b, n.p.), once again, notes:

Standardised testing rewards the ability to find the ‘correct answer’ and thus discourages creativity, which is about asking questions and challenging the status quo. A narrow and uniform curriculum deprives children of opportunities to explore and experiment with their interest and passion, which is the foundation of entrepreneurship. Constantly testing children and telling them they are not good enough depletes their confidence, which is the fuel of innovation. So, by any account, what policymakers have put in place in American schools is precisely what is needed to cancel out their desire for creative and entrepreneurial talents.

If this is where chasing ‘the best’ leads, we urgently need to reassess where we are going. More importantly, we need to identify and build on the strengths we already have, work on our weaknesses and get over our PISA envy.

There is, however, one thing we can and should borrow from Asia and some of the other better performing countries – their undeniable, unrelenting focus and emphasis upon investing in and improving education. On this point alone, they rightly put us to shame.

Education, the battered profession

Education has increasingly become the ‘battered profession’ (Scott & Dinham, 2002, 2013; Scott, Stone, & Dinham, 2001). On a daily basis we hear damning statements – denigration, abuse, misinformed criticism – about the dire state of education. In the main, these statements are made not by educators but by politicians, education bureaucrats, the media, members of the corporate sector and other self-appointed experts. The standard of those entering and practising teaching is generalised and criticised as poor (Dinham, 2013), and university faculties of education are said to be staffed by out-of-touch ideologues who produce graduates unfit for teaching. Teacher unions are seen as nothing more than self-serving rabbles and schools as war zones. Our school students are fit for neither society nor work. Such views, if expressed often enough, enter popular consciousness and become accepted as truth.

Much of this criticism is directed at public education, but other sectors are also targets and victims. And the worst part is that by and large, the profession accepts it, although sometimes, unhelpfully, it turns upon itself, particularly across the public–private and SES divides as well as upon matters of ideology.

For over 40 years Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) and Gallup have polled the US public on their attitudes towards public education (see, e.g., PDK, 2012). One of their perennial findings is that whilst there is widespread concern about public education generally, those surveyed invariably report a high level of support, satisfaction and appreciation for *their* local public school. These findings are instructive in understanding how we as a society regard education, teachers and schooling.

There are, however, real concerns, and educators encounter these on a daily basis. Despite our overall performance as a nation on international and national measures of student performance, we can and need to improve. In particular, we need to address the impact of disadvantage and inequity on student development and achievement, which is greater than in other OECD nations (Thomson et al., 2012) and larger than we would like it to be.

There is an ongoing need to focus – through evidence – on the nature and impact of our pedagogical practices and the roles that teachers' preparation and professional learning, professional standards, leadership and appraisal and development processes can play in improving teaching and learning. However, addressing these real concerns is made more difficult by the prevailing climate of criticism and the fact that every time a social problem emerges it is passed to schools for resolution, with the result that schools are constantly battling pressures to simultaneously address the 'basics' as well as the 'extras' society seems unwilling or unable to deal with. In essence, 'we trust you less' yet 'we entrust you with more' (Dinham, 1997).

Critics of education make simplistic pronouncements that disregard decades of research and the many great achievements of our teachers and schools. Our accumulated expertise and wisdom in education is totally disregarded, yet when I speak with international colleagues they frequently express admiration for what we have achieved in Australian education (Dinham, 2011b). These people look to Australia for leadership, research and guidance, while the self-styled experts urge us to copy Shanghai and the like on the basis of their 'research', which usually consists of selectively using statistics from reports completed by others and making flying stage-managed visits to schools to discover the 'secret' to their success.

Our home-grown critics persistently argue that education is 'broken' and must be 'fixed' and as noted previously, the quality teaching movement, once so promising, appears to have been hijacked. It is hardly surprising that educators have lost self-confidence after years of such treatment.

Entry to the profession

Unfortunately, the quality teaching movement is also being put at risk through the related issues of the widening range of entry standards to teaching, the varying quality of teacher education programs and the uncapping of commonwealth-funded places for teacher education candidates.

Despite all the talk about improving the quality of teachers and teaching in Australia – and partly because of the poor publicity around teachers and teaching – the general downward slide of entry standards to undergraduate teacher training courses continues. While the best-performing nations such as Finland and South Korea draw their teachers from the top quartile of school leavers or higher (Dinham, Ingvarson, & Kleinhenz, 2008), some Australian universities have seen their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR – a percentile ranking of high school graduates' final assessment performance) entry levels for this year fall to the 45th percentile and even lower (Preiss & Butt, 2013).

Teacher education is typically the largest undergraduate professional program in most universities and is thus a significant source of university revenue. Unfortunately, in some universities, to fill the desired number of places and reach financial targets, minimum entry levels are set far too low. Additionally, when universities experience an overall shortfall in student applications, often this 'load' is shifted to teacher education, usually against the wishes of education faculties, further driving down entry standards.

This has been exacerbated recently with the 'uncapping' of undergraduate Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP – these places are substantially subsidised by the Australian Government so that students pay only the 'student contribution' amounts for their units of study). Some universities have reacted to this 'free for all' by greatly expanding their places

and offers for teacher candidates, at a time when there is an oversupply of primary teachers and long waiting lists for employment more generally. At present, more than 75% of teachers on waiting lists around the country – there are more than 40,000 in New South Wales alone – are seeking primary positions, yet around 50% of the 16,000 teachers graduating every year in Australia are primary-trained. However, there are teacher shortages in areas such as secondary mathematics, science, technology, languages and English and for special needs and early childhood teachers (Productivity Commission, 2012). Put simply, we are training too many primary teachers and these resources would be better spent targeting areas of shortage. We are also misleading people about their chances of gaining employment, something which has both financial and personal cost and is ethically questionable, if not unconscionable.

Overall, this situation has a number of serious consequences. Students with higher ATARs who might otherwise be attracted to teaching feel they are ‘wasting’ their marks if they accept a place in an education course that could have been ‘bought’ with a much lower ATAR. There is a powerful view that one must ‘spend’ all one’s ATAR. More broadly, lower entry scores reinforce the perceived low status of teachers and teaching.

Meanwhile, those accepted with low ATARs are likely to find completing their course challenging and teaching itself difficult. If they do manage to complete their course, they will find themselves teaching students who are potential ‘90+’ ATAR performers – something that will present challenges for both teacher and student.

It needs to be recognised that, contrary to popular thinking, entry scores to undergraduate teacher training courses vary widely. While some universities do set minimum entry standards as low as the 40s, others require ATARs of over 90. This discrepancy is widening, particularly with the entry of some TAFE and private colleges to teacher education, and cannot be allowed to continue if we are serious about improving the quality of teaching and learning in Australian schools.

Where candidates cannot meet minimum standards for admission, bridging programs may need to be provided to enable candidates to demonstrate capability at the standard required, but universities and other providers must not be permitted to enrol candidates below 70–75 ATAR or equivalent into undergraduate teacher education programs. Making excuses and exceptions is the beginning of a ‘slippery slope’, which can lead to the acceptance of candidates with very low ATARs, thereby reinforcing unproductive cycles we need to break.

It also needs to be recognised that the quality of teacher education courses is variable. Processes for national accreditation of teacher education courses which are currently being introduced (AITSL, 2011c) need to address the issue of course quality and, in particular, the effectiveness of graduating teachers and their impact on student learning. There needs to be a rigorous, evidence-based process for course accreditation rather than the minimalist, competency-based approach that currently predominates.

If we are to continue to offer teaching as an undergraduate qualification – and I do not think we should for reasons outlined below – we must set firm minimum acceptable standards for entry (Dinham et al., 2008).

Many will cite equity issues in that high school students from particular backgrounds and geographic locations experience disadvantage which is reflected in their final ATAR. It is important to recognise this and to seek to attract a broadly representative teaching service, but accepting candidates with very low levels of secondary school achievement into teaching

is not the way to achieve it. It risks setting many of them up for failure, and in many cases, those who do manage to pass will go back to the same sorts of disadvantaged schools from which they have emerged.

Some teacher educators maintain that entry standards to teacher education are irrelevant and that it is what teachers exit with that is most important (e.g. Tovey, 2013). But this is simplistic thinking; both are important. However, there is a need for other measures of suitability for teaching to augment ATAR scores above minimum levels, to ensure that those selected into teaching have the attributes needed to succeed in their courses and in their careers.²

However, I do believe that the practice of taking people straight from school, training them as teachers and then sending them back to school, often in the same geographical area from which they have come, is no longer appropriate. Graduate entry teaching degrees, particularly Master of Teaching courses – as opposed to the old one-year diplomas in education – are attracting candidates with high-level undergraduate academic performance who are older, more experienced and who have made a mature decision to become a teacher (see McLean Davies et al., 2013).

Serious attention to the standards required for entry to teaching is long overdue. If entry requirements to undergraduate programs are allowed to continue to decline as they have over the past few years, there will be a heavy price. All the effort around improving the quality of teachers, the quality of teaching and student achievement in this country will be undermined. As noted, the quality of teachers and of teaching needs to be addressed at each key point of leverage (Dinham, 2006), but the quality of those entering the profession is of crucial importance for everything that follows.

It is time for the profession to speak and for the nation to act

Those involved with all aspects of education need to find their voice to reject the misinformed, persistent, harmful rhetoric and indeed bullying that at present is going largely unchallenged in the public arena and, worse still, informing education policy. In doing so, it is imperative that evidence-based reasoning is employed, rather than defensive, apologetic excuse making.

In engaging with the wider community and stakeholders to promote the cause of education, professionalism is essential. Educators need to work with the media and key bodies to ensure that the evidence and ‘good news stories’ get out there to counter the fixation with the tiny proportion of students, teachers and schools that are so easy and tempting to sensationalise. Taking our lead from the PDK findings, we need to think globally yet act locally to raise awareness of the many great things schools achieve on a daily basis, often against great odds.

We cannot ignore the effects on learning and development of socio-economic status, family background, geographic location and the uneven level of funding and other resources available to schools, but this is not a reason to give up; quite the opposite.

We also need to be realistic. Not every teacher is going to be able to bring every student to an average or above-average level of performance – a statistical and practical impossibility – but the vast majority of teachers and principals will try very hard to do this. Life is not fair, but education can make it fairer. Good teaching and good schools are the best means we

have of overcoming disadvantage and opening the doors of opportunity for young people. We must hold to this belief.

Much attention has been given to the 'Gonski review' recommendations on school funding (Australian Government, 2011). The fact is that we have a highly inequitable, opaque and inefficient means of allocating funding to schools that has been cobbled together over time (Dowling, 2008). An ideal scheme would be lean, powerful, efficient and fair in achieving its aims. It will be difficult to achieve this from the position where we currently find ourselves.

There is a lack of will to make the necessary hard decisions on school funding because of fear of alienating elements of the electorate. Whenever there is debate about a more equitable funding system, politicians are forced to offer the guarantee that whatever the process, no school will be worse off. In other words, equity comes a distant second to votes. This guarantees that little will change and that inequalities will be perpetuated if not exacerbated.

We also need to address the present salary and career structures for teachers, which are inefficient, inconsistent, 19th century industrial artefacts that see teachers' salaries peak too soon and at too low a level. I have written extensively on the need to integrate the new Australian standards for teachers with authentic, efficient assessment and accreditation processes and with industrial awards, to provide incentive, guidance, reward and recognition to teachers who continue their professional learning and improve their performance (see Dinham, 2011a; Dinham et al., 2008).

We are at a crucial point in our development as a country and the national initiatives around enhancing the quality of teaching introduced since 2007 have been substantial and significant. We are, however, at a crossroads. We have the opportunity through these initiatives and agreements to take the necessary next steps down the road of ensuring effective professional learning for all teachers and principals and quality teaching for all Australian students, but we badly need strong, informed bipartisan support rather than the fragmentation, push back and politicking that is increasingly occurring (Tomazin, 2013). It is time education ceased to be used as a political football. It is too important for that.

This is unfortunately complicated and exacerbated by the situation whereby education is constitutionally largely a state and territory responsibility yet funded substantially through the Commonwealth tax system. The 'rail gauge mentality' of the 19th century is apparently alive and well. Australia has a population similar in size to Florida, yet is bedevilled by wasteful duplication, mistrust, competition and, in some instances, petty jealousies.

We need to be cognisant of decades of empirical work in educational research rather than dismissive. We need to stop adopting quick-fix solutions that have been found wanting elsewhere. Education as a whole is performing much better than many of the corporations and governments that seek to criticise it.

Above all, as a nation we need to recognise education as our most important investment in facilitating personal, social and economic prosperity and not as a cost or a commodity to be purchased by those with the most social and financial capital.

Many are convinced that there is a crisis in Australian schooling, and this has eroded our self-belief and confidence. As a result, we are tempted to seize upon quick, cheap, simple solutions when what we need is comprehensive evidence-based improvement and action to create a system and career structure for promoting effective teaching and for recognising and rewarding effective teachers (Dinham et al., 2008).

Darling-Hammond (2012) has identified what such a coherent systematic approach requires:

- (1) **Common statewide** [sic] **standards** for teaching that are related to meaningful student learning and are shared across the profession;
- (2) **Performance-based assessments, based on the standards, guiding state functions** such as teacher operation, licensure and advanced certification;
- (3) **Local evaluation systems aligned to the same standards**, for evaluating on-the-job teaching based on multiple measures of teaching practice and student learning;
- (4) **Support structures** to ensure trained evaluators, mentoring for teachers who need additional assistance and fair decisions about personnel actions and
- (5) **Aligned professional learning opportunities** that support the improvement of teachers and teaching quality.

Fortunately, most of the key national elements are largely in place, with developmental work proceeding through AITSL and other bodies, but we are not there yet and the temptation will be to do these things quickly and cheaply, which will severely compromise their impact.

We need to remind ourselves we have much of which to be proud in Australian education and we need to be prepared to recognise, understand and build upon that foundation and not let others undermine and pull it down.

It is time for the profession as a whole to speak up, to state what it believes in and to question from a basis of evidence the externally proposed remedies to the perceived problems of teachers, teaching and schools in Australia. If we fail to do this, the outcomes will be neither pleasant nor productive and we can expect to continue to slide down the international student achievement league tables, with the resultant negativity feeding upon itself. If this occurs, we will all be poorer for it.

Declaration of conflicting interests

None declared.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Australian College of Educators, Canberra, 28 February 2013, as the 2013 Phillip Hughes Oration.
2. The University of Melbourne is currently piloting an instrument, *Teacher Selector*, developed for this purpose.

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