

Dr Nicole Mockler

Submission Number: 13
Date Received: 13/02/2013



7 February 2013
Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write in response to the invitation to make a submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012.

This submission relates primarily to Section 7 of the Bill, namely the Reform Directions for the National Plan (Section 7), and specifically to the subsections relating to Quality Teaching (7.1), Quality Learning (7.2) and Transparency and Accountability (7.4). My comments are based upon my professional knowledge within the field of education, having been a classroom teacher, school leader and teacher educator for the past 20 years. In 2008 I was awarded my PhD in Education based on my study of teacher professional identity, and I have written and researched quite broadly over the past decade on teachers' work and professional learning, having produced in this time over 20 books, book chapters and journal articles related to these areas.

Quality Teaching

The text of the Bill states:

All teachers will have the skills, and support they require, to improve their performance over time and to deliver teaching of a high quality to all of their school students. The work of teachers will:

- (a) reflect rigorous professional standards and best practice; and*
- (b) be based on evidence of successful teaching methods.*

The provision of teaching of a high quality to all students is not merely a question of skill acquisition for teachers. Good teaching is highly contextual and responsive to local needs, and based upon the exercise of well honed and finely tuned professional judgement on the part of teachers. The development of teacher professional judgement and of teachers who are confident in their own judgement needs to be at the centre of professional learning endeavours in order to develop teachers with the capacity to truly provide "teaching of a high quality to all of their students".

Furthermore, good teacher professional learning is:

- ▶ inquiry-based, supporting teachers to ask good questions at the local level of their practice and to collect evidence in and beyond their own classrooms;
- ▶ collegial, providing a framework for teachers to engage together in critical conversations about practice and develop strategies for change and improvement; and
- ▶ explicitly focused on developing a deep and shared understanding of pedagogy and curriculum.

Recent Australian research has shown a sound link between such approaches to professional learning and improved student learning outcomes, as measured using a range of different means including standardised test results (Bowe and Gore, 2012).

Quality teaching is at least as much about teachers' dispositions and the quality of their relationships with their students as it is about a bundle of skills and competencies that might be expressed in 'rigorous professional standards' and packaged as 'best practice'. As noted above, good teaching is highly contextual, and the notion that we might devise a set of technical competencies that represents 'what works' in schools and classrooms to be implemented across different school contexts is unhelpful if what we are after is teaching that will lead to high quality learning for all students. Far better would be the cultivation of an understanding on the part of the community that good teaching is about responding in different ways to different learners at different times, appropriate to their learning needs - to be comfortable with this as a society we need to understand and value teacher professional judgement, remembering Michael Power's observation that "the most pressing and most unpredictable problems cannot be solved without the effective marshalling of expert knowledge and judgement" (2007, p.42).

Some years ago, Susan Groundwater-Smith and I wrote at length on this issue and the impact of the erosion of teacher professional judgement on teachers and their work:

...hand in hand with the intensification of teachers' work over the past 15 years has come an unwillingness to trust what is seen as the 'subjectivity' or teacher professional judgement in favour of more 'objective' measures such as standardised testing and other forms of competitive assessment. If the human dimension of education is to be acknowledged and valued, the reclaiming of teacher professional judgement as a trusted and respected tool, developed through and based upon reflection on and in professional knowledge and practice, is critical. Understanding that teacher professional judgement is more than a random grab bag of 'ideas' and 'feelings' based upon casual and formal interactions with students and other stakeholders is a significant element of this reclaiming, and this part of the gap will only be closed when the current orthodoxy of objectivity and standardisation is questioned and critiqued in the public forum (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009, p. 138).

At the current crossroads of Australian education, we need to remember that education is not a set of standardised or standardisable practices. It is at its heart a messy and human business, that relies on teachers' capacities to respond to learners' needs, agile in their decision making and sound in their judgement.

Quality Learning

The text of the Bill states:

Australian schooling will provide a high quality educational experience with an environment and curriculum that supports all school students to reach their full potential.

As the F-10 Overview to the Curriculum states:

The Australian Curriculum describes a learning entitlement for each Australian student ... It acknowledges that the needs and interests of students will vary, and that schools and teachers will plan from the curriculum in ways that respond to those needs and interests. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013).

Both the Bill and the Overview to the Australian Curriculum, then, recognise that one size does not and cannot fit all. Supporting all students to reach their full potential and providing classroom experiences that respond to the individual needs and interests of students requires teachers to effectively differentiate learning for their students, a practice that once again relies on professional judgement.

Reaching this goal relies on teachers who have well-grounded confidence and faith in their own good judgement in order to make well-informed decisions about how to tailor teaching to their students on an individual and collective level. Again, it demands professional learning that values teacher professional judgement and a commitment to the kinds of professional autonomy that make it possible for teachers to design appropriate learning experiences for their students.

Transparency and Accountability

Care needs to be taken to ensure that this Reform Direction does not actively undermine and provide an obstacle to the achievement of Quality Teaching and Quality Learning. Evidence from Australia and elsewhere suggests that the cultures of audit and accountability in education represented in the 'transparency' agenda of which MySchool is a key technology, work in some ways against quality teaching and learning (e.g. Au, 2009; Taubman, 2009; Thompson, 2012). In some contexts, the pressure brought to bear on teachers and students because of the possibility of public 'naming and shaming' of schools on the MySchool website has caused a narrowing of curricular and pedagogical experiences in the name of concentrating efforts on improvements in NAPLAN results. Others are no doubt better placed than I to discuss this at length, but my concern here is that we ensure that transparency and accountability operate in such a way as to recognise that teachers' primary accountability is to their students and their students' families.

It sometimes appears that humans are hard-wired to love comparisons and league tables, such as those provided by and generated from the MySchool website. We need to be careful, however, in the way we share data and recognise that just because data *can* be shared and used for purposes of comparison in a myriad of ways, does not mean that it necessarily should be. Furthermore, the transparency and accountability agenda risks undermining community and parental trust in teachers and their judgement, which, linked to the discussion above, is critically important for the provision of quality teaching and learning. A balance needs to be struck here which satisfies reasonable accountability desires while not undermining the social trust required for teachers and schools to educate young Australians to the best of their abilities.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representatives Inquiry.

Yours Faithfully,

Nicole Mockler, BEd(Hons), MA, PhD

References

- Au, W. (2009). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012). The Australian Curriculum: F-10 Overview. Retrieved January 6, 2013, from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Curriculum/Overview>.
- Bowe, J. M. and J. M. Gore (2012). 'Reassembling teacher professional learning'. Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Vancouver, Canada, April 2012.
- Groundwater-Smith, S. & Mockler, N. (2009). *Teacher Professional Learning in an Age of Compliance: Mind the Gap*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Power, M. (2007). *Organized Uncertainty: Designing a World of Risk Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taubman, P. M. (2009). *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, G. (2012). *Effects of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy): Executive Summary*. Murdoch, WA: Murdoch University. Retrieved October 10, 2012 from <http://www.effectsofnaplan.edu.au>