

Ready, or not

More than 75,000 trainee teachers undertake supervised classes in Australian schools each year as part of their degree courses. A House of Representatives committee investigating teacher education has found the practise teaching round by far the most contentious issue.

Story: Geoffrey Maslen

Cover Story

The noise rolled down the long school corridor like thunder. Outside room 28 I could see a crowd of boisterous, shouting boys. The pushing and tugging stopped as they heard my steps. Young teenage faces turned to watch as I nervously approached and I could almost see them thinking, “Here comes another newey—this should be fun!”

I arrived at the western suburbs all-boys technical school after two weeks at the teachers college. Like the other 100 tyro teachers at the college, I had not set foot inside a school since I had left my own six years before. Yet, with only the briefest advice about managing a class and some of the other tasks teachers have to undertake, we were assigned to a range of schools and told to report on the first day of term—schools whose students had learnt to pick a trainee from 20 paces.

A harried-looking headmaster greeted me as I pushed through the front door: “Ah! Just the man,” he said when I introduced myself. “Can you look after 2C in room 28 for the first two periods, it’s up those stairs on the second floor. Let’s see, they’re down for maths...”

Before I could ask a question he was gone and I could already hear what seemed to be the sound of a Jimmy Sharman boxing troupe booming down from above. As the boys scrambled inside, fighting for places at the back but finally settling in their desks, I wrote my name on the board in letters that started near the top and dropped at a drunken angle.

“Right!” I said with an authority I did not feel. “Take out your books and pens and open to the first page of the maths text.”

“We don’t have no books yet, sir,” a helpful lad at the front explained. “And we don’t have no pens or paper neither.” The noise level was already so high I could hardly hear what he said and this was only the first class on the first day...

It was a nightmarish introduction to a career as a teacher that was to last more than 20 mostly enjoyable years. The internship scheme of teacher preparation was sound enough: place the trainees in a school for half the week throughout the year, let them learn on the job with some educational theory provided by the college lecturers, and then send them off to teach full-time.

But we were ill-prepared to control our wayward charges and, although we gave regular supervised lessons in front of senior teachers and college staff who offered comments and advice, we were mostly left to survive as best we could. I think back with pity for the poor kids who suffered under our inexpert instruction...

More than four decades on, the teaching round known as the practicum is now spread out over 70 to 100 days during the four-year

bachelor of education degree. Yet it continues to inflame debate—as the House of Representatives Education Committee has discovered.

In February last year, then federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson asked the committee to investigate teacher training. The inquiry has attracted more than 160 written submissions. As well, the 10-member committee is holding public meetings in every state and territory and has listened to the views of academics, principals and teachers.

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Dr Nelson said at the time the committee would examine the philosophical underpinnings of teacher training, the way schools were delivering mentoring and support to new teachers, and the extent to which teachers were supported during the practicum.

Although the terms of reference cover 11 main areas, including the selection of teacher education students, the structure of courses and how well teachers are prepared to teach reading and numeracy, the practicum has been a key element in many of the submissions and was raised numerous times at the public hearings.

“Professional practice needs to be at the heart of teacher education,” the Australian Council of Deans of Education said in its submission. This was more complex than simply increasing the practicum component of courses, the council declared, as it involved relating professional experience to theoretical insight: the relationship between theory and practice had to be seen as essentially intertwined.

The deans called for a separate investigation into the practicum to look at partnerships between faculties of education and schools, the level of support available for supervising teachers and ways of improving the experience for the trainees. The federal

government’s pledged \$81 million increase in practicum funding should be used for this purpose in its entirety, they said.

In another discussion of the practicum, Professor Malcolm Skilbeck and Dr Helen Connell drew on research they had undertaken around the world. The two internationally distinguished educationists reported that trainee teachers generally valued their teaching practice rounds yet there was an almost universal dissatisfaction with the educational theory courses provided by universities.

“Not only do teachers find little if any value in educational theory for the craft of teaching, they do not value it as an intellectual discipline,” the researchers said in their submission. “This is extremely disquieting given the reforms, reviews, and developments of university programs of teacher education in recent years.”

The two scholars said the most widely reported challenges facing teachers in their first years in the profession related to planning of learning experiences appropriate to student diversity; classroom management, especially behavioural problems; relationships with the parents of their students; lack of feedback on their teaching; and recognition of their performance.

“In addressing these challenges, teachers speak highly of the classroom and school experience they gained while preparing to teach. However, they often appear unable to integrate into this experience the theoretical subject matter they have been taught at university and feel that in this respect they have been inadequately prepared.”

The Australian Secondary Principals Association called in its submission for the teacher preparation courses provided by universities to be “grounded in reality”. This was necessary to ensure that new teachers were well prepared for life in the classroom, particularly in the management and motivation of students.

The principals said the amount of time spent by trainee students working alongside experienced, quality teachers, should be markedly increased. A survey the association conducted into

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the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of beginning teachers regarding their preparation for the profession found that a large proportion were teaching at least one class in a subject for which they did not have any expertise.

As well, those responding indicated that their colleagues at school had provided the most worthwhile support and advice during their training, with relatively little value supplied by their university lecturers. Some said they were already in leadership positions for which they felt unprepared, while others admitted they were considering quitting the profession for an alternative career.

“As a result of this research, ASPA has developed a policy representing the collective views of principals from across the nation regarding teacher preparation courses,” the submission stated. “As an association we have a strong commitment to seeing that there are targeted places made available in universities to address the shortage of teachers in certain subject areas, and that the courses provided by universities are grounded in reality... [and are] well structured and focused.”

The Australian Teacher Education Association—the major professional organisation representing faculty of education academics—pointed out that the current inquiry was simply one of many conducted at the Commonwealth and state level over the past few decades. The association noted gloomily that almost none of the recommendations of these previous inquiries had ever been implemented.

“In three crucial areas—the condition of initial teacher education, the development of standards, and the supply and demand for graduates—the problem has not been lack of appropriate advice but, rather, lack of appropriate action,” the academics wrote.

Defending their own patch, they argued that teacher training at university could not fully equip entrants to the profession with all the skills that would be displayed by experienced teachers. The most it



could do was give prospective teachers some understanding of curricular, pedagogical and assessment processes, as well as knowledge of the diversity of developmental, cultural and social issues they might face in schools.

“Schools are inherently diverse in their locations and characteristics, and the adaptation of these initial understandings is central to the induction stage of teachers’ professional development,” the academics said.

As with many of the other submissions, the educators drew attention to recent increases in the number of students enrolled in pre-service programs and the considerable difficulties facing education faculties in placing students in schools for even the required minimum number of days. Many schools were no longer prepared to take on the task of looking after significant numbers of trainees, while teachers were demanding increased payments to act as their supervisors.

In its submission, the University of Western Sydney’s school of education noted that these payments had not increased since the early 1990s. A claim by the Australian Education Union for teachers to receive more money to undertake this work, when added to other financial

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pressures, could place an unsustainable burden on the school.

Likewise, the deans of education agreed that funding inadequacy was most evident around elements such as the practicum. They called for an increase in base funding to education faculties to enable a reduction in student/staff ratios, a higher quality teaching and learning experience, and the recognition of teacher education as a national priority.

They drew attention to the decline in the autonomy of education as a university discipline over the past decade, noting that only 14 faculties of education remained in Australia’s



Photo: Newspix

40 universities. The rest had become “schools of education” that were located within larger units and faculties.

“The result of this change is that the discipline of education has lost influence,” the deans said. “It is difficult for those dedicated to teacher education to set strategic goals and priorities.”

In one of the more radical proposals put to the committee, the deans have suggested the creation of separate “education universities”. Although a single university devoted to the discipline of education might seem novel today, they used to be known as teachers colleges: autonomous institutions whose sole task was to prepare people to teach.

As the deans said, education universities were not new and were typically reflected in the “Normal Universities” found in nations such as China. Evidence indicated this was a growing global trend, the deans observed, stating that such universities would not act as isolated institutions but would remain “deeply engaged with other university disciplines”.

“Education-specific universities could reflect the importance of education to national prosperity and social cohesion, and provide the discipline with a level of autonomy hitherto unseen. The establishment of such universities is worth exploring.”

In a reference to what education institutions should be teaching,

whether as an autonomous organisation or part of a university, the deans spoke of “lifewide and lifelong learning”.

They said the new learning was less about imparting defined knowledge and skills and more about shaping a certain kind of person: “somebody who knows what they don’t know; knows how to learn what they need to know; knows how to create knowledge through problem solving; knows how to create knowledge by drawing on informational and human resources around them; knows how to make knowledge collaboratively; knows how to nurture, mentor, and teach others; and knows how to document and pass on personal knowledge.”

One significant change to teacher education was likely to be a greater focus on “reflective practice”, the deans said. This did not simply mean spending more time in schools which, as one critic claimed, simply reproduced the status quo and reinforced the idea that teachers were technicians. Instead, the idea would be based on enquiries into educational practice and involve project work and collaborative learning between trainees, teachers and academics.

“This is not to refute the value of initial teachers taking classes in designated schools, but to suggest important and often neglected ways

of adding to this experience,” the deans said. “The development of mentoring, team teaching, and the allocation of time for collegial discussion and feedback, are all vital to the goals of collaborative and flexible learning.”

They argued that in future, not only would more links be sought between schools and communities, universities, businesses and government, but that the education institutions themselves would be “reconceptualised as parts of a broader learning environment”.

“Rather than being added on to an existing scaffold, local and regional collaboration will in fact come to redefine the very nature of schools and their orientation to society.”

The House Education Committee will consider these comments, suggestions and criticisms for much of this year. Its report, including recommendations, is expected to be tabled in parliament late in 2006. ■

Journalist Geoffrey Maslen has taught in primary and secondary schools and has lectured to student teachers of mathematics and science. He now writes on education for newspapers and magazines around the world.

For more information on the teacher education inquiry, visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/teachereduc or email evt.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.