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Keynote: Building Quality in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper addresses quality teaching and teacher education from a number of angles. The connecting thread is a view that, as with quality in all things, quality in teacher education is more than the sum of its parts. Hence a competency-based and often atomised professional standards approach to the evaluation of teachers' performance and capacity is insufficient to ensure quality. Quality is argued to be born of these competencies as they come together holistically through the acquisition and employment of productive behaviours, and most importantly through the catalytic impact of specific personal attributes. Personal attributes, such as having high expectations of all learners, kindness, fairness, humour, and a general positive attitude to teaching are described as the forces that bring about quality. The equation for quality in teacher education is: Quality = (competencies + productive behaviours) x personal attributes. Initial teacher education can, and should, develop pre-service teachers in their personal attributes and values, at the same time as they hone their competencies for teaching. This intertwining is important to ensure teachers have the bespoke approach, the specialised productive behaviours, and the skill to influence learners positively, beyond the next achievement test.

What do we mean when we use the word "Quality?"

The word "quality" is used in so many different ways. We can say "I'm interested in the quality of teaching in this school". In this context the word quality has a negative ring to it. The speaker is not clearly applauding the teaching, there is a tacit question of the value of the work being performed in that school sitting behind the statement. We could also say "That teacher is an example of quality". In this case the word quality has a positive connotation. The statement is an endorsement of the value that the teacher brings to their work. So what do we really mean when we talk about quality teaching, teachers, teacher education, or teacher educators? Sadly, and generally speaking, the term "quality" in the field of education is typically used when the value of the teaching venture is being criticised or at the very least, being questioned. So how do we consider the development of quality in teaching through our teacher education programs?

Great teachers and teacher education

Teacher education is not as simple as identifying the elements for quality teaching and creating a sequence of learning events to progressively develop someone on each. The problem is that “quality” is more than a sum of the parts. If we ask ourselves what might constitute “quality” in teaching, or indeed a “quality teacher” we begin to see the complexity. When I reflect on quality teachers in my own experience I’m reminded of Mrs Clarke, my Junior Secondary music teacher. Perhaps you can also think of a teacher that epitomised quality teaching for you.

Mrs Clarke was an excellent teacher in every respect. She was a skilled organiser for learning. She planned her teaching and learning program impeccably. She was able to design learning experiences that connected with each student in the class. But above all, she was my teacher, with the emphasis on “my”. She had a way of engaging with me that made me feel I was capable, that I should work hard, and that I was worthwhile. She cared, was good humoured, fair, entertaining, and committed. These personal attributes, and so much more, meant that Mrs Clarke was a great teacher.

Evaluating for quality in teaching

To be a great teacher you need to be competent on a range of skills, AND you need to frame this with personal attributes to enable deep connection with learners. Mrs Clarke possessed the competencies required for teaching, and she was able to put them together with a suite of personal teacher-ly attributes that made each of the class feel invincible as learners. I think in the strict regulatory environment that exists in teacher education today we have forgotten the importance of the personal attributes required for teaching well. Instead we have focussed on the things that can be counted, ticked, demonstrated, or completed. Yet, as my mum always said, “Just measuring a carrot will not make it any bigger”. I suggest that with our competency based framework, we have simply been measuring the carrot when it comes to assuring the development of excellence in teaching. In our quest to define quality in teaching, we have metaphorically tried to dissect a frog, itemise the component parts and then put it back together as a living being.

In my book with Suzanne Mellor, *Building Quality in Teaching and Teacher Education* (Bahr & Mellor, 2016), I discuss the insights to quality expressed in the classic modern philosophy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974), in which Pirsig writes:

“What I mean (and everybody else means) by the word ‘quality’ cannot be broken down into subjects and predicates. This is not because Quality is so mysterious

but because Quality is so simple, immediate and direct ... That is why Quality cannot be defined. If we do define it we are defining something less than Quality itself." (p. 252)

In this very succinct statement Pirsig makes it clear that our quest for understanding and assuring quality in teaching should not rely on any attempts to break it into component parts. But this is exactly what we have done in our efforts for continual improvement in the quality of teaching in Australia. The result has been the creation of the 37 Australian Professional Standards (APS).

The Australian Professional Standards for Teaching

These APS are supposedly a definitive map to the componentry of quality in education. The APS expected competencies, as elements of quality, are grouped into sets of demonstrable knowledge, attitudes and skills under the following seven headings:

- Know students and how they learn
- Know the content and how to teach
- Plan for and implement effective learning and teaching
- Create and maintain supportive and safe learning
- Assess, provide feedback, and report on student learning
- Engage in professional learning
- Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers (AITSL, 2016)

The APS were developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to bring a national consistency to the expectations for teacher competency and quality. This is all very well, but I contend that these standards cannot be accepted as a complete proxy for quality. The competencies are necessary but insufficient for describing teacher and teaching quality. There is an elephant in the room here that is being ignored; that is, the role of the personal and professional attributes of the teacher.

Personal Professional teaching attributes

Now I have to be careful here. I'm not suggesting that we simply add some missing componentry to our conceptualisation of quality in teaching in an effort to acknowledge personal attributes. While I am identifying some missing elements, I don't imagine that we just add a list of personal attributes to our compendium for teacher and teaching quality. The personal attributes are not separate. I believe

that they act as catalysts for the APS. They are integral and they have a multiplicative effect on the impact for learners of the competent good order provided by attending to the 37 standards. They are not just an outer wrapping for the expression of the competency elements. These personal attributes are the glue that bring the whole teaching enterprise together. They are the substance for the experience of quality in teaching. So what are they?

There has been some research work in the distant past that has referred to personal attributes that make the difference between competency and excellence. This research has consistently identified the following important personal attributes, attitudes and beliefs: high expectations for all learners, kindness, fairness, humour, and a general positive attitude to teaching. These are described as the forces that bring about quality in teaching. It is enticing to think that we might simply be able to select people who already have many of these attributes and then attend to the learning and development they need to become competent across the APS. Unfortunately, this cannot work. This is because they are professional personal attributes. Let me explain.

A person with these professional personal attributes applies their expertise and deep understandings of the teaching and learning exchange to the interpersonal aspects of their teaching. For example, to be kind as an educator requires understanding of the nature of the individual student's experience, perspective and capabilities. A kind teacher will recognise and reward the achievement of a student if it represents their best work, even if it is not the strongest work in the classroom. A kind teacher will think to have a stash of spare pens and other resources to discretely share with students who are having a tough time financially or in other circumstantial ways so that their disadvantage is not compounded. Kindness will extend to the appropriateness of the design of assessment. A kind teacher will recognise when equity will only be achieved if they do not pursue equality in all things. The same professionalism dimension exists for the other personal attributes. Let's consider the use of humour as another of these catalytic personal attributes.

A teacher who can find the funny moment in a learning event, or use a humorous anecdote can help a student to recall the concepts being explored and therefore can make the experience more potent and memorable. Finding ways to bring humour to intensify understanding is a deeply professional skill. It requires complete understanding of the concepts being explored as well as a mature and nuanced sense of what would be received as humorous by the learners, and how this will assist their understanding and recall. The same kind of professionalism is present for all these personal attributes. So what does this mean for teacher education?

Teacher education responsibilities

Teacher education and teacher educators have a threefold responsibility: to select people with an appropriate vocation to teach; to provide instruction and opportunities for supervised practice of base competencies and knowledge as outlined by the APS; and, to develop preservice teachers' personal professional attributes such that they are for example, professionally kind and fair, and thoughtfully humorous. This requires a complete overhaul of our approach to teacher education, and to our consideration of what constitutes quality in teaching.

Our new wave teacher education approaches will need to focus much more heavily on providing opportunities for pre-service teacher to establish meaningful and authentic working relationships with students. This refocuses attention away from the testing of competencies. This turns evaluation of teaching away from performative aspects and attends to the interpersonal dimensions of classroom exchanges. It places a much higher value on the personal side of teaching and how the interrelationship between professional attributes and APS are managed. This also recognises teaching and teacher education as being rather complex. There is one further dimension to quality teaching, and I call this the dimension of "productive behaviours" (Bahr & Mellor, 2016).

Productive behaviours

Productive behaviours are the enactment of the professional personal attributes. They are what the teacher does in their effort to be fair, kind, humorous and so forth. This is quite straightforward. A teacher who is competent alone may not always be fair. A teacher who is competent and who can bring humour to a situation, may not be enhancing the learning if the humour doesn't assist students to understand and/or recall concepts. I portray the relationships here as:

$$\text{Quality} = (\text{competencies} + \text{productive behaviours}) \times \text{personal attributes}.$$

Where quality is the desirable outcomes, the competencies are the APS, productive behaviours are the enactment choices made by the teacher, and the personal attributes are the professional attitudes, beliefs, values and perspectives that a teacher brings to their vocation.

Conclusion

I hope I have convinced you that quality in teaching and teacher education is a complex endeavour involving much more than development of a suite of competencies. They are simply the baseline and

can only be considered as key contributors to quality. Further that the pursuit of quality isn't served by attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct the elements that are the fabric of the teaching. I urge you to avoid the use of the nebulous term "quality" and instead seek excellence.

References

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