Teacher registration

Does it improve teacher quality?

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This article describes aspects of the national teacher registration program, especially the expectation that registration has a role in raising student learning outcomes through improved teacher quality.

While this article doesn't set out to trace the documentary evidence which has led to the *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL), such a review would confirm that the current organisational structure has been attained through the accumulated research and wisdom from a large collection of research papers, government and industry sponsored reviews of education and teaching. It would also illustrate the current determination to complete a series of interrelated educational reforms on the part of state, territory and federal government (see for example Council of Australian Governments: National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality, 2009).

Introduction

Teacher registration, which was formerly regulated by the states and territories, now comes under the management of the AITSL, with a mandate to promote excellence in teaching and school leadership. This is to be in keeping with the broad goals of its predecessor, *Teaching Australia*, which articulated aims to improve teacher quality, school leadership, the status of the teaching profession, and the learning outcomes of students.

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Under centralised federal government control, education reform has engaged in a program which directly seeks to address the quality of teaching through accreditation of teacher preparation programs, curriculum design and development, management and description of professional standards for teachers, and the processes of recognition of teacher accomplishment throughout their professional career. In acknowledgment of the relevance of school leadership to learning and teaching, the registration process also extends to the development of similar standards and processes for school principals.

The research literature repeatedly asserts that the quality of the teacher is among the most significant factors influencing student learning outcomes (e.g., Dinham, 2008; Hattie, 2003; Rowe, 2003; Wright et al., 1997); therefore, an agenda seeking to raise the quality of learning and teaching through development of quality teachers is both a worthy and value-adding enterprise for any system of education.

Parental demands for quality teaching

Determining how teaching influences learning is not only a matter for academic pursuit but of interest to parents and the wider community. Many parents are familiar with the benefits of their child receiving instruction in the classroom of a highly accomplished teacher. Armed with increased knowledge of good practice, parents expect to have their child educated by the teacher of their choice—notably those who are highly effective. Marzano (2003, in Miller, 2003) highlighted the impact of quality teaching on student achievement.

> A student scoring at the 50th percentile who spends two years in an average school, with an average teacher, is likely to continue scoring at the 50th achievement percentile. That same student, having spent two years in a "most effective" school with a "most effective" teacher, rockets to the 96th achievement percentile. The converse also holds: If this same student spends two years in a "least effective" school with a "least effective" teacher, that student's achievement level plunges to the third percentile.

One significant negative factor arising from the elevated level of community expectation and understanding is the unfortunate publication of measures of student learning such as those on the MySchool website, which do little to inform parents of the real learning gains being made by their child.

Quality teaching and student learning—seeking the causal link

Though teacher registration processes differ between Australia and the USA, it is in the US context that most of the large data analyses have

been conducted to determine the link between teacher registration and student achievement. Not surprisingly, the results of this research vary. Using a longitudinal analysis of data from North Carolina, Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2007) concluded that student achievement is positively impacted by a teacher's experience, test scores (based on curriculum, instruction and assessment knowledge) and regular registration. However, research by Buddin and Zamarro (2009), Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008), and Leak and Farkas (2011) found that average academic achievement for students was not affected by teacher certification status.

The inconclusive nature of these results suggests that teacher registration as a gatekeeper for professional entry is not an assurance that student achievement will be improved. Registration needs to be a process rather than an event, and it needs to be incorporated into a wider process of professional development that is founded on credible professional learning theory and research.

Elements of the home schooling community cite those findings from within the research literature that conclude no positive correlation exists between teacher certification requirements and student performance (e.g., Clicka, 2003). Though this perspective is consistent with the home schooling preference by parents to personally retain control over the education of their children, it is a defensible position to uphold.

Describing quality teaching—the foundation of professional standards

The establishment of nationally agreed professional standards and procedures for professional recognition through four career stages is regarded as an important milestone in the national education agenda. Those devising the model of quality teaching through defined professional standards have proposed that the standards offer a basis 'for teacher reflection and development and a guide for professional learning' (MCEECDYA, 2011). The 2009 *Standards for accomplished teachers and principals* statement by the Teaching Australia Network includes the bi-line, "a foundation for public confidence and respect". The document subsequently listing the purposes of the standards as including: making the values, beliefs, knowledge and practices of the teaching profession known to the public; guiding professional reflection and improved practice; providing a framework for professional learning; differentiating the specialised practice of teaching; informing assessment and promotional procedures; recognition and reward of accomplishment; and, raising self-esteem within the profession and commitment to accountability.

The development of the agreed standards has been through a long and consultative process. Standards have been informed by the very significant body of teacher and school effectiveness research and arranged into three domains—professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement. The case for an additional domain outlining skills and attitudes relevant to education systems which seek to offer a fourth dimension to the education they provide has been described elsewhere and is a point for productive discussion within the private school sector.

Throughout the AITSL documentation there are statements recognising that a set of professional standards has little impact on student learning outcomes without genuine engagement by teachers through individual professional learning. This is one of the strong arguments for including school leadership as a key component in the success of the new registration program. Concerns about the failure to achieve a lasting impact and integration of teacher professional standards within the professional dialogue and mindset of teachers and school leaders have also been expressed. The advice given by Ramsey (2000, p. 31) has not gone unheeded.

> The evidence indicates that failure, including at a national level, either to establish standards of professional teaching practice or to embed them deeply into the profession is now impacting in a negative way on the direction and quality of initial and continuing teacher education, and hence teaching.

"Teacher registration as a gatekeeper for professional entry is not an assurance that student achievement will be improved"

Whether the current development toward national teacher and school leader registration is a positive process or not may depend on one's views about quality management theory and how it should inform the ongoing professionalisation of teaching. Those holding a view that quality management within a professional context should empower self-regulation and address mechanisms for professional renewal and learning will find centralised management structures frustrating and inconsistent with some of the commonly held characteristics of a profession. Those who embrace the implementation of quality assurance and accountability mechanisms for achieving quality will find that centralised management processes under the direction of the emerging education industry offers a sense of direction and a structured mechanism for defining and managing career progression. The AITSL approach offers the potential for both perspectives to be accommodated. The registration process provides a mechanism for assessing teacher practice and determining when a higher career stage has been reached.

The risk with a highly centralised process administered by a distant government and education bureaucracy is that teachers will not have any sense of being part of a self-regulating group and see the process as an employment requirement. The AITSL literature recognises this risk.

> A compelling reason for the profession to assume collective responsibility for standards of practice is that regulation and prescriptive approaches cannot in themselves assure the quality of a child's education. (Teaching Australia, 2009, p. 3)

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Therefore, while a great deal has been said about registration and standards, the goal of quality teaching is dependent on effective professional learning and the leadership of the school.

Professional learning—bridging the gap between standards and quality teaching

Aware that the establishment of standards is not a guarantee of professional development, and seeking to attain continuous professional improvement, Teaching Australia, and the AITSL have 'enshrined' professional learning into the standards (Standard 6—Engage in professional learning and Standard 7—Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community).

Achieving and sustaining a professional learning environment for teachers needs to reflect a set of principles emerging from the professional development literature. Timperley (2008) describes ten principles of professional learning.

1. Focus on valued student outcomes—centre the professional learning process around the desired student outcome rather than teacher skill acquisition;
2. Worthwhile content—develop effectiveness in skills which are evidence-based;
3. Integration of knowledge and skills—meaningful change requires theory which is demonstrable and skills which are embedded in research areas such as processes of learning, curriculum development, instruction, assessment and reporting;
4. Assessment for professional inquiry—what students need to know and do informs what teachers will know and do;
5. Multiple opportunities to learn and apply knowledge—change in practice requires multiple opportunities to learn new information, in environments characterised by trust and challenge;
6. Approaches responsive to learning processes—acquiring new knowledge and skills is influenced by a teacher's existing knowledge, skills and outlook;
7. Opportunities to process new learning with others—collegial dialogue, focused on student outcomes is highly beneficial;
8. Knowledgeable expertise—bringing in external expertise helps to challenge existing perspectives and build new knowledge and skills;
9. Active leadership—educational leaders are pivotal to developing expectations and organising engagement in professional learning opportunities;
10. Maintaining momentum—continuous improvement requires a supportive working culture.

Achieving a culture of professional learning may not be easy.

> Some organisations and groups appear to suffer from learning disabilities. These disabilities need to be diagnosed, assessed and addressed through suitable interventions in the same ways in which we would help students. (Dinham, 2009, p. 114)

From an educational enterprise perspective, all students should be encouraged toward new goals and levels of achievement and this principle applies well to schools that aspire to be known as quality learning communities. To that extent at least, the new national teacher registration program will have contributed to the quality teaching agenda and the consequent improvement in student learning outcomes.

For teachers to accept responsibility for their own professional learning, informed by the professional standards corresponding to their career stage, is not unreasonable. The pragmatic reality for many teachers will be the unrelenting pressures on their time to continue to attend to the day-to-day responsibilities of teaching, despite the desire and acknowledgement of the need for, and benefits of, professional renewal, learning and development of a quality culture. It will therefore be important that the same people who established the standards and the processes associated with teacher and school leader registration, give teachers time to develop—as expressed in the ten principles above. For the reforms currently being implemented to achieve their goal, it will be important to ensure that the resources and funding used to develop the bureaucracy of teacher registration is matched by the funding and support needed at the school sites where the real changes will need to take place. TEACH

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