

Productivity Commission Submission

The Current Situation

An underlying aim of the educational reforms in the Australian colonies in the 1880s was to ensure that every young person, whether they lived in a city or isolated rural area, was entitled to receive the same basic education. In many isolated communities this was achieved through the one-teacher school where multiple grades were taught in the same room.

In the twenty first century our concept of a minimum standard has progressed far beyond that of basic literacy and numeracy but over the last twenty years there has been a gradual move away from a system where every student had an equal opportunity for a quality education irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances, as evidenced by our PISA ranking on equity. This is particularly worrying at a time when we are moving further away from an economy with a strong manufacturing base to one requiring an intellectually skilled and adaptive workforce. When this is combined with our decline in our overall rankings in PISA in literacy, numeracy and scientific understanding over the last few years there is a real case for concern.

A need to focus on the classroom teacher

At the heart of changing this situation is ensuring that all students have equal access to highly professional educators and this occurs primarily in the classroom. To me a weakness of the draft report – and one partly determined by its terms of reference – is that it focuses too much on the managerial aspects and not enough on the classroom where the actual education takes place.

The most significant factor in a child's achievement is what happens in the classroom. Some eighty per cent of teachers are fully classroom teachers and about another 12% - middle executive - spend most time in the classroom, with limited release time for their managerial responsibilities.

The ideal teacher is one who is highly intelligent, very knowledgeable in their subject area, emotionally mature and highly creative, as well as being a committed and self-directed professional. We have to confront the reality that currently classroom

teachers vary from the brilliant through the ordinary to the barely competent, although we lack qualitative research on the proportions of each.

While there are significant studies to show that teachers can make a difference, we urgently need research to quantify the current range of teacher abilities. Now that the AITSL has established National Professional Standards we do have a yardstick for doing this. I realise there would be strong opposition from a variety of stakeholders who would prefer that such information be hidden and I can also imagine the media outcry, which would focus on the negatives, once such a report was released.

But this should not stop this being done as it can provide an impetus for action. For example, some Australian States found that comparisons between them and other states, based on PISA results, were not flattering but then took steps to do something about it. The Victorian Government for example responded to their PISA ranking in scientific literacy by investment in 100 Primary Maths and Science specialists.

How to improve the quality of the workforce

It would take a long term commitment – ten or more years – to even begin to remedy this situation but hopefully once the process began it might, like the Australian Curriculum Process, gain a momentum of its own once all the States and Territories come on side.

There are three elements in creating a truly professional work force that are strongly interrelated:

(1) A selection procedure at the entry level

At present in most jurisdictions the only selection carried out is by way of the University Entrance Score and in recent times that required to enter a teaching degree has been dropping to be in the low sixties for some Universities. One would hope that any teacher capable of inspiring the brightest students in a school was in the top ten per cent of graduates.

Beyond this few jurisdictions have any rigorous pre-entry selection which compares unfavourably with other public services such as, for example, the police force

(2) A far more professional training with a strong internship focus

In the 1970's Gilbert Highet wrote a book called *The Art of Teaching*. In my position as an assessor for the NSW Quality Teacher Awards program (2007-2009) I observed lessons of some of the best teachers in the state and each lesson was a self-contained work of art with complex inter-relationships and responses being managed almost second by second by the teacher from start to finish.

A strong internship program and the secondment of quality teachers to Universities would help develop this complex skills required. This would also raise the status of the individual teachers who were seconded to this process and enhance their own skills. I would recommend a two year graduate program, but at least half of this spent in schools, with real responsibilities for the interns.

This would of course be more expensive, but so is the loss of qualified teachers after a few years in schools.

(3) A career structure that recognises the professional status of teachers and rewards all teachers who reach the highest professional standards and especially those who remain in the classroom.

A basis for how this would work has been clearly set out by Professor Steve Dinham in his Dean's Lecture at the MGSE on 27 September 2011:

<http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/news/lectures/pdf/S%20Dinham%20lecture%20notes%2027.9.11.pdf>

Again there would be a cost involved in this, but with true professionals in the classrooms, the bureaucratic structure at both State and Federal levels could be drastically reduced over time as a true profession would, like the medical profession, be self managing. And again there would be economic gains as the best teachers would be encouraged to remain in the profession.

Autonomy

As the draft report indicated there is conflicting evidence on the benefits of autonomy. This is because it has advantages in some areas but disadvantages in others.

Three limiting factors are

(1) When it is used to contrast an individual school with “the system”. ‘Come to our school because we do things better than the others.’ Instead of money being sent on programs it is spent on promoting the school.

(2) It can mean an absolving of responsibility for the less privileged by focussing on what is good for one’ preferred clientele.

(3) In Government schools, where it is combined with having teachers on short term contracts and teacher’s positions are terminated not on the basis of their quality but on their subject areas, it is part of the demoralising of the teacher workforce

Where autonomy *can* work in the Public and Catholic systems is where the overall goals are clearly spelt out at the systems level, but it is up to the individual school to develop strategies to meet these goals that are relevant to the schools staffing composition and the community in which it operates.

While we need to look at the autonomy of the school from system constraints, we also need to recognise the autonomy of, and respect for, the teachers. A good model is a medical practice where the doctors work independently but appoint their manager. Of course a clear difference in a school is that each teacher is responsible for part of a child’s education and more co-ordination is required but this management should be responsive to the teacher input.

Ian Keese B Sc, BA(Hons), Dip. Ed. FACE.