



Whose fault is it?

Dennis Sleigh

It is probably not news (at least to most teachers) to read about “Principals causing teachers stress”. That was the heading in a daily news bulletin¹ that I saw recently and as a former principal, I decided to see what my successors were up to now. The story turned out to be a report about Dr Anna Du Plessis, discussing the impact of allocating teachers to classes for which they are not trained.

Dr Du Plessis is a Research Scholar at ACU’s Learning Sciences Institute of Australia, and her book on teacher burnout will be published shortly. The article announced that *“Principals need to be aware that when they assign teachers to positions outside their qualifications, it can lead to stress, burnout, and drag on student achievement”*. It added that *“...raising awareness of principal s about the implications of assigning teachers outside their qualifications was the first step in minimising the impacts (of burnout).”*

This is definitely something worth examining since the warning flags have been up for some time indicating that school populations across the nation are once again rising. Paul R Weldon² at ACER has served notice that something must be done about increasing the numbers of available teachers. In the light of Dr Du Plessis’ work, it might well be asked if such reports as Dr Weldon’s have been ignored or placed in the ‘too hard’ basket, leading to overcrowded classrooms in many schools. Perhaps our senior bureaucrats should re-read Weldon’s warning: “Out-of-field teaching in

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some subjects is likely to become more acute over the next 10 years if the forecasted rising demand for teachers is not addressed on the supply side.”³

Since the alarm about the implications of out-of-field placements has now been clearly sounded, it should prove to be a worthwhile addition to current research on teacher stress. Hopefully, it will alert stakeholders to some of the risks of placing a trained English – History teacher in front of an advanced mathematics class. While I await the report with some interest, I trust it will not put the blame solely on principals for such staffing decisions; to do so would narrow the field unjustly. I say this somewhat defensively, having been guilty of the offence myself.

Most of my teaching career was spent in primary schools, but when I was invited to resurrect the secondary section of a central school (K–10), my brief was to re-open one year at a time, starting with Year 7. Initially, it was not possible to employ a group of secondary staff with relevant qualifications to teach each of the subjects on offer; that option became

possible only as the overall secondary numbers grew. Meanwhile, some teachers in the new classes were primary trained. It was not the perfect arrangement but it was one that was carefully considered and executed. The mathematics teacher was an outstanding teacher with a particular flair in this field. She accepted the position (albeit reluctantly) and has excelled in it ever since, accessing targeted professional development along the way.

Despite the obvious success of this teacher, I am still rather alarmed to hear that “About one-third of Year 7–10 maths classes are estimated to be taught by teachers without maths qualifications.” My concern, I should add, comes from two sources: I find it hard to believe that despite adequate warnings about the lack of trained teachers to serve the needs of the increased pupil population passing through the school system, governments today seem unprepared for this looming situation. My second concern is that these same governments seem to be unable to supply adequate data about teachers and their qualifications to permit more than an ‘estimate’ of the situation.

On the first issue, it is hard to understand why systems are unable to assess real needs simply by looking at the numbers gradually moving through the primary system; the increase in secondary students does not consist of people who have just joined the education system; they have been in it for seven years. As for the second matter, I wonder why principals have to submit such detailed annual statistics to central offices, if the same central offices still cannot report exactly how many people are teaching outside their field.

When I read that principals caused stress by placing teachers in classes that they are ill-equipped to teach, I had to ask myself “Why are the principals always responsible? Are they the ones who decide how many teachers they can employ? Do they get to choose the staff appointed to the school?” If not, should they take the full blame? In raising that question, I readily admit that principals do play a part in *solving* the problem.

The principal can – and should – take responsibility for ensuring that any ‘misplaced’ teacher is given the greatest level of relevant support. No principal will blithely staff a class when the teacher is unable to handle the subject – such as a putting a tone-deaf teacher in charge of music – but it is still undeniable that many of the arranged matchings are far from ideal. *The Australian* referred to a physical education teacher taking a science class – but I can certainly think of many worse pairings. In my experience, many PE teachers know far more about science – especially biology – than people, say, with an Arts or Economic degree. In the same way, I could countenance placing an Italian-speaking teacher in a French class on the basis that it is valuable to have studied language methodology, even without being able to speak the language offered in a particular school. My language skills would make me comfortable in a French class or an Italian class, but I like to think they would also make me a better candidate to teach Spanish or German than someone who spoke only English. (This argument loses impact when you are dealing with senior students, of course, but hopefully these students could access on-line education.)

What is at stake?

Three basic questions should be answered before a principal implements out-of-field staffing arrangements:

- Does it really matter?
- Can it be avoided?
- Can the challenge be met some other way?

The first answer might seem to be ‘No’. After all, if the current instance of these postings is anything to go by, it is clear that such a practice does not signal the end of education as we know it. The number of teachers and their pupils impacted is clearly huge, and yet we know that they survive; can the practice really be harmful? In brief, it might turn out that the decision to employ a teacher without the desirable qualifications might be better than the option: not offering the subject. If it is true that, as already noted, about one in three maths classes in Years 7 to 10 are operating without a suitably qualified teacher, would anyone seriously advocate closing down all such classes? Such a dramatic action might indeed shake up the Government and if they were really responsible for the situation, they might be forced to improve their performance.

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However, whatever might be said about years of neglect, we cannot expect to solve the problem overnight.

If a significant number of teacher education students never actually enter our profession after graduating, can the Government solve that issue? If private industry tempts maths/science graduates away from their original plans by offering higher salaries, can the Government stop them? If new graduates decide that they don’t like teaching once they have experienced the challenges of life in the classroom, can the Government make them change their minds? I accept that in these matters, the Government is powerless. We can lament the current situation, and even suggest that authorities should be more alert to future trends, but such actions will not put better trained teachers in front of classes.

Having said that, I cannot move on without arguing that the first question deserves a more thorough treatment. The question does indeed matter, and I am optimistic that Dr Du Plessis will show why. The cost to teachers in stress, to students in reduced opportunities, and to society in its assessment of the effectiveness of schooling, justify a more rigorous

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attempt to solve the problem – but again, I caution that we cannot expect miracles and there will be no short-term solutions.

This brings us to the second question about the out-of-field placements: can the situation be avoided? Let us just consider the mathematics situation as a start. Since most of us would probably not want to shut down one-third of our mathematics classes (and no, the students are not going to have a vote here!), there does not appear to be any short or even medium term solution. In the long term, of course, more attention should be paid to realistic planning, but again, most of the problems already mentioned will continue to have an impact. By all means let us press for a more satisfactory way of solving the problem, but if we are going to retain the right of students to make their own life choices, we will have to be patient.

We now come to my third question, asking if there is a better way to handle the current situation. Here again, I hope Dr Du Plessis will offer solutions and I hope they include advice to principals and system authorities about reducing the inherent tension faced when a history teacher has half a load in the Materials Technology department, or a music teacher is thrust in front of a Year 9 Chemistry class.

The exercise is not just about numbers, of course; it also involves an equity issue. The spread of these ‘misplaced’ teachers is definitely not an even one. Dr Weldon points out that they are more likely to be found in the early secondary years, not Years 11 and 12. They are also more likely to dominate staff lists in the country than in the city; in economically

deprived areas, rather than in affluent areas; and among new graduates, rather than experienced teachers. Each of these might be understandable but that does not make them acceptable. Let’s take recent graduates as an example.

A principal might decide that recent graduates might be better informed about issues in the new national curriculum because of the recency of their studies, and might use this to justify putting a new graduate in an area for which they are not really trained. Regardless of the logic involved, the truth is that the new graduates at a school are usually less able to cope with the extra challenges of a discipline outside those for which they trained. This is not a matter of ability but of experience; give them a few years and they might well adapt to the more strenuous options, but staffing decisions should not be based on optimistic day-dreams. In ACER’s *Policy Insights issue 6*, Out-of-field teaching in Australian secondary schools, Dr. Weldon addresses the issue of new graduates and states “The figures suggest that one way of improving the retention of early career teachers in secondary schools would be to ensure that they are not required to teach outside their subject areas for at least the first two years of their teaching career.”⁴ It would be hard to ignore such informed advice.

It is obvious that many new graduates are already feeling the strain of full-time teaching, and it would be regrettable to add to their problems by giving them a role for which they are not properly prepared. It is also argued that “Students in junior classes with an unqualified teacher are less likely to pursue the subject in later years”⁵ Finally, parents will become

justifiably alarmed when they hear about the matter and that could impair the positive relationship between home and school that should play an important part in secondary studies.

I think it is a lose-lose situation to depend on the good will of the teachers in such a manner, and it is time that education authorities came up with some other suggestions about how to address this growing problem.

Footnotes

- 1 CathNews 20 April 2017. (CathNews.com/cathnews/28955-principals-cause-teachers-stress)
- 2 Weldon P.R., The Teacher Workforce in Australia – Supply, Demand and Data Issues, (<http://research.acer.edu.au/policyinsights/2>), accessed 23 April 2017.
- 3 Op.cit., p. 9
- 4 Weldon P.R., 2016, <http://research.acer.edu.au/policyinsights/6/> (accessed 25 April 2017), p. 9.
- 5 Chris Presland, President of the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council, cited in Illawarra Mercury, 24 April 2017, “Unqualified teachers burning out as they ‘try to keep ahead of the kids’”.

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