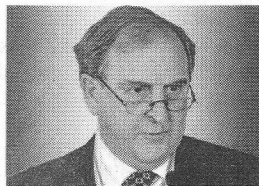


Training for our school teachers is substandard

Educators are entering the classroom without the knowledge to succeed

KEVIN DONNELLY



IN a recent edition of Q&A Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney Michael Spence, argued that teacher education is beyond reproach. Replying to criticisms made by opposition education spokesman Christopher Pyne, the VC said, "What do you mean by better teacher training? What's your problem with teacher training at the moment?"

Unfortunately, Pyne's complaints are valid. Teacher training is substandard, flawed and ideologically bent and as a result teachers are entering classrooms without the knowledge, expertise and skills to get on with the job.

Those responsible for educating teachers, such as the Australian Council of Deans of Education and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association,

took control of teacher training, very few lecturers and academics have any recent, practical experience of classroom teaching.

That those training the teachers have a superficial and overly theoretical view of teaching is exacerbated by the impact of the sociology of education movement and the impact of politically correct theory.

Since the cultural revolution of the late 60s and early 70s, the more traditional approach to education, such as a commitment to a liberal-humanist approach associated with Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot and what the Americans call a liberal arts program, has been either attacked or ignored.

The new orthodoxy argues that academic subjects, competition and meritocracy are elitist, flawed and a tool employed by capitalists to reinforce their hegemony over society and various victim groups.

There is nothing inherently valuable about the disciplines of knowledge associated with the Western tradition as these subjects, so the argument goes, are simply socio-cultural constructs

little evidence of its effectiveness. The report states "much curriculum design, content, teaching and teacher preparation seems to be based, at least implicitly, on an educational philosophy of constructivism yet the inquiry found there is a serious lack of supporting evidence for its effectiveness in teaching children to read".

Evidence that schools of education are failing to teach the more formal phonics approach to reading, where children learn the relationship between letters and sounds, is also found in a 2006-07 survey of beginning teachers that concluded "pre-service and in-service teachers have limited knowledge of phonological awareness, spelling and the terminology associated with language structure and phonics".

Anecdotal evidence also illustrates the failings of Australia's schools of education. One student complains: "Teacher academics pay lip service to philosophy and other traditions of thought about education, but everything we do is based on the progressivist psychology of Dewey, Vygotsky, etc, manifesting as a constructivist approach to teaching."

Another student writes: "I have struggled through this course which has seriously been more like a long fuzzy lesson — stabbing in the dark, and am slowly becoming more and more terrified at the

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Those responsible for educating teachers, such as the Australian Council of Deans of Education and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association, argue all is well, but reality proves otherwise. The problems are manifest and long-standing.

A 2006 survey of 1300 beginning teachers by the Australian Secondary Principals Association concluded that a significant number "suggested that university-based teacher education faculties were out of touch with the reality of classrooms and school life, which meant a lot of new teachers were unprepared for the working environment in which they found themselves".

A second survey of approximately 1000 Victorian teachers, carried out by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 2007, stated that teachers believed their training only made them "moderately prepared" and that "a worrying proportion believed their preparation was less than adequate".

Compounding the problem, at a time when schools and teachers are forced to publicise performance data, is that teacher training institutes are unaccountable. As noted by the Australian Council for Educational Research in its submission to a commonwealth government inquiry into accrediting teacher training institutes:

"To our knowledge, no teacher education program or institution has ever been discredited, yet variation in quality is known to be considerable. Teacher education is arguably one of the least accountable and least examined areas of professional education in Australia".

That teacher training is substandard should not surprise. The majority of courses in this country are biased towards a cultural-left, progressive view of education that indoctrinates teachers with fads such as open classrooms, constructivism and personalised learning, and that demands teachers, instead of teaching, act as facilitators and guides by the side.

Many teachers enter the classroom without the subject knowledge needed to inspire and challenge students and without a balanced and research-based understanding of what constitutes effective

teaching. The new orthodoxy argues that academic subjects, competition and meritocracy are elitist, flawed and a tool employed by capitalists to reinforce their hegemony over society and various victim groups.

There is nothing inherently valuable about the disciplines of knowledge associated with the Western tradition as these subjects, so the argument goes, are simply socio-cultural constructs that cannot and do not deserve to be privileged.

Practising teachers and schools should have a greater say in teacher training

As a result, trainee teachers are overwhelmed by postmodernist, feminist, neo-Marxist, postcolonial, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex theories that, while possibly having some value in the cloistered world of the university, do nothing to help teachers deal with a restless and noisy class of 30 prepubescent children on a hot Friday afternoon.

Teaching primary pupils to read provides an example of how our schools of education are failing teachers. Even though the whole language approach (where the assumption is that learning to read is as natural as learning to talk, and therefore does not have to be taught in a structured way) is a proven failure, it has been the preferred model since the late 70s.

Underpinning whole language, and other fads such as personalised learning and open classrooms, is a theory known as constructivism. Advocates argue that more formal approaches to teaching are unnecessary as children construct their own knowledge.

As noted in the 2005 commonwealth report *Teaching Reading*, constructivism is prevalent in teacher training, notwithstanding

pay lip service to philosophy and other traditions of thought about education, but everything we do is based on the progressivist psychology of Dewey, Vygotsky, etc, manifesting as a constructivist approach to teaching."

Another student writes: "I have struggled through this course which has seriously been more like a long fuzzy lesson — stabbing in the dark, and am slowly becoming more and more terrified at the prospect of teaching children in an outcomes-based system."

A third writes: "Am I going to be unemployed because I disagree strongly with current teacher training? I cannot agree to teach according to the left-wing, post-modern philosophies. I have no idea how I can complete the Aboriginal study unit that is inevitable."

What's to be done? Schools of education need to be held accountable by undertaking ongoing surveys of graduating teachers in the first few years of their profession to evaluate the effectiveness and value of their teacher training.

Research should evaluate the success or otherwise of often competing learning theories and various models of classroom pedagogy, and schools of education should be made to publicly document and justify their preferred approach.

Practising teachers and schools should have a greater say in teacher training, both in terms of course development and in giving teacher training courses a more practical focus. An apprenticeship model should be adopted, where trainee teachers spend more time in the classroom being mentored by experienced teachers.

Alternative methods of training and employing beginning teachers should be supported, such as Teach for Australia and, in Britain what is known as Troop to Teachers, where those leaving the armed services have the chance to work in schools, especially those that are disadvantaged, and mentor students.

Those responsible for teaching the teachers should be made to work in schools for extended periods to ensure a reality check by making them face the practical consequences of the theories they champion.

A more market-driven approach needs to be explored to ensure that the current monopoly enjoyed by existing schools of education is challenged and there is a diverse range of providers competing for trainee teachers.

