

Specialist primary teachers: Experts in the field

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An increasingly crowded primary school curriculum means generalist teachers often have a breadth but not a depth of knowledge. Stephen Dinham explains how introducing an element of specialist teaching to the primary level, coupled with a narrower, deeper curriculum, would address this problem.

In 2002-2003, the Commonwealth government conducted a Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, one of many over recent decades. The review committee was asked to report on issues of teacher supply and demand, the current level of teacher skills, and the effectiveness of pre-service and in-service education and training for teachers. The aim of the review was to 'help build a culture of lifelong learning and innovation in Australia's schools.'

I was a member of that review committee. During the review and through my research, professional development work with teachers and visits to schools, I became convinced that Australian education had reached the point where the expectations being placed on primary teachers to teach all areas of the curriculum, as well as addressing all the other societal issues being shifted to schools, had become unreasonable, if not untenable.

It is clear that many current concerns, such as secondary student achievement, post-compulsory retention and attracting suitable people to university courses for careers in maths and science, have their origins in the quality of teaching our young people receive in primary schooling.

Schools and teachers are blamed unfairly and often for the failings of society. A substantial share of blame is also levelled at universities, the institutions responsible for teacher training. Whenever a social problem arises, the automatic response is to squeeze a solution into the school curriculum, which in turn must be addressed in pre-service teacher education courses. Rarely is anything taken away to balance what is imposed. The results are overcrowded and at times unbalanced curricula, both in schools and in pre-service teacher education courses, and pressure on teachers and resources.

We have the paradox whereby teachers are valued and trusted less by society, yet entrusted with more responsibility. We have a second paradox in that, by general admission, teaching has never been more challenging. Because of this situation, so the

argument goes, we need teachers who are ‘bomb proof’, autonomous professionals who can operate effectively from day one, i.e., “the job is more difficult and we can’t afford to help you because we are all struggling ourselves”. This of course ignores what we know about teacher development and expertise generally – it takes up to 10-13 years to become expert at anything - and teachers typically go through a number of stages: novice, competent, proficient, accomplished or ‘expert’.

As the primary school curriculum has become increasingly crowded with social ‘extras’, accompanied by greater standardised testing and reporting of the ‘basics’, it has become more difficult to train, professionally develop and support primary teachers. As the breadth of teaching increases, inevitably, the depth and effectiveness decreases. It has thus become even harder to prepare beginning teachers.

Recently, there have been calls from bodies such as the Australian Primary Principals Association for a narrowing of the curriculum to four core areas of English, maths, science and history. What is ‘left out’ under such an arrangement will provoke spirited debate and re-drafting the primary curriculum won’t be easy, although there seems to be growing recognition that this has to happen.

For a variety of reasons, we have seen a general drift away from the study of curriculum or subject areas since teacher education moved into universities in the late 1980s. Over the same three decades, teacher education programs have become longer, particularly in primary education, where four years of pre-service undergraduate training is now standard. For graduate entry, two years of teacher education is increasingly the norm. Theoretically, longer periods of pre-service education should better equip our teachers for the realities of teaching, yet this is not necessarily so.

The longer time available for pre-service education has been soaked up by increasing demands and often competing ideologies. Many areas, views and subjects jostle for inclusion. Some are mandated by various stakeholders and education ministers, including Indigenous education, English as a Second Language, languages, Information and Communication Technology, special education, behaviour management, and so on. All are worthy and have their supporters, but each adds to the pressure on university courses, teaching staff and resources. Compromises are inevitable and can lead to conflict over what to omit or reduce in priority.

In these academic and ideological turf wars, ‘traditional’ curriculum areas have tended to lose out to areas seen as more important and relevant in this postmodernist, poststructuralist era, such as subjects about diversity – the icing has replaced the cake. The view from some is that curriculum areas can and should be integrated; that process is more important than content; that student-centred activity is better than teacher direction; and that studying the ‘nuts and bolts’ of school curricula and assessment is somehow wrong in the current context.

Subject content knowledge has been portrayed as rote learning and recitation of facts, names, dates and places, and is seen as less worthy than critical thinking and the acknowledgment of multiple social realities. Learning to learn is seen as preferable to learning. Teacher-directed learning is seen old-fashioned, even harmful, while student activity and choice is championed, regardless of what that activity or choice might entail.

Such dichotomies are unhelpful, divisive and misleading. As with most things in life, there is a question of balance and good teachers have always managed to achieve this, albeit under increasing pressure.

Based on my research and experience, beginning teachers have two fundamental needs. They want to know what to teach, and how to teach it. Everything else should support these ends. Many studies of quality or effective teaching have demonstrated the need for teachers to have strong, deep subject matter knowledge. The backbone of any teacher education program must be the school curriculum, something with which all practicing teachers must engage.

For effective and powerful teaching and learning to occur in the primary years, I believe we have reached the point where a degree of subject specialisation needs to be introduced to primary teacher training and teaching. Whenever I mention this, the usual reaction is shock and horror that primary schools could adopt the perceived worst aspects of high schools – multiple teachers, teaching subjects rather than students and the tyranny of the bells. After all, one of the principles of middle schooling is to ease the primary-secondary transition through making the middle years more like primary schooling and less like secondary schooling. My heretical view is that there are actually advantages in making the primary years more like secondary education. This too could make the primary-secondary transition less problematic.

In my experience, high schools today are more orderly than primary schools. The primary school day is fragmented with numerous disruptions and changes of activity and these are more intrusive than in the typical high school. It is difficult to finish anything and primary teachers struggle to master and cover all aspects of the curriculum. Science is particularly problematic, as recent reviews have demonstrated. Many teachers admit they lack the expertise to teach science effectively and thus it receives less attention and treatment in the typical school day. A second aspect worth noting is that where primary teachers have been offered a reduction or narrowing in their responsibilities, they are often reluctant to let go, something both to their credit and detriment.

We will continue to need the generalist primary teacher, but I believe that two broad teaching specialisations would attract suitably talented people to teaching - including some presently deterred by the breadth of the primary curriculum - and enable greater depth in teacher education, teaching, and teacher professional learning. It might also help to attract more men to primary teaching, although the quality of a teacher is more important than that teacher's personal qualities.

One primary teaching specialisation could encompass maths, science and technology, with a strong emphasis on numeracy, while the other could address the humanities, with a strong emphasis on literacy. Some areas of the curriculum such as physical education would be common to each. All teachers would still be teachers of literacy and numeracy as well as performing the usual pastoral care, organisational and extra-curricular roles. Over time, additional specialisations could be added, again in areas such as languages where teachers report they are inadequately prepared.

As such specialist teachers enter teaching they will in turn enable other generalist teachers to specialise through being released from some of their present, subject-based responsibilities. They could also be supported through team-teaching with these subject

specialists. I suspect primary students would actually welcome the variety and challenge resulting from greater teacher specialisation.

Under this proposal, a pre-service primary teacher could: undertake a degree in the relevant subject areas, then complete a one or two year end-on teacher training program; undertake a four-year education degree designed to address their specialisation, or complete a suitable concurrent double degree in, say, science and education. Mature entrants with relevant industry experience might also be attracted from outside teaching to such specialist roles.

The time saved in primary teacher training from not having to address all areas of the curriculum would enable greater depth of treatment and understanding of both subject knowledge and teaching methods, as well as providing for more time in schools and other settings depending on the model adopted. Professional experience could also be more focussed.

Some of these teachers could undertake a qualification to enable them to teach in the first two years of high school to facilitate middle schooling initiatives.

Under such an arrangement, primary school students (and teachers) would have the benefit of working with someone with a greater depth of knowledge, and hopefully passion for their specialisation, which would provide a firmer foundation for student success in the primary years of schooling and beyond.

It is time we looked seriously at the potential benefits of introducing a limited amount of formal specialisation to primary teaching in Australia, over and above that which currently occurs on a loose, school-by-school basis. This needs to take place within the context of a broader discussion on the overall purposes of primary and secondary schooling which might result in the greater use of para-professionals and support staff in schools so that teachers can concentrate on a more limited range of professional responsibilities. Such specialisation would also complement and strengthen any moves to narrow and deepen the primary school curriculum.

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