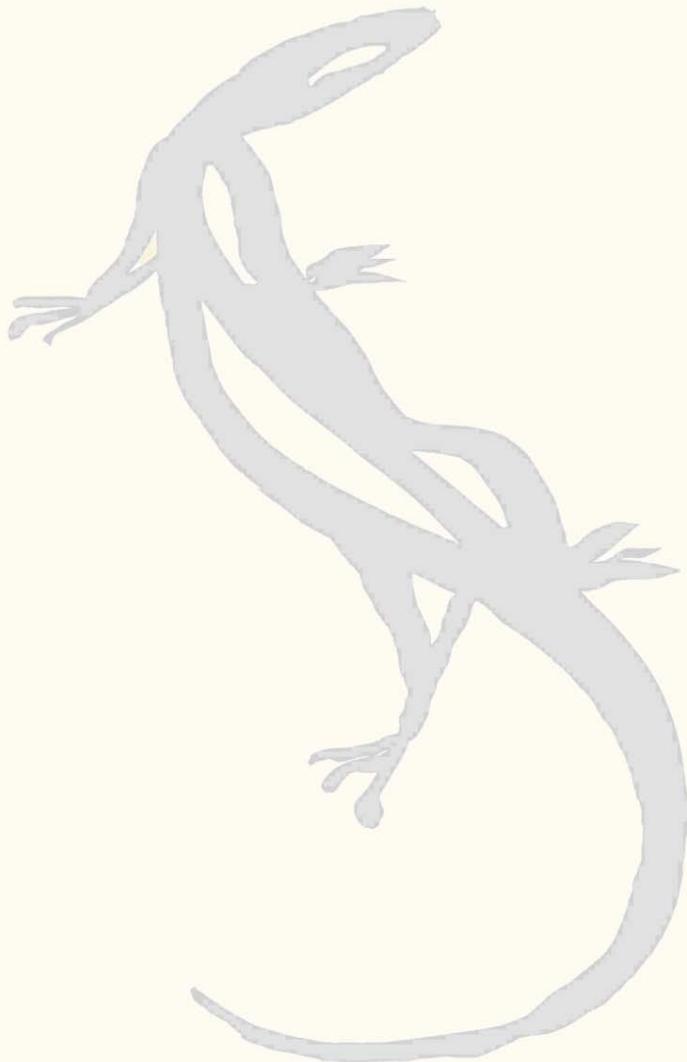


Teachers' professionalism

Excerpt from: *Conditions for a dynamic and effective teaching profession*,
Address to the Independent Education Union NSW/ACT conference,
'The Learning Age: Teachers hold the key'
Sydney, 15 June 2001

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A highly professional teaching workforce has been a policy priority from time to time since the late 1980s and the 'teacher quality' projects of the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, culminating in *Australia's Teachers: An Agenda for the Next Decade* (Schools Council 1990), followed by the 1991 to 1993 work of the collaborative National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning. Earlier, the Schools Commission had devoted much attention to teacher competence (through, especially, inservice professional development) and the quality of teacher's work though teacher participation in decision-making and support for innovative activities and programs for which teachers took major collective and individual responsibility. I think we would all agree here that enhanced teacher professional work is a key factor in the improvements needed in schooling for all students. However good schooling may be, there is always room for improvement, and such improvement is necessary for social justice and better lives for everyone.

I believe that over the past decade or so there has been much confused thinking about the appropriate (and possible) nature of 'teacher professionalism', about structures and mechanisms to support that professionalism, and about the professional nature of teachers' work (Preston 1995). There has been a certain defensiveness, even a cringe, around teacher professionalism, often associated with a belief that teachers should be emulating the traditional elite professions (especially medicine). Yet this has often been associated with a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the professional structures of those other professions, and the nature of their professional work – individually and collectively in contemporary Australian society.

In this section I want to outline my understanding of the nature of teachers' professional work, to draw out the implications of this, and to discuss some of the key aspects of professional structures that will need to be addressed if we are to have high quality teaching for all students in the coming decade.

We need to understand, and celebrate, the nature of teachers' professional work at its best. In judging what is the 'best' professional teaching the ultimate focus should always be on the quality of student learning, rather than some supposed similarity with the work of other professions.

The status and recognition of teachers as professionals should not be an end in itself, but a means to enhancing student learning – especially the learning of those students who come to school with the least advantages. Medical practitioners may have higher public status than teachers, but that is for deep historical reasons, public anxiety about illness and death, the relative scarcity of medical practitioners compared with teachers, and their market power as predominantly private practitioners in a largely publicly funded health system. Much of this teachers would not want to emulate - even if they could.

¹ Excerpt from: *Conditions for a dynamic and effective teaching profession*, Address to the Independent Education Union NSW/ACT conference, 'The Learning Age: Teachers hold the key', The Masonic Centre, Castlereagh Street Sydney, 15 June 2001

In important ways good teaching is more powerfully professional than mainstream, discretely individual, episodic medical practice. Let me explain how I understand professional teaching practice. Teaching:

- involves high level professional judgements
- is collective and strategic
- is democratic.

The need for *high level professional judgements* – complex situational judgements - arises from the complex diversity of students, educational objectives, contexts, and teachers themselves. There can be no predetermined ‘one right answer’, and the rule-based application of knowledge, technique and materials, however sophisticated, is insufficient. Teachers’ professional judgements involve the integrated and appropriate application of personal qualities such as sensitivity, flexibility, patience and humour, combined with knowledge and understanding in depth and breadth covering areas such as the content to be taught, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts, knowledge of education ends, purposes and values, combined with high level cognitive and social capabilities such as communicating effectively and working in teams (Preston 1996, pp. 248 - 249). Effectively teaching all students to their full potential is very different from instructing highly self-motivated and well-prepared students – the ‘easily teachable’ or ‘already taught’ (Schools Council 1990, pp. 29 and 50).

Effective teaching is inherently *collective and strategic*. These characteristics are features of teaching far more than many other professions. Teachers' work is not primarily the aggregation of discrete one-to-one relationships between professional and client. In a classroom teachers are relating to a group of students, and while individualising their teaching much of the time, the complex inter-relationships between all the students in the class and between the students and the teacher is something the teacher needs to constantly manage. In addition, the education of particular students is dependent on the inter-relationships between the work of many teachers over many years. Some of those teachers have a direct teaching relationship with the students, while others play a part in curriculum development and creating the structure, culture and climate of schools and the system as a whole. These inter-relationships indicate the *collective* nature of teaching. That the education of students through schooling occurs over a period of time, and that the pattern and sequence of inter-relationships between the work of different teachers in part determines the nature and quality of learning, indicates the *strategic* nature of effective teaching. (Preston 1996, p. 252)

Effective teaching is *democratic* because effective learning requires respectful and willing collaboration between teachers and students – the students as active participants in their own learning -, and, in the early years especially, between teachers and parents. These democratic collaborative relationships are inherent to good teaching in a society such as ours – they are not incidental or occasional as they may be in the practice of some other professions. Partnerships with students and parents do not lessen professionalism, but demand a higher level of professionalism to manage. For effective learning, partnerships must be democratic, rather than the traditionally understood hierarchical relationship between the elite professional and the submissive client (or patient). In addition, teachers (most explicitly those in the public sector) in democratic societies have a responsibility to

educate for democracy, and that involves students experiencing and observing democracy at work around them.

Democratic professionalism is not a contradiction in terms, but it is not easy. A decade ago the OECD, in its report, *The Teacher Today*, noted the difficulties in its discussion of 'open professionalism' (a notion it had developed initially in the 1970s):

The concept 'open professionalism' enshrines the idea that the modern teacher, as the focal point of rapidly changing and highly demanding educational policies, needs to be both open to communal influence and co-operation – with colleagues, the school, on-going research and developments, parents, the community – and to receive respect as an individual professional. Reconciling these two elements in practice may not, however, be straightforward. It would entail an openness to outside influence that enhances, not diminishes, the individual's sense of commitment and responsibility. (OECD 1990, p. 44)

I believe that our understandings of teacher professionalism, and the actual professional practice of teachers, in Australia today are powerful and robust enough for the reconciliation to be generally accepted and easy. However, a strong assertion of the traditional medical model of professionalism as one to be emulated will be a backward step.

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