

What it might mean to be a ‘classroom ready’ teacher?

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Abstract

Questioning what it might mean to be a ‘classroom ready’ teacher is prompted by the process of developing a Master of Teaching program for submission to TEQSA on behalf of a Christian tertiary provider. A challenge to compliance is understood as emerging from within a worldview derived from the story of the Bible, a perspective which creates space to observe difference, particularly in relation to teacher identity and the purpose of schooling.

Introduction

The Australian Government document, *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (TEMAG, 2014) contributes to reforming initial teacher education in Australia. Instigated by the 2014 Ministerial Advisory Group it elaborates 38 recommendations in relation to pre-service or initial teacher education programs. The key findings frame previous preparation of teachers in Australia as “weak” and that “public confidence has been poor” with “poor practice in a number of programs” due in part to “insufficient integration” between schools and providers (p. xi). The critique of previous teacher preparation is couched in terms including “inadequate”, “insufficient” and as having “gaps” (p. xi). In their assessment Yeigh & Lynch (2017) add “poorly organised, irrelevant and insular” (p. 113). Such critique creates space for six key concepts underpinning the recommendations, being: national accreditation, rigorous program design and delivery, transparency of entry, integration and evidence as program elements towards shaping teachers as potentially classroom ready. The resulting AITSL initiative in, *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia* (2015) reifies classroom readiness through rigorous parameters encapsulated by concepts including ‘performance’, ‘positive impact’ and ‘evidence’ which graduate teachers must demonstrate in order to teach in

Australian classrooms.

In tracing a changing pattern in training Australian teachers from school-based ‘apprentices’ and ‘monitors’ through ideas of ‘teaching as a craft’ to current university programs, Aspland (2006) maintains that becoming a teacher in Australia has come under “an inordinate amount of scrutiny” (p. 140). Increasing pressure to present teachers as professionals led to the establishment of teacher colleges in the seventies which was attributed to the rapid expansion of “population and the Australian economy” (p. 148). The historical refinement of Government legislation is presented by Aspland (2006) as a mechanism whereby standards of performance have become regulated through a raft of reforms up to Dawkins (1987, 1988), established under the consolidating influence of economic rationalism. An implication which includes that such neo-liberal scrutiny framed ‘teaching as scholarly pursuit’ to impel a shift to the university as a base where, “outcomes focus necessitated the development of a number of course standards which reflect the emerging professional standards developed within the state, and which are elaborated as sets of teacher practitioner attributes” (Aspland, 2006, p. 155).

Consequently, the process of accreditation of teachers in Australia has come to require a developmental process of increasing intensity, complexity and length of ‘performance’ to ensure ‘impact’ so that the ‘pre-service teacher’ is ‘classroom ready’ by meeting *The Graduate Standards* (AITSL, 2011).

The following discussion, looking through a biblical lens, questions the possible worldview implications regarding teacher identity implicit in the AITSL Graduate Teacher Standards, as a mechanism of compliance in the service of a “neoliberal imaginary” (Mockler, 2017, p. 336).

Worldview and classroom readiness

Naugle (2002) defines worldview as “a semiotic system of narrative signs that has a significant influence on the fundamental activities of reasoning, interpreting and knowing” observing that “any view

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of 'worldview' is itself worldview dependent" (p. 253). His historical and conceptual review concludes that worldview "is itself a function of the actual worldview of the theorist or definer" (p. 253). Worldview, as a set of assumptions, is 'looked through' therefore 'overlooked' yet is powerfully and unceasingly at work, grounded in a foundational narrative enacting an experience that is rationalized, understood and reified. Wright (1992) in discussing worldview maintains that all cultures "have a sense of identity, of environment, of a problem with the way the world is, and of a way forward - a redemptive eschatology" (p. 123). In this discussion the claim includes that mandated policy documents act as frameworks encapsulating what is considered valid and important, suggesting solutions that orient the person toward a particular future. Therefore, policy documents emerge as intentional artefacts of a lifeworld; a set of assumptions that disclose the cherished, deep-rooted beliefs of a culture. Such a story frames a context to inform a sense of identity and presents solutions to perceived problems. In this case the problem includes 'classroom readiness' with the solution being *The Graduate Standards* as the instrument informing and forming teacher identity.

Consequently, documents including *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (TEMAG, 2014) and the resulting *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia* (2015) are the legitimization of a presuppositional narrative about a context (the classroom), a person (the classroom ready teacher) whose problem, (poor practice and insufficient integration) might be solved by *The Graduate Standards*.

For advocates of the world-picture of the AITSL Graduate Standards 'performance', 'evidence' and 'impact' is presented as a high bar, denoting an excellence of teachers through whom quality teaching will flow for the benefit of the wider community. If the present form of global consumer culture is understood as optimal, then to form a teacher ready for a classroom whose primary function is to replicate compliant consumers then the AITSL standards may be an effective mechanism. Compliance with the standards may produce a teacher capable of equipping students to take their productive place in the machinery of a global society whose main function is the exploitation of resources for the ongoing generation of economic wealth. Such a view appears to be the politically driven dominant discourse (Sachs, 2002) of economic rationalism which holds schooling in its grip in order to produce human capital made in the image of 'units of economic production' informed by science and technology. If as Hiebert (2009) claims "consumerism reduces life to commodities" (p. 256), classroom ready teachers may be the means

whereby the worldview of economic rationalism reflects through schooling the human as a consuming entity. Forming teachers who reflect a consumerist worldview governed by neo-liberal exchanges may be an assumption, or 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2007), driving what it might mean to be 'classroom ready'.

Mulcahy (2010) claims the standards have emerged as a framing of scientific practice and are "representative and the performative" (p. 95) suggesting they frame a context that scripts the acting out of a particular role. Mulcahy concludes, "standards do not simply describe pre-existing realities such as accomplished teaching practices or accomplished teachers; they actively produce them" (p. 96). The initial teacher *Graduate Standards* (AITSL, 2015) might then be understood as a defining narrative for schooling which scripts the 'performance' by actors labelled 'classroom ready' whose conformity to the standards is evidence of worldview assumptions and a presuppositional narrative. Essentially, a teacher is framed by the worldview of standards, constructed to fit the classroom; they 'become' the epistemic object or artefact of the culture that the standards represent. To be classroom ready therefore denotes being 'assembled' by the authority of *The Graduate Standards* based upon the performativity in relation to evidence. The teacher is deemed ready when proven to be scripted for enactment within a space representative of wider culture into which learners are also inducted. Being 'classroom ready' has become an imperative which frames an indicative; the concept of the classroom as a context determines the form of the teacher. Or, expressed in terms of control; the person becomes subordinate to text and context. Teaching standards as a means of implementing educational reform become for the pre-service teacher an ontological framing of the self through the classroom. If so, then the standards become, as proposed by Mulcahy (2010), the means to 'assemble' the teacher. If, however from a different worldview a richer story might be told about being fully human then to define a teacher as 'classroom ready' might suggest a reduction of human potential.

Gannon (2012) challenges the capacity of standards to address deficiencies of teacher quality claiming "in a Foucauldian sense" they "become a disciplinary apparatus through which teachers engage in surveillance of themselves" (p. 61). This thought gives rise to the conclusion that "it becomes difficult for those who are caught within the standards grid to see other dimensions of accomplishment in teaching beyond those prescribed by the standards" (p. 74). As a language specialist Gannon calls for standards to be "locally enacted and contingent" (p. 74, with an expansion of emphasis beyond the standards into affective factors including "insight, sensitivity...

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trust... persistence... enjoyment... enthusiasm and dedication" (p. 66) to avoid "homogenising [of] performance" (p. 75). Such a claim suggests being classroom ready through *The Graduate Standards* is also a limiting narrative about human agency.

Cumulatively, such critical appraisal suggests a one-dimensional replication of a teacher results when a reductive rendering is bounded by a limited script narrowly enacted. The resulting classroom teacher potentially becomes a cardboard cut-out, defined according to the template. Another less flattering analogy includes the cookie cutter; a device with sharp edges for cutting biscuit dough into a particular shape. One popular form is that of the gingerbread man usually with four stumpy limbs and rounded head. Once the shape is pressed out, cooked and decorated, the iconic image of a smiling gingerbread man represents the stylized or preformed caricature of the human. A common denotation is of the person mass-produced and lacking any distinguishing characteristics. The actual material used to form the dough is usually a metal band that has been pressed in by force, causing the material from which it is made to retain that shape. The suggestion includes that the AITSL standards act to shape the classroom ready teacher as the force which gives power to the mechanism of formation. If what forms the teacher creates a shape that has the capacity to replicate itself, then the forces that create the template, or the underlying presuppositional narrative, may need careful consideration in terms of an exercise of significant authority over teacher identity.

If the classroom ready teacher is equivalent to the gingerbread man rigidly framed for replicating an economic rationalist worldview then it might be concluded the mechanism of *The Graduate Standards* as a template intentionally reflects a limited assemblage with a limiting goal. If to be classroom ready is to reflect a neoliberal or 'social imaginary' then society, schooling and students may need a more hopeful and liberating story than simply producing more consumers.

The worldview of 'the Authority'

An emerging premise includes that, whomever has authority over the formation of the teacher governs the shape of the classroom and by implication the formation of the student. The forces forming the teacher are replicated in students in a self-reinforcing feedback loop thereby endorsing the underlying narrative of a culture. The script will be enacted just as thunder follows lightning since it is the power of the narrative that provides a set of assumptions, reinforcing a way of being, a worldview or lived

experience. The idea of classroom readiness if ideologically driven by a powerful presuppositional narrative, may as Goudzwaard and Bartholomew (2017) claim, be "always rooted in an orientation to an absolute goal or end" (p. 62). If so, the totalising nature of worldview suggests that if a different worldview contests the legitimated narrative, as in *The Graduate Standards*, then 'deep disagreement' (Godden & Brenner, 2010) may result meaning the authorised or legitimated story of classroom readiness represents elements of an imposition by benign force. To be deemed classroom ready by 'the Authority'¹ assumes the underlying narrative of *The Graduate Standards* has the capacity and right under accreditation for the authorised teacher to be marched to the beat of their drum to its destination. As Smith and Smith (2011) claim practices are not just "things we do" but are objects that "do something to us" (p. 15).

Disquiet with the preparation of teachers in Australia with cognisance of the complex demands of globalisation is also echoed by educators internationally. Groundwater-Smith & Mockler (2009) also propose teacher education globally is in the thrall of "an age of compliance", through what they describe as an "audit society" subsumed by the "rituals of verification" (p. 4). Their conclusion is a call for courage to stand against the "neo-liberal economic and social agenda" with professional learning that is somewhat ambiguously defined as "inquiry-based, rigorous" and "engaging" (p. 139). Zeicher (2009) identifies a similar impact upon teacher education as a struggle for social justice, which discussed briefly in terms of identity (p. 34), invests hope in a constructivist transformation through research.

Van Brummellen (2009) ironically states the problem in terms of a 'faith commitment',

Technological progress has enabled globalization to occur. But it is also repeatedly forcing education into a technological straitjacket. The faith commitment behind this is that the world needs efficient educational strategies. Such methods will lead to competencies for the workplace that, in turn, will enable the world's gross economic product to continue to grow. The economy must continue to be profitable for larger corporations. Therefore, education must teach these competencies needed to contribute to a prosperous and sustainable economy. This is accompanied by the mass media shaping children and adolescents into individualistic, self-centred consumers. All this led to narrowing the meaning of education as well as how human beings are viewed. (p. 350)

The 'faith commitment' includes an ingrained demand for the certainty and method of the contemporary Western mind, grounded in a 'technological straitjacket' of science and economics

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¹The term used by AITSL (2015, p. 2)

which leaves little room for formation of other than persons in service of a global economic system. If the implicit pressure of the AITSL standards through an expectation of ‘performance’, ‘positive impact’ and ‘evidence’ allows little else to frame teacher identity or classroom readiness, it may confirm reductive pressure upon what it means to be fully human. The worldview of ‘the Authority’ may require a faith in schooling as the handmaiden to economic rationalism. The classroom ready teacher by this standard is authorized to teach when confirmation to the worldview of ‘the Authority’ is demonstrated.

Another worldview; A different proposal

Gee (2001) defines a teacher educator as “kind of person” in a “given kind of context” (p. 99), whose identity formation Dinkelman (2011) observes is a “remarkably complex” (p. 312) process largely produced “out there”, meaning through wider cultural influence, for “in there” (p. 311) is indicative of the idea of the classroom. The elements of context framing identity highlights that existing forms of schooling represent a worldview whose capacity includes orienting the person within a larger narrative. This suggests that being human, if viewed through a lens of classroom readiness, tends to a reductive shaping of function to form, possibly limiting a challenge to changing deep structures of schooling or forming learners other than as ‘economically’ prescribed. The legitimating ‘Standards’ establish an authorised framework that facilitates a reductionist view of the person largely rewarded by compliance to consumerism. Such pervasive fundamental influences, if legitimised, weight the task of schooling in the favour of the neo-liberal imaginary at the possible expense of other ways of being. An implication includes that the cumulative effect of *The Graduate Standards* in authorising classroom readiness is limiting the rendering of teacher identity in terms of another story.

Sewell (2016) in his discussion of the reductionism of Evangelicalism as an element of Christianity in crisis concludes “the answer to the problem of the human condition is not to be found within humanity itself, and the answers to the multiple malformations of human culture are not to be found within our admittedly immense cultural resources” (p. 224). In like manner exclusive human authority seemingly claimed through ‘the standards’ if grounded in a scientific worldview represent a reductive narrative with classroom readiness the facilitation of a one-dimensional way of being in the world. In fore-grounding method and certainty as the primary means of establishing positive impact through evidence and the cookie cutter pressure points of *national accreditation, rigorous program*

design and delivery, transparency of entry, integration and evidence other voices will be restricted. Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves (2014) observe in relation to the mentoring of new teachers that “choice is not just a choice of a mode of induction, it is a choice about the kind of world and the kind of profession a new teacher is inducted into” (p. 163). Likewise, Bertucio (2017) in arguing the debilitating nature of “trends, fads and assorted vicissitudes of fashion” (p. 477) concludes “the hegemony of Bloom’s taxonomy” has “transformed education into a Cartesian training facility” (p. 494). He also claims the legacy of Descarté is reflected in “modernity’s narrowly industrial and dehumanizing tendencies” (p. 478) which has been claimed are reflected through the idea of classroom readiness. If the worldview of classroom readiness through *The Graduate Standards* is a reductive vision, then so too will be the resulting teacher. The standards may result in a split vision of the world whereby the classroom becomes a space for mechanistic replication by the dualistic. If *The Graduate Standards* denote readiness of the teacher as an unreflective transmission of a dominant worldview which represents a validity of the classroom for ongoing global consumerism, a serious problem with character may result.

Naugle (2009) maintains “the most practical and important thing about being human is his or her view of the universe and theory of the cosmos—that is, the content and implications of one’s worldview” (p. 5). A key observation being that “life proceeds ‘kardiologically’ out of ‘a vision of the heart’ ” (p. 16). This suggests that the worldview of the teacher is critical as through interaction with them a vision of life is transferred. If classroom readiness is limited to consensus, scientific rigour, clinical practice and evidence then schooling may continue to be a politicised tool reflecting a neo-liberal imaginary. What may also be highlighted includes a marginalization of being human from within ‘a different story’.

Beech (2015) when discussing what Christians as teachers might look like argues for the idea of a relational epistemology. The key idea being that the ‘perfect’ teacher understands knowledge is relational and through careful enactment of the degrees of connectedness demonstrates “an understanding of knowledge that is integrated, holistic and dependent on the network of relationships that exist” (p. 90). In observing epistemology as web of connections, a case is developed for more than the flattened lines of connection of secular humanism to only that which can be measured through the senses. Beech maintains that knowledge is more than mere data and requires a connecting reference to God to bring greater meaning and value to what it means to be a teacher. Marsden (1997) concludes that with the

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idea of God and his purpose factored back into any discussion, “the set of epistemological questions changes dramatically” (p. 88). Consequently, *The Graduate Standards* as a reflection of a prescriptive performativity, represent a limitation to knowing if a connection to the God of the Bible is not considered.

What is considered essential to effective ‘classroom readiness’ is a worldview that includes and foregrounds God’s good, creational, covenantal, and holy character as key elements defining any teacher. An assumption based upon a biblical worldview of teacher readiness includes that God has a particular person, place, and practice in mind that He intends to ‘form’ and into which the human is invited to participate. It is to the end God has in mind, the renewal of all things, that the meaning of classroom readiness might find richest meaning and purpose. It may be that an authority greater than the all-consuming narrative of consumerism and the depletion of the earth’s resources is the only antidote to the human condition.

Conclusion

The question framing this discussion about what it might mean to be a ‘classroom ready’ teacher is prompted by the process of contributing to a Master of Teaching program for submission to TEQSA by a Christian tertiary provider. The capacity to challenge compliance is understood as emerging from within a worldview derived from the story of the Bible which, it is claimed, creates space for critical distance to observe potential differences. While there are acknowledged positives to a desire for accountability and excellence through rigour and quality of initial teacher programs, it is the deeper narrative purpose of classroom readiness, that may be a critical concern. It has been claimed the worldview position of *The Graduate Standards* highlights the materialist assumptions made about concepts including ‘evidence’, ‘positive impact’ and ‘performance’ feeding into a deeper presuppositional neo-liberal narrative about classroom readiness. Such questions suggest that to be ‘classroom ready’ is dependent upon a worldview presented as ‘normative’ and ‘authorised’ emerging from a powerful story about the world that is in terms of establishing identity may be potentially antithetical to a biblical worldview. The flaw in the ‘classroom readiness’ story includes exclusive knowing through science and technology to instill confidence in method and certainty of understanding to ensure the promotion of economic rationalism. Such a story if held up to another perspective, such as a biblical worldview with the plans and purposes of God as a greater authority, may represent a story that calls into question the worldview impetus of ‘the Authority’ and *The Graduate Standards*. If

the story of classroom readiness is driven by neo-liberal imaginary enlisting science and technology to drive consumerism then the evidence of resource depletion, climate change and human suffering needs informing by the story that includes the plans and purpose of God as a greater authority in the formation of identity, especially as a teacher. One of the many challenges facing Christian schooling in Australia includes wrestling over the formation of Christians as faithful teachers schooled in God’s vision against another vision of what it might mean to be ready to teach. **TEACH**

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