

TEN BIG IMPACT MEASURES TO HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT ON TEACHER QUALITY AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

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"The biggest equity issue in Australian education today isn't computers, new buildings or equipment. It's each student having quality teachers and quality teaching in schools supported by effective leadership and professional learning in mutually respectful local community contexts". (Dinham, 2010)

Introduction

There are numerous simplistic solutions offered for the 'problem' of teacher quality such as sacking poor teachers and performance bonuses (Dinham, 2013b). However the quality of those entering teaching and the quality of the pre-service programs they undertake are vital for everything that follows. A ten point plan is outlined below to address these two crucial issues.

1. **Make Teaching A Graduate-Entry Profession** – 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 came is no longer appropriate, if it ever was. Graduate entry teaching degrees are becoming more common and are attracting candidates with high undergraduate academic performance who are older, more experienced and have made a mature decision to become a teacher (McLean Davies, 2013).
2. **Make Graduate Entry Teacher Education Programs Two Years Equivalent in Duration** – this is in line with AITSL program standards (2011c) and needs to occur as soon as possible. It is not possible or desirable to cover all required areas to prepare a teacher in one year. However whilst a minimum of two years is necessary, it does not in itself guarantee improved quality and impact. There is wide variation in the effectiveness of teacher education programs as there is with the quality of entrants to these programs (see 5. below).
3. **Institute a Minimum Level of Entry Requirement to Existing Undergraduate Programs for Teaching** – Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATARs) for entry to teacher education programs continue to fall overall yet vary widely, from less than 45 - various early admission and local 'bonus' schemes can see ATARs fall even lower - to over 90 (Preiss & Butt, 2013). . While undergraduate programs continue to exist (see 1. above), in line with leading international educational performing nations, we need to draw our teacher candidates from no lower than the top 30% of school leavers, and preferably the top 25%. ATARs, whilst a good predictor of general tertiary achievement, do however need to be augmented by other measures built on known predictors and attributes of success as a teacher candidate and teacher. Where candidates cannot meet minimum standards for admission, bridging programs need to be provided to enable candidates to demonstrate capability at the standard required. Universities and other providers must not be permitted 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 low ATARs. (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.)

4. **Allocate Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) for Teaching Based on National Teacher Supply and Demand data** – To control present over-supply in some areas (e.g., primary, secondary humanities), universities should not be permitted to arbitrarily over-enrol teacher education candidates. This situation has a direct impact on lowering entry scores and the status of teaching, which in turn can deter higher quality candidates. This will require Commonwealth, State/Territory, profession and employer agreement as to setting targeted CSP quotas for courses along with minimum entry standards (see 4. above) as currently occurs with places in professional training for fields such as medicine and dentistry (Dinham, 2013a). 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). Reducing primary CSP places would both free up resources to target areas of shortage and lead to higher entry standards for primary teaching.
5. **Make Teacher education Programs Evidence-Based and designed on World's Best Practice** – National teacher course accreditation processes being developed by AITSL (2011c) need to be rigorously and consistently applied to assure quality of programs, as measured by impact on teacher quality and student learning. New entrants to teacher education such as TAFE colleges need careful scrutiny e.g., around supply and demand and meeting 'top 30%' literacy and numeracy requirements. Teacher education programs which cannot demonstrate acceptable minimum levels of impact on teaching and learning should be dis-endorsed.
6. **Operationalise Teacher Certification at the Highly Accomplished and Lead Levels of the National Professional Teaching Standards** – Current lock-step incremental salary structures see teachers' salaries peak too soon and at too low a level at a time when salaries for the most able practitioners in other professions are rising steeply. Current performance assessment methods have low impact, with very few teachers found to be under-performing or indeed exceptional. Valid, reliable, developmental assessment processes need to be implemented to inform, recognise and reward teacher accomplishment. Assessors need to be fully trained. Assessment and certification of teachers needs to be meshed with salary and promotion structures and consistent with the Australian Performance and Development Framework (AITSL, 2012). This will require new industrial agreements and awards. Simplistic forms of 'performance pay' don't work (Dinham, 2012a). We need a professional standards-based salary and career structure fit for a profession (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008; Dinham, 2011).
7. **Don't permit or require Teachers to teach 'out of field'** – AITSL, ATRA (Australasian Teacher regulatory Authorities) and employers need to ensure that teachers are only teaching subjects/levels for which they are trained, qualified and registered. This is a particular problem with subjects such as mathematics and science, in rural and regional areas and in junior secondary education. PISA in 2009 reported that around 30% and 24% of Australian 15 year old students are taught by unqualified mathematics and science teachers respectively, with the

OECD average for each being only 18% (Productivity Commission, 2012). Low entry standards coupled with out of area teaching is a recipe for lowering student achievement.

8. **Introduce Specialisation into Primary Teaching** – What is expected of the generalist primary teacher is becoming untenable. As a first step there needs to be specialised primary teacher training in mathematics and science. Graduates of these programs can then work alongside existing generalist teachers both in team-teaching and release modes. Research on the need for quality teaching of mathematics and science in the primary years is compelling in terms of student attitudes and later accomplishment in the secondary years. It is evident that some primary teachers have modest levels of previous achievement, confidence and competence in the teaching of mathematics and science, yet they will be teaching students with high potential in these subjects (Dinham, 2007).
9. **Provide Universal Access to Quality Early Childhood Education and Introduce Literacy Coaches at all levels of Schooling**– We know that there are wide ranges in students' literacy development at entry to primary school and that such gaps can widen progressively through primary and into secondary education. Providing universal access to quality early childhood education is a crucial step to addressing disadvantage. Literacy is the currency of education and foundational evidence-based teaching of literacy in the early years needs to be augmented by on-going assessment and remediation by trained staff K/P/R-12. Literacy also needs to be addressed consistently across the curriculum. Once again, research on the importance of literacy to overall student achievement is compelling (Hattie, 2009).
10. **Target and provide professional learning to support the above** – Teachers' professional learning has a large demonstrated impact on student learning. Strong, effective, evidence-based professional learning, including thorough grounding in clinical and instructional leadership (McLean Davies, et al., 2013; Dinham, 2012b) needs to be provided en masse, possibly nationally by consortia on a contract basis in the case of in-service, and consistent with assessment/development processes against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011a; 2011b). It will also be essential to evaluate and research the impact of such professional learning on teacher and leadership effectiveness and student outcomes.

Conclusion

We are at a crucial point in our development as a country and national initiatives around enhancing the quality of teaching since 2007 have been substantial and significant. We 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. This is not helped 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 duplication, mistrust and competition and there are worrying signs that the national initiatives and agreements are pulling apart (Dinham, 2013b).

We need to be cognisant of decades of empirical work rather than dismissive. We know what good teacher education programs, good teaching, good educational leadership and good schools look like. 'Thus, the major challenge in improving teaching lies not so much in identifying and describing quality teaching, but in developing structures and approaches that ensure widespread use of

successful teaching practices: to make best practice, common practice' (Dinham Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008).

We need to stop looking for quick fix solutions which have been found wanting elsewhere.

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

Australia still performs well on international measures of student achievement but there are worrying signs of slippage. The equity gap is also too wide. If we fail to act decisively to address the crucial issue of teacher quality then we can expect this slide to continue. Our first step is to address the quality of entrants to teaching and the quality of teacher education programs.

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