

Classroom Ready Teachers? Some Reflections on Teacher Education in Australia in an Age of Compliance

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In 1998, an Australian Senate Inquiry into the status of the teaching profession produced a report called *A Class Act*. Of the role of initial teacher education, the report had the following to say:

It is generally acknowledged by all those involved – university educators, practising teachers, education departments and beginning teachers themselves – that no pre-service training can fully prepare new teachers to perform at their full capacity from their first day at work. This is not a reflection on the quality of new teachers nor on the standard of pre-service training. It is a recognition of the complexity of teaching and of the large number of variables (such as type of school, socio-economic and cultural background of students, school ‘ethos’, extent of support from colleagues and principal etc) affecting a teacher’s performance. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998)

While Australia had by 1998 long embraced an instrumental, human capital-infused approach to education policy, not yet was the blunt instrument of standardisation, now used in its many forms as a proxy for ‘teacher quality’, a popular tool.

Fast forward almost two decades and this understanding of the complexity of teaching and the variables that impact the enactment of teachers’ work is starkly lacking from the report known as *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers*. Authored by a short-term committee formed to advise the then Federal Education Minister on initial teacher education, the inquiry, according to the Government, exposed the “gap between the knowledge and skills universities are preparing their teaching graduates with and those that are needed for new teachers to thrive in the classroom” (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. 8).

Classroom readiness, like ‘quality’ and ‘standards’, other tools of the neoliberal trade in education, is both slippery to define, and hard to argue against. After all, what school principal wants to employ a teacher without classroom readiness? What parent wants their child taught by a non classroom-ready teacher? But if classroom readiness is about beginning teachers ‘thriving in the classroom’ from day one, how many current teachers would declare they were classroom ready as they took their first tentative steps in their own classrooms, with their very first students?

A closer look at *Action Now* suggests that the ‘classroom ready teacher’ is an apt metaphor for the ongoing impact of the neoliberal imaginary on teacher education. The report is replete with observations about the need for evidence-based practice, attention to basic literacy and numeracy, adherence to and assessment of professional standards, standards which in their very essence privilege the technical, ‘performable’ dimensions of teaching. ‘Evidence of impact’ is a recurring theme in the report: classroom ready teachers demonstrate that they have had a positive impact on student learning during their professional experience placements, and universities should provide evidence that students of their teacher education programs make such an impact, both during and beyond their initial teacher education.

Subsequent to *Action Now*, new standards were devised for national accreditation of initial teacher education programs designed to bring about classroom readiness. Built on the eight principles of impact; evidence-based; rigour; continuous improvement; flexibility, diversity and innovation; partnerships; transparency; and research, defined as “accreditation generates and relies upon a strong research base that informs program design and delivery,

and informs the continual improvement of teacher education programs by providers” (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015, p. 3), the new standards have been the catalyst for a flurry of activity around defining and measuring ‘evidence of impact’. These ideas are not exclusive to the Australian context by any means, and no doubt sound very familiar to readers from many different contexts. The question for teacher educators is, of course, ‘what’s to be done?’.

In many ways, the path of least resistance would be easiest: to deny the complexity ourselves and recreate our teacher education programs to serve the ends of instrumentalism and demonstrable impact on student learning. The required emphasis on content knowledge, pedagogical strategies, literacy and numeracy provide more than enough for teacher education to ‘go on with’, without clinging to what are seeming like increasingly outdated ideas about the theoretical foundations of education, an understanding of which might be less immediately demonstrable but no less important for sustaining and developing practice over the course of a career. Over 15 years ago now, just a few years after *A Class Act*, Marilyn Cochran-Smith made the following argument,

As researchers, practitioners and policy makers in teaching and teacher education, we will not measure up unless we preserve a place for critique in the face of consensus, unless we keep at the center of teacher education *rich and complex understandings of teaching and learning that are not easily reducible to algorithms*...At this critical juncture in the reform and development of teacher education, if we do not take control of framing the outcomes in teacher education, then *the outcomes will surely frame us and undermine our work as teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and policy makers committed to a democratic vision of society and to the vital role that teachers and teacher educators play in that vision*. (Cochran-Smith, 2001, pp. 543-544, my emphasis)

These words ring very true in Australian education at this time. The assumptions about education embedded in neoliberalism, that teaching is about ‘strategies’ rather than encounter and relationship; that learning is about the transmission of knowledge; that ‘data’ and ‘evidence’ are preferable substitutes for professional judgement; that ‘theory’ should take a back seat to practice; that ‘performance’ is not a proxy for learning, but learning itself, and so on, have the capacity to undermine the democratic project of education. Our challenge as teacher educators is to keep a strong sense of our purpose at the centre of our enterprise. Good teaching is scholarly work, knowledge work, relational work. Good teaching requires good judgement that emerges from a deep understanding of the theoretical foundations and stretches into the particularities of practice. Good teaching builds knowledge, but more importantly, develops for our children and young people an understanding of the world in which they live, and the capacity for criticality so desperately needed if our democracies are to survive. Classroom readiness is not a standard to be attained at graduation, but a process of becoming, to be committed and re-committed to over the course of a career. Neoliberal education discourses privilege the easily counted and measured over the more multifaceted and complex capacities required in teacher education that seeks to prepare students for this kind of teaching. Our most important task as teacher educators at this time is to preserve the space for them anyway, and fill that space passionately.

References

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