

# Flipping the system for Australian teachers – Why do we need to ‘flip the system?’

Keith Heggart, IEU Organiser, says teachers should be driving education policy

One does not need to look far to find hotly contested debates about education, schools and teachers. These debates are both global and local in context; in Australia, especially in a year which will feature a Federal election as well as a New South Wales state election, there is no doubt that education will continue to be a popular football for politicians, policy makers and organisations. These arguments will extend far beyond discussions of demountables and air-conditioning; topics such as teacher registration, accountability, standards for entry into the profession, the role of initial teacher education providers and the need for ongoing, registered professional development, especially in rural and remote areas are all central to discussions about education in Australia today.

However, a common, and for the most part, valid criticism about these discussions is that they ignore the voices of those education workers who have the most to contribute: teachers themselves. For whatever reason, and whether it's a deliberate or accidental omission, teachers are often marginalised or ignored entirely in these debates. A case in point is the fact that the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training is holding an Inquiry into the status of the teaching profession. This inquiry, chaired by Federal MP, Andrew Laming (who is no friend to teachers, based on previous comments), will be holding hearings about teachers and teaching; but these hearings will take place in the middle of the day, at a time that excludes teachers from attending due to their inflexible hours of work.

Even the elected representatives of the teaching profession, like the Australian



Education Union and the Independent Education Union, are often overlooked. For example, the current Board of Directors from AITSL has no requirement to appoint representatives from the teaching unions that collectively advocate for more than 200,000 teachers across Australia.

Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers are seeking new ways of promoting their voices to fill these gaps. The ‘Flip the System’ movement is one such example, and it is one that is quickly gaining interest in Australia. The movement began with the original book, ‘Flip the system: changing education from the ground up’ (edited by Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber) being published in 2016. This book sought to highlight the forces of neoliberalism in education, linking the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) with the increase in

international benchmarking rankings like PISA and TIMSS. The authors in the book argue that such approaches, rather than improving student achievement, actually contribute to limited curricula and a lack of teacher autonomy.

In 2017, *Flip the system UK: A teacher's manifesto* (edited by Lucy Rycroft-Smith and JL Dutaut) was published. This book diagnosed the concerns relating to teacher burnout and morale, mostly in the UK but also worldwide, and suggested ways that teachers themselves might address these concerns by regaining control of their profession.

Most recently, in 2018, *Flip the system Australia: what matters in education* was published. Edited by Deborah Netolicky, Jon Andrews and Cameron Paterson, this volume draws together a range of Australian and international voices to critically examine narratives of ‘failing’ schools and teachers, as well as the increased privatisation and de-professionalisation of teachers within the education system. Well known Australian education academics, like Anna Hogan and Bob Lingard are joined by internationally respected academics such as Pasi Sahlberg. In addition, there are the voices of practicing teachers, like Yasodai Salvakumaran and Kelly Cheung.

## So, what's the book all about?

The foregrounding of the voices of teachers is, in and of itself, a worthwhile aim, and this book certainly does that. The editors have successfully managed to draw together a wide ranging collection of voices to present a thoughtful, detailed and comprehensive analysis of the challenges facing education in Australia and, more generally, globally. More importantly, some of the chapters describe actions

that schools and teachers are currently undertaking.

The book is divided into five parts. The first part explores notions of teacher identity, voice and autonomy. It's a wide-ranging section; of particular note are Deborah Netolicky's discussion of how young teachers formulate their identities, and also Cameron Malcher's thoughts about how podcasts might be used to build teacher community and professional growth. The second section explores the ways that collaborative expertise might serve as a mechanism for re-professionalising the system – a theme that is returned to in part four, where more attention is devoted to what professional learning might look like in a flipped system. Michael O'Connor touches on well-known themes of teachers' wellbeing, and Greg Thompson, David Rutkowski and Sam Sellar identify the way that large-scale assessments relate to teacher expertise. Part three examines the ways that the education system might be democratised to make it more socially just; Melitta Hogarth writes powerfully about the ways that Indigenous voices are silenced in education, while Dan Haesler and Melissa Fotea explore alternative education settings. The final section explores how leadership might be fashioned in a flipped system. Susan Bradbeer writes thoughtfully here about the way women in rural schools act as leaders.

So what does this all mean for teachers in schools? While the promotion of new voices that are close to practice is a

valuable exercise in and of itself, *Flip the System Australia* goes much further. The first thought that comes to mind is that it's not a manifesto of one particular approach. In the five sections there are a range of diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions. This is not necessarily a weakness; rather, I think that it is recognition of the diversity of contexts of education in Australia, especially, and the need for any flipping of the system to take these diverse contexts into account if there are to be successful changes to the work of teachers.

The book itself is overwhelming in its range of ideas and discussions of educational matters but it is overwhelming in a way that is generally positive. It would be easy to become disenchanted at the range of challenges facing teachers and schools recounted in this book. However, the authors manage to avoid this by considering positive and motivating approaches to these challenges as part of the text and by presenting them alongside discussions of the nature of these challenges. Of course, no teacher or school leader – or even a system of schools – would ever be in a position to implement the wide variety of initiatives suggested here – and nor should they – but by reading critically and reflecting on what is happening in their own environments, teachers will be able to consider,

adapt and develop meaningful ideas to deploy in their schools.

Such school-based approaches are important but, I would argue, they are probably not enough, in and of themselves, to effectively re-professionalise the education system and ensure that teachers' voices are heard. This is where the real strength of the book comes into play. By building on a burgeoning global Flip the

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System movement, this book serves as a driver for larger scale change. The principal mechanism for this, and what I think will be its most powerful legacy, are

the networks of like-minded educational professionals that are being developed through engagement and discussion with Flip the System Australia. These communities of teachers, academics and other education workers offer a testimony of hope and the means of ensuring sustainable change towards a more just, democratic and humane educational system.

#### Where can I find out more?

There are some Flip The System Australia events currently being organised. The best place to find out is by following Flip The System Australia on Twitter (@flipthesystemoz). The editors, Deborah Netolicky (@debsnet), Jon Andrews (@Obi\_Jon\_) and Cameron Paterson (@cpaterso) are quite active on Twitter, too.

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