

# TEACHER QUALITY, TEACHER REGARD AND TEACHER RETENTION

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Teaching is one of the most challenging and demanding professions anyone can enter. As with all professions, teaching requires training in the relevant and contemporary practices and skills of the profession in order to be an effective and qualified teacher. Preparedness for entry into the profession is recognised through qualifications, and effectiveness and quality lead to career progression.

Teaching is about relationships – relationships with, and among, children as learners, parents, adults, teaching colleagues and peers, as well as members of the public and governing bodies. Yet there is an increasing trend of negativity and disrespect towards teachers and what they achieve and do in the course of carrying out their duties within Australian and American societies (Hoenig, 2011; Rickards, 2016). It has been suggested that this trend applies globally. The media do not portray teachers in a good light, and Australian society has developed a disregard and disrespect for the role of teachers in educating children. Students and parents now have the means to share their views and opinions of schools and individual teachers publicly via social media sites such as Rate my teachers (<http://au.ratemyteachers.com/>). Negative posts are often ill-informed and ill-founded, and do not constitute an evaluation of the essential skills and teaching practice demonstrated by individual teachers, or of the reflective nature of quality teaching practice. These types of negative criticisms have led to undervaluing of the teaching profession (Rickards, 2016).

The lack of value and respect shown towards teachers in Australia is in notable contrast to Finland, a country often cited as an example of teaching excellence, with highly trained and highly respected teachers (McKinnon, 2016; Rickards, 2016). Yet there are significant differences between the Finnish system and other Western educational systems, including Australia. The most significant difference that distinguishes Australian and American perceptions of teachers, from the Finnish perception, is the regard afforded to teachers in Finland (Hoenig, 2011). In Finland, teachers are held in high esteem and ‘accrue similar respect to doctors’ (Rickards, 2016: 3). However, this is not the case in all countries and, thus, teachers are not recognised as deserving the same respect and trust as members of the

medical profession (Rickards, 2016). This continued negative attitude to teachers and the teaching profession has, in recent years, come to the attention of journalists, who have noted the low retention of teachers in the profession, and have highlighted causes, including continued public denigration of teachers (Asplan, 2016).

American and Australian teachers are under constant fire for the poor performance of students and their lower-than-expected learning outcomes, on both the international stage and at home (Hoenig, 2011). National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores and ratings, and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, have been used as quality key performance indicators, together with other measures such as teacher retention (Bahr, 2016; Balogh and Parnell, 2017). It would seem that in a nation becoming more reliant on blaming others, the shortcomings of the education system, as currently measured by international and national standards, as well as unsubstantiated public and personal opinions, are attributed to teachers and teacher training institutions. Teacher training institutions are called to demonstrate the positive impact they have in their teacher training programs, as well as the ability of graduates to influence student learning (Rickards, 2016).

While there is no dispute that teachers have a crucial role in improving student learning outcomes, researchers (Ryan et al, 2013; Byrne, 2015; Rickards, 2016) suggest that we not only need to raise the standard of training courses and graduates; we also need to ‘ensure teachers are well supported so they can contribute fully as highly developed experts in a widely respected profession’ (Rickards, 2016: 4).

While it is easy to look at a single factor, such as teacher quality, as the main contributor to student learning outcomes and teacher retention, there are many other factors to consider, such as the undersupply of specialist teachers of Languages, Geography, History, Computing, and of secondary Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics teachers (Rickards, 2016), particularly in disadvantaged rural and regional areas (Asplan, 2016). There is an increasing number of teachers working outside their area of expertise, despite the evidence indicating that is a current oversupply of graduating teachers (Rickards, 2016).

Australia needs to address the need to attract the brightest candidates to the profession and to retain the best people in the teaching profession (McKinnon, 2016; Richards, 2016). Teacher retention is significantly influenced by societal values and attitudes. New teachers need effective support in the areas of student discipline, curriculum, instructional method and induction into the school culture in order to improve retention (Robinson, 2011). Young teachers need in-school mentoring and support at the start of their careers (Aspland, 2016; Fluckiger et al, 2006). Quality mentoring during the first year of teaching is a key factor leading to teacher retention, as well as the development of expertise. Yet the reality of the job and its many unattractive aspects, together with 'heavy workloads, classroom management issues and lack of collaboration and support, are the main reasons that teachers leave the profession' (McKinnon, 2016).

Not only are Australian teachers being exposed to negative criticism by the media, and direct personal criticism from parents, they are increasingly subject to physical violence and assault. Kevin Donnelly, a senior research fellow at The Australian Catholic University, argues that confrontational and disruptive classroom behaviour has led to the nation's sliding education standards, and he has pointed the blame at parents. He argues that children are not being taught to respect older people or their teachers. This, along with the increasing freedom given to children by their parents, has contributed to a lack of respect and regard for Australian teachers. Parents are also increasingly exhibiting confrontational and disruptive behavior, to which Donnelly refers as 'the angry parent syndrome' (Balogh and Parnell, 2017).

Consideration needs to be given to the impact that this lack of respect and regard for teachers has on both teacher performance and wellbeing and, in turn, on student-learning outcomes. Teacher-bashing and denigration by the media, together with parental complaints and ongoing criticism, both personally and in the public forum, continue to undermine teachers in a way not experienced by other professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and engineers. The brightest and most talented of students that the profession actively seeks to attract are dissuaded by the current attitude to, and treatment of, teachers. These attitudes and behaviours also influence young teachers, and are a significant cause of the increasing number of young graduates who leave the profession in their first five years. Researchers estimate that 30% to 50% of teachers leave in the first five years (Aspland, 2016; McKinnon, 2016). This also represents a substantial loss of financial investment in teacher training (McKinnon, 2016).

In light of the increasing demands placed on teachers, and of the constant changes required in order to be the best teacher capable of providing effective and quality teaching practice, it is vital that these societal expectations are addressed. A turnaround in teacher regard is required urgently. A higher level of respect for teachers and the profession will, in turn, lead to improved student learning outcomes and high levels of retention of quality teachers in the profession. This improved retention of quality teachers will then feed back into the cycle of improved student learning outcomes, teacher satisfaction and fulfillment, a sense of achievement and a passion to continue improving.

*'It's easy to suggest singular fixes for multiple issues but education is complex. It involves parents, students, teachers, academics, institutions, governments and many other organisations all playing their part.*

*If we want the best quality teaching this country can offer, we need to work more in concert; strengthen partnerships; gather and use evidence – rather than ill-informed opinion – to make needed changes; provide the right working conditions for early career teachers to thrive; and strive to integrate all the elements it takes to educate a child'* (Aspland, 2016).

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