

Mediocrity in teaching

Miro Martin



When I was 40, I was told that I had an acoustic neuroma that required immediate surgery. I was also told that I would be referred to a surgeon regarded as the “best in the world” with this type of surgery. This was extremely reassuring and allayed much of my fear and uncertainty. Imagine how I would have felt if I was told the surgeon was average or OK. We wouldn’t accept mediocrity from our doctors. What about our teachers or school leaders?

Throughout my career I have seen a range of teachers, from incompetent to highly skilled – teachers to whom I would happily entrust my own children. Unfortunately, there are too many of the former. From experience, I would

say there is a significant amount of mediocrity in the teaching profession when we should have the best of the best working in our schools. Education is the most important investment that we can make in our future. We can’t afford to leave it to average people.

What causes mediocrity?

I believe that the teaching profession has a low status in Australia. The salaries are not commensurate with that of other professions. Men, especially, stay away from primary school teaching, not just because of salary. I think the old stereotype of “child care is woman’s work” is hard to change. I also think that men may be put off because of the level of scrutiny student

protection laws have created and the prospect of litigation constantly looming over their heads.

When I began teaching over 30 years ago, I was probably the first male kindergarten teacher in my area. There was a huge community backlash against my principal for hiring a male and I endured many derogatory comments from parents.

Bad press regarding discipline issues, bullying and the ever-increasing spectre of litigation by disgruntled parents, combined with the mountain of paper work associated with increased accountability, have made people think twice about going into teaching.

While there are many highly intelligent, learned and motivated teachers in our schools, there are also quite a few who get into teaching because they can’t get into the more fancied professions. I suspect that, because of pressure for universities to put bums on seats, some have lowered their entry requirements to ensure funding.

I have worked with teachers who barely had Year 12 level English. Their literary skills were so poor that I am surprised they graduated. Yet, they got through university! I hold the universities accountable for, firstly allowing such people into the teaching faculty and secondly, for giving them degrees. I’ve come across teachers who did their degrees by correspondence who didn’t know what a genre or pedagogy was. What curriculum training could they have possibly had? I concede that experience is a crucial factor in creating excellence in teaching, but, when the foundations are poor, experience doesn’t help.

Another contributing factor to mediocrity is passiveness – the principal who knows a teacher is coasting but does nothing to intervene because he wants to avoid confrontation – the teachers who don’t reflect on their practice and keep on doing the same thing year after year because no one complains, as long as the children and parents are happy.

The most important factor is the outdated paradigm of school, itself. We are still using a factory or military model of schooling that goes back 200 years to the Industrial Revolution. Schools are all about sameness and conformity.

We make a shoe that fits all. For children with big feet, we cram them in with a shoehorn. For those with small feet we pad them up with layers of socks so their feet will fit (the layers of socks are the many intervention programmes we employ to make the children fit our outdated model rather than making a model that suits the children). We should be measuring

each child's foot and tailoring their shoes accordingly.

How many teachers are still out there copying reams of 'black-line masters' and giving their classes the same worksheets to do day after day? When their children rebel, either because they are bored or because the work is too difficult, these same teachers punish them with detentions and ask them to do more of the same.

"You will fit your foot into the shoe or else!" What about the teachers who write on their students' reports, "... your child is not working to their full potential ... does not pay attention ... is easily distracted ...?" They find every excuse for a child's poor performance, e.g. their parents don't support us at home, the child has ADHD, the child comes from a poor neighbourhood or has a dysfunctional family. I am surprised that parents accept these excuses. Sure, these things impact on a child's learning in a classroom, but do the teachers ever take a look at their own practice to see if the children are off-task because they may be employing poor teaching strategies? The old saying is "... a poor tradesman blames his tools..."

Maybe the teachers I describe above don't know any better. In this case it is imperative that we train our teachers to self-review and to acquaint themselves with good teaching strategies. I don't have confidence in our universities to do this. I fear that too many academics have little, no or outdated classroom teaching experience. Many academics I have met have the knowledge, but have no talent in imparting their knowledge. I believe that we should be identifying the excellent practitioners in our profession and getting them to mentor their colleagues and graduate teachers. Do it at school level. These practitioners need to be rewarded accordingly. Pay peanuts and you will get monkeys.

I think another reason why teachers may not

know any better is the lack of alternative work role models. A lot of teachers go straight from school to university and then back into school. They have no concept of a workplace outside the school environment (in the real world). They only know the teaching they experienced from the teachers who taught them and can do little more than perpetuate the status quo. In private industry competition for a job doesn't end at the interview. If you fail to perform after you're appointed you will be quickly weeded out. This doesn't happen so readily in a school setting.

Not all parents are discerning about their child's education. As long as their child is happy and safe, that's all that matters. Teachers aren't challenged that often to "produce the goods".

I must say that the vast majority of teachers I have worked with have had a wonderful work ethic and they have shown commitment way beyond their scheduled hours of duty. But, unfortunately, I have come across several teachers who make note of every minute of release time they miss out on and complain if they have to do one minute more playground duty than necessary. They are genuinely affronted when you refuse to grant them extra release time to do their planning or reports. I thought teaching was a vocation where the well-being of the student was first and foremost. For this small group of mediocre teachers it's not about the children. "It's all about me!"

Sir Ken Robinson talks about the need for an education revolution. I have said many times that the people who make the decisions for schooling are often those most ill-equipped to do so. Our politicians are mostly lawyers, yet they have the final say, e.g. NAPLAN. I wouldn't want an electrician putting in my plumbing any more than I would want a lawyer telling me how to teach.

We will never escape the out-dated factory model of education when governments

constrain us more and more with the shackles of conformity (national, standardised education) and use the clichés of bad practice borrowed from overseas. We need personalised and individualised education to cater for the diverse range of cultures and demographic settings we have in Australia. Just as "one size does not fit all" in my shoe metaphor, one standard education system does not suit everyone.

We need creative, intelligent, innovative teachers who have a repertoire of good practices and who can improvise and adapt these practices to suit their children. These teachers need to be acquainted with the different learning needs of individual students and promise to burn their black-line masters and destroy their photocopiers. These teachers should have the right to name their own salary, as long as they focus on delivering the best for their students. Not all students are the same. Not all teachers are the same. Why should they all get the same wage?

I'm confident that a hierarchical approach of paying teachers according to performance rather than years of service would weed out the mediocre teachers in our ranks. Teachers would need to compete for their appointments and not simply be given unlimited and unchallenged tenure. Unfortunately, it would also mean that the best teachers would end up working in the richest schools that could afford them. Here, at last, is something for the politicians to work out – how to fund it all and make it equitable. Leave the teaching to the teachers and the economics to the government.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.

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