

CHAPTER 4 PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS' STATUS

This Chapter considers the perceptions of teachers' status:

- in the general community
- among parents
- among students
- among teachers themselves.

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Community attitudes to schools and teachers are difficult to categorise. They are not uniform. As a generalisation, those most familiar with teachers' work are most supportive of them. However, many do not appear to translate their positive views of individual teachers known to them to the profession as a whole. A number of recent surveys have illustrated the paradox whereby members of the public can speak highly of their local school and teachers **while at the same time** disparaging schools and teachers in general.

We found that our sample [of community members in rural and regional areas of central western NSW] consistently suggested that most teachers are incredibly hardworking and highly skilled professionals. However, they claimed that the community perception of teachers was still one which saw teachers working 'short hours' and having 'long holidays'. The local scene it seemed was generally viewed positively while the broader system was not necessarily seen in this light.¹

Witnesses from Tasmania discussed recent work there which had reached similar conclusions.

1 E J Hatton, R Meyenn, J Parker, J Sutton, M Gard, & K Maher. *The Status of Teaching in Rural and Regional Areas: Selected Themes*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association, July 1997, Yeppoon p 5

The most important finding from this group of questions is the trend that the closer the respondent is to the schools, the higher the rating.²

There is an interesting distinction that is made in people's minds that when they are asked about the quality of schools and of teachers and they are asked about their local school, they speak very highly of it. If they are asked about government schools in Australia as a whole then that rating drops in the order of 25 or 30 per cent.³

The discrepancy between public perceptions of individual teachers and public perceptions of teachers in general was attributed by many Inquiry participants to negative reporting and stereotyping by the media. The following excerpt is typical of the sentiments expressed on this issue.

Teachers and schools receive mostly negative publicity. Rarely are media representatives witness to the caring, commitment, dedication and long hours put into the job by teachers, much of which takes place in their leisure time and all of which goes virtually unseen by the community as a whole. Yet let there be a whisper of industrial action, or let some teacher commit an offence, and the media are on the spot, and the profession as a whole is publicly denigrated.⁴

The adverse impact of the media on community perceptions of the status of teachers, and especially media coverage of industrial disputes, was an issue of great concern to Inquiry participants. It will be discussed in more detail in the next Chapter.

Community perceptions of teachers and the teaching profession were also considered to have been negatively affected by the increasing politicisation of education and the scapegoating of teachers by politicians for short term political advantage. The following excerpt is again included to provide a flavour of the views expressed to the Committee. The impact of the politicisation of education on the status of teachers will also be discussed in the following Chapter.

2 W Mulford, M Myhill, C a'Court and F Harrison. *Attitudes Towards Government Schools and Education*. University of Tasmania School of Education, Research in Progress Report No 1, August 1997, p 8

3 *Transcript of evidence*, Hobart, 9 October 1997, p 549 (Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania)

4 Submission no 64, vol 2, p 175 (Mrs Grey, NSW)

If Ministers of Education were prepared to adopt a less adversarial role in their public pronouncements, and if they were prepared to learn - and acknowledge - what the roles teachers perform in the schools of this decade actually *are*, and how hard they are required to work, perhaps the public perception of teachers would improve.⁵

The ambiguity in community attitudes to schools and education may in part reflect a lack of clarity or consensus on their role, and on the boundary between parental and school responsibility for children's education. Some people believe the primary (or perhaps sole) purpose of schools is to provide an academic education. Others think it is to develop well-rounded, well-socialised individuals. In recent years there has been an increased focus on vocational education and the role of schools in equipping students for jobs in later life. Another recent phenomenon is the perception of schools as welfare centres with teachers providing health and welfare services as well as education, in the absence of adequate provision by parents and cutbacks to community support services.

One consequence of the lack of community consensus on the role of schools has been to require schools to do more of everything without a commensurate increase in resources and support. Indeed, in most cases these have been reduced rather than increased. Nor have teachers been able to delete existing subjects or activities from the curriculum in order to accommodate the new ones. (More detailed consideration of the issue of the 'crowded curriculum' is included in Chapter 6.)

Inevitably when community expectations are so great, and often so unrealistic, teachers are not always able to fulfil them. This causes stress and frustration for teachers and strengthens community perceptions, fostered by the media, that teachers are failing our young people.

To some extent, teachers have been handed an impossible task, being expected to be the miracle workers of modern society, an unrealistic expectation which ultimately results in guilt and strain

5 Submission no 184, vol 8, p 36 (Ms Geeson, Vic)

when teachers and schools cannot deliver all that is demanded of them.⁶

Another factor contributing to a lessening of respect for teachers is the increasing demands of their task with unrealistic expectations. No longer are teachers just expected to teach students academic subjects. We expect schools to be the agents for solving all the ills of society. Sex education, drug education, road safety, fitness, nutrition, interpersonal relationships, socio-economic disadvantage, unemployment are all seen as the responsibility of schools. When teachers fail to solve the problems associated with these - as fail they must because education is only one part of the solution - society is quick to blame the teachers.⁷

Another factor affecting the low status of teachers among some sectors of the community was thought by many witnesses to be people's lack of understanding and appreciation of the complexity of teaching in the 1990s.

I believe that in dealing with the issue of the status of teaching we are dealing with the challenge of managing perceptions. In trying to manage those perceptions we need to look particularly at informing the community about what the nature of teaching and learning is in classrooms today.

... The community, by and large, still tends to view teaching and learning as being similar to their experience of 30 or 40 years ago when the teacher was the expert who delivered the content. Now it has dramatically changed.⁸

The fact that everyone has been to school encourages firm opinions from most people on education and teachers. Many such views, however, are based on conditions of a bygone era; society has changed, schools have changed and teaching has changed. Related

6 Dr Steve Dinham, Dr Catherine Scott. *Modelling Teacher Satisfaction: Findings from 892 Teaching Staff at 71 Schools*. Report to American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 1997, p 17

7 Submission no 262, vol 13, p 147 (NSW Federation of School Community Organisations)

8 *Transcript of evidence*, Hobart, 9 October 1997, p 502 (Tasmanian Secondary Principals' Association)

to this is a relatively low level of appreciation of the demands and complexity of teaching...⁹

A number of witnesses suggested that the misconceptions persist because the community is not aware of teachers' contributions outside school hours.

This view [of teaching as a job requiring minimal training, with many holidays and short working hours] is compounded by the situation where the teachers' preparation and evaluation is done at home, out of community view. The community perceives only the actual class teaching time, but not the time outside the children's attendance, as 'teaching'.¹⁰

Whatever the reason for the persistence of this view it is certainly undermining of the status of the profession. Yet, as a number of submissions pointed out, one must question the sincerity with which such critical views are held given that rarely do these critics ever feel tempted into the profession to enjoy the benefits about which they wax so lyrical.

Despite the commonly voiced opinion that teaching is a breeze, working 8am-3pm with 12 weeks holiday a year, few people are rushing to join our ranks.¹¹

...within our (NT) public service, people are encouraged to gain experience in areas other than their normal one. To date, although many teachers have applied for work experience outside of teaching, not one person from the public service has sought out teaching as an alternative to their normal work area.¹²

One reason suggested for the low status accorded to the teaching profession is that it lacks the mystique associated with professions with which people are less familiar. After all, everybody has been to school so they think they know what teaching is all about.

9 Submission no 224, vol 11, p 19 (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria)

10 Submission no 275, vol 14 (Early Childhood Teachers' Association, Qld)

11 Submission no 240, vol 12, p 49 (Maningrida Community Education Centre, Australian Education Union, NT Branch)

12 Submission no 176, vol 7, p 149 (Mr Shorter, NT)

Teaching is a mass profession not an elite profession as with medical practitioners or lawyers. As well the teaching profession suffers from the fact that everyone has been to school and therefore has an opinion about what they think schools should be like - albeit an opinion based on childhood and adolescent experiences from a past era.¹³

Teachers' status is also likely to suffer, in comparison with that of some other professions, because of the relatively large number of teachers. They lack 'scarcity' value. Their work is also much more open to public scrutiny than is that of many professionals.

Unlike some high status professionals, teachers are also particularly numerous, there being approximately 250,000 Australia-wide. There is a perception that the visibility of teaching practice (since everyone has been through school) tends to render teaching knowledge and skills "knowable" and therefore, to many in the community, less "professional".¹⁴

Over the past thirty years the number of teachers in the community has dramatically increased... Teachers are a very visible part of almost all communities and it is a profession which is seen as within reach of very many within society. Society as a whole is now considerably better educated than it was thirty or forty years ago and teachers are not so revered by the rest of the community as they used to be.¹⁵

The Victorian Council of Deans sees the size of the teaching force as a cause for celebration, reflecting the success of our education system, just as our ageing population reflects the success of our health system.

The lessening of the status of the teaching profession in the latter part of this century is a consequence, in part, of the success of the education system. Teachers no longer stand out in the community as educated professionals, as there are now many and diverse

13 Submission no 231, vol 11, p 97 (Australian Curriculum Studies Association Inc)

14 Submission no 271, vol 14, p 148 (Government of Victoria)

15 Submission no 262, vol 13, p 147 (NSW Federation of School Community Organisations)

professionals in the community who compare favourably with teachers in terms of education, salaries and influence.¹⁶

The decline in university entrance requirements for intending teachers may, to the extent that the community is aware of it, strengthen or confirm their view of the low status of teachers compared with that of other professions with higher entrance requirements. This issue is discussed in Chapter 7.

The general view expressed in evidence to the Committee and in the literature is that the status of teachers in rural areas tends to be higher than it is in urban areas, although it has also declined over time, as a result of many of the same factors referred to above, which affect rural as well as urban schools.

The following extracts from submissions point to the factors contributing to the higher status of rural teachers. They also indicate factors limiting that status.

Teachers generally are held in high regard in country communities. They are often a "role model" - in many cases someone to set the standards, regarded by many as a diplomat and leader.

...country teachers often have more 'out of school' responsibilities within rural communities and can suffer loss of esteem within the community if they fail to meet up to the standards and expectations placed upon them.¹⁷

Perceptions of urban and rural communities regarding schools can differ, due to:

rural media reports are more likely to be positive towards education, particularly in highlighting the local school's successes

rural families often have a more personal relationship with local teachers; thus feedback can be frequent and fast

16 Submission no 62, vol 2, p 159 (Victorian Council of Deans)

17 Submission no 243, vol 12, pp 79-80 (Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia)

shortcomings of the system can be very obvious, eg lack of access to specialised assessment procedures for students with special needs, lack of system support services for such students...¹⁸

A number of witnesses made the interesting observation that community attitudes to schools and teachers reflected more general community perceptions of the state of society. In their view, when people were optimistic and secure about general societal developments they were likely to be supportive of schools and teachers, which they saw as projecting and encouraging those developments. But today many people are perplexed by the rapidity of social change and confused as to its likely future direction. Schools and teachers perhaps reflect that lack of certainty. In turn they are blamed by the community for failing to provide the direction it so badly craves.

As a group of principals, we wonder then whether or not how the community feels about teachers is directly related to how people perceive society to be going, and that when society is seen to be on track then so too are schools and teachers.¹⁹

...we indicate that from Bill's [Professor Mulford] research, the community seems to be most positive about teachers and teaching when employment levels in the community are high, when violence is contained, when the community is well informed about current issues in education, when there are high levels of community participation in school matters and when they are funded adequately. To some extent, I guess schools and teachers might be the fall guys for other ills in the community.²⁰

If this is indeed the case then it represents a severe handicap for teachers hoping to improve their standing in the community. However, the limited research available on community attitudes to teachers suggests that the picture is not as bleak as many teachers suppose. The (former) Australian Teaching Council commissioned some research on this issue in 1995. It concluded:

18 Submission no 266, vol 14, p 21 (NSW Primary Principals' Association)

19 *Transcript of evidence*, Sydney, 29 August 1997, p 4 (Sydney South West Primary Principals' Forum)

20 *Transcript of evidence*, Hobart, 9 October 1997, p 549 (Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania)

What is striking... is teachers' conviction that the community thinks badly of them. The reality is that there exists a range of opinions about teachers, with those closest to the teaching process holding the most positive views.²¹

Other surveys and polls also suggest that, while variable, community views of schools and teachers are in fact quite favourable. A 1996 study commissioned by the Northern Territory Government, for example, found that 82.7% of respondents indicated they were either 'very satisfied', 'quite satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with Northern Territory education services.²² This was very similar to the findings of an earlier study conducted in the Northern Territory in 1993-94.

These findings are consistent with the those of the recent Tasmanian survey referred to earlier,²³ which found that 48% of all respondents gave Tasmanian government schools statewide an A or B rating (out of five possible ratings, with A being the highest); for local schools the figure was 63%. Two thirds of these respondents considered teacher quality a major contributor to their high rating.

All of this would suggest that there is at least some basis for improving perceptions of teachers and teaching among those sectors of the community who are ill informed about, or disparaging of, teachers' work, and for further enhancing the already favourable views held by many in the community. The media, politicians and bureaucrats can all assist, and the following chapters will suggest means by which this might be done. Teachers themselves also have a responsibility to improve community perceptions, especially through greater efforts to communicate with their local communities.

The sometimes poor communication between schools and the communities in which they operate, and the desirability of improving links between them was referred to in evidence to the Committee and in the general literature.

21 Australian Teaching Council. *What do teachers think?* Sydney, 1995, p 1

22 Submission no 298, vol 18, p 60 (Northern Territory Department of Education)

23 W Mulford, M Myhill, C a'court and F Harrison. *Attitudes Towards Government Schools and Education*. University of Tasmania School of Education, Research in Progress Report No 1, August 1997

... it is probably equally true that teachers and schools have kept the community at arm's length over time, with authentic, representative community involvement yet to be achieved in many instances. Thus to some extent, some teachers and schools have probably been their own 'worst enemies' in the areas of community misconceptions and criticism. It should also be acknowledged that there are no doubt some members of the community who have no desire to be involved in schools, for whatever reasons, and are happy to leave the education of students and the running of schools to school staff and the DSE.²⁴

The relationship between teachers/schools and the community is a sadly neglected area in most teacher education programs. It should be a compulsory component of all teacher training programs and accorded the importance it deserves, given that the centrality to successful educational outcomes of a cooperative approach to education by teachers, parents, students and community is generally acknowledged. (This issue is discussed in Chapter 7)

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

Parents' perceptions of teachers and their work are a microcosm of those of the general community. Attitudes range from downright hostility, through indifference to strong support. As in the broader community, parents with the closest contact with their children's school tend to be most supportive of its teachers.

Parents seemed to agree with the public's perception of teachers in general, but tended to have more positive views of the teachers they had closer associations with.

There was a feeling that, the closer parents get to the actual business of teaching in schools, the more they appreciate and respect their teachers (although there were some exceptions)²⁵

24 Dr Steve Dinham, Dr Catherine Scott. *The Teacher 2000 Project: A Study of Teacher Satisfaction, Motivation and Health*. University of Western Sydney, December 1996, p 63

25 Australian Teaching Council. *What do teachers think?* Sydney, 1995, p 11

The Committee received a number of submissions from parents who recognised and valued the contribution of teachers. The following excerpt, from a mother of children with disabilities, provides a particular perspective.

Teachers have a pivotal role in child development as well as formal education. They have to pick up the pieces in the lives of children who may have little support or stability. They may be the only caring person in a child's life.

...Teachers may be supporting the only developmental program a disabled child has, because of funding cuts of services to the disabled. They are under pressure to fill the gaps left by inadequate support of disabled children by other government departments.²⁶

Again, as with the general community, parental attitudes to teachers are influenced to a significant degree by the media.

Parents and the community continue to be alarmed at what is happening "in schools", but highly supportive of their local school. According to NSW DSE statistics, students are ten times safer in schools than they are in their own homes and local communities. The danger of the media image is that of the pygmalion effect: of the image becoming the substance.²⁷

Parents also demonstrate the curious dichotomy of views referred to earlier in connection with community attitudes whereby they can be very supportive of their own children's teachers, and appreciative of their efforts, while at the same time appearing to subscribe to a stereotypical view of teachers as bludgers with easy jobs.

On the one hand, many parents in my experience, refer to the admiration that they hold for most teachers in having to cope and deal with the type of pressures that confront so many young adults. On the other hand they will also often refer to the perception that teachers enjoy an abundance of holidays and remarkably short working hours, implying it would seem that many teachers are quite indolent.²⁸

26 Submission no 168, vol 7, pp 50-51 (Mrs Matthews, SA)

27 Submission no 217, vol 10, p 77 (The Australian College of Education, NSW Chapter)

28 Submission no 192, vol 9, p 17 (Mr Huggard, Vic)

Parents' attitudes to teachers reflect in large part their own experiences of school and of teachers. Where these were favourable, parents themselves are generally very supportive of teachers. The reverse is also the case.

My experience is that parental expectations are very frequently derived from the parents' own school experiences. Where these were relatively happy and productive, the parents tend to be supportive of teachers and their actions, even in dealing with difficult behavioural incidents such as drug use at school.

Where parents have not had much experience of secondary education, or have unhappy memories of their days at high school, it is much harder to establish common understandings of school operations and processes, particularly where younger adolescents are concerned.²⁹

A number of recent surveys³⁰ point to relatively high levels of parental satisfaction with teachers and schools. But it is also the case that many parents seem not to be able or willing to engage with the school once the child's enrolment has taken place. Evidence presented to the Committee by some teachers suggested a high degree of parental apathy.

When our school presents parent teacher evenings (induction, information, reporting etc) the percentage of parents that actually attend is very low. Those that do attend usually are from the more professional sector of our community who generally have higher expectations for their children or see education as highly valuable.³¹

Parental involvement appears to be higher in primary than in secondary schools. Parents may feel less intimidated by primary schools. They are better able to relate to what happens there, and primary schools are smaller and usually situated within the local area. But lack of involvement at the secondary level may, in some cases at least, result from discouragement by the students concerned.

29 Submission no 147, vol 6, p 83 (Ms Stokes, NT)

30 Dr Tony Townsend, *Survey of school councils, teachers and parents in a representative sample of Schools of the Future*, 1996 and Education Coalition, *Parents and the LAP*. February 1997

31 Submission no 176, vol 7, p 149 (Mr Shorter, NT)

It is a reality that parent involvement in secondary schools is less than it is in primary schools. I do not think it is from a lack of desire on the part of the parents; in many cases, parents stand off from any involvement in secondary schools because their students do not want them to be involved. There is a cultural perception amongst their peers that it is not cool to be seen at school.³²

The Committee received conflicting evidence on the impact of socioeconomic status on parental support and involvement. Some submissions claimed that parents in lower socioeconomic groups were most anxious for their children to succeed and most supportive of teachers' efforts on their children's behalf. Others considered that parental support and involvement was highest among those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who understood more about the role of teachers and were often themselves beneficiaries of the education system.

There appears to be some association between parental attitudes towards teachers and socioeconomic status. While not, of course, universally true, it is often the case that working class parents are more appreciative of the teacher's efforts whereas parents from higher socioeconomic levels can be more demanding.³³

While there was a general consensus in the evidence presented to the Committee that most parents are either supportive of teachers or indifferent to them - a view supported in general literature - this evidence also showed that a very small number of parents are openly hostile and/or aggressive towards their children's teachers. Their impact on teachers is out of all proportion to their numbers. They are a major contributor to teacher stress and to declining morale - both directly and indirectly through the influence they exert on their children. The following excerpts are typical of the experiences described by teachers. Similar reports were provided from all States and Territories and from all types of schools.

One of the most stressful issues facing teachers, which I believe is really shaking many teachers and school administrators to their roots, is what we are calling the aggressive parent syndrome. We can tell you lots of stories about parents coming to the classroom and

32 *Transcript of evidence*. Brisbane, 10 September 1997, p 171 (Mr McLay)

33 Submission no 224, vol 11, p 19 (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria)

literally abusing the teacher in front of the children in school. It is becoming more and more common. Once that happens as you are taking the kids into school at a quarter to nine your day is blown, as you can imagine.³⁴

"Vexatious" parents are a growing breed. These parents are often vocal, abusive and threatening in putting their point of view both privately and publicly. Such comment is frequently difficult to combat and further undermines the role of individual teachers in particular and the profession in general. Teachers and schools rarely have an opportunity to reply to these criticisms.³⁵

A lot of those lower socioeconomic groups from my area have had previous problems themselves. They do not see us as anything but an authority figure to bash. 'Get on with the job. It is your job. You sort it out.' Quite often, if they are called to the school from the principal down, all of us face nothing but pent-up emotion, fury and, more often than not, abuse.³⁶

Allied to the anxiety caused to teachers by vexatious parents is the growing fear of litigation. To protect themselves teachers are reducing out of school hours contact with students and modifying their behaviour in the classroom. Fear of litigation was also mentioned in the evidence as a factor which discouraged men from taking up kindergarten or primary school teaching. The general student population therefore suffers, along with teachers, because of the threat of litigation or its implementation. (Many teachers were at pains to point out that they did not wish to see offending teachers protected. They were simply drawing attention to the large proportion of cases in which parents launched prosecutions without any evidence.) In these cases teachers are normally vindicated eventually but in the process their reputations, careers, self esteem and health are sometimes irreparably damaged.

The spectre of litigation is an unfortunate added burden teachers now have to shoulder, one that was not common in years gone by. A sad side effect of this is that teachers can no longer interact normally with all children in their classrooms. They have to keep in the back

34 *Transcript of evidence*, Townsville, 11 September 1997, p 306 (Catholic Education Office, Townsville)

35 Submission no 209, vol 10, p 4 (Sydney South West Principals' Forum)

36 *Transcript of evidence*, Darwin, 14 October 1997 (Australian Education Union, NT)

of their minds the knowledge that all they say and do may be reported, and sometimes misreported, to super-critical parents driven by motives of power and revenge. In recent years malicious and unfounded allegations of teacher misbehaviour have all but destroyed the unfortunate teachers' mental and physical health and have wrecked their teaching careers.³⁷

The increased eagerness of parents to sue teachers has greatly reduced the number of teachers taking sport in some schools. In certain cases, the fact that a student acted contrary to instruction does not seem to matter. The teacher is still held responsible.³⁸

While it is difficult to see how teachers can protect themselves from vexatious and litigious parents other than through the modifications to their teaching practice which they are already undertaking, it is essential that principals and education department staff provide far more support to teachers facing litigation than they have to date.

It would be unfortunate but not surprising if teachers facing a small number of cases of the aggressive parent syndrome tended to overlook or downplay the fact that most parents support them. This is particularly understandable given that the disgruntled minority are the most vocal (aided by the media) while those who are most supportive do not often express their support publicly. This certainly was the view of the Tasmanian Primary Principals' Association.

It is tempting to suggest, at this stage, that the concert of public criticism of public education does not involve the whole orchestra but only the loud instruments. The body of this orchestra, the general, broader public, contains a large number of parents who seem to be happy with their schools and teachers. They are perhaps not represented in the brass section of the concert.³⁹

Evidence presented to the Committee did not suggest any major differences in perceptions of teachers between rural and urban parents. In both, a wide spectrum of perceptions and attitudes was observable, ranging from the highly favourable to the totally obnoxious. However, one or two submissions suggested that, because the school was often a

37 Submission no 70, vol 3, p 18 (Ms Cowan, Qld)

38 Submission no 245, vol 12, p 123 (Anonymous teacher, Qld)

39 Submission no 114, vol 4, p 130 (Tasmanian Primary Principals' Association)

social and community centre in rural areas and parents were familiar with it, they were more likely to be in contact with teachers than their urban counterparts. This could be either beneficial or unwelcome, depending on the attitudes of the parents concerned. (The sometimes vulnerable position of female teachers in rural schools is discussed later in this Chapter.)

Tension between parents and teachers sometimes arise as a result of parents' unrealistic expectations of schools and teachers. In this, once again, parents mirror the unrealistic expectations of the general community.

Parents are conscious of the difficulties their children may face in obtaining jobs when they leave school. They recognise the importance of education in this process without acknowledging its limitations. Their anxiety about their children's futures translates into pressure upon their children's teachers to ensure that their children succeed. It is an impossible task but the expectation - implicit or explicit - by some parents can make the parent - teacher relationship a very difficult one.

Young people's futures have become increasingly dependent on educational success as requirements for educational credentials for employment purposes have escalated. When coupled with a high rate of social change, general economic uncertainty and an increasingly competitive employment market, pressure on individual schools and teachers to perform, in parents' terms, becomes more marked.⁴⁰

...parents seemed to be almost paranoid about outcomes and standards. They had become so much more competitive and placed more pressure on their children and therefore on the teachers to perform.⁴¹

In private schools, parents are sometimes even more demanding, believing that they have paid for results.

... when parents pay a school a lot of money for the educational services, they then believe that they are buying a product. It is not at all unusual for parents to come to the school or to the teacher with a

40 Schools Council. *Australia's Teachers. An Agenda for the Next Decade*. Canberra, 1997, p 17

41 Australian Teaching Council. *What do teachers think?* Sydney, 1997, p 9

comment, a criticism or a disappointment and say, 'Don't you forget that I am paying your salary.'

...That is a different sort of pressure. It builds a level of expectation that our schools have to learn to cope with to some extent - matching what parents are hoping they are providing for their children with what a school can realistically deliver to the children of those parents.⁴²

A further unrealistic expectation on the part of some parents is that teachers will provide the nurturing and social support which parents themselves have failed to provide. While many teachers do in fact make valiant efforts to assist children from dysfunctional families they are not trained for this role, which they undertake in **addition** to their normal teaching duties. In these circumstances they will in many cases be unable to fully meet the needs of the young people concerned. For this they are condemned, often by those parents whose children they are attempting to assist.

We have a society which, more and more, is delegating to schools and teachers, responsibilities which ought to lie firmly within a family. With the number of dysfunctional families increasing, schools increasingly find themselves obliged to provide breakfast, snacks and lunch, after school care, and counselling services in addition to the normal educational curriculum.

... Teachers and ancillary staff do not always feel competent or confident to deal effectively with these problems, but must do so nonetheless. Funding does not provide much in the way of support staff for students with problems of any kind - educational or social, yet for many children the school is the one secure, safe, and predictable place in their lives, the classroom teacher their one anchor and source of confidence and self-esteem.⁴³

Parents' perceptions of teachers have been influenced by a number of recent developments. Two of these, devolution and funding, will be discussed here in that context (and discussed more broadly later in the Report).

42 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 740 (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia)

43 Submission no 64, vol 2, pp 173-174 (Mrs Grey, NSW)

Ideally, devolution of decision making from central bureaucracies to schools should ensure that parents have greater involvement in decisions affecting their children and greater opportunities to familiarise themselves with curriculum issues and with teachers. Given that parents most familiar with their schools are generally most supportive of its teachers, this would seem to be an initiative likely to improve parent - teacher relationships and to enhance teacher status. In practice, devolution has fallen far short of this ideal. The following excerpt illustrates the position at one school, but similar stories could be told from schools all over the country.

The NT school system features considerable devolution and our school council is the major management body for our school. The council (which has a majority of parent members) deals with bottom line financing, maintenance, curriculum aspects, and some components of teacher assessment and selection. With this extensive involvement in the school, it is interesting to note that at the AGM, we are usually hard pressed to get a quorum (24) of parents (from a thousand students). Parents collectively do not see schools as their responsibility. Further, parents with the professional skills needed to properly manage the council business often make it clear that their skills are not available gratis when they can obtain consultation fees elsewhere.⁴⁴

The same submission conceded however that there were some benefits, to parents, from devolution.

However, it must be said that the devolution process has led to a greater parental involvement in school management. This has been attended by a corresponding reduction in services to schools by the NT Gov.⁴⁵

Devolution has been promoted as a means of encouraging parental involvement in school management and decision making but because it has been accompanied in some schools by a decline in government resourcing its effect has tended to be to limit parental involvement to fund raising. Far from enhancing parent - teacher relationships, this additional burden serves only to increase pressure on both parents and teachers. This process is most advanced in Victoria. It is no coincidence

44 Submission no 145, vol 7, p 150 (Mr Shorter, NT)

45 Ibid, p 150

therefore that most of the Committee's evidence about its adverse consequences also originated in Victoria.

Parents involved in fund-raising projects in the past did not have the same expectations placed on them as the current situation requires.... Today, schools publish the amount of funds they expect their fund-raising body to raise and where the funds will be allocated. Pressure on both parents and school community members to achieve these goals, the introduction of corporate sponsorship and school fees to try to bridge the gap, adds stress to teachers involved in fund-raising committees. Some parent groups feel that the school is placing unreasonable demands on them to raise funds, pay school fees and door knock local businesses to try to gain sponsorship or donations.⁴⁶

... the Voluntary Parent contribution has become a necessary payment and schools are requesting subject levies for core subjects, especially at VCE level. Parents are being required to organise a payment schedule if they are unable to pay these monies in full. Some schools, struggling to balance operating budgets, are subtly or blatantly pressuring parents to sign their EMA cheque over to the school to pay outstanding fees.⁴⁷

The factors influencing parents' attitudes to teachers, like those influencing attitudes in the community more generally, are to some extent beyond teachers' control. But some initiatives can be taken by teachers, or indeed by supportive parents. These relate to improving communication between parents and teachers and to increasing parental involvement in schools. Currently the degree and quality of such involvement is very variable but, on the basis of evidence provided to the Committee, it would seem to be generally inadequate.

There is considerable evidence that parents are not satisfied with the depth of the dialogue that takes place between home and school.⁴⁸

The results of interviews with parents of children at Townsville High School conducted by the staff of the School of Education at James Cook University, for example, were similar to views expressed in other

46 Submission no 145, vol 6, pp 68-69 (Ms Mahar, Vic)

47 Submission no 227, vol 11, p 43 (Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Vic)

48 Jane Figgis. *Designing a communication campaign to improve the status of teaching*. Unicorn, vol 23, no 2, July 1997, p 82

submissions and in the general literature. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with teachers at Townsville High School but high levels of dissatisfaction with parent -teacher communication.

- (i) All parents found communication with the school difficult and in important respects unsatisfactory.
 - (a) Information: school reports were brief and uninformative: that information concerning subject choices was inadequate and the decisions often taken prematurely.
 - (b) Procedures: routine parent-teacher interviews rushed and out of routine interviews difficult to arrange; it was difficult to be sure decisions made by parents, often in discussion with their children, were taken into consideration.⁴⁹

One member of a school council with 'an ideological commitment to state education' and 'a belief that teachers have a very difficult role to perform' wrote of her dissatisfaction with her experiences on the council in the following terms:

It is also obvious that teachers have never felt that they should be accountable or answerable in any way to the school community. Any challenge or criticism is taken personally so that any attempts to look at an issue objectively become impossible. This is where the lack of professionalism and the resistance to any form of responsiveness to community expectations is most obvious.⁵⁰

A number of reasons have been suggested⁵¹ for the failure to develop adequate links between teachers and parents. These include:

- the difficulty of communicating with a diverse, multicultural parent body

49 Submission no 138, vol 5, p 172 (School of Education, James Cook University, Qld)

50 Submission no 58, vol 2, p 136 (Mrs Moss, Vic)

51 For example, by Shirley Allen. *Parent-Teacher Partnerships: A Parent View of Purposes and Problems*. In *Teachers in Australian Schools: Issues for the 1990s* Lloyd Logan & Neil Dempster (eds), Australian College of Education, Canberra, 1992, pp 101-111 and Prof Andy Hargreaves. *The four ages of professionalism and professional learning*. In *Unicorn*, vol 23, no 2, July 1997, pp 86-114

- poor preparation and training of teachers for communicating with parents
- concern by teachers that parental involvement in school policy and curriculum development might usurp rather than complement their role
- lack of time and the pressure of immediate priorities for schools and parents
- lack of a real commitment by educational bureaucracies.

On this issue the noted Canadian educationalist, Professor Andy Hargreaves concludes:

The new relationships that teachers are having to form with parents is one of the greatest challenges to their professionalism in the postmodern age.⁵²

Improving Links with Parents

Given the joint responsibility of teachers and parents for successful educational outcomes, how might teachers improve links with parents?

The Schools Council emphasised the importance of regular and accurate reporting to parents.

The Council believes that much greater attention should be paid by schools to their processes of face-to-face and written reporting of student activities and achievements. This reporting should be accurate, honest and detailed and be in terms of what parents want to know rather than what teachers think they should know.⁵³

A number of submissions also referred to the importance of reporting to parents.

Reporting to parents to be improved, parents are treated as though they can't be trusted with real information about their own children. They have more right to this information than teachers and other service providers. Currently school reports resemble smokescreens

52 Andy Hargreaves. *The four ages of professionalism and professional learning*. In *Unicorn*, vol 23, no 2, July 1997, p 102

53 Schools' Council. *Australia's Teachers. An Agenda for the Next Decade*, 1996, p 136

which prevent parents knowing important information that they should be acting on.⁵⁴

The Committee recognises that some schools have comprehensive reporting mechanisms in place. Others do not. If these schools were able to improve their reporting arrangements to parents, and thus to strengthen communications between teachers and parents this would be a worthwhile investment of time and effort. This is also an initiative within the control of individual schools.

Parents can also assist in improving links with teachers and in ensuring that the value of their work is more widely understood. Several recent parent initiatives have been reported in the literature⁵⁵, such as International Teachers Day (ITD) and the National Excellence in Teaching Awards.

International Teachers Day began three years ago. It is organised jointly in Australia by the NSW Parents Council, the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations and the Council of Catholic School Parents. It holds events in communities and schools, such as breakfasts cooked for teachers by parents, speeches in appreciation of their work etc. Such events provide perfect media opportunities, the potential of which has not yet been fully explored. The primary purpose of ITD is to publicly recognise the work of teachers and, in this way, to contribute to improving the status of teachers in the community generally and among parents in particular.

The National Excellence in Teaching Award scheme began four years ago. It was an initiative of the Australian Scholarships Group, which was concerned about the negative images of the teaching profession being portrayed in the media. Nominations for primary teachers are submitted by parents, while both parents and students can nominate secondary teachers. Regional and national awards are presented and to date more than 6,000 teachers have been nominated for consideration. The main aim of the awards is to publicise good teaching practice and to overcome negative community perceptions of teachers. In the last few

54 Submission no 229, vol 11, p 91 (Ms O'Connor, Vic)

55 See, for example, Suzanne Kowalski. *Locating the positive*. In *Independent Education*, vol 27, no 2, August 1997, pp 22-23

years the awards have received increasing publicity. They are a good example of positive media portrayals of teachers.

Around the country there are local parent initiatives with similar aims to the national schemes referred to above. The Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) at Brigidine College in Randwick is an example of such a group. It informs parents about school and broader educational developments, maintains links between community, parents and teachers, promotes a positive image of teachers in the community and supports teachers in their work. A former president explained this latter aspect of its work as follows:

The PAC group tried for example, to acknowledge teachers by sending flowers, cards or giving chocolates after an open day or following other events where teachers had put in a lot of extra work, well beyond the call of duty. Teachers can get rundown and depressed and wonder if what they are doing is worth it so we felt it important to look for opportunities to say thanks.⁵⁶

A more focussed initiative is run by the South Australian Association of School Parents' Clubs Inc.

SSASPC, together with other parent organisations in South Australia, runs information sessions for parents on statements and profiles and on assessment and reporting, so parents know what pressures teachers are under. Quite often you get parents who are not otherwise involved in the school but they want to know what is being taught to their children within the curriculum. I believe this way we can help alleviate some of the problems that teachers have, because parents become aware of the pressures the teachers are under and why they have to do it. It is not something that the teachers have decided to do; it is something that comes from the system.⁵⁷

In the Committee's view, small scale initiatives of this kind are likely to prove beneficial to teachers and parents alike. If they were more widely known they might be adopted by more parent groups. Publicising such initiatives could be part of any media campaign designed to improve the status of teachers.

56 Ibid, p 23

57 *Transcript of evidence*, Adelaide, 16 October 1997, p 972 (South Australian Association of School Parents' Clubs Inc)

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

The Committee received only limited input directly from students, notably public hearing witnesses from Ascot Vale Primary School in Victoria and from five high schools in the Brisbane area. These students were generally very supportive of teachers. Being closer to the action than parents or members of the general community they were also much more aware of the complexities of teaching. They did not agree with the stereotypical view of teachers as working short hours, having long holidays and generally enjoying an easy life. They acknowledged the high levels of stress suffered by some teachers and also remarked upon the negative portrayal of teachers in the media. They considered teachers were generally undervalued and underpaid.

The following excerpts from the Ascot Vale and Brisbane public hearings provide a summary of the views expressed.

Teachers are one of the most important things in your life. I think teachers should be rated higher than they are rated now. I think most people do not want to be a teacher because the pay is too little and they have so much stress on them. The hours are pretty long, and they do not get the respect they should be getting.⁵⁸

... it is a hard job. It is a job that the teacher takes home. For instance, a mechanic will work on a car while he is at work, but a teacher takes home students' problems and their own problems. I think there is a deal of psychology in teaching these days. There is a higher level of commitment.⁵⁹

These views were repeated in a submission from a Year 11 Victorian student who conducted a survey of 70 fellow students in Years 8, 9, 11 and 12. She found that teachers were well respected by their students (70%), were considered hard working (81%), helpful (87%) and good at their subject (84%).

58 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 656 (Grade 6 student, Ascot Vale School, Vic)

59 *Transcript of evidence*, Brisbane, 10 September 1997, p 145 (High school students forum)

Most of the students surveyed would not consider a teaching career because of the difficult and stressful nature of the job.

A number of reasons are given for this lack of interest [in teaching as a career] and the most commonly occurring is the conditions that teachers endure (51%). Students identify stress, difficult kids and excessive workload as some factors contributing to their decision that teaching offers unacceptable conditions of work. Accordingly teaching rates poorly as a first preference career choice. 99% overall are not interested.

Of the small sample of students whose parent were teachers (23% overall), none would choose to follow in their parents footsteps.⁶⁰

The reluctance of the children of teachers to enter the profession was reported in a number of submissions.

It is significant that few children of teachers are interested in becoming teachers - their exposure to the workload and the stress of the position, and the comparatively low salary, given the qualifications and responsibilities, are often mentioned as reasons.⁶¹

All of this evidence suggests that students are much more perceptive about the role and value of teachers than teachers realise. However, the Committee recognises that not all students would hold the views expressed in evidence. Students' views might be expected to reflect the broad spectrum of views evident in the community and, more particularly, the views of their parents.

A submission from a Victorian country high school teacher reported the result of a survey of 48 of her students whom she questioned about their views on teaching as a career. They were remarkably similar to those expressed directly to the Committee, if less circumspect.

My impression of wages/working conditions for teachers is that they SUCK. You can earn more if you're a garbo.

Public schools have some fairly shocking facilities, due to government funding. Science facilities are bloody shocking, here, anyway. Why would a young, energetic person want to teach

60 Submission no 223, vol 11, p 4 (Ms Cuthbertson, Vic)

61 Submission no 181, vol 8, p 5 (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia)

Science in an environment where magnets don't attract or repel and compasses can't tell north from south?

Something needs to be done. Information is supposed to be the currency of the future, and if we don't have anyone to teach us information, we're not going to be very rich.⁶²

A number of submissions from teachers commented on the extent to which students' attitudes are shaped by the generally low regard in which education is held in Australia. Several teachers expressed dismay at students' emphasis on their rights without due regard to their responsibilities. This resulted in an undermining of all authority figures, including teachers, and the perception, by students, that the primary role of schools is to entertain rather than to educate.

The more strongly these somewhat selfish attitudes are held by students the lower is their regard for teachers, and the less likely they are to participate constructively in classroom activities. Indeed, they are more likely to disrupt their fellow students.

One of the themes that came up in our discussions was a concern about a lack of respect for the teacher - a lack of respect for authority. It is a societal problem, but one that is particularly focused in schools.

...- we do find it increasingly difficult, even our schools, to get respect for authority as teachers have traditionally come to expect it.

I am at pains to point out that I am not talking about students sitting up in rows and saying, "Three bags full, sir," sitting in nice neat rows.... I am talking about questioning of individual teachers by individual students of collective decisions for the benefit of the group, which teachers have to do all the time.⁶³

What has not been sufficiently acknowledged is that school is an old fashioned compulsory institution that requires work and cooperation from a clientele who have grown up in a culture which values individual freedom and choice far more highly than the satisfaction of hard work well done or any other aspects of the work ethic. School can not simply turn itself into something jazzily up to date that will be attractive to children who are compelled to attend it

62 Submission no 184, vol 8, pp 32-34 (Ms Geeson, Vic)

63 *Transcript of evidence*, Townsville, 11 September 1997, pp 358-359 (Mr Paul, Qld)

by law, just because they are children. Compulsion and confinement can never be as attractive as freedom. Work can never be made as attractive as leisure.⁶⁴

There is a cultural dimension to this too. In cultures where education is more highly valued than in Australia, students are more highly motivated to learn and hold teachers in higher regard.

Experience with learners from Asia and other parts of the world demonstrates that Australian students do not make the same amount of effort to acquire knowledge, skills and good study habits as students from other countries. Indeed the principal difference between teaching mainstream students and recently arrived or foreign students ...is that the non-Australians accept the role of student and respect the requirement of the teacher to do the set work to the best of their ability and the Australians, in the majority, do not.⁶⁵

The school I am at now... has an Asian component of at least 20 per cent or 25 per cent, which brings a strong emphasis on Confucian values to the school. These values include respect for teachers and education.⁶⁶

Many students, like their parents, consider the primary function of schools is to ensure that they are able to get jobs when they leave. They also recognise that many will not obtain work. In this situation they may see schools, and therefore teachers, as irrelevant.

Earlier generations could see that education was valuable because it led to a job and a secure future. There is no such guarantee now. **Education is not perceived to be intrinsically valuable, hence the work of teachers is devalued.** ⁶⁷

Many young people who would previously have left school after Year 10 now remain there for a further two years in the hope that this will improve their job prospects. (Retention rates peaked in 1992 at 82% for Years 11 and 12. They have declined slightly since then to 77% in 1996. See Chapter 8.) Introduction of the Common Youth Allowance will

64 Submission no 93, vol 3, p 165 (Mr Addie, Vic)

65 Ibid

66 *Transcript of evidence*, Perth, 17 September 1997, p 456 (Mr Macphail, WA)

67 Submission no 83, vol 3, p 112 (Ms Bullivant, ACT)

increase the number of students remaining at school by about 12,000, on government estimates.⁶⁸ They are often there for lack of any viable alternative rather than through choice. However, positive developments such as more relevant curriculum and more congenial approaches to teaching and learning have also played a part in encouraging students to remain at school.⁶⁹

Many students who feel compelled to remain at school are resentful, alienated and lack motivation. While their cynicism is understandable their presence in schools can exacerbate student - teacher tensions and increase pressure on teachers. This is particularly the case in schools which have been slow to adapt their organisation and curriculum to the needs of a more diverse post-compulsory student population.

One of the most intractable problems faced by teachers today is the large number of disaffected youth who do not want to be at school at all and who, in a previous generation would either have been working or in an apprenticeship situation.⁷⁰

In extreme cases, student alienation manifests itself in violence against teachers and their property. The scale of such violence is difficult to determine because reporting is not mandatory. For this reason available figures are likely to underestimate the extent of the problem. This certainly is the view of the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA), which conducted surveys of physical, verbal and property violence against teachers in Western Australian government schools in 1993, 1995 and 1996.

The 1996 survey (based on survey responses from 161 of Western Australia's 750 government schools) found that although there was a steep decline in reports of verbal assault over the period concerned, physical assaults increased, as did damage to teachers' property.

68 Figure supplied by Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs during Supplementary Estimates hearing 1997-98. This figure is disputed by State governments, which consider it is an underestimate.

69 For a discussion of this issue see Graeme Withers and Margaret Batten. *Retention: Pressures and Reactions*. In *Teachers in Australian Schools: Issues for the 1990s*. Lloyd Logan & Neil Dempster (eds), Australian College of Education, Canberra, 1992, pp 85-100

70 Submission no 76, vol 3, p 66 (Mr Moore, SA)

The percentage of schools reporting more than 20 physical assaults has increased from 2.8% in 1993 to 3.7% in 1996 and the percentage of schools reporting zero results has decreased over the period 1993-1996.

...the level of physical assaults reported by primary and pre-primary schools is of great concern to teachers. ... Although five and six year olds may not be physically strong, they can inflict a lot of damage by using objects such as chairs and tables as missiles.

...There has been a significant increase in the number of days reported as being lost from work due to all forms of assault with 134.5 days reported for 1995 and 341.5 for 1996.

The incidence of theft and damage to teachers' personal property appears to be on the increase in the primary and pre-primary sector. ... 92% of senior high schools report damage to teachers' personal property.⁷¹

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the incidence of violence is small and that our schools are relatively safe for both teachers and students. However, the Institute of Criminology in 1993 estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 teachers were assaulted each week in Australia.⁷² Some teachers recounted to the Committee their own experiences of violence in the classroom.

My submission was based on my personal experiences - a lot of them as a reading/resource teacher in a senior high school. I talked about the violence. I had been punched, spat at, sworn at on a daily, if not hourly, basis.

... it is a constant threat. It is not just the fact that I was once punched and twice spat at, but it is a constant threat.⁷³

Where violence occurs, its effect on the teachers concerned can be very damaging and long term. The SSTUWA report notes that teacher victims of violence and assault claimed to have received inadequate support

71 State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia. *Teacher Assault Survey 1996*, p (ii)

72 Michael Correll. *Violence or its threat are big causes of stress*. In *Human Resource Monthly*, August 1993, p 24

73 *Transcript of evidence*, Perth, 17 September 1997, pp 441-443 (Ms Josso, WA)

from the Western Australian Education Department and, in many cases, from their principals.

Most teachers who discussed the issue of violence against teachers wanted greater authority to remove students from mainstream classes - both for the benefit of the disruptive students themselves but, more importantly, for the benefit of other students in the class. They favoured the provision of alternative teaching arrangements - with adequate resources - rather than expulsion.

Some school systems are re-examining their response to violent students. In Queensland, for example, government schools suspended more than 10,000 students and expelled 674 in 1996⁷⁴ but expulsion was a cumbersome process requiring ministerial approval and suspensions were limited to a maximum of five days. Since 1997 principals have been granted authority to suspend students for up to 20 days - during which they are required to undertake special programs - and to expel those older than 15 without departmental approval.

At present it is generally very difficult to remove disruptive students from schools, especially in the state sector. Students are fully aware of the lack of adequate sanctions against those who exhibit unacceptable behaviour. This undermines teachers' authority and status. Some students have resorted to litigation in response to schools' attempts to expel them.

It is becoming common place for students who are suspended or expelled from the school for serious breaches of discipline to return the next day with a letter of demand from a lawyer. These letters from their solicitors state that the school must take these students back or the school would be sued.⁷⁵

One response to higher retention rates and the presence in the post compulsory years of increasing numbers of students who do not intend to proceed to university has been greater emphasis on vocational training and the development of closer links between schools and TAFE. Both of these approaches have been generally popular with students, who perceive vocational courses as more relevant to them than the more

74 Chris Griffith. *Sparing rod, but keeping control*. Sunday Mail, 9 March 1997, p 57

75 Submission no 96, vol 3, p 200 (Brother Ivers, NSW)

academic approach traditionally associated with the last two years of schooling. For these students the focus on vocational education has not only increased the relevance of school; it is also likely to have enhanced their perceptions of teachers.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

There is a contradiction in teachers' perceptions of their status. On the one hand, they believe their work is important and they value teaching excellence in colleagues and strive for it themselves. On the other hand, they believe that their skills are neither understood nor valued in the community, which accords them low status. This contradiction is apparent from the evidence.

Teachers see their status as low, in comparison with that of other professionals with equivalent qualifications and training. They generally consider that their status has declined over the last twenty or so years and that it is continuing to decline. In evidence to the Committee, and in the general literature, they attribute this decline to many of the same factors as does the general community. These include:

- the low value placed on education, in its broadest sense
- the low status of children
- feminisation of the profession
- low salary
- inadequate career structure
- casualisation
- poor working conditions
- inadequate recruitment, training and induction practices
- increased work load/ crowded curriculum
- increasing proportion of time devoted to non teaching tasks such as counselling

- litigation and violence
- lack of control over the profession and over their work
- negative media portrayal
- lack of support from education departments
- attacks by governments
- lack of support and understanding by the general community
- falling entry requirements for teaching, which are both an effect of declining status and a contributor to it.

Since these factors are discussed elsewhere in the Report they will not be elaborated upon here.

Rural teachers' perceptions of their status generally parallel those of urban teachers, but are adversely affected by the particular difficulties they face. These include: lack of adequate or appropriate induction; lack of opportunities for professional development; professional isolation; poor housing when compared with that provided to other professionals in rural areas and the difficulty of separating public and private life in small communities. Expectations of participation in out of school activities, though an issue elsewhere, was a particular concern of rural teachers.

Morale seems low. Teachers feel under-appreciated and some are begrudging the many extra contributions they make to the communities in which they teach. They chaff under the fact that the voluntary extra services they give are now treated as a regular part of their role and attract no special attention unless they fail to give these services. This feeling must influence how teachers themselves are now perceiving teaching as a profession.⁷⁶

76 E J Hatton, R Meyenn, J Parker, J Sutton, M Gard & K Maher. *The Status of Teaching in Rural and Regional Areas: Selected Themes*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association, July 1997, Yeppoon p 9

A number of witnesses referred to the particular vulnerability of female teachers in rural and remote schools, and to the need for employers to recognise it by providing extra support.

I think there are issues for young women teachers going out into the country... which need to be addressed. [These are] to do with safe, secure and affordable housing and support so that they do not feel isolated and alone.⁷⁷

There was a report in the Australian in March this year that talked about the major issues facing rural women teachers, for example, in isolated and remote areas. In particular, they mentioned the difficulty of keeping female principals in schools in the tropical areas of Australia. The main reasons cited by women interviewed in this report were a lack of acceptance by some local communities of women in leadership positions; a sense of personal or professional isolation; safety and security issues; poor quality accommodation and a lack of adequate child-care facilities.⁷⁸

The community view of the status of individual teachers reflects the status of the school in which they work. Teachers at some private schools have higher status than teachers at public schools.

It is a very dangerous area to generalise in, Senator, but I think that generalisations can be made... If I have to come down on one side or the other, I certainly think teachers in independent schools are afforded more status and respect by parents and students alike.⁷⁹

Among teachers there does not appear to be any major difference in perception of their status between teachers in private and teachers in public schools.

Our view is that teachers regard themselves as belonging to a profession, and it is a national profession. When they pick up the newspaper and read statements that are critical of their work and the work of schools. I do not think that, if they are in a non-

77 *Transcript of evidence*, Adelaide, 16 October 1997, p 1010 (Australian Education Union, SA Branch)

78 *Transcript of evidence*, Townsville, 11 September 1997, p 293 (School of Education, James Cook University, Qld)

79 *Transcript of evidence*, Townsville, 11 September 1997, p 369 (Mr Paul, Qld)

government school, they somehow divide themselves off from their colleagues in the public sector.⁸⁰

There were a number of indications in evidence to the Committee of teachers' poor self image and defensiveness about their profession. A number explained how, at public functions, they did not reveal their occupation.

In many instances I best describe my occupation to other people as "I'm just employed as a public servant." Such is the way teachers are perceived by the community.⁸¹

Of particular concern is the fact that some teachers say they hesitate to reveal their occupation in public because of the negative reaction that can occur, while some principals admitted that they only admit to being a teacher in such circumstances.⁸² Others made the point that they did not recommend teaching as a career to either their children or their students.

This teacher of 30 years experience has strongly **discouraged** his children from following in his professional footsteps in the belief that teaching is a declining profession from a number of indicators and there are many more careers offering far greater rewards in terms of financial returns, recognition, value, job satisfaction and social status.⁸³

...whereas only a few short years ago, I would have highly recommended teaching as a career path for any of my students with academic ability, empathy and integrity, now I would not do so.⁸⁴

We know that in Australia 52 per cent of teachers, if given a choice, would move to other professions.⁸⁵ We also know that large numbers

80 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 678 (Independent Education Union)

81 Submission no 5, vol 1, p 25 (Mr Lardener, NSW)

82 Submission no 66, vol 2, p 193 (NSW Teacher Education Council)

83 Submission no 211, vol 10, p 27 (Mr Davies, Qld)

84 Submission no 78, vol 3, p 75 (Mrs McGrath, Qld)

85 This figure is from the *Third International Mathematics and Science Study*, 1996, and refers particularly to mathematics and science teachers.

retire at the earliest opportunity. These figures give some indication of the extent of teacher dissatisfaction.

The Countervailing View

It would be misleading to paint a totally bleak picture of teachers' perceptions of their status. Positive views were held by many teachers, as the following contributions at public hearings attest.

There is an enormous amount of high quality work taking place in schools by teachers, in faculties by teacher educators that this country ought to be proud of and should do a lot more to acknowledge than it does.⁸⁶

Teachers are professionals who do a job for kids. I feel I do my job well, and so do many other teachers, but we need support from the top. Only when this support, resources and a review of education occurs can we be seen as unlimited in what we can teach and contribute to learning. We need to think about [that] now in order to plan for the future of education. Universities and schools are doing this, and the passion is out there; it just needs to be recognised.⁸⁷

There was general agreement in evidence to the Committee that teachers considered their work was not understood, not valued and not adequately remunerated, but at the same time many were keen to point to its **intrinsic** rewards. These are what attracted them to teaching in the first place and what keeps them in it despite the external factors which inhibit job satisfaction and increase stress.

I stress that teacher perceptions of their accorded status is quite distinct from teacher perceptions of the importance of their role, and we certainly share with teachers a belief in the real importance of teaching as a profession.⁸⁸

86 *Transcript of evidence*, Adelaide, 16 October 1997, p 897 (Australian Council of Deans of Education)

87 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 9 October 1997, p 618 (Ms Schnellmann, Vic)

88 *Transcript of evidence*, Canberra, 1 December 1997, p 1143 (Australian Council of State School Organisations)

Dr Steve Dinham, in describing the findings of his study of teacher satisfaction,⁸⁹ made this point very strongly.

When we asked people what satisfied them most in teaching, overwhelmingly it was helping students, pupil achievement, their own professional self-growth, getting through to somebody, helping them overcome problems, working with colleagues. That was remarkably strong and consistent.⁹⁰

Other teachers made similar observations.

Good teaching is about moments... It is about the moment when you actually surprise a child into doing something that they thought they could not do. A good teacher tries to do that all of the time.⁹¹

Even those teachers, quoted above, who had advised others not to become teachers, still derived pleasure and satisfaction from this aspect of their work.

[My recommendation against teaching] ..is in spite of an enduring love of working with children and joy at observing them inquire, learn and develop positive attitudes despite the range of backgrounds they come from.⁹²

At the outset I would like to stress that I love teaching and regard it as a privilege to learn with the fine young people I have contact with in my daily work. However...⁹³

One of the major contributors to teachers' perception of their low status is what they see as a lack of understanding, appreciation and support for their work on the part of the general community. The Dinham study, among others, disputes their assessment of the situation and argues that in fact community perceptions are much more varied and often much more positive than teachers themselves recognise.

89 Dr Steve Dinham, Dr Catherine Scott. *The Teacher 2000 Project: A Study of Teacher Satisfaction, Motivation and Health*. University of Western Sydney, December 1996

90 *Transcript of evidence*, Sydney, 29 August 1997, p 96 (Dr Dinham)

91 *Transcript of evidence*, Brisbane, 10 September 1997, p 213 (Association of Independent Schools of Queensland)

92 Submission no 211, vol 10, p 27 (Mr Davies, Qld)

93 Submission no 78, vol 3, p 75 (Mrs McGrath, Qld)

The poor way teachers *perceive* they are regarded by society is particularly worrying. It is possible that teachers are probably harder on themselves in this respect than society is generally, a phenomenon that indicates some deep seated problems within the profession. There is thus the need to take steps to restore teacher pride and confidence even before improving teacher status is contemplated.⁹⁴

The Australian Teaching Council reached a similar conclusion, as did a number of witnesses.

Teachers think well of themselves and of the work they do. But they are convinced that generally other people do not share that sense of a difficult job well done. There is, therefore, a distinct feeling of ambivalence amongst teachers as to their role and worth in society.⁹⁵

... compared with other countries, Australia has a very high credibility with its teaching profession overseas, particularly because of the teaching skills people have today. But it is the perception of the Australian society, and certainly the perception of teachers themselves, that the status of their profession is diminishing greatly.⁹⁶

At least one submission pointed to teachers' negative assessment of their status as a self fulfilling prophesy: the more they projected this image, the wider its acceptance in the general community, which in turn fed upon it in making its own assessments.

The status of teachers is to a large degree determined by the status teachers afford themselves. If teachers have a negative opinion of their own situation then it will be communicated to the students, their parents and to the wider community very quickly.⁹⁷

94 Submission no 66, vol 2, p 211 (Dr Dinham)

95 Australian Teaching Council. *What do teachers think?* Sydney, 1995, p 5

96 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 640 (Australian Secondary Principals' Association)

97 Submission no 220, vol 10, p 148 (Mount Lawley Senior High School Education Committee)

Teachers' perceptions of their status might be enhanced were they more aware of the degree of support they enjoy in the general community. But teachers, like everybody else, are influenced by the media in this respect. And they have not in general been good advocates of their cause. While teachers themselves place a high value on their skills their perceptions of their status appear to be inextricably linked to community perceptions. It is therefore unlikely that they will improve until favourable community perceptions are more widely recognised. However, the Committee anticipates that the establishment of a national teaching body (as recommended in Chapter 2) will enhance teachers' status and their **perception** of their status by giving them greater control of their profession and by providing a national body to speak on their behalf.