

# Incentivising Quality: It Will Take More Than Carrots to Keep Teachers in Classrooms

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**By Melanie Ralph**

Last year, along with many other Queensland teachers, I applied to be accredited as a Highly Accomplished Teacher (HAT). The certification involves the submission of a portfolio which is annotated against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), as well as classroom observations. At Stage 1, the portfolio is assessed by trained assessors for a fee of \$850, and if successful, an applicant progresses to Stage 2 assessment for an additional \$650. In Queensland, the remuneration for HAT certification, as well as Lead Teacher (LT) certification, is among the highest in the country; a HAT annual salary is \$111,725, and an LT will receive an annual salary of \$121,975. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) states this recognition of exemplary teachers provides “a financial incentive for teachers to lead from the classroom” (“Spotlight” 9) and will help to keep “great teachers within the classroom” (QCT).

My experience of applying led to much soul-searching and questioning. I know I’m not alone in my reasons for applying; a desire for recognition, and of course, a higher pay bracket, certainly were appealing. But, when I stood back after not being successfully accredited, I realised that more wide-reaching structural reform in education would be needed to stymie the looming teacher shortage and keep enough great teachers in the classroom.

The reality is that many teachers desire more recognition for their work. In fact, Australia ranks as the 4th worst of 23 countries surveyed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with regards to our efficacy in providing teachers with recognition in schools, and according to the same report, 92% of teachers report “that if they improved the quality of their teaching, they would not receive any recognition in their school” (Jensen et al. 4). Because the impact that a teacher has on a student’s life is not often immediately evident, it can be difficult for a teacher to attain professional recognition or acknowledgement for their impact, particularly in an education system which increasingly values that which is visible and measurable, or in the case of HAT certification, that which can be ‘evidenced.’

It’s not a positive outlook when one also considers “the negative climate, where teaching, teachers and teacher educators were (and are still) perceived by the public as underperforming, and worse, as declining in effectiveness” (Bahr and Mellor 6). Think dramatic or alarmist headlines about how Australian schools are ‘crashing down’ international ladderboards for education, and even \*gasp\* ‘falling behind Kazakhstan’, or that results are plunging due to ‘dumbed down curriculums’ that no longer provide students with the basics. Chitty et al. explain (qtd. in Perryman et al.), that “the policy explosion of the last twenty years has been made possible in part because a constant stream of criticism has led to public and political acceptance of the idea that teachers are in need of reform, and this reform needs to be monitored by increased surveillance...and performance reporting.”

This low status and heightened scrutiny of teachers is compounded by the fact that “while professions such as ‘law, medicine and architecture have tangible and widely understood types of accomplishment: cases won, cures effected, buildings well designed, the accomplishments of teachers are, both historically and currently, less tangible and less well understood” (Boston qtd. in Mackenzie 193). As governments continuously clutch at reform strategies – such as classrooms swamped with laptops, state-wide installation of interactive whiteboards, or even the “expensive failure” that was Teach For Australia – Professor Andy Hargreaves warns that teachers risk becoming the “clones and drones of policy makers’ anaemic ambitions for what underfunded systems can achieve” (2).

Despite the policy noise, Dylan Wiliam asserts that we have been pursuing ineffective policies for too long and that “the only thing that really matters is the quality of the teacher” (3). In addition to this, teachers would feel more motivated to aspire to quality teaching if they believed they’d be supported and recognised for their efforts. Research even suggests that “recognising innovation within classrooms may be more effective and cheaper than formal, large-scale government programs” (Jensen 16).

So, all we need to do to create system wide success in our schools is ensure we have quality teachers and that we recognise them. Given that 1 in 3 Australian teachers leave the profession within their first 5 years, it appears we must examine these novel ideas as a matter of urgency if we are to remedy the predicted ‘attrition crisis’ looming in Australia.

## **THE INTANGIBLES**

Both in Australia, and around the world, the idea of incentivising ‘quality teaching’ has often featured in discussions about retaining teachers, lifting standards, and improving the professionalism of teaching. But reforms that aim to financially motivate individuals for their ‘quality teaching’, rather than lift the collective standards for all teachers, assume that teachers can be extrinsically motivated by carrots to achieve better results. Michael Fullan says that for whole system success, it has to be about the group, not the individual: “Incentives and other investments in human capital do not motivate the masses... better performing countries did not set out to have a very good teacher here and another good one there, and so on. They were successful because they developed the entire teaching profession – raising the bar for all” (“Choosing the Wrong Drivers” 11-12).

Fullan’s assertion is complex, because before we can raise the bar for all, we must be able to define what a ‘very good teacher’ is. According to Laureate Professor Jennifer Gore, “One of the biggest challenges in moving toward greater quality is defining what quality is. While ‘quality’ as measurable student outcomes on standardised tests is reasonably widely used and accepted (despite contestation), consensus about ‘quality’ as it pertains to teaching has proved much harder to achieve” (88).

In 2011, AITSL introduced the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) to once-and-for-all lock down what it is teachers are supposed to know and be able to do and to “serve as a quality assurance mechanism to improve the overall quality of Australian teaching” (Call 99). The introduction of the standards demonstrated a “significant leap forward in developing a cohesive approach to teaching standards across Australia” (Timperley qtd. in Call). These standards provide the framework which underpins HAT or LT certification.

While the standards offer teachers across the country a common language about their professional practice, they do present limitations. For instance, examples of the descriptors in the “Professional Practice” domain of the Highly Accomplished Teacher level include “use teaching strategies” and “use effective classroom communication”. However, in their extensive review, *Building Quality in Teaching and Teacher Education*, Bahr and Mellor argue that “capability is a lesser measure than, for example, ‘to show flair’. Yet we know that teachers need to be innovative, exciting, engaging, motivating and that planning needs to be personalised to meet the learning needs of students. That is, they need to show flair” (17). Certainly, every teacher can ‘use’ a series of strategies in the classroom, but can they show flair in the use of strategies? A limitation of the current model of accreditation is that it “only considers the demonstration of competencies, capabilities and the consequent impact on learner conceptual understandings. It does not go far enough to give insight into the key attributes that form the quality in teaching...while standards can assure competency, and maybe even effectiveness, this is a much lower bar for achievement than one set to ensure quality” (Bahr and Mellor 20).

Naylor and Sayed propose that we must look beyond a checklist of competencies in our quest for quality, and instead consider that it encompasses “both ‘quality teaching’ and ‘quality teachers’” and as such, it should include a recognition of a “teacher’s personal qualities, skills, knowledge and understanding, their

classroom practices and importantly their impact on student outcomes” (4). There is value in what the standards offer in terms of competencies, but evidently, they can miss the crucial, intangible qualities that are less easy to measure, though undeniably demonstrable, such as a teacher’s ability to motivate students, or to show care and compassion. Even the Teach Queensland government website lists “enthusiasm”, “keeping your cool under pressure” and “patience” as essential teacher attributes, and yet these personal qualities are missing from the standards.

Bahr and Mellor ask, “Why don’t we ask for passion, enjoyment or humour as an important teacher competency? (The retail trade, for example, requires such qualities.) Where is the sense of teacher identity and responsibility for student development, self-confidence or self-efficacy?” (20). Undoubtedly, it is harder to measure these qualities than it is to measure test scores, but should this mean that the personal competencies of quality teaching should be squeezed out of the teacher standards used across the country to recognise and reward expertise?

British writer David Boyle explores our obsession with data and measurement in schools in his book *The Tyranny of Numbers*. He writes, “the more we measure our lives, the less we actually live them. We take our collective pulse 24 hours a day with the use of statistics. We understand life that way, though somehow the more figures we use, the more the great truths seem to slip through our fingers. Despite all that numerical control, we feel as ignorant of the answers to the big questions as ever.”

Clearly, big questions about the nature of quality teaching continue to allude us. Financially incentivising a few top performing teachers will not lead to whole system transformation or the solutions we really need. After all, “the installation of an accreditation process does not, in and of itself, assure the development of quality teachers” (Bahr and Mellor 20). This may seem like a harsh assessment, but if accreditation did assure quality, surely we’d have more teachers staying in the profession – preferably the quality ones, too.

The truth is that in the background of the politicised navel gazing and finger pointing, teachers are bolting for the classroom doors. While accreditation is certainly one way to reward, acknowledge and promote teaching expertise, unless we address the critical issues relating to attrition and give back to teachers as a whole in terms of more structural support, we won’t keep enough teachers in the classroom, whether they are quality or not. Even worse, we risk narrowing the definition of quality teaching to a checklist of competencies and skills, which are “silent on the personal attributes that a quality teacher requires” (Bahr and Mellor 22).

## **GHOST OF REFORMS PAST**

To understand how we got to here, we must go back in time to observe how reforms such as these do not necessarily assure the development of quality teaching, and certainly do not go far enough in retaining teachers. In fact, HALT accreditation could be likened to Frankenstein’s creature, in that it is a patchwork of old, dead reforms that have been stitched together in a bid to galvanise teachers to seek to join a tiny, elite group of better-paid ‘super-teachers’.

Back in 1989, unions, employers and governments across Australia introduced the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) classification designed to “constitute a professional career path that would recognise and reward improvements in teaching, offer all teachers an incentive to engage in ongoing professional development, attract highly competent graduates to the profession, and keep good teachers in the classroom” (Ingvarson and Chadbourne 2). Sounds very familiar. At last, it seemed, teachers would have a more promising career path that didn’t require them to shift out of the classroom to school management roles.

So, what went wrong?

The AST program was widely criticised for “the absence of quotas, a ‘soft’ selection process, and an expectation that most applicants would be successful” (Ingvarson and Chadbourne 11). Issues also arose

regarding the role of the AST after accreditation: it was designed to reward teachers for doing better work, not necessarily extra work. Due to a lack of a clear role description, many teachers in a 1994 study of the AST initiative described it as a “con” and “an insidious attempt by their employer to get extra administrative work done ‘on the cheap’ and introduce substantial changes in schools without providing the necessary resources” (Ingvarson and Chadbourne 25). Five years after being introduced, the role had lost credibility and failed across the states.

Things went quiet for some time in Queensland after this, until 2015 when ‘Master Teachers’ were introduced as part of the Queensland Government’s \$535 million “Great Teachers = Great Results” action plan. With a focus on developing literacy and numeracy, as well as providing coaching, mentoring and guidance to teachers, the three-year Master Teacher positions aimed to “boost” teacher quality and were capped at a quota of 300. Like AST, the role was financially incentivised.

Notably, in its response to “Great Teachers = Great Results” in 2013, the Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP) warned against monetary bonuses, suggesting they could “fuel competition which would be counterproductive to the culture of teamwork, collaboration, mentoring and coaching” and that “the limited number of Master Teachers is of concern if the system’s aim is to achieve the goal of Excellence in Teaching” (“QASSP Response”). Indeed, looking back, it is difficult to see how 300 Master Teacher roles could really impact the quality of teaching across the other 1423 schools in Queensland in which there was no Master Teacher. QASSP even cautioned that “we need to beware of offering everything to the high-quality teachers, without the notion of ‘giving back’ to the system and improving the quality of all teachers” (“QASSP Response”).

Fast-forward to 2018, and, without much attention, the phrase ‘Master Teacher’ disappeared from school lexicons as the role seemed to vanish into thin air. Ask a teacher now who the ‘Master Teacher’ is in their school, and they’ll likely look at you puzzled; “I didn’t know we had one,” they might say, or “Are they still going?”

Thus, the arrival of HALT in Queensland in 2019 resembled a ghost of reforms past. Despite the lessons of the AST and Master Teacher roles, HALT accreditation takes us back to square one, where a standardised approach is embraced, which assumes teachers will be motivated to deliver more ‘quality’ teaching if the price is right, without paying attention to the broader challenges that limit teachers as a collective group.

Of course, I know this now. But a year ago, my thinking was very different.

## **MY ACCREDITATION ‘JOURNEY’**

I applied for Highly Accomplished accreditation in 2019 because I believed it was the next logical step in my 10-year teaching career. After all, I wasn’t a Head of Department, a Year Level Coordinator, an Assistant Head of Department, a Literacy Coach, etc. If I wasn’t one of those, I thought, what was I? ‘Just’ a teacher? This sense that I needed to have a formal title above ‘classroom teacher’ to feel validated is reflective of how so many teachers who stay in the classroom “have been led to believe they have forgone the opportunity to have a career and in some sense ‘failed’” because “for over a century, managing schools has been afforded more status than teaching well, even though expertise in teaching is critical to the ability of schools to achieve their primary objective” (Ingvarson and Chadbourne 1). I didn’t feel that I had ‘failed’ by continuing to teach, but I believed that accreditation might give me a better sense of recognition and that it was a way to ‘keep climbing’ the career ladder I felt I was on.

Putting together my portfolio was an enormous, time consuming endeavour. In fact, an AITSL report on the HALT accreditation process reports that “the time that it takes to apply for certification surfaced as a key barrier to teachers engaging in the process” and “while 85% of certified teachers would consider renewing their certification, only 43% think a colleague would do it” (“Spotlight” 15). Consequently, my

accreditation journey led to a lot of late nights and cancelled weekend plans as I turned my attention to the immense task of proving that I was competent in all 37 descriptors of the standards.

Some of these descriptors were more achievable than others. For instance, as a high school English teacher, I found it difficult to find evidence to show my support of colleagues to implement effective strategies to support numeracy achievement (2.4). Likewise, as a classroom teacher, I am not often given opportunities to “Work with colleagues to construct accurate, informative and timely reports to students and parents/carers about student learning and achievement” (5.5). Thus, I found this mouthful of a descriptor pretty tricky to ‘evidence’ as I didn’t want to (nor would I be allowed to) step on the toes of middle management who typically oversee the school’s protocols around ‘timely reports’.

Though I struggled with some of these downright clinical descriptors, I found that I had a lot of ‘artefacts’ to demonstrate my achievement of descriptors I was passionate about, such as behaviour management strategies, engaging in professional learning, supporting students with disabilities, fostering problem solving and critical and creative thinking – the list goes on.

Throughout the process I noticed some very real scepticism and confusion from some colleagues about the role of a HAT. The idea of another reform to ‘fix’ education by plucking out the stars can lead to professional jealousy and “animosity towards the HAT role from colleagues” (“Evaluation” 109) who do not value accreditation or who perceive others to be motivated solely by money. “She’s only doing that for HAT,” I heard someone murmur under their breath in a staff meeting once about a colleague who was addressing us. In preparing the hall one day for senior exams, a colleague said to me facetiously, “You’re going for HAT so you can hand out all the exam papers.” These examples demonstrate that authenticity of teachers’ motivations can come under scrutiny as they collect evidence. In the process of compiling my own portfolio, I even began to question myself: Was I initiating something because I genuinely wanted to, or was I deliberately manufacturing the collection of evidence to fill a ‘gap’ in my portfolio? Even worse, could my colleagues tell? Could the kids tell? Stephen Ball refers to this dilemma as a “kind of values schizophrenia” experienced by teachers “where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance” (221).

As my soul gradually became possessed by this tension, I routinely squirrelled away evidence in files for my portfolio – everything from lesson notes to student work samples, to desperately boring meeting notes or email chains. In the late stages of compiling my portfolio, I could even recite which descriptor I was embodying at any given moment throughout the day. As I chatted with a colleague over lunch about modifying a task for a student with autism, I wondered to myself, ‘Would this fit with 3.2 or 1.6?’ Helping colleagues in my department to use plagiarism software to check student work got me thinking, ‘Oh, this would be great for 4.5!’

This robotic inner voice followed me daily and progressively alienated me from the immediate joys of my job. Because applicants are advised to completely avoid emotion in their annotations of evidence, I felt estranged from my normal professional identity because intangible accomplishments, such as meaningful student or parent interactions, do not validly evidence the descriptors. For example, an email I got from a past student who told me she had just completed her primary teaching degree after being inspired to teach in my English classes has no place on the standards. Likewise, in the realm of accreditation, achievements I felt proud of, like enrolling in an Auslan course to learn sign language to communicate with my deaf students, rang hollow against the standards. Clearly, the process of proving one’s highly accomplished status can be mechanical and unfeeling, because the QCT acknowledge that although “it is well established that the emotions of teachers and learners are highly influential in the teaching and learning process...the focus of certification is on professional practice, not applicant’s emotional responses to their professional practice” (QCT Webinar). Like Bahr with Mellor, I began to question, “why would someone aspire to teach if the interpersonal dimension is lost?”

This process mirrors the AST role. In a 4-year study of the AST role, involving 250 teachers and principals, Smyth et. al found that for teachers to be successful, they had to move “spiritually and linguistically away from the classroom” (15). Additionally, many teachers believed that in the process of narrowing down

teaching to meet criteria, the “whole approach smacked of having to jump through criterial hoops, displaying the right amount of policy gloss in terms of familiarity with the latest government ideology, in order to receive a meagre reward” (Smyth et al. 4). I certainly found that because the descriptors for Highly Accomplished status require an applicant to focus so much on supporting and leading their colleagues, my attention was inevitably diverted outside of the classroom.

In a system which “expects you to climb” beyond the classroom, to be more than ‘just’ a teacher, it’s easy to become what Ball describes as “ontologically insecure,” that is, “unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent” (220). For me, this insecurity began to manifest as apprehension. If I was to successfully pass Stage 1 of the application, what might an assessor who visits me at school for Stage 2 discover? What if they came on a day when my practice looks nothing like the neat annotations in my portfolio? What if they discover that my desk is a mess, I rarely take notes in meetings, and in fact, in some areas of my teaching, I had completely pulled back to look after myself? For example, I took half the year off my coaching role working with first year teachers. Why? Because I had no time because I was applying for HAT. Oh, the irony.

Fullan says, “If accountability-driven standards and assessment do not kill you, individualistic appraisal will come along to make sure you are dead” (“Choosing the Wrong Drivers” 14). To extend on his metaphor, when I received the email that told me I would not be joining the ranks of Highly Accomplished teachers in Queensland, I experienced a kind of exorcism – as my accreditation-possessed teacher identity died, my more self-assured, relaxed and joyful teacher identity returned.

## **LIFE POST-HAT: SAME SHIT, DIFFERENT DAY**

Yes, my ego was a little bruised. But when I remembered that I’d return to school the next day to teach my heart out again, because it is my passion, I started to cheer up pretty quickly. Most of my colleagues wouldn’t know. The students wouldn’t know I wasn’t Highly Accomplished. To them, I’d still be Miss Ralph: English teacher. With the awareness that I would no longer be consumed by evidence mapping, collecting artefacts, or dissecting my practice at a microscopic level, I could now return to my pre-HAT teaching life, where a good lesson was just, well, a good lesson – even if no one saw it or there was no data to prove it.

While a very small group of teachers no doubt popped the bubbly to celebrate successful accreditation, I contemplated the many teachers who would be feeling extremely low morale as a result of ‘failing’ what is a very emotional and expensive experience. If the main objective of the certification process is to keep great teachers in the classroom, just how much impact will anointing so few HALTs have on the seismic pressures contributing to the looming teacher shortage? To use Fullan’s words, how exactly will it ‘motivate the masses’?

While accreditation may retain some of the already high-achieving, dedicated teachers, AITSL research into teacher attrition in Queensland suggests that we are already losing our best and brightest teachers at alarming rates. Gaining Highly Accomplished teacher status does nothing to change the day to day life of teaching that goes on despite the newest reforms. Indeed, “it is unrealistic to expect teachers to be highly and consistently effective when working in crowded staffrooms, desk jammed against desk, and with the most basic of facilities” (Ramsey 92). HAT certification won’t help to alleviate these challenges, nor will it cool the classroom for those unfortunate enough to fall outside the “Cooler Schools” zone on a 40-degree summer day, and therefore may not have air-conditioned classrooms.

Likewise, certification won’t change the fact that Australian teachers are working longer hours than ever before, yet most of these hours are spent on non-teaching tasks. Correna Haythorpe, Australian Education Union federal president, states, “On top of a complex curriculum and hours of marking and lesson preparation at nights and on weekends, teachers are burdened with skyrocketing administration

requirements, increasing reporting requirements, and demands to focus on coaching students for standardised testing such as NAPLAN...None of these demands contribute to real student achievement.” Indeed, one young teacher who is leaving the profession just three years into his career, says, “Teaching is awesome until you have to do something other than teach, which is about 80 per cent of the time.”

It is this pressure that can also lead to the high rate of burnout amongst teachers. Though reported benefits of HALT certification supposedly include an “increased standing with colleagues and peers” and a reduction in “teacher burnout,” (“Spotlight” 9) what about the standing or wellbeing of the other thousands of registered teachers in Queensland who do not get certified, whether they applied or not?

AISTL list other benefits of accreditation, such as “renewed collegiality, personal practice improvement, improved leadership confidence and feelings of pride and accomplishment” (“Spotlight” 9). This is wonderful for the few who attain accreditation – but my concern lies with the thousands of unsuccessful applicants who are left alone with pages of feedback on a screen informing them about how they did not “validly evidence” descriptors. In this way, Stephen Dinham describes how the standards have become ‘twisted’ by some to be more about “standardising, judging and dismissing teachers than developing and recognising them” (94). He says, “Rather than being done with and for teachers, many measures advocated and being hastily and poorly implemented in the quest to improve teaching and learning are essentially being done to teachers and without their involvement, almost guaranteeing resistance, minimal compliance and inefficiency” (Dinham 94).

We don’t seem to have learnt from past mistakes. During the AST application process of the 90’s, there was a “total absence of any official procedure for ‘after-the-process’ support for individuals who failed to meet arbitrarily set and administered standards of good teaching. The inextricable embeddedness of self-worth in teaching meant that failure produced huge emotional and social disjuncture” (Smyth et. al 6). Certainly, this emotional toll is a feature of those who were unsuccessful in their HALT accreditation. On the Facebook HAT applicants’ group, started by teachers as a forum to discuss the “journey” of accreditation, some members openly share their feelings of stress as they juggle the expensive certification process and the effects on their families, as well as feelings of demoralisation if they were unsuccessful. It’s interesting that this type of post-assessment collegial support and ongoing dialogue is missing from the formal accreditation process, given the cost of assessment. Some may say, “Well we can’t have every applicant succeed – there’s simply not enough money.” But this is the very culture that Fullan urges us not to create in education, one which obsesses “about the extremes in the field by celebrating the stars and dismissing the duds” (“Reviving Teaching” 2).

But it’s not entirely smooth sailing after-the-process for the successful applicants, either. AITSL reports that 42% of HALTs did not believe that their school provided sufficient time and opportunity to lead, initiate or plan professional or collaborative learning activities post-certification. The report also acknowledges “by funding release time for HALTs, systems are likely to benefit more from a utilisation of their expertise across learning environments” (“Spotlight” 15). It seems that despite the certified expertise of HALT teachers, the same issues of release time and funding appear to limit the possibilities of the role. The phrase ‘same shit, different day’ comes to mind.

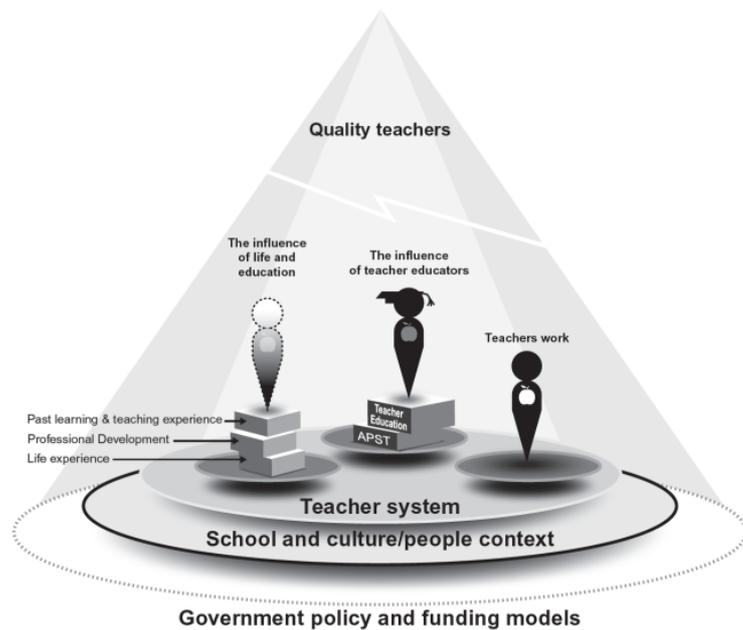
Fullan puts it more eloquently when he warns that no successful education system in the world has ever been led by financially rewarding “high performers” by using “accountability measures plus sticks and carrots” or through “individualistic, rather than collective” reform. Instead, he suggests, “Whole system success requires the commitment that comes from intrinsic motivation and improved technical competencies of groups of educators working together purposefully and relentlessly. Better performing countries did not set out to have a very good teacher here and another good one there, and so on. They were successful because they developed the entire teaching profession – raising the bar for all” (“Choosing the Wrong Drivers” 8-10).

## **RAISING THE BAR FOR ALL**

Certainly, raising the bar for all teachers will require more nuanced, collective commitment from all school and policy leaders, as well as teachers, that draws on the intrinsic motivation of teachers, but which also examines the environmental factors which help to nurture quality teaching. As the saying goes, the rising tide lifts all boats. A set of individualistic criterial hoops that only a few individuals successfully jump through will not turn the tide to lift enough teachers. Merryn McKinnon of the Australian National University asserts, “we should be supporting teachers to allow them space and opportunity to innovate and do good things. This requires a cultural shift in the way schools operate at a systemic level.”

This shift would require us to examine how we define quality, how we cultivate it, and how we change environmental and structural challenges facing teachers to allow it to flourish. It will also call for teachers to not lose their voice, or their heart, in the face of challenging, accountability-driven school settings.

Firstly, I propose that we need a cultural shift in the way we understand ‘quality teaching’. Beyond basic competencies, Bahr and Mellor instead describe it as an “ecosystem” – their visual is below:



(Bahr, data file)

*Ecosystem of influences underpinning teachers of quality.*

In this ecosystem, the first circle represents governmental reforms or policies, which undoubtedly impact a teacher’s daily reality. The next circle is the school context and culture. After this comes the visual of the teacher’s identity: this takes into account a person’s past experience, initial teacher education, as well as their professional and life experience. The figure in the middle includes the building blocks of teacher education and the standards. Finally, the ‘teachers work’ figure on the right refers to the ‘on the job’ work of the teacher. These various elements underpin and support the ecosystem of ‘quality teaching’ and certainly provide a more complete model which recognises teaching as an interconnected and evolving system. (Note: Tom Sherrington’s beautiful blogpost ‘From Plantation Thinking to Rainforest Thinking’ uses a similar ecological metaphor).

Secondly, we must re-examine how we motivate teachers to do more quality teaching. In the past, Wiliam says “the job of schools was to identify talent, and let it rise to the top” (2). He now argues that the demand for talented teachers in schools is so great that it is not enough to identify it, we must make schools “talent incubators” (2) that allow for it to flourish. He suggests a ‘love the one you’re with’ strategy, that is: we work with the teachers we’ve already got to support them to change their practice, “not because they’re not good enough, but because they can be even better...If we can create cultures in our schools where teachers embrace the idea of continual improvement, there is no limit to what our teachers can achieve” (“Teacher Development Trust” 00:00:01-00:03:35).

One way we can transform teacher practice is through utilising the expertise we already have. Traditional Professional Development has unfortunately been based on the idea that teachers lack important knowledge and “that real expertise has to be helicoptered in from a distant place or exists only in senior team members” (McWilliam). When we return from a PD session, we may be more knowledgeable, but are we more effective in the classroom? And what about the expertise we already have in our schools? William asserts, “Changes in what teachers know or believe will not benefit students unless teachers also change what they do in classrooms...we need to help teachers change habits rather than acquire new knowledge” (5). He suggests teachers be given the support, choice and flexibility to meet monthly with their colleagues in professional learning communities to discuss how they are trying to improve their practice, support each other with difficult changes, and to hear about and share new ideas. Similar to professional learning communities, the Quality Teaching Rounds, developed by Julie Bowe and Jennifer Gore, involve small groups of teachers collaborating in highly focused and critically supportive conversations about practice. Gore explains, “through Quality Teaching Rounds we are supporting the development of new teachers, supporting the professional growth of all teachers, re-energising and leveraging high-performing teachers, and ensuring that all student groups are receiving better quality teaching” (90). (Note – it is critical that these meetings do not become dominated by top-down direction – what Andy Hargreaves calls ‘Contrived Collegiality’).

While these strategies have been proven to offer “promising quick gains” in the quagmire of “glacially slow” (Gore 90) education reforms, McWilliam notes, “too often, line management accountability is the ‘urgent’ work that drives out the important work of professional learning.” Evidently, and somewhat ironically, it seems that if more of the ‘dailiness’ of teaching focused on actual teaching, there would be more potential for educators to become reenergised and excited, and this “is likely to be a key factor in teaching that makes a difference to quality” (Gore 90).

Thirdly, we must not underestimate the impact that poor quality facilities have on not only the learning outcomes of students, but on the morale and effectiveness of teachers. For example, many studies acknowledge the correlation between poor ‘structural capital’ and teacher attrition. Structural capital refers to “the physical infrastructure, including buildings as well as the physical teaching resources and technological equipment” (Mason and Poyatos Matas 57). While Instagram may be flooded with ‘flexible learning spaces’ and ‘classroom makeovers’ that resemble Target catalogues, in actuality two-thirds of teachers report that their school is under-resourced, and many are spending their own money on basics such as stationery. Even more disturbing are the articles about “filthy toilets, muddy floors, dusty windows, cobwebs, clogged drinking fountains, dirty carpets and overflowing bins” in our public schools. One school in Sydney’s West is described as being made up of “80 per cent demountables” and “more than 500 students are having to spend their lunchtimes lining up to use the 10 available toilets.” Not only is it foolish to underestimate the impact these structural factors have on students, but it is simply outrageous to ignore the impact on teachers and quality teaching. Research concludes that as a result of these conditions, teachers exhibit “higher absenteeism, reduced effort, lower effectiveness in the classroom, low morale, and reduced job satisfaction” (Schneider 6).

## **DON’T LOSE HEART: FAIL BETTER**

What draws so many of us to teaching is that it is so very difficult. As William points out, it is “a job that is so difficult that one’s daily experience is of failure, but one where, each day, to quote Samuel Beckett, one can “fail better” (5). But to ‘fail better’, rather than to simply ‘fail’, would require reforms that actually shift school cultures, both with regards to learning cultures and environments, to support teachers to feel valued and appreciated.

Additionally, American educational philosopher Maxine Greene calls for a ‘new type of educator’; one who needs to be “existentially present and engaged with what is happening” who is also “awake, critical,” and “open to the world.” As teachers have increasingly become ‘spectators’ of their own profession, she believes

they must continue to “...move towards possibilities, to live and teach in a world of incompleteness, of what they all are but are not yet” (Greene “Teaching in a Moment of Crisis”).

To look the incompleteness of teaching in the eye, and to grapple with the many challenges that face us in the so-called ‘battered profession’ (Scott and Dinham qtd. in Dinham 98), we must not be passive, but awoken, “to a realisation that transformations are conceivable, that learning is stimulated by a sense of future possibility and by a sense of what might be” (Greene “Landscapes of Learning” 3). HALT accreditation perpetuates the idea that quality teaching is a destination that can be reached and packaged up definitively. But my accreditation ‘journey’ awoke me to a sense that teaching “transcends a technicist approach” (Hennessey and McNamara 9) and lives and breathes in the realm of ‘what might be’. “Endings have nothing to do with teaching,” Greene says, and teachers must be “perpetual beginners” (“Columbia Learn” 00:02:23-00:09:35).

Free of the gaze of self-regulation, I have reclaimed a sense of agency as a teacher and begun again. I am optimistic that although there are no quotas for HALT roles, there are certainly more Highly Accomplished teachers in this country than the certified 573 as of 2018 (“Spotlight” 3). I’m also optimistic about what HALT ‘might be’ for the teachers who attained it – I genuinely hope that their positions motivate them to stay in the classroom and allow them to create positive changes within their school cultures. In the meantime, I am heartened by Paulo Freire’s assertion that the “indispensable quality of a good teacher” is the “capacity to always begin anew, to make, to reconstruct, and not to spoil, to refuse to bureaucratise the mind, to understand and to live as a process – live to become” (qtd. in Hennessey and McNamara 12).

AITSL’s ‘Recognising Exemplary Teachers’ workbook asks, “Do you really want to grow and develop as a professional?” and “Do you want to be the best teacher that you can be?” Well, yes. All teachers can aspire to this, regardless of certification. Greene reminds us that it is “an honour and a responsibility to be a teacher in dark times,” thus, I live to become the best teacher I can be, embracing the incompleteness of this journey.

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