

Learning First facilitates new approach to teacher training

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3 October 2015

Just before events in Canberra began dominating the news, a new approach to how teachers are educated before they enter classrooms was taking shape in Melbourne. Representatives of seven education systems from across the world formulated a commitment to reform teacher education. This was not a normal gathering. A commitment was being made by groups that often sit on opposing sides of reform debates.

Their reasons for coming together are simple enough. First are the problems in our schools. Over the next couple of months about 17,000 new teachers will graduate from 400 teacher preparation courses across Australia. Every year, too many of them are underprepared and feel overwhelmed when they enter classrooms.

The reasons for this are numerous, but among those continually highlighted are poor connections between schools and universities, resulting in poor feedback loops on how to better develop teachers, and teacher education that focuses on the wrong issues. In addition, there is growing concern that many teachers' skills in areas such as maths and science are underdeveloped.

The overall result is a poor outcome for new teachers and worse outcomes for their students. If new teachers are not trained in the right areas, or lack subject knowledge, their students fall further and further behind. Moreover, the underprepared young teacher who went through the poor course will not be hired by the best schools in the leafy suburbs. They will likely end up in schools struggling to serve disadvantaged communities, teaching students who have the most complex needs. So our failures in teacher education reform entrench disadvantage.

Second, previous government reform efforts created little or no change. Many reports were written, regulation and compliance increased, but they did little to change the way teachers are actually trained. This fed into reform debates that have been incredibly disappointing.

The problems are talked about freely in private but rarely aired in public. Defensive posturing dominates and quickly denigrates into turf-protection and buck-passing between parties. Some universities and schools blame each other for disjointed efforts to develop teachers. Evaluative agencies are often seen to lack teeth. Teacher registration bodies rarely reject applicants others see as underprepared. And everyone blames the federal and state governments for not fixing it all.

The historical response from federal and state governments has been for each to claim it is the other's responsibility. This is the context into which teacher education reforms are thrown and it is the reason so many fail. Recent announcements by governments about reforming initial teacher education through more rigorous selection into courses, improved professional experience requirements and strengthened accreditation processes for teacher training providers are all positive moves. But unless the context changes — unless there is greater buy-in to work towards clear objectives of how we want education systems to improve over time — all these reforms will have limited impact.

A new way is needed to help new teachers and, over time, lift the capacity of every teacher in every classroom. Tired old debates can't continue. Improving teacher education requires new solutions: new ways of thinking that significantly recast the roles of various actors in teacher education.

With this hope, systems and international education leaders converged on Melbourne last month to kick off a two-year collaboration to improve teacher education. Learning First, a Melbourne-based education reform organisation supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, brought together teacher educators from Australia (Victoria), Brazil, China, Britain, Finland, South Korea and the US.

This was not a typical conference. It was a prerequisite for participants to be committed to reforming teacher education in a manner that breaks away from past failures. Education systems could not just send government bureaucrats. Teams had to be designed that included key players; governments worked alongside university providers and key state and national stakeholders

So organisations that for years have engaged in the usual buck-passing debates are now working together in a committed fashion to lift the status of teachers and their ability to help our children. Bringing disparate groups together is not easy. People don't change their usual positions easily. But as they work together and start to understand what can be achieved by doing so, people gradually drop their self-interest and focus on the greater good. This has to mean something, so systems had to commit to meaningful change to participate in this reform project. The focus of their reform efforts ranges from better support for new teachers in schools, improved subject-matter knowledge and practical teaching skills in teacher education, to better evaluation of teacher education providers. These reforms have to be developed to maximise the impact across all schools.

But this is not easy. There are few countries that have managed meaningful reform of teacher education. It is a surprisingly underdeveloped and under-researched area. There is limited common acceptance of what is good teacher preparation; there is little evaluation of graduates, and minimal feedback between employers, schools and teacher educators. Roles and responsibilities between players are often poorly co-ordinated. Meaningful reform therefore requires all actors in the system to change the way they act and interact with each other.

Much of the debate on reforming teacher education ignores this complexity. Reform attempts regularly fail to deal with the incentives that key players face, meaning they fail to predict how institutions will actually respond to, for example, new regulations or quality-control measures. What is often misunderstood in all areas of public policy — not just education — is that the first step in an evaluation and accountability regime is to start with your objectives. What do we want teacher education to become? How will evaluation help us get there? This requires an understanding of how different actors will react to policy and regulatory changes. For example, a response to increased regulation may involve increased paperwork or crafty avoidance, rather than the intended improvement in quality. Too often we skip thinking about this step and create reform with unintended or negative consequences.

The key question is therefore which reforms will have the largest impact on changing the actions of actors in teacher education. Which levers will best motivate individual academics to improve the way they prepare new teachers, and what will encourage universities to build the capacity of their staff? Which lever will help schools influence the quality of teacher preparation?

These questions highlight that a key problem is the incentives within universities for change. There is a clear lack of incentives to reform and lift the quality of teacher education for those that actually provide the education to new teachers. Most teacher educators are academics. They have very clear incentives: publish in academic journals. They don't have incentives for changing the education of new teachers. Therefore, we shouldn't expect regulatory reform or new accountability for universities to have an impact unless we change the incentives faced by academics or at least provide other motivations.

Other reform efforts in Australia try to build better linkages between universities and schools. But individual schools have little incentive to engage in reform of teacher education. Most schools see teaching children — not pre-service teachers — as their core business and they don't feel they have the power to change what universities do. Unless this is addressed, we shouldn't expect reform to be effective.

So what should we do? How do we create a system that will improve over time? The solution involves reframing what actors think they should and can do, and who they can influence from their position in the system.

Some systems have introduced serious incentives and constraints that have shaken up their universities. Top teacher education programs in South Korea are financially rewarded and lower performing programs can have their funding and number of program places reduced. This has led to many universities increasing funding to build capacity in their education faculties.

In Singapore it is recognised that all the incentives for academics relate to more and more high-quality publications and they are under pressure to provide these publications. So incentives have been directly altered to link school performance with that of the education faculty. Education academics are now promoted on the basis not only of their publication record, but the impact of their research and teaching on schools. Hence they focus much more of their work on improving primary and secondary schools.

Florida has taken a more direct approach. It has implemented a training guarantee to schools: if a new teacher underperforms in their first two years of teaching, the training provider must deliver additional training to their graduate. At first glance the accountability nature of this reform is obvious. But dig deeper and you realise that training providers respond by working more closely with schools to better understand their needs to ensure that they will meet their training guarantee.

Of course part of changing how people act is building their capacity. It is a sign of the narrow approach of previous efforts to reform teacher education that Hong Kong is one of the only systems in the world to directly target capacity building in its education faculties. It knew it had a problem with literacy in primary schools. So it built capacity in its universities to help current teachers improve their literacy instruction and ensure future teachers were trained with these skills.

Significant amounts of money were provided to universities if they could improve literacy in primary schools. This created clear incentives for universities to connect with schools and focus their work on the key problems children face. Education researchers were held accountable for improving schools and when they did, they received more money.

This sounds incredibly simple, but few places outside of Hong Kong have taken this direct approach or focused on building capacity in education faculties.

If there are options for academics to be provided with incentives, what about schools? Many schools feel they cannot influence universities or effect change across the system. In Singapore, schools as well as universities must show how they are helping each other, through feedback and evaluation, to improve teacher education. Universities take feedback from schools about the quality of their graduates seriously, and enhance their programs accordingly.

A key aspect of all of these reforms was creating a shared vision for teacher preparation. The current debates very rarely describe our aspiration for teacher education — or, put simply: how do we want the system to operate?

There are so many possibilities for what teacher education could become, and how it could -transform our schools and universities, that are continually cut short by a debate that focuses on regulation and, invariably, minimum requirements.

The teams that met in Melbourne are trying to change the way actors in the system operate to ensure continuous improvement. They are following the path of all high-performing education systems around the world: bringing disparate groups together and getting them to drop their self-interest and focus on what really matters.

This creates powerful reform momentum that achieves much more than any combination of individual reform efforts.

We need more of this in Australia, particularly as so many of our reform efforts are fraught with conflict and hostility. That is why Learning First brought different groups together at the earliest stages of reform.

After two years of collaboration and working with some of the most insightful leaders in the world to produce meaningful reform, we will have some important lessons to share. We need to: we owe it to our underprepared teachers who are doing their best in our neediest schools.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/learning-first-facilitates-new-approach-to-teacher-training/news-story/0de23594c7591649af79c586b6914b99>