

AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF EDUCATORS

Phillip Hughes Oration

Canberra

28th February 2013

The Quality Teaching Movement in Australia: Losing Our Confidence, Losing Our Way and Getting Back On Track

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Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the ACT Branch of the Australian College of Educators for giving me the honour of presenting the Phillip Hughes Oration for 2013. Professor Phillip Hughes AO, who died in 2011, was a leading figure in Australian education for many decades and had a long and active involvement with ACE extending over more than 50 years. Phillip Hughes was an outstanding educator of great insight, energy and influence. It would be interesting and no doubt instructive to hear his thoughts on some of the current developments and debates within Australian education that I am going to touch upon in this address.

Concerns Over Teacher Quality

Concerns about teacher competence have been around for decades. In Australia there has been, on average, one major state or national inquiry into teacher education every year for the past 30 years (Dinham, 2006; 2008). No other program of professional preparation in Australia has been thought to warrant such scrutiny.

Recently there has been a growing chorus of criticism of teacher education, teachers and school performance. 'Evidence' from international surveys and reports has been selectively used both to paint a grim picture of the 'problem' and to prescribe remedies. Many frequent flyer points have been earned on trips 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 issue of teacher quality with often naive, misinformed ideas and in some cases overt ideological intent. There has been a concerted push by state and federal governments and educational systems to enact policies to improve 'teacher quality'. As part of this agenda it has been determined that all teachers will have to undergo annual performance reviews (AITSL, 2012).

In this paper I chart my own involvement with the issues of teacher quality and student learning before raising concerns over the potential hijacking of the quality teaching movement. There are danger signs that the gains made since the agreement and introduction of 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.

Our fixation with international measures of student achievement and our seeking to emulate the current star performers are shown to have dysfunctional consequences, not the least of which is an erosion of our self-belief and confidence as educators. The standard of entry to teacher education and the oversupply of teachers are shown to work against teacher status and quality. The persistent and increasing 'battering' of the teaching profession is examined and the paper closes with a call for educators to find their voice in the current debate and policy context.

A Personal Involvement With Teacher Quality

I have been involved with research into teaching and learning for more than 20 years. Much of my early work involved working in schools observing and interviewing teachers and students and surveying teachers about their work both in Australia and overseas. A former teacher, I was involved in projects investigating aspects such as teacher induction, communication in schools, new approaches to teaching, the impact of teaching on teachers' lives, the social aspects of teaching and learning, teacher health motivation and satisfaction, teacher resignation, educational leadership, professional learning and effective schools (see Ayres, Dinham & Sawyer, 2004; Dinham, 2007a; Dinham & Scott, 2000, 2002; Scott & Dinham, 2002; Scott, Stone & Dinham, 2001; Brady, Aubusson & Dinham, 2008; Dinham, 2009).

In 2000 I was asked as ACE NSW Branch President to establish and chair the NSW Minister for Education and Training and Australian College of Educators Quality Teaching Awards. These awards were designed to research and recognise outstanding teaching in early childhood, primary, secondary, TAFE and university settings (Dinham, 2002).

Another significant involvement was being asked in 2002 to join the Interim Committee which established the NSW Institute of Teachers. Both the NSW Quality Teaching Awards and the work of the NSWIT involved working with professional teaching standards. Joining the Australian Council for Educational Research in 2007 gave me the opportunity to work closely with the late Ken Rowe, a key advocate of evidence-based approaches and a staunch critic of what he termed 'trendy nonsense' (see Dinham & Rowe, 2007).

Whilst at ACER I also had the opportunity to work with Lawrence Ingvarson, particularly around the intersection of professional teaching standards, teacher quality, teacher recognition and professional learning. With colleagues we conducted the initial mapping and consolidation of professional teaching and leadership standards for DEEWR which became the basis for the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers developed by AITSL (2011a) and the Australian Professional Standard for Principals that followed (AITSL, 2011b; Dinham, 2011c).

In 2008 we produced a report for the Business Council of Australia which laid out the imperative for a new standards-based salary and career architecture for Australian teachers (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008). This model was echoed in subsequent work by AITSL. I have continued to advocate the need to develop a new career architecture for Australia's teachers and to utilise the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers to inform, improve, recognise and reward the professional development of our teachers (Dinham, 2011a).

In 2008 I published a book *How to Get Your School Moving and Improving: An evidence-based approach* (2008a) which brought together much of my work around the areas of learning, teaching, leadership, school change, teacher's work and lives, professional learning an overall school effectiveness. I have also been extensively involved with providing consultancy to a range of bodies here and overseas.

Since 2010 I have been involved with the groundbreaking Master of Teaching program at the University of Melbourne, a clinical interventionist approach to teaching and learning championed by the Dean Field Rickards which incorporates close partnerships with stakeholders and a strong evidence-based, 'clinical' approach to both teacher preparation and teaching (McLean Davies, et al., 2013). I have also been heavily involved in the development of the Master of Instructional

Leadership degree introduced to Melbourne in 2013. This degree prepares aspiring and practising educational leaders to be evidence-informed leaders of teaching and learning (Dinham, 2012c).

The Quality Teaching Movement: Danger Signs

There is no doubt that there is now a significant emphasis on teacher quality within Australia and internationally through bodies such as the OECD and UNESCO and that national developments such as NAPLAN, My School, ACARA, National Partnerships, AGQTP and AITSL have all played a part both in reflecting and strengthening this focus.

However there are growing and worrying signs that the quality teaching movement is in danger of being hijacked (Dinham, 2012a, 2012b).

Initially I was pleased to see the growing focus on teachers and teaching rather than other aspects of education such as school organisation, marketing and management. By recognising teachers as the biggest *in-school* influence on student achievement I was hoping that this would lead to significant focus on and investment in teachers' professional learning. However it is apparent that rather than regarding teachers as our most precious asset they are now being seen as our biggest problem when students fail to learn or reach the standards we have 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 we thus have finger pointing and blame. The effects of Socio-Economic Status (SES) are cited by some as being too powerful to overcome and there is panic over international league tables of student achievement.

There has been a growing chorus of ill-informed half-baked solutions to the 'problem' of teacher quality. These top down simplistic measures based upon misunderstanding of the field, and in some cases ideology and prejudice, have included: sacking the 'bottom' 5% of teachers (Victoria DEECD, 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'; giving principals more autonomy and power to hire and fire; bonus pay for 'top' teachers (10%?); raising entry standards for teacher candidates; allowing non-educators to become principals, and so forth. At the same time of course, we have seen 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 ignores the fact that Australia still performs well on international measures of student achievement such as PISA (see later) although we certainly can't rest on our laurels - there *are* signs of slippage and the equity/SES gap 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 PIRLS, is however, of concern (Thompson, et al., 2012). Why do our 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). These phenomena need careful investigation, not invective and panic.

Nowhere in any of these proposed solutions or remedies do I see 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 do I see the means to provide educational leaders *en masse* with the knowledge and skills they need to be true leaders of learning. What we do see 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.

The work of my colleague at the University of Melbourne John Hattie has been particularly misrepresented and misused as a blunt instrument to attack teachers, teacher education and

teaching, something far from his intentions. His recognition of teachers' importance (Hattie, 2009) has been twisted 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. Similarly, NAPLAN data, which has its purpose and place, has been misused to criticise and condemn.

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 report on a growing practice of snap inspections of classrooms sometimes accompanied by video-taking to 'catch' teachers performing badly. As we tend to copy what others do overseas, this practice is not only confined to Australia:

One of the more dubious practices in U.S. 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. (Marshall, 2012).

Rather than careful, collaborative planning and constructive, improvement oriented feedback, we see arbitrary, unfocussed, impressionistic teacher 'assessment', with an overall demand to lift performance, whilst 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 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.

Similarly the role of professional standards has been twisted by some to be more about standardising, judging and dismissing teachers than developing and recognising them. 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* them, almost guaranteeing resistance, minimal compliance and inefficiency.

I have said elsewhere that 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 leverage (Dinham, 2008b). Simplistic, quick fix, populist solutions promulgated by economists, those from the business sector and educational advisers and politicians 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.

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 everybody was talking about Japan due to the strength of the Japanese economy. We needed to emulate the educational and business practices of Japan and Australia students needed to learn Japanese. Nobody talks about copying Japan now.

For a time the world's focus was on Finland but our new infatuation is with Asia (Jensen, 2012; Dinham & Scott, 2012). Dr Pasi Sahlberg, Director General of the Finnish Ministry of Education, 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 rated 15th.

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're 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 this measure, they have been successful.

In Australia's case, as noted, there is concern both over ladder slippage and with the so-called equity gap. However a more meaningful comparison would be not with these cities and city states but with whole countries. For example, *overall* data on student performance in China would be instructive. In the same manner, data on the ACT alone would paint a favourable though distorted picture of Australian educational performance generally.

When we consider our 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 us, the gap is actually small. Should we be satisfied with this? No, but we shouldn't 'beat up on ourselves' either.

What Really Are The Lessons from 'The Best'?

As Catherine Scott and I have noted previously (Dinham & Scott, 2012), just what we have to 'learn from the best' is moot. Despite their chart topping performance the Chinese have not made a fuss of their students' attainments; quite the contrary. As Diane 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, they send them 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 five weeks of classes during the winter and summer school vacation. All day long, the students don't have any self-study time, or physical education classes ... This is not the end. After coming home after 10pm, she has to spend at least one hour on her homework. She has to get up at 5am. She is still a child. May I ask how many adults can endure this kind of work?' (Zhao, 2012a)

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, 2012a)

The success of nations and cities is thus arguably bought at high cost to the individual children involved. Research on TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) results reveals that there is a negative correlation between TIMSS scores and how much children enjoy mathematics and how confident they are in their abilities (Zhao, 2012b). The push for high test scores harms both enjoyment and self belief. It is doubtful that Australian parents would want this for their children.

The narrow focus on success at a limited curriculum has real world consequences, beyond the harm to children's well-being and physical health. 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. 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 a proxy or predictor for 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.

The above leads to the important questions of whether are we using the wrong measures to compare national performance. For example the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) talks about 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, it is questionable the degree to which Chinese students would demonstrate personal and social development. The evidence suggests that the Chinese have taken cramming and test preparation to new extremes including long hours, extra tutoring out of school and work on weekends and in 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 to questions where we already know the answers.

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. This is a lesson no-one would wish to learn.

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, 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 three times better than intelligence tests. 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 standardised tests.

As Zhao (2012c), 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, please give us something else. More importantly, let's 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 for personal, social and economic prosperity. On this point alone, they rightly put us to shame.

Education, the Battered Profession

Education has become the 'battered profession' (Scott & Dinham, 2013). On a daily basis we hear damning statements - denigration, verbal 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 staffed by out of touch ideologues who produce graduates unfit for teaching, or so the argument goes. Teacher unions are nothing more than self-serving rabbles and schools are war zones. Our school students are fit for neither society nor work. Such views, if spouted 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 takes 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 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, there is the issue of the impact of disadvantage and inequity on student development and achievement, which is greater than we would like.

There is an on-going 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 are ignorant of decades of research and of the many great things achieved by 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 education (Dinham, 2011b). These people look to Australia for leadership, research and guidance while the uninformed 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, varying quality of teacher education programs and uncapped places for teacher 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 top performing education nations such as Finland and South Korea draw their teachers from the top quartile of school leavers or higher, some Australian universities have seen their ATAR entry levels for this year fall to 45 or even lower (Preiss & Butt, 2013).

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

This has been exacerbated in recent times with the 'uncapping' of undergraduate Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP). 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 are seeking primary positions yet around 50% of the 16,000 teachers graduating every year in Australia are primary trained. However there are shortages in areas such as secondary maths, science, technology, languages and English and in 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 these areas of shortage. We are also misleading people about their chances of gaining employment, something which has both financial and personal cost.

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 take on teaching and are in turn deterred. 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 will find completing their course challenging and teaching itself difficult. If they do manage to complete their course, they may well end up 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 go as low as the 40s, other 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 however to enrol candidates below 70-75 ATAR or equivalent into undergraduate programs. Making exceptions is the beginning 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 also variable. Processes for national accreditation of teacher education courses which are currently being introduced 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 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 don't think we should for reasons outlined below – we must set firm minimum acceptable standards for entry (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008).

Many will cite equity issues in that high school students from certain backgrounds and geographic locations experience disadvantage which is reflected in their final ATAR. We do need to recognise this and seek to attract a broadly representative teaching service, but accepting candidates with very low levels of secondary school achievement is not the way to go, particularly if it sets them up for failure and if those who do manage to pass 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 (Tovey, 2013). I disagree with this thinking. It is neither entry nor exit standards that are important. After almost 25 years in teacher education, in my view *both* are important. However we do need other measures of suitability for teaching to augment ATAR scores above minimum levels.¹

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 at universities such as Melbourne 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 (McLean Davies et al., 2013).

It is time the issue of the standard of entrants to teaching is addressed. In fact, it's overdue. If entry requirements to undergraduate programs are allowed to continue to decline 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. The quality 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.

¹ The University of Melbourne is piloting an instrument, *Teacher Selector*, developed for this purpose.

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. We 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 varying level of funding and other resources available to schools. On the subject of the latter, we currently have the contradictory situation of schools being pressured to lift performance while educational budgets are being slashed, as noted earlier.

Let's be realistic. Every teacher is not 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 isn't fair, but good teaching and good schools are the best means we have of overcoming disadvantage and opening the doors of opportunity for young people.

Much attention has been given to the Gonski review recommendations on school funding (Australia Government, 2011). The fact is we have a highly inequitable, inefficient, ramshackle means of allocating funding to schools which has been cobbled together over time. 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 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 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 industrial awards to provide incentive, guidance, reward and recognition to teachers who continue their professional learning and improve their performance (see Dinham, 2011a; Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 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 at the crossroads and have the opportunity through these initiatives and agreements to take the necessary next steps down the path of ensuring effective professional learning for all teachers and principals and quality teaching for all Australian students.

We need however, strong, informed bipartisan support rather than the fragmentation, push back and politicking that is increasingly occurring (Tomazin, 2013). It is time we stopped using education as a political football. This is exacerbated by the situation whereby education is constitutionally a state and territory responsibility yet funded substantially through the Commonwealth tax system. The 'rail gauge mentality' is unfortunately alive and well. Australia has a population similar in size to Florida yet is bedevilled by wasteful duplication, mistrust, competition, and petty jealousies.

We need to be cognisant of decades of empirical work in educational research rather than dismissive. We need to stop looking for quick fix solutions which have been found wanting elsewhere. Education as a whole is performing much better on international standards than many of the corporations and governments that 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.

Others are convinced and we have convinced ourselves that there is a crisis in Australian schooling and this has eroded our self-belief and confidence. As a result, we are madly looking around for 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 recognising and rewarding effective teachers (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008).

Linda Darling-Hammond (2012) has identified what such a coherent systematic approach requires. Fortunately, we have much of the key national elements 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 the outcomes:

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.

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, 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.² 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 resultant negativity feeding upon itself.

² The Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Australian College of Educators and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders on the 25th February 2013 to work together is a significant step towards this end.

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