

From: Mr James Hurley

13 April 2005

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing in response to the terms of reference for the enquiry into educational and vocational training currently being held. As a teacher of 15 years' experience with the NSW department of School Education I would like to contribute my views based on my own experiences and observation of the current system. I hasten to add that the following views are entirely my own and no one else should be held responsible for them.

With respect to your terms of reference:

(1) and (2) Selecting prospective student teachers and attracting high quality candidates to teaching: When selecting students for teacher training it is necessary to select high quality students. Unfortunately, because of lower remuneration than other professionals and a general loss of respect for teachers and other authority figures in society, teaching is simply not attracting the best people for the job. Even when I graduated in 1990 this was true. I was an exception in that my HSC score qualified me to study Arts or Science at the University of Melbourne if I so wished, but I chose teaching against all sorts of advice. Today the situation is even worse. Part of the problem is that high quality candidates will opt for careers which offer more money. Another part of the problem is that being a teacher is not seen as being a true professional in the same way as being a doctor, lawyer or engineer is. Teachers must be treated as true experts in their field who know far more about education than anyone else does.

With respect to term (4), the selection of education faculty members:

Unfortunately, many of the members of educational faculties are people who retreated there after failing to cope with classroom situations. The result is that our student teachers are being trained by people who have already shown that they do not have the skills to manage a primary or secondary classroom. My suggested solution would be to second outstanding classroom teachers who would continue to practice in their schools. They may work for 3 days per week in their school and 2 days per week at their tertiary institution. At the moment, even the rare competent classroom teacher who becomes a teacher trainer soon loses their sense of reality of what can be achieved in a classroom through lack of exposure.

With respect to (5): What should be taught in a teacher training course: There is not enough basic training in the "how" of planning a lesson or unit of work before student teachers have to do their first teaching rounds. I remember two student teachers at a high school where I was teaching coming to do their teaching rounds and they hadn't even been taught how to plan a lesson! Obviously it is hard for student teachers to get exposure to classroom situations when they are not actually on teaching rounds, but I would propose as much "workshopping" of difficult incidents as possible to give student teachers some experience and an idea of how to handle these events when they happen.

With respect to (7): the various things which present day teachers have to deal with: it simply takes a long time to become a teacher. I would propose a 2 year diploma of education with a lot more teaching rounds (and many more contact hours per week) for a start. Even this will not make a student teacher completely ready: like most other demanding professions it takes years before you are even competent at the job.

With respect to (9) the current split between primary and secondary teacher training: it is probably appropriate given that the two jobs are very different. Primary teachers are generalists who need to have a basic understanding of every subject taught, whereas secondary teachers are specialists in a certain subject area. Also, the age of the children in each area means that different methods of teaching must be used.

With respect to (10) how ongoing professional development of teachers can be improved: at the moment, a lot of consultants who were not even competent classroom teachers are being employed to run courses. Last year I attended a course which (I hoped!) would help me to implement the new syllabus for stages 4 and 5 (Years 7 to 10) in Mathematics in NSW. Our consultant wasted the day by showing us a way of teaching Pythagoras' Theorem. Although there are, no doubt, many different ways of teaching this important concept and I am not unhappy to be presented with a new one, 15 minutes would suffice. As it was, I had already seen this particular method and I didn't even think it was particularly good!

I hope that the views I have outlined above give you an insight into the feelings of a practicing classroom teacher. Thank you for giving me the chance to be heard.

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