

JAMES PHELPS

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL REVIEW OF TEACHER REGISTRATION

TO THE PANEL

I have been a classroom teacher for 25 years. I also convene and moderate discussions on an education Facebook page (Minds Wide Open) which has almost 7000 Australian teachers following. It is a safe place for teachers to express their concerns regarding the many systemic and cultural problems currently affecting teachers and teaching and to put forward potential solutions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is my conclusion, and that of thousands of my colleagues, that the implementation of frameworks and processes for teacher registration, accreditation and maintenance have only nominally improved teacher quality, and have failed to improve outcomes for students. Declining mean scores in NAPLAN and PISA tests suggest that our national initiatives, meant to “raise standards”, may have in fact had a detrimental effect on teaching and learning.

- *‘Calls for NAPLAN review after report reveals no change in decade of results’*, ABC NEWS, 7 March 2018
- *‘PISA 2015: Reporting Australia’s results’*, Sue Thomson, Lisa De Bortoli, Catherine Underwood, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2017

Besides falling standards, we are experiencing unprecedented declines in teacher wellbeing and morale following significant increases in teachers’ working hours. Extra compliance measures and poorly designed accountability/accreditation/maintenance processes and programs have added to the burden. For many teachers, both new and experienced, their workload is now beyond capacity.

- *‘Why do teachers leave?’* Gabrielle Stroud, ABC News, 6 Feb 2017
- *‘School Staff Workload Study’*, Dr Paul Weldon and Dr Lawrence Ingvarson, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016
- The Australian Education Union’s *2016 State of our Schools report*
- *‘Seven reasons people no longer want to be teachers’*, Nan Bahr and Jo-Anne Ferreira, Southern Cross University - Source: ABC News, 16 April 2018

A radical re-think is required if we are to “strengthen teacher quality” and “raise standards” without exhausting great teachers and pushing them out of the profession. In keeping with the spirit of this century we implore the panel of the National Review of Teacher Registration to seek out innovative, evidence-informed and empathetic strategies as you consider how best to “strengthen teacher quality”.

To that end, we recommend the panel considers Michael Fullan’s advice to “go outside to get better inside” and investigate successful Teacher Registration and Teacher Quality strategies employed by high-performing education systems (for example Finland, Singapore and Canada). Further, and most importantly, we believe that a thorough ongoing consultation process with practicing classroom teachers is an imperative if the panel is to become fully aware of the serious problems that have arisen at the school level since the implementation of the 2011 national framework.

PROBLEM 1

The current practices used to manage and monitor teacher registration, accountability and maintenance is overburdening teachers, eroding professional autonomy, reducing incentives and lowering morale. This is true for both new and experienced teachers.

“I am a newly graduated teacher and I can honestly say I am totally overwhelmed at the process: what I need to document, when, to whom and then there is getting my head around how schools vary and do things. I am very lucky in that I am on a block at a school that is tremendously supportive. Even so it is very overwhelming. It is as if I did all this study only to be not trusted to do the job I was trained for. I understand keeping up with training and maintaining standards but I feel like it is going to be too hard to keep up and I will get 'de-registered' before I can even get my feet wet in my chosen profession.” (Kate)

“For the first time in my 33yr career, I don't want to go back to work next week. I've programmed and planned for most of the holidays, as usual, but found little satisfaction from the achievement. Doing something for the love of it is very different to feeling as though you are jumping through hoops for the sake of it. Lately the hoops (like the goalposts) are getting smaller, higher and more numerous! My experience is disregarded and irrelevant. I feel overwhelmed and stressed.” (Francine)

SOLUTIONS

"It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do. We hire smart people and they tell us what to do." ~ Steve Jobs, Apple

- ✓ Lighten the burden on teachers and school leaders. Reduce the current exorbitant levels of scrutiny, intrusion and micromanagement.
 - ✓ Learn from Finland's success. Competitively select and screen prospective teachers. Train them well (five years/masters) then let teachers focus their energies on what matters most: teaching and caring for their students.
 - ✓ Recognise and trust teachers for what they are: reflective and conscientious professionals who are experts in their domain. When teachers feel they are trusted, and are given professional autonomy, they will work more productively and (re)assume responsibility for their own, and each other's, development.
- *Enhancing Teacher Performance: The Role of Professional Autonomy*, Emery J. Hyslop-Margison & Alan M. Sears, University of New Brunswick, 2010
 - *Teachers should study postgraduate degree before joining workforce*, Australian Education Union says, Natasha Robinson, ABC News, 24 Nov 2017
 - *Building quality in teaching and teacher education*, Nan Bahr with Suzanne Mellor, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016

PROBLEM 2

“Where do I find the time?”

The number one issue raised on the Minds Wide Open Facebook page is the extra time required of new graduates, experienced teachers and supervisors to accumulate, analyse and interpret data and produce documents (“evidence”) to fulfil registration and compliance demands.

“So many ways to collect data, so much data required, officially for the Dept and more of the same at a school level. It all seems to end up somewhere, unused...” (Jen)

“There is also a load of extra work being put on school executive staff to monitor PP&D. As an AP I've just attended training in this and was told that I can't sign off on teacher PD until I've seen evidence that teachers are putting their learning into practice in their classrooms. I realise that the teachers need to log their PD themselves but apparently I am also accountable not only for my own PD at classroom teacher level and AP level, but for checking on theirs as well. When am I supposed to find the time to do this, along with facilitating in-house PD, monitoring PLT meetings, checking programmes and all the other things that fill my day?” (Denny)

The current top-down accountability model requires each level in the education hierarchy – from classroom teachers up to district leaders - to provide continual evidence of their own performance and improvement, as well as that of their students. This requirement does not factor in that most teachers and school leaders already work 60+ hours per week. Other professionals in non-teaching fields can meet their compliance demands within regular 'business hours'. Designing performance development plans, meeting with supervisors, collecting data and producing documentation can be done as part of the normal course of their work day. However, for obvious reasons, classroom teachers cannot complete these tasks during normal work hours. Good teachers - who are extremely busy doing what good teachers do - often have to borrow from family time or even sleep time to do these extraneous compliance tasks.

“Nowhere in the teaching standards is there actually time allowed for all the documentation that is part of the process. So far, it's just another thing for us to do on top of the work we are already doing.” (Cheryl)

- *'But don't teachers work 9am to 3pm?'* Sally Baker, January 21, 2015 (<http://www.aeuact.org.au>)
- *Inside Teaching. How Classroom Life Undermines Reform*, M. M. Kennedy, 2005
- *Teacher resistance against school reform: reflecting an inconvenient truth*, Ewald Terhart, 2013

“We certainly need to be given paid hours to do all the extra work involved in the accreditation process. If not, the entire process is counter-productive as teachers have less resources (time, energy etc) to put into quality teaching. Maybe there could be more practical assessment eg. classroom observations instead of endless written submissions.” (Ann)

SOLUTION

Rather than put the onus on quality teachers to perennially prove 'on paper' that they are good teachers the responsibility should rather fall on education authorities to identify, reprove and train poor teachers - while recognising, and not burdening, good teachers. This could be done, for example, with a new type of 'benevolent' school inspector. This would free up teachers to teach, and executives to lead learning, yet there would still be an accountability mechanism in place.

These 'benevolent school inspectors' would be qualified and experienced teachers appointed to clusters of schools and trained in the Teacher Standards as well as action research and data collection and management. They would be responsible for supervising, inspecting, mentoring, and supporting classroom teachers so that teachers can re-focus on the main thing: teaching and learning. These 'inspectors' would supervise teachers and also assist them with their professional development plans and collecting and presenting evidence for maintaining accreditation.

“Teachers need to get back to the business of teaching, that's how student outcomes will improve. Admin requirements are out of control, so much of our time is spent doing this now rather than planning and programming to support our students. We need to support teachers, a paraprofessional sounds like a great solution.” (Annette)

“My workload has increased exponentially in the last 4 years. Employ an extra teacher so that all the peer observations, mentoring, strategic planning, admin, proper induction for beginning teachers etc can actually be done without taking away from the students and quality teaching.” (Deanne)

“This idea would be more supportive than 'big brother'. There must be accountability, that won't go away. We can't avoid the monitoring so let's make the monitoring less confrontational and more helpful.” (Cathy)

CONCLUSION

The current design of the teacher registration system in Australia has too many flaws and cannot ultimately “strengthen teacher quality” nor improve student outcomes. It needs to change. But the prevailing ill-conceived solutions of “let’s make teachers work harder” and “let’s make them collect more data” fly in the face of research and reasoning.

Teachers are not against change nor hard work. But they are against ‘more of the same’ because they have seen that it doesn’t work at the school level. Since 2011 national frameworks and policies have led to state and local mechanisms being put in place that have actually created barriers to improving teacher quality, which didn’t exist before.

“I have been teaching for 20 years and although I have some experience I often feel that we are not trusted to be professional. We know our students and work hard to be up to date with the National Curriculum. Let teachers teach - without being encumbered with the extra administrative duties. When I first started my career I had real time to prepare, plan, teach, mark, evaluate and reflect. I do not have that anymore and this means one or two areas always do not get my full attention.” (Annette)

As you can see lives are at stake: both the future wellbeing of teachers and future prosperity of students. I recommend that during the course of this review the panel remain empathetic to the teachers at the coalface and be mindful of the impact that new recommendations will have on teachers’ performance, health and morale. To that end, I ask that the panel would be open to endorsing radical changes to the current registration and maintenance system, changes that will require courage to recommend and an innovative spirit to design and implement.

In the review process it is imperative that the panel seeks input from international education change experts such as Michael Fullan and Pasi Sahlberg who, importantly, also understand what frameworks, processes and strategies are required to improve teacher quality and how best to build systems which facilitate that noble goal. They could pinpoint best practice that has been tried and proven elsewhere and advise the panel as to how that might work in an Australian context.

Also, here are two excellent local resources for the panel’s consideration:

- *Building quality in teaching and teacher education*, by Nan Bahr with Suzanne Mellor (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016)
- *How Principals Affect Schools*, by Mike Helal and Michael Coelli, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne, 2016

Please contact me if you would like to know

- more perspectives from Australian teachers and school leaders re the affect the current registration and maintenance processes have on teachers
- innovative ideas from teachers and school leaders on how best to strengthen teacher quality through changes to the registration and maintenance framework and processes
- where to find research and case studies that identify evidence-informed approaches to improving teacher quality.

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Classroom Teacher & Stakeholder

Minds Wide Open Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/KidsCanThinkForThemselves/>

“Empowering teachers to take back their personal and professional lives”

“Teaching our students to think for themselves”