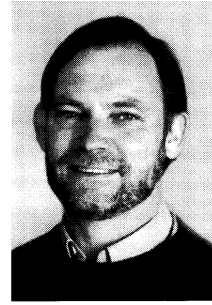


OPINION

Diversity: “Duck and cover”

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Colin McCahon, arguably New Zealand's most influential contemporary painter, spoke of a deep sense of responsibility, energy, and commitment expected of the artist. He said that the artist

is driven to reflect what is within- it can be called soul- and must reflect faithfully, without bluster, or pretence, with no compromise, whatever the cost. Failure to do so will soon enough emerge in the work leaving it thin and hollow, without meaning (Bloem & Browne, 2002, p.44).

The analogy with teachers and teaching is seductively attractive. Great teachers, it seems to me, reflect something special that is within. In a simple sense, teachers need to know about what they teach, as well as having the kinds of curriculum knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge which inform their teaching. Sadly, as we review the past two decades of teacher education in New Zealand we see there has been a decline in the amount of subject content knowledge. While good teachers teach well, the fear is that without solid subject content knowledge they will do little more than teach garbage brilliantly.¹

But I think McCahon means more than reflecting knowledge that is within. He suggests the artist reflects from the soul (though I prefer the term spirit). Great teachers teach faithfully, being true to themselves and their beliefs, without bluster or pretence. They teach in ways that reveal the spirit of their inner person. In doing so, their teaching is characterised as self-revealing and expressive, while meaningful and central to the learners' lives and learning. There is a sense that the inspirational teacher- like the artist- teaches with a commitment that is without

¹ A frequently espoused view of the late Dr Rae Munro, a staunch believer that effective teachers actually know about what they are teaching

compromise so that learners are enabled to be wholly-developed, maximized, creative and efficacious citizens. Such commitment sometimes comes at a cost to the teacher - it is perhaps not surprising, then, to consider that some of the greatest teachers of all time faced the fear of death or crucifixion! But personal cost for inspirational teachers is often superseded by a prevailing professional integrity, passion, and inner reservoir of life. Interestingly, for the inspirational teacher, there seems little choice but to willingly teach in such ways. For they know that failing to do so, will reveal teaching that is thin and hollow, without meaning. Therein also lies a challenge for teacher education programmes.

But the analogy with teachers and teaching is seductively attractive for another reason. Increasingly, teaching and being a teacher have become more akin to science, business, and industry rather than art, humanity, and service. An overly unhealthy obsession with accountability, standards, and achievement of learning outcomes (all of which, incidentally, are good things) drives this scientific, business, and industrial paradigm. And the essence of creativity, expression, and generation of new ideas, understandings, forms, and movements, become secondary to this prevailing business of delivering monolithic education packages concerned with producing measurable outputs on international academic league tables.

James K Baxter, arguably New Zealand's most influential poet, spoke of the artist as one who “might speak prophetically and sanely to a wider audience” (1951, p.19). It is interesting to consider that the teacher, like the artist, might also be charged with a responsibility to teach prophetically and sanely in ways that inspire her/his learners for life. It seems to me that *prophetically* in this context might refer to acting (albeit, teaching) in ways that are inspired on the one hand, and inspirational to others, on the other hand. Effective teachers, like artists, not only teach in inspirational ways but they also inspire. Likewise, *sanity*, in this context, suggests to me that like artists, teachers are charged with a responsibility to teach informed by wisdom, knowing that what they create will endure and be valued for a lifetime, or conversely as McCahon puts it, will be “thin and hollow, without meaning.”

Teachers do impact on the lives of students, and perhaps more so than our teacher education textbooks are prepared to confess. McCahon spoke of one such teacher at Māori Hill School who inspired him for life, albeit it in perhaps an unusual way!

Miss Guy was small and neat in nothing clothes. She was well-ordered and used a strap. The whole younger school looked forward to her domination with a kind of juicy horror.... What she taught was forever, and very real. Her real subject, as I look back, was “order”- the order of thinking, looking and living. The glamour was over and, with it, the horror of the infant school. A calm and stern discipline held us in a teaching web.... now came the relentless Miss Guy, who taught me to understand that the only way to put all the information I had together was by my own hard work. Miss Guy was my most real angel (Bloem & Browne, 2002, p.160).

And so, as I reflect on education in New Zealand, increasingly I am returning to the wisdom of previous generations and especially to those

who have shaped our education system in ways that promote diversity. Gordon Tovey, the National Art Adviser during Beeby's years, was one such inspirational leader who actively and passionately promoted the value of diversity. His commitment was towards the expansion of learning - the promotion of diversity in learning so that all children might benefit from a whole education. He said

in our education system, mostly through ignorance but sometimes through willful bloody-mindedness, we have almost completely disregarded the historic patterns of subjective learning... the minds of many students have been denied their rightful development through our indoctrination on a single, unimaginative and for many unproductive process (Henderson, 1976, p.221).

Three years later, Sylvia Ashton Warner commented thus

Oh there are many who can tell you of the steel straight jacket of tradition clamped upon the souls of the wild ones with penalties for variation, the wild ones themselves declare it, and you got a staid, sedated and timid society.... I'd rather see education falling down and getting up again in the open slather of experiment... than playing it safe within the letter of the law. The concern of New Zealand for safety, its crippling caution (Ashton-Warner, 1979, p.135).

A crippling caution continues to produce conservative and safe solutions to perceived educational problems. Such conservative and safe solutions provide a sense of comfort (on international achievement comparisons, standards might have increased) but not necessarily life (adolescent suicide rates have increased). During World War Two, advertisements encouraged people to "duck and cover" in the event of a nuclear bomb exploding. Not surprisingly, people's sense of safety increased, yet in reality nothing changed. I fear that the crippling impact of such things as an over-emphasis on meeting the standards, excessive accountability regimes, and the massification of standard approaches to curriculum, assessment and teacher education will all serve to promote a slow death for inspirational teachers.

Though not new, the crippling caution of conservative acceptability has particularly narrowed the focus of the curriculum and teaching to that which is considered safe. Reflecting on Steiner, for example, we are reminded of ideas about 'education towards freedom', versus the prevailing 'education towards achieving standards'.

Thoughtful parents and educationalists alike regard with growing caution the fact that children are turned more and more into little college students, however emotionally immature, and that some schools they go to become more like university-type institutions every day. They view with dismay...a purely scientific and materialistic mode of thinking...It is realized that schools are seldom orientated towards a real knowledge of the developing human being and that educational principles are less and less directed towards assisting a healthy growth of body, soul and spirit (Rudel & Rudel, 1986, p. 8).

In a similar vein Gordon Tovey says

So the sun of accomplishment of our purposefully unspun world of learning enlightens but one side alone, the verbal, while the creative, like the dark side of the moon, recently revealed through adventurous journeying, remains in uncomprehending, non-activating shadow (Henderson, 1976, p.221).

In my view, teacher education programmes in New Zealand do not score highly on promoting the expression of quality through diversity and difference. We do prepare teachers who are internationally recognised. But the tiredness of philosophical sameness remains. It is also true that all teachers hold their own philosophies of teaching. But commitment to philosophical diversify which varies too far from the established norm is seldom sanctioned, implicitly or explicitly, in our teaching profession or teacher education programmes.

The task to reshape teacher education in ways that allow the fullness of philosophical diversity to flourish is not easy. It means exploring and experiencing different philosophies towards education. As student teachers buff these philosophies against one another, so too do they become engaged in the creative task of becoming teachers with a

difference, who understand and can discern the purposes of education and how these might be best achieved for and through them as teachers.

If as teachers and teacher educators we are to contribute prophetically and sanely in education, then diversity must have space to speak, a chance to be genuinely heard, and the freedom to express and be experienced through teaching in creative and perhaps even unusual ways. The political power of standardisation and the trend towards curriculum and pedagogical conservatism become painfully evident when one tries to reach outside the established practice.

I have thought for some time that the three attributes of effective teachers are that they are passionate about something in their lives, they enjoy thinking and helping students to be thinkers, and they believe that they are capable even against the odds to make a difference in the lives of their students. While not exhaustive as a list, I remain believing these. If we are to promote a profession that believes that teachers reflect what is within and are empowered to teach faithfully and without pretense in accordance with this, then our teacher education programmes must enable this to happen. We cannot afford to do otherwise - to fail to do so will produce teachers whose teaching is thin and hollow, without meaning, providing neither order, prophetic inspiration, nor sanity for the lives of our students.

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