

Changing teacher education for a changing world

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The report of the Senate Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession, "A Class Act" (Crowley, 1998), found that student teachers were inadequately prepared for the complex and demanding task ahead of them. In particular the amount and quality of "hands on" experience and training in schools and classrooms was seen as inadequate. A review of teacher education conducted in New South Wales (Ramsey, 2000, p.107) concluded "**in spite of the best efforts of some universities, teacher educators, employers and teachers, it is apparent that teacher education and schools are insufficiently connected.**" It is therefore, important that the nature of the possible relationships between schools and universities should be examined carefully.

In recent years relationships between schools and universities have been described as partnerships. However, as Calderhead (1995) has pointed out, there are different types of partnerships. These can range from "a casual acquaintance" to partnerships which go far beyond the limited involvement in practice teaching that was once the norm in teacher education. Because most partnerships for teacher education have been designed by university-based teacher educators and school administrators, it is these groups whose voices are most commonly heard. **The classroom teachers' voice has largely been absent.**

This paper documents the initial stages of a project designed to give teachers a voice in pre-service teacher education. The project began with a survey of teachers' perceptions of changes they saw in their own roles over the past decade and the impact

these changes should have on pre-service teacher education. All present teaching staff (N=107) in six primary schools in the Parramatta Catholic Diocese of Western Sydney were surveyed. Data was collected using an open ended questionnaire. The questionnaires were anonymous, identifying only the school where the respondents taught.

The questionnaires were presented to the teachers at a staff meeting for completion. This procedure was designed to maximise the response rate. The response rate in five of the schools was 98%. In one school it was not possible to organise a staff meeting because of a State wide industrial issue and the response rate was much lower at only 23%.

Results

Of the 107 survey respondents, 106 replied that they

thought teaching has changed in the past ten years. The teachers' voice sounded clearly and mirrored the reality of educational change which has been discussed in many previous studies (Hargraves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 1998). In total, 315 separate comments were made. The responses by the teachers were classified into two broad categories where changes were perceived to be caused by 1) changing practices within the school, (reported 220 times); and 2) external pressures influencing changes within the school, (reported 95 times).

Changing practices within the school

Within this broad category the teachers surveyed commented most frequently on changes related to teaching practices, curriculum, accountability, role diversification and increased workload. These com

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ments have been noted throughout the paper as (N) for referencing purposes and are examined below.

Teaching practices

The aspect of change within the school over the past 10 years that was most frequently commented upon was change in teaching practices. The four main types of changes to teaching practices that were noted involved: catering for individuals and groups; use of technology; parental involvement in the classroom and changes in assessment practices.

Of the comments written about specific teaching practices, the largest group (26%) indicated one of the major changes in teaching over the past 10 years has been **an increase in focus on the needs of individual students and the task of catering for individual learning styles:**

Teaching is now more child driven than teacher driven (112)

The need to cater for more individual learning styles (312).

Some teachers reported this focus on the individual learner produced more work for teachers:

Teachers are having to produce more individualised programs which are being produced in their 'own' time. (208)

Awareness of individual needs /more demands on teachers / grouping. (313).

The next largest group of comments on teaching practices (15%) referred to the use of technology. Teachers spoke simply of the increased use of technology in the classroom whilst others commented upon use of technology as a resource in the classroom:

There is a much wider variety of resources, especially in the technology area (509)

More technology is used - computers, internet etc (213).

Other teachers, however, wrote about how the emphasis of technology has impacted upon aspects of teaching practice which "has meant a change in the way teachers structure lessons and more learner based than teacher based (406)".

Increased parental involvement in classrooms was a change also recorded by teachers. **These comments were positive with some teachers referring to the partnership of parents and teachers.** Assessment was also reported by 12% of teachers to be a factor to cause change in teaching practice.

Curriculum

Changes in teaching practices are often driven by changes in the curriculum. This link was clearly seen by many of the teachers surveyed with 67% of teachers commenting on changes in the curriculum over the past 10 years.

The increasingly broad scope of the curricu-

lum was commented on by 35% of the teachers where many reported that "Curriculum has become overcrowded (405)" and was filled with "Extra 'subjects' like child protection, sun-safe, IT (122)".

The constancy of curriculum change was referred to by 10% of the teachers surveyed where the "Implementation of the ever-changing curriculum / courses of study (302)" was viewed as a major source of pressure. A number of remarks were also made about the changes in curriculum planning due to the introduction of outcomes based learning. This change has introduced a narrower more behaviourist approach to curriculum planning and evaluation that has been perceived by teachers as increasing their work load. The remaining 11% of teachers remarked generally about curriculum and covered a range of aspects relating to particular syllabus documents and the way in which curriculum drives the learning in the classroom. However, there is also a sense in which teachers see these changes, which are usually made by curriculum developers, as a major external influence on changes in their role as a teacher.

Accountability

Changes in the level of accountability of teachers was identified by 31% of teachers as a meaningful change in the last 10 years. Teachers commented on the legal aspects of child protection for which they are accountable, as well as the increase in routine administrative tasks that they see as outside their core teaching role:

Legal aspects - laws, etc relating to different aspects of education - excursions, reporting of children in danger (609)

Also, there is a lot more administration/paper work to be completed - due to accountability (517)

We are more accountable to outside - parents, CEO, etc (216).

Role diversification and increased workload

Closely related to accountability were comments by 22% of the teachers who referred to increases in the number of roles teachers are now expected to undertake and also to the diversification of these roles:

The role of 'teacher' is becoming so broad and the responsibilities so great that it is hard to imagine not cracking under the pressure (515)

The change of role of teacher to cover parent, mentor, social worker, counselor, etc. as well as educator (204).

Comments such as these reflect a dissatisfaction with the extent to which teachers are being pulled away from what they see as their main role of teaching students. Whilst the teachers' comments relating to teaching practices and the curriculum indicate a broadening of the tasks in those key areas, there is no implication that these are not legitimate roles for teachers to fulfil. A

broadening of the teachers' central role and the addition of more peripheral roles highlight there is an increase in the teachers' workload. In fact, 20% of teachers remarked on this element. Quite often the comments were tied to other statements made about previously discussed factors, for example, curriculum, catering for individuals and accountability:

More and more work is having to be done at home due to the amount of work being done at school (208)

Teachers need to do more in and out of the classroom (508).

External pressures influencing changes within the school

As well as commenting upon changes in their day to day practices within the school, teachers also noted a number of changes in the educational system and in the wider society which impact upon schools. These factors included: the type of children entering the education system; family issues which affect the children; the image of teachers as perceived by society and the expectations placed upon teaching staff by parents, the government, the system and community.

Expectations

Of the 107 teachers, 40% remarked upon the increased expectations placed upon them. Some commented on only the increased expectation itself (14%) and did not attribute its origin:

Increased demand on classroom teacher (610)

More demanding pupils, parents, society (523)

On the other hand, more respondents (27%) chose to comment about who they considered to be placing these pressures upon them. Some teachers spoke about parental expectations (13%) whilst others referred to the government (7%) and of the community (7%):

Greater demands from parents much more involved and wanting more information about their child (606)

Greater school, systemic and societal demands (121).

Children and family issues

Changes in the nature of the children they teach was noted by 19% of the teachers:

Children themselves have changed - more demanding (212)

Behaviour/respect of children has worsened (309).

Furthermore, some teachers (9%) commented on the effect that society's changes had upon the children being taught:

The social structure of society has changed impacting on schools including cultural factors such as multiculturalism [and] breakdown of the traditional family resulting in less social interaction in families - impacting on language development (401).

Professional image

The final external factor articulated by 16% of teachers regarding educational change in the last ten years encompassed the image and profile that teachers believed they presently held in society and the community:

Less respect for profession which filters down from society to parent to child (117)

Community attitude, respect, value of teaching (609).

With respect to teaching, teachers have spoken with a clear voice. **Teaching has changed over the past ten years.** This clear message and the many faceted picture it presents provides an excellent backdrop to the remaining discussion of this survey.

Should teacher education change?

Of the 107 teachers who responded to the survey 87% said they thought that there should be changes in the way pre-service teacher education is conducted. They commented upon how it should change and these were classified into two major categories: those referring to field-based changes; and those referring to university-based changes.

Field-based education

Many teachers wrote about the need for student teachers to spend extended time in schools so that the student teachers could experience more of what happens in a classroom in an ordinary day:

Student teachers need to be in the real world of classrooms more, really see how the teachers' day progresses (105)

Much more time spent in day to day classrooms. (305).

Whilst the call for more time in schools was clear, many other comments focused on the structure of field-based experience as it presently exists for student teachers and for schools. Some teachers spoke about the need to have students within the school more regularly for a longer period of time:

The "1 or 2 off" practicums are outdated - system of internships should be considered (101)

Preservice teacher education is moving in the right direction by placing student teachers in the classrooms more often (517).

Teachers believed student teachers should focus on the "practical" things that happen in the "real world" of teaching as distinct from the "ivory tower" of the university. They reported strongly upon changes needed in preservice education as discussed below.

University-based education

The majority of remarks centred on the need for change in the course content taught within pre-service education at university. It was accepted that certain things needed to be learned within the university, but again knowledge that had a direct relationship to the classroom should be focussed upon. Thus the teachers emphasised classroom

management, programming, literacy, and the use of technology in teaching. Indeed, the sentiment was clear; student teachers needed to know more about the day to day skills of working in the classroom:

At uni more emphasis should be placed on classroom management (115)

General course for a semester e.g. how to fill out a roll, etc (307).

Other examples about literacy, programming and technology were:

In language education – current practices in reading theory should be taught – functional, logicolinguistic model and explicit teaching of text should be given a priority (401).

PROGRAMMING – I only did one semester out of six on this – NOT ENOUGH (307)

Technology should play a huge part in preservice (some students unfortunately don't know how to turn a computer on!) (302).

Again the teachers' emphasis is on knowledge of day to day classroom activities. In this context it is not enough for teacher educators to lecture about the importance of reflection and of a solid theoretical base for understanding the variety and differing quality of teaching practice. **These activities must be linked to real classrooms and experienced in school settings.**

Conclusion

Clearly teaching has changed. To accommodate these changes, teacher education needs to give attention to the knowledge and skills that teachers see as central to the tasks of daily practice. For example, the change in teaching practices most commonly referred to by teachers was that of catering for different individuals and groups within the one classroom. Over the years there has been increased emphasis in curricula on catering for individual differences among students. Such emphases can and have been picked up by many teacher education programs. However, while it is possible to talk about individual differences in a university setting, **a full appreciation of the meaning and the implications of this for classroom learning requires both observation, experience and reflection in classrooms.**

As well as being able to cater for the needs of individual students, student teachers need to be skilled in the use of technology to assist the learning of all children and to enhance daily teaching practices. **Student teachers should further demonstrate competence in the use of technology to facilitate the daily administrative demands that are placed on teachers.**

Teachers' reports of increased collaboration with parents in a variety of contexts to enhance the development of the child, suggests the need for student teachers to develop these important skills during initial teacher education. **Contact with parents and experience in working with parents is again something that can only be acquired through**

involvement in the day-to-day life of a school.

Knowledge of a broad range of curricula and how it impacts upon teaching and learning practices was also perceived by teachers as being important for teacher education programs. The continuing change in curriculum identified by teachers suggests student teachers should acquire a thorough understanding of the principles and process of change. **However experience of the impact of change in a school context must be acquired from the field.**

The role of the teacher and the school with respect to the law was also viewed by teachers as an important feature of teacher education as teachers identified that teacher accountability, especially in relation to child protection issues, is now a concern for many practitioners. The theoretical aspects of the law regarding what teachers can and cannot do may be acquired in a non-school context **but again the particulars of those rules in a given situation require that the student teacher have experience in the situation.**

If teacher educators are to adequately prepare student teachers for the reality of the field, then the messages heard from these teachers' voices need to be listened to and acted upon. Teaching has changed and teacher education should change too. If academics are willing to get involved through partnerships with teachers in practical projects which are of benefit to teachers, pupils and student teachers then mutual benefits can be experienced for all concerned. **The practice of crammed lecture auditoriums to hear about the nature of teaching is finished. The arrival of learning in the field with particular projects identified by the school in personalised and meaningful contexts such as classrooms, is now the place for learning.**

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