

The Harold Wyndham Memorial Lecture

Valuing Teachers and Teaching: An Existential Hope

On valuing, respecting and honouring our teachers

Memorial Address presented to the NSWIER

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“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

In this address I shall use as my anchor the thread of hope, at times so tenuous to be almost ineffable, but at the same time strong and enduring. Emily Dickinson’s delicate and fragile poem reminds us that we can and must hope. It is conceivable to construct hope as a powerful force that can guide us through the maelstrom of difficult times. In particular, I want to argue for a hope that the complex work of teachers is recognised, understood and esteemed. As the much-quoted Robert Frost put it, “Hope is not found in a way out but a way through”, through the impenetrable thicket of policies and nostrums constructed by those furthest from practice.

I argue for this position in the light of the contribution made to education by the late Sir Harold Wyndham whose stance on reform was undergirded by his own extensive experience; always by contrast, close to practice. While his illustrious career initially led him down a largely academic path he spent a period of time as a primary school teacher, a time that opened his eyes to the nuances of practice. His commitment to educational research took him to the US and the UK from whence he further developed as a researcher and inventor

of policy. Throughout his service to education he was ever-vigilant concerning the honouring of the education profession over the aspirations of politicians, with their often- spurious claims of expertise. (Sherington, 2012).

With 'hope' at our backs it is now my intention to survey today's educational landscape, both its surface features and the morphology that lies beneath. I shall explore teacher agency in these tumultuous times and some of the challenges and vicissitudes faced by them in relation to the adoption of particular forms of research evidence and the ways in which it can undergird or undermine professional practice and influence the ways in which teaching is seen and the ways in which teachers see themselves I shall argue that teachers are their own best 'inspectors' through reflexive self- insight, employing evaluation and action research as a powerful force for their professional learning that, in turn, should inform the esteem in which they are held. Finally, I shall examine the context in which our teachers are currently vulnerable to and demoralised and the manner by which this condition may be remedied in a land of hope.

I appreciate that when speaking here of teachers and teaching I am considering the school context. I realise that during the height of the pandemic this role and these tasks fell to the home and parents and care-givers. Remarkable as their efforts were I think that the larger picture to be considered is the school and schooling.

Teacher Agency

There can be little doubt that the amount and complexity of the work of teachers has greatly intensified in recent years. In particular there has been a

swing to performativity fed by the global measurement industry (Biesta, 2019). In their carefully conducted inquiry Gallop, Kavanagh and Lee (2020) found this inexorable progress to be influenced by rapid social, economic and technological change as well as myriad government policies and initiatives often informed by evidence that could be highly selective and of a particular 'genre'. Among the report's many insights regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers and their leaders, with respect to their conditions of work and their professional learning, it is possible to identify a thread of concern. It is perceived that as actors and agents within school education they should be more directly engaged with policy formulation and the research, its kind and nature, on which it is based.

An example of such a stance can be seen in the recent history of education in Australia. While it is some years now since the operations of the Australian National Schools Network functioned under the rubric, 'the conditions under which teachers work are the conditions under which students learn' the program still has much to inform us. As Reyes (2000, p.596) characterised this spearhead, directed to the reform of teaching, the network was "built around a professional community rather than one based on bureaucratic authority or dictated by prevailing market forces". In drawing attention to the organisation and content of teachers' work the ANSN gave insight to its extent and complexity. In effect the impulse was directed to bottom-up versus top-down reform through the active co-creation of professional practices.

In more recent times the matter of teacher agency has become a widespread concern. The OECD (2018), itself part of the global measurement industry, published a discussion of the future of education and skills and noted

“teachers should be empowered to use their professional knowledge, skills and expertise” (p.7). Teachers may be seen to both inform research and inquiry and to be informed by research and inquiry. These active roles should, in turn, inform the ways in which teachers are esteemed.

In their report *Using Research Well in Australian Schools* (2021) the Monash Q Project suggested that there needs to be a clear process whereby practitioners are no longer “fumbling through the fog of habits and traditions” (Rickinson et al, 2021, p.5). They argue that in determining quality research-use it should be: embedded; collective; purposeful; time and effort dependent; curiosity driven; and connected to teacher professionalism. These conditions are scarcely contestable. They go on to argue that it is not up to teachers *alone*¹ to construct the conditions under which they can learn about and through research; but there should be clear policies that will enable them to encounter research appropriately. Again, a noble sentiment but not one that takes sufficient account of a greater condition of reciprocity wherein teachers may be engaging in their own research enterprises, or what might be meant as ‘appropriately’ given the emphasis in the report upon certain forms of empirical research.

Seemingly then in the eyes of the Q Project and others like it teachers are perceived to have insufficient time and commitment to consider and evaluate research findings pertinent to their practice. Generally, research that has been conducted by others is the norm. The current conditions for teaching have been summed up in the Grattan Report (Hunter & Sonneman, 2022) thus:

¹ My emphasis

Pressures have been mounting on teachers' jobs for decades. Teachers are now expected to collect large volumes of learning data, diagnose student needs, target their teaching, track student progress, and evaluate the effectiveness of their own practices. Increasingly, teachers are also expected to develop student competencies such as creativity and resilience, support students' mental health, and tackle social issues such as bullying. And there are now larger numbers of students with complex needs in mainstream schools. While these changes are for the better, they have significant implications for teachers' workloads.

What is absent from these studies is an argument about the nature of educational research itself; particularly in relation to what counts as evidence. 'Evidence' cannot be understood as an innocent resource. In recent years the phrase 'evidence-based practice' has been an oft-cited aphorism. Politicians have seized upon the notion of evidence-based practice as a means of coercing teachers to follow specific regimes; thus reducing them to mere functionaries and consequently reducing the esteem in which they will be held.

Along with such understandings of the nature of evidence in educational practices another orientation is emergent, that is, considering evidence in the ways in which a forensic scientist might seek to investigate a phenomenon in order to better *understand it*, this in contrast to the current adversarial thrust that seeks to *prove* one feature of practice is better than another with little attention paid to the subtleties and variations inherent in context. There is a third conceptualisation of evidence which has been largely unexplored in relation to educational research. This is the notion of re-examining and re-

interpreting evidence as an historian would². Evidence from past events can be re-thought and re-told in the light of new knowledge. Furthermore current historical work also draws attention to a fresh examination of what counts as evidence suggesting that records, reports and statistics are not enough; that evidence is to be found in unexpected places outside the structural boundaries that contain us (Clark, 2022)

All of this is not to decry the professional knowledge that traditional educational research can bring to practice through one form of evidence or another. Rather it prefaces a signal that gestures to the need to recognise practitioner agency in the conduct of local and contextualised inquiries. Teacher research can be seen as an umbrella term for such practices as action research and practitioner inquiry and has a long history through the latter half of the last century up until today. In their examination of its development Mills, Mockler, Stacy & Taylor (2021) emphasise the narrowing of the scope for practitioners to undertake this work in a 'post-truth' world of performativity and narrow accountability. But, nonetheless, they conclude by envisioning positive futures wherein rich and meaningful research may be conducted by teachers as work honoured in the profession.

To make my case that these conditions are not confined only to the professional world of education, I shall turn to an example from farther afield. Sumane et al (2018) examined the ways in which farmers in a wide range of locations generated local knowledge on the basis their experience. They argued that such local knowledge could be more optimally used if it were integrated and synthesised with the standardised agricultural information

² My thanks go to A/Prof Nicole Mockler for drawing my attention to this conception linking evidence to historical thought.

generated by more formal research procedures. They based their arguments upon the ways in which dynamic contexts, complexity and local specificity can contribute to a more general knowledge regarding agriculture if it is to become sustainable and resilient. Furthermore, they believe there is an imminent danger of local and often tacit knowledge being lost as farmers lose confidence in their own experience and are led by government policies founded solely on standardised procedures. In their conclusions they argue that “practical, experiential knowledge adds to farmers’ confidence, professional satisfaction and autonomy, which, in turn, are strong motivators for further learning” (p.238).

It is not difficult to identify the parallels when speaking and writing of teacher agency in research and the ways in which teachers and their inquiries, just like farmers, can be held in greater esteem. It is possible to imagine, as in the case of the NSN discussed earlier, that the co-creation of professional evidence-based knowledge, both top-down and bottom-up, can be honoured as each can interrogate the other. Too often systems will adjust to the latest research evidence without sufficiently assessing the changes, while in the case of teacher research local victories go unheralded but failures are more readily detected. Rather, the context within which education services are provided is one that is highly variable with many different social mechanisms at work as understood by Edgley, Stickley, Timmons & Meal (2016:317)

The social world is by definition an ‘open system’ (because we can never predict the future, which means we can never say that I acting on P will always produce O). In other words, the same causal power can produce different outcomes. This means that the possibility always exists that an effect is attributed to one mechanism but is actually due to another.

Debates within the social sciences are rife with such instances of disputed causation.

This view is echoed by Kennedy (2010, p.591) when she argues that “it is time to look beyond the teacher to the teaching situation itself.” Furthermore, she insists that the emphasis should be upon what teachers *do*, that is most relevant to student learning.

These assertions return me, for a moment, to my core hope that the complex work of teachers is recognised, understood and esteemed. Nonetheless, there are clear signals that the teaching profession is experiencing a vulnerability of an unprecedented measure.

Dropping out, or not dropping in

Teacher agency is not only a matter of how they engage in their professional practice it is also exercised when they choose to leave teaching or even whether they choose teaching in the first place. Gallop, Kavanagh & Lee (2020, pp. 90-101) cite numerous studies and report on a looming crisis in teacher retention and recruitment. This position is echoed by Hefferman, Longmuir, Bright & Kim (2019) who indicated that shortages are at a critical point in specialist areas and rural and remote schools. They reported “Although the public feel teachers are respected and trusted this is not consistently transferred to teachers for the work they do” (p.9). Unhappily this position is reflected in matters of retention where only 42% of the many teachers contacted planned to remain in teaching and 53% would not recommend teaching as a career. Admittedly this view has been ameliorated by the experiencing of COVID 19 lockdowns, with parents and caregivers handling the

responsibility of teaching their children, greatly acknowledging the complexity and intensity of teachers' work. Henebery (2020) cites Adam Fraser's study of parents' attitudes towards teaching changing during this period with 91% of parents reporting a greater respect for teachers following the lockdown period.

These perceptions are just one cluster of the many that impact upon the recruitment of teachers. Those aspiring to adopt a teaching career hear the tales of early career teachers who are subject to successive temporary engagements within and across schools. This abrades against a perception of teaching as a rewarding and enduring career. Overall, the reported downward trend in academic attainment of students entering initial teacher education along with a decline in completion rates certainly impacts on the attractiveness of entering, or indeed staying in the profession.

How do those in their career and those aspiring to the career gauge the right thing to do? How do they identify the emotional, intellectual and moral clarity of what is at stake?

Demoralised teachers

Gaby Stroud, a former primary school teacher, writes of being thirty eight years old and tired (Stroud, 2022). In her poignant essay she draws a verbal picture of the ceaseless and varied demands being made of her in one cataclysmic afternoon that ends with:

There was pain in my chest, my heart clenching and screaming *LET ME OUT.*

A cold sweat shivered on my skin.

This is it, I thought.

This isn't teaching.

I'm not a teacher anymore.

She concludes that she was 'burnt out', a victim of what Stevenson (2017) calls 'datafication'; that is, an attempt to standardise all aspects of student learning through their measurable performance. Her earlier and more extended work on the same theme (Stroud, 2018) elicited a large number of five-star reviews that emphasised the emotional labour inherent in the work of teachers and teaching as a way of life. An extract of one such review was written by Sue (2018):

Gabbie Stroud's voice is loud and clear. *Teacher* is a highly readable and extremely well-written memoir, and a searing indictment on our education system and its "standards". Our education system is broken. This book won't fix that, but Gabbie's voice, the voice of so many educators out there, needs to be heard. By everyone. Read it, cry, then resolve to never let another child sit the NAPLAN and to tell your child's teacher they are valued, that they MATTER. A heartbreaking call to arms. A must read for EVERY parent of school-aged children, and everyone else too. Highly recommended.

There is little question that in the town square of public opinion the esteem in/with which teachers are held is shifting. The old narratives of teachers working short hours and enjoying long holidays have gone. Stroud's work is a *cri-de-coeur* that has touched many readers who now appreciate better the complex works of teachers (Guardian Readers, 2021).

Nevertheless, there is much that has been said about the ways in which teachers are exhausted and demoralised. Santoro (2018) dispels the notion that the way forward is to applaud teachers' resilience, but argues instead for a process of re-moralisation whereby the moral purposes of teaching are recognised and applauded. Throughout her book she points to the deep dissatisfaction of teachers with the features of their work that are dictated by the current regime of performativity driven by the testing industry. She argues that the moral purposes of teaching, *doing good*, can and should be renewed, not as a personal gain, but one to be owned by the profession itself. "Good work depends on the conditions of teaching, not just individual teachers' motivation, skills and expertise. The context of teaching provides the backdrop for the action needed to generate the moral rewards" p. 177; a position argued for throughout this address.

I conclude by returning to the anchor of hope - a hope that teachers and teaching are reinstated in the public realm as immersed in judicious and moral practices. We must be alert as a community to ensure that the esteem in which these practices are held is robust and enduring and that through its political and social processes such practices are honoured and rewarded. If it is our hope that teachers and teaching may be valued. We could well heed the words of Sir Harold Wyndham, substituting pupils for teachers 'pupils did not merely "drop out", they were pushed out, in many cases, by lack of relevance in the curriculum and by the inevitability of failure' (Hughes, 2021).

Do our teachers drop out, or are they pushed out by the intolerable conditions of our audit governed policies that impact upon practice? Havel (1991, pp 181 -

182) reminds us “that hope gives us strength. It enables us to work for something that is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed”. It provides us with strength and impetus for action; a belief that what we do matters.

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