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SOCIETAL PRESSURES AND TEACHING

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Abstract

Education systems worldwide have experienced considerable change in recent years. Schools and teachers have increasingly been required to address and remedy the problems of society while at the same time satisfy the needs of national economies through the provision of appropriately trained school leavers. Youth unemployment levels have remained high and post-compulsory retention has risen. There has been pressure to modify curricula to accommodate these students. There has also been greater public and government scrutiny of how schools and educational systems transform their financial inputs to measurable educational outcomes. The age of the teaching profession has steadily risen and it seems more difficult to entice talented young people to enter teacher training, a situation exacerbated by the general aging of the population which has led to teacher redundancies in some systems.

This paper draws upon this contemporary context, an interview study of 57 resigned teachers, a current research project, and the literature to examine the pressing issue of societal demands, expectations and pressures on teaching, schools and education. It was found in the study in question that societal pressures were a significant factor in teacher dissatisfaction and resignation.

The Contemporary Context

It is no exaggeration to say that the last 30 years in Australian education have seen great change, with the pace of change increasing since the late 1980s (Hughes, 1991:1). Earlier, there had been fundamental changes such as the introduction of comprehensive high schools, school based curriculum development, increased community involvement, and increasing federal involvement, both financial and otherwise, in education. The Schools Council (1990: 10) has noted how this preoccupation with increased educational inputs which held sway during the early 1970s has given way to an increasing concern for accountability and outputs. The Schools Council (1990:13) observed

that "one of the lessons learned from the experience of the 1970s is that a massive increase in resource allocation will not of itself necessarily improve the quality of education".

From the mid-1970s there had been growing concern that the increasing level of youth unemployment experienced in Australia was in some way attributable to schools. There was increased attention paid to the school-work transition, with alternative more vocationally and recreationally oriented secondary subjects being formulated to better meet the needs of the perhaps less academically-able students who were no longer able to find employment in traditional "trades" and were returning to post-compulsory education in increasing numbers and/or who were being attracted to senior high school because of rising

educational and vocational expectations.

There has been ongoing debate as how to best meet the needs of those students increasingly being attracted to post-compulsory education, or being deterred from leaving school because of lack of employment opportunities, as the case might be (Dinham, 1988; 1989). Post-compulsory education and training is, in fact, increasingly seen as part of a national social and economic agenda (Dawkins, 1992), with the traditional areas of "academic" and "general" or "vocational" education and training converging, and with "key competencies" for young people being identified and advocated, these coming to the fore in the "Finn Report", formally entitled "Young People's Participation in Education and Training", which the former Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and the Arts, John Dawkins (1992: 7), termed "a vitally important document, a watershed in education and training policy direction in Australia".

The late 1980s saw fresh impetus for change with "arms length" committees drawn largely from outside the various departments of education set up to evaluate both the management of education and educational curricula in most states of Australia, part of what some have termed the "world-wide educational reform movement". Beare (1989), noted in some detail how structural change had become a common feature in educational systems internationally during the last decade and attributed this to a number of factors, including the increasing "interlocking international order" and the entering of the "post-industrial" phase in the major economies, which has led to the demand for "post-bureaucratic" structures in both private and public industries and services.

Increasingly, the dysfunctional effects of bureaucratic, centralised educational structures have been brought to light in a succession of reports, both international and Australian. Beare and his colleagues examined some forty five Australian reports into educational management structures and summarised their essential features (1989: 5-7). Many

have overseas parallels and precedents and it is worthwhile taking some time to examine these features as they vitally impinge upon the work of the teacher and school and also illustrate the changing context of teaching:

1. Virtually all the new structures put emphasis upon efficient management.
2. The structures re-establish clear and simple lines of control.
3. The structures redefine and simplify portfolio co-ordination.
4. The structures have broken up or disbanded the large central bureaucracies, and have replaced them with lean, head-office management.
5. Every State and Territory system has experimented with some form of regionalisation.
6. 'Devolution of responsibility' is a frequently used term in the reconstruction ... [with] school-based governance ... [usually implying] the creation of a school-site council.
7. A strong commonality in the documents is the talk about 'Better Schools' or 'Excellent Schools' or just 'Excellence'.
8. Yet the abiding impression in all the reconstruction is that the reform agenda has been set by the economic and political forces. Regardless of what the country's constitution might say, it is now obvious that the national government has become one of the key players in deciding educational policies and practices.
9. ... there is no doubt that education has become more politicised ... there has been a growing tendency since the mid-1970s for the Minister

[for Education] to assume a much more prominent role not only in setting policy but also in managing the system.

10. The impermanent head: The rapid succession of people through the office of the chief executive [Directors General of Education] has been one of the notable features of the 1980s.

11. The notion of a Senior Executive Service (S.E.S.) is now being formalised.

12. The overwhelming impression left by the most recent round of reconstructions, however, is the new pervasive metaphor for the organisation of Australian education ... best epitomised as a shift from 'educational administration' to 'efficient management'.

[Original emphases]

Additional features of Australian education not mentioned above include an emphasis upon the infusion of technology into schools, greater choice and diversity, closer ties with industry, greater parent and community participation and involvement, greater diversity and "choice" in education, and a more recently, a change in emphasis from "excellence" to "quality". Accountability has assumed a much higher importance with schools increasingly being made responsible for the management of their resources, performance contracts being introduced

and performance appraisal of staff at all levels being increasingly advocated and in some cases implemented, both to monitor performance and to assess for promotion on "merit", part of the overall emphasis on "excellence" noted by Beare above, within the general climate of educational "renewal" and "reform" (Bourke, 1994), while the average age of teaching population steadily climbs beyond 40 (Beazley, 1992).

A peripheral consideration during this period of change has been the welfare and status of teachers. However, the status of teachers in the community is a matter for some concern, particularly if it results in teacher dissatisfaction and dissuades talented people from becoming or remaining teachers. Hewett (1990: 9), an "industrial officer" with the N.S.W. Teachers Federation, made the following comments in an article which attempted to link teacher status to salary and in turn to resignation:

The image of teaching as a well paid and rewarding profession is no longer the case. A recent survey by the Tasmanian Teachers Federation dramatically illustrates the low self rating of teachers and the poor perception that teachers have of their own prestige and status in their local community. 70% of respondents in the sample claimed to be moderately to highly dissatisfied with their status in the community compared to other professions.

Rightly, it seems the community has high expectations for its children, and the responsibility for the fulfilment of these expectations is transferred to schools and teachers. Education is seen as the means to achieve upward social mobility and job security but it should be obvious that all students cannot reach the same high academic standards nor enter tertiary education. This situation may thus lead to a degree of disappointment when this fails to eventuate.

It is probable too that the industrial pressure applied by teachers' unions increasingly since the early 1970s also resulted in a measure of community disapproval and dissatisfaction, particularly when the aims of teachers in these disputes seemed to relate more to personal gain than general educational improvement, or when the connection between better working conditions and improved educational outcomes was either not apparent nor widely appreciated. In such disputes, the media is frequently the forum for complaints about teachers' short hours, long holidays and lack of dedication, particularly when parents are

inconvenienced by strike action. "Teacher bashing" has thus become something of a national sport in Australian society, although there are hopeful signs that this is abating somewhat as the media and general public come to a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by schools and teachers.

Confidence in teachers and education has not been helped by concern

over perceived falling standards in the "basics" and in pupil discipline. Education, being the key concern that it is, has not escaped the attention of the various political parties who have made their own contributions to the debate over standards. Each political party seems to view the "crisis" in education differently and each has its own agenda of educational "reform" to right the perceived wrongs in education.

In addition, it has become common for teachers and schools to be charged with the responsibility for solving the social problems that society itself seems unwilling or unable to deal with, resulting in an increasingly complex and overcrowded curriculum.

The Schools Council (1990: 129-131) considered the issues of confidence in education, pupil discipline, satisfaction with teachers, and educational standards and came to a number of significant conclusions:

1. There is no firm evidence that standards of achievement have either increased or declined over time ... If 'standards' have remained the same, they are being achieved by an increasingly large sector of the community.
2. The number of Australian schools which do not devote a major proportion of their teaching time to the basics of language and mathematics is negligible.
3. The curriculum range to which most Australian students have access, in both primary and secondary schools, has increased significantly in scope and variety over the past two decades.
4. Our schools are comparatively orderly. Assaults on teachers by students are most infrequent ... There are very few schools in Australia of the 'difficulty' of some of those in the larger cities of Europe and America.
5. Schools are diverse in their programs and practices, in keeping with variations in their location and ethos. Schooling in Australia has been characterised by a great liveliness and willingness to experiment.
6. While resources do vary considerably across schools according to system, sector and location, the degree of variation may not be as great as in most other developed countries and certainly not as much as those in less developed countries.
7. If the amount of individual attention provided to students is based on the proportion of teachers to students, Australian students receive on average as much or more individual attention as most students internationally.
8. Student counselling and career services are provided in most secondary schools.
9. ... there is a high level of concern and activity among schools to improve the quality and range of educational opportunities.
10. The successful integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classes is at a higher level than in many comparable countries and is increasing.
11. ... Culturally diverse communities in some parts of the country have

been provided for educationally through a considerable process of mutual adaptation by teachers and school communities.

12. In Australia, schooling is provided effectively to some of the most isolated students in the world.

13. Genuine parent participation in school activities is widespread and growing.

While believing the above to be true, the Schools Council (1990: 130-131) admitted it is difficult to raise public confidence in education, partly because of the lack of "comprehensive and reliable" information to support the above contentions.

If, as the Schools Council suggested, the issues of confidence and standards owe more to misapprehension than to reality, then perhaps schools, teachers and departments of education have been guilty of faulty communication over the past two decades and if this confidence is to be won back, then perhaps the whole nature of communication and the matching of expectations to what actually happens in schools needs greater attention, although it is highly unlikely that complete agreement over values and goals in education can ever be reached, given the diversity of Australian society. Reaching consensus in the area of educational expectations is, of course, much more difficult during a period of rapid change.

The Schools Council (1990: 12) has noted the related problems of rapid change and uncertain role expectations:

One of the general effects on the teaching force has been the production of uncertainty about its role and responsibilities. But it should be noted that this has been generated at least as much by the profession itself as from outside it. Whatever its sources, the variety of influential and conflicting opinion provided in a relatively short space of time was difficult for practising teachers to digest and assimilate.

The Study

This paper is drawn from the literature, a study (Dinham, 1992) undertaken to explore teacher resignation, and a current research project involving interviews with the partners of 90 teachers. In the resignation study, 57 teachers and educational administrators who had resigned from the New South Wales (NSW) Department of School Education (DSE) in 1991 were interviewed.

Data were analysed using grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and a model of teacher persistence was derived which highlighted the complexity of the "Resignation Decision"

and hence, the difficulty in formulating "quick fix" solutions to the problems posed by teacher resignation, including personal, economic and educational cost. Figure 1 represents the model of teacher persistence derived from the study.

It was found that in the educational system under study, little was being done to prevent teacher resignation, and that change in that system since the late 1980s had put increased pressure on those within it. This situation had been exacerbated by societal criticism of teachers and education coupled with increased expectations and responsibilities for schools.

Figure 1:

A Model of Teacher Persistence Derived from the Grounded Theory
Analytical Process of Resigned Teachers' Interviews

The conduct and results of the study are described in more detail elsewhere (Dinham 1992; 1993; 1994b). In brief, the stated purpose of probing more deeply the personal aspects of resignation led to the adoption of a methodology based upon largely open-ended interview questions.

The subjects who were self-selecting and represented four per cent of the teachers resigning from the DSE during the 1991 school year. A pilot study was carried out in late 1991 and early 1992 in which seven former teachers were interviewed, with the remaining 50 teachers being interviewed during the first half of 1992.

During the interviews the subjects were asked two sets of questions. The first were closed questions related to such variables as age, gender, teacher training and qualifications, experience and length of service, position held, present employment status, and salary.

More importantly, teachers were asked to "tell their story" (Wolcott, 1985) through the use of open-ended questions deliberately designed to encourage reflexivity in that the questions took the teachers through their career by asking them to describe why they became a teacher, their positive and negative experiences during their pre-service training and teaching career, the circumstances leading to their resignation and how they felt about resigning.

What follows is an examination of the data obtained concerning teachers and their relationship with society. These findings bear a close relationship to concerns raised about the issue of societal pressures on teaching in the literature. Finally, the implications of the study are considered, and general recommendations made, although as stated above, it is futile to pursue "quick fix" solutions.

Findings of the Study Relating to Societal Pressures and Teaching

The grounded theory analysis of the interviews undertaken in the study confirmed the existence of "Society" to be a category impinging upon the central or core category of "Attitude to Teaching" (see Figure 1 above).

Even less experienced teachers who had recently been secondary students themselves noted how the nature of society had changed, with greater social problems which carried over into the classroom which schools were expected to cope with and solve. Levels of acceptable behaviour had been seen to change, with swearing, violence and the questioning of authority increasingly common. However those interviewed did in the main profess to coming from stable "middle class" backgrounds which made them unprepared for the realities they encountered in schools.

Many of those interviewed felt keenly the criticism levelled at teachers and schools in recent years and cited this as a cause of dissatisfaction. Criticism from the Government itself and from the former Minister for Education Dr Metherell was particularly distressing, as it came from within the "system" and tended to reinforce negative public perceptions of education.

There was a commonly held view that the curriculum had become "overloaded" due to well meaning attempts to solve society's problems and to better prepare students for entry to the workplace and society generally. There was, however, criticism of schools from society and the media for failing to address the "basics" while implementing this increasingly "crowded" curriculum.

Secondary teachers in particular expressed concern with the higher levels of post-compulsory student retention in recent years and the difficulties this has created for teachers and schools. In particular, the efficacy of the H.S.C. in meeting the needs of this changed post-compulsory clientele and the motivation and ability of these students were questioned.

Generally, there was a view expressed that society, and in particular the media, had something of a fixation with teachers' hours and holidays, and did not really appreciate the difficulties involved, with

preparation and marking time in particular being largely "invisible" to the general public, who expected things to be as they were in days gone by. Everyone seemed to have something negative to say about teachers and schooling.

Those interviewed tended to see society as more demanding, more critical, and less appreciative of teachers and education than in former times. A number of those interviewed even stated that they were wary of revealing to strangers their occupation, for fear of the hostile reaction this often generated, while others went so far as to say that "society didn't hate teachers" when they had entered teaching, implying that this was no longer the case. It was obvious that the period from the mid-1970s to the present was seen as increasingly difficult for teachers while criticism and "teacher bashing" had increased commensurately. There was a common sentiment that teachers were giving out more and more "positive reinforcement" to students, with the view expressed that the use of extrinsic motivators or rewards had gone "too far", while teachers received less and less recognition and encouragement themselves. For a further discussion of teacher satisfaction, see Dinham (1994a).

What follows is a small representative selection of comments made by those interviewed concerning the category of "Society". All names used are fictitious.

Jane, a mature aged student, expressed the opinion that "a great deal had changed from 20 years ago" when she had last attended school and that she was "appalled at the accepted levels of behaviour" and at "the violence in the system". Malcolm stated that "the demands today [on teachers] are incredible compared with the 1970s ... expectations are perhaps too high. It is case of time. Syllabus changes require a great deal of input at school level ... there are many non-educational programs that have to be implemented ... Kids today are different, more open, more likely to tell you to 'get stuffed'". Rebecca, now resigned, was "seeing friends and colleagues being burdened more and more with teaching, plus welfare, plus administration ... every problem of society is put onto schools as if they aren't doing anything at all".

Karen, now working in a private school, stated that "teaching can still be very exciting, although I resent the hours sometime, I'm only one person ... society expects far more of us now, we have to teach the kids all the skills". She did however say that she "does not despair about the education system, people have always complained".

Judith found the unrealistic expectations held by parents for their children a source of dissatisfaction, particularly as she had grown up in the same town where she had taught and knew the academic abilities of parents, who believed that "money can buy anything, and [they] can't accept that their kids, although very nice, are only average".

Julie found "attacks from the media, uninformed criticisms about long holidays and teachers being treated like grubby little unionists" sources of dissatisfaction. People felt that they could criticise education because "they've all been to school, that makes them experts", according to Julie, a view shared by others. Helen felt that "parents expected schools to solve their problems" and that "over time there were more and more difficult problems to solve ... I couldn't get the results the community wanted".

Francis returned to teaching after an earlier resignation but lasted only five weeks before again resigning. Francis said that "they should offer refreshers for people going back after a gap" in the light of her experiences. She thought that others such as herself really needed to be brought up to date with curriculum and other changes in education and in methods to cope with "the children of today".

Paula, who resigned after just over one year of teaching, said that sometimes socially "I was embarrassed to say I was a teacher", and this concerned her, while Sue said she was critical of the "nine to three" view of teachers held by the public. David also felt dissatisfaction from the "lower community status" of teachers and from "Government criticism that teachers weren't working ... community perceptions are put out by the Government that we work 9-00 to 3-30 ... It gave me very little satisfaction". Vanessa too was concerned that "public perceptions of teachers had dropped" and that "people were ashamed to say they were teachers". Hazel said that she "had some element of frustration with the public image of teachers ... I saw the effect [of this] on the morale of teachers" and said that "one of the biggest problems teachers face is unrealistic expectations which they don't have time to face ... changes to curriculum, community demands". Jan believed "the general public and the media thought teachers the lowest of the low". Lee gave as a source of her dissatisfaction the decline in "respect from children and society ... teaching is not as respected as it once was". Lee was "not a disciplinarian, but discipline is needed ... if there is not discipline at home, it has to come from somewhere". She was also "worried that society and parents today have created so much stress ... it is affecting teachers and students".

Linda found the poor public perception of teachers a source of dissatisfaction, as were "difficult Year 12 students who didn't want to work" and "parents sticking up for their kids" while "parental support was lacking". Vanessa was also critical of higher post-compulsory school retention, and believed that it was "crazy to make kids stay at school ... not every kid is suited to school ... the H.S.C. gives false expectations ... employers want the H.S.C. for anything ... higher retention can destroy the self-esteem of some kids when they get a very low mark".

Resigned and working as a casual teacher as well as delivering pizzas and cleaning to support her family, Leanne said that she "wouldn't advise anyone to be a teacher ... I am working casual purely for the money ... there is no future for teachers ... anyone with a bit of nous should get into something else ... nurses get a lot more respect ... I don't ever mention I was a teacher, it causes conflict at dinner parties".

General Measures to Address the Issue of Societal Pressures on Teaching

Education both reflects and influences society, and there have been significant changes in the nature of society with commensurate changes in education since the late 1960s. It is difficult to alter something

as complex as the society that individual teachers and schools have to deal with, and, in any case, "society" is a dynamic construct, but the following general measures arising from the study are proposed to assist teachers and society to come to a closer accommodation of the needs and expectations of each.

To begin, students involved in pre-service training need to be exposed to a wider spectrum of society than that in which they grew up. They need to be exposed to different geographic, cultural and socio-economic groups to enable them to deal more effectively with the students in their care and the range of communities where they will teach to reduce the "culture shock" that many of those interviewed experienced, in part due to propensity of educational systems to send their most inexperienced teachers to their most difficult schools.

Regardless of grade taught or subject discipline, teachers need knowledge of social issues. They also need to be able to recognise the nature of social change, its causes and effects, and to communicate effectively with a variety of cultural and other groups. It was plain that those interviewed in the study came predominantly from English speaking backgrounds. Only two of 57 interviewed had a first language other than English.

More meaningful two-way communication is needed between society and the various interest groups it contains and schools, so that the expectations of each are seen as informed, reasonable, appropriate, and capable of being fulfilled. This communication needs to take place at all levels from national to local. Where expectations for schools and teachers are seen as being unable to be achieved or where the fulfilment of such expectations is likely to impact negatively on other school and teacher responsibilities, alternative avenues for the achievement of such expectations need to be identified and utilised to avoid the continued "overcrowding" of the curriculum and the increased administrative burden on teachers and schools which many of those

interviewed described. In particular, the almost automatic response that occurs when a new social problem is given prominence and schools are given responsibility for its solution needs to be seriously questioned.

Where there are increased expectations for teachers and schools, the necessary support needs to be provided to enable these expectations to be fulfilled, with some rationalisation of existing expectations and responsibilities taking place. For example, it might be possible for some responsibilities to be handed over to other community or service organisations or para-professionals within the school.

Efforts need to be made to raise and restore the status of teachers within the community. This can be achieved through some of the measures already outlined above such as better school/community communication and increased community involvement in schools and education. Other measures to raise the status of teachers include public dissemination and recognition of school, student and teacher achievement, but the first step is clearly communication. In most schools where those interviewed taught, only a small and probably non-representative group of parents took part in Parent and Citizen groups, School Councils or attended Parent Teacher nights.

Efforts also need to be made to attract more suitable and higher calibre people to teacher pre-service training and to the production of higher quality and better trained graduates. The issue of teacher salary is complex. The study found that salary was not a major factor in teacher resignation but it was found that teachers' salaries need to

be geared more to the undertaking of post-graduate qualifications and to the mastery of additional knowledge and skills. The possibility of promotion alone is not enough to motivate teachers to undertake on-going professional development, particularly given the aging of the teacher population noted earlier.

It has been demonstrated that the identification of "merit" for appointment and promotion purposes is far from easy, and the recently introduced "merit" promotion procedures in the NSW DSE were roundly criticised by those in the study, but attempts to do so should be persevered with so that teachers performing above commonly held expectations can be adequately rewarded and recognised, either financially, or in other ways.

The measures outlined above have the potential to lead to greater understanding of the difficulties and the achievements of teachers and schools, and hence any criticism that still arises will be more informed criticism. However schools and the Department of School Education still need to set in place mechanisms for the identification of criticisms of education, both generally and in specific schools, and

be prepared to thoroughly investigate the substance of such criticisms and act upon them in partnership with the school and the community in a spirit of co-operation for the improvement of education. The recently introduced quality assurance procedures in the DSE, which non-government schools are also utilising on a fee for service basis, have the potential to aid in the identification of school strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to the investigation of criticisms of education, the Department of School Education would be advised to set up additional measures to identify and recognise achievement and to adopt a pro-active stance to the promotion of excellence, thereby reducing overall the level of criticism of schools, particularly that of a misdirected or misguided nature. However, if such recognition is misapplied or tokenistic, the result may well be the opposite of that intended.

Overall, the aging of the teaching population, the increasing complex and sometimes conflicting expectations placed on teachers and schools, the status of teachers, and the level of public criticism of education, are serious issues which need to be urgently addressed.

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