

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT BEING A PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER?

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Denis Fitzgerald reflects on why it is wonderful to be a public school teacher...

Being a public school teacher today is more demanding than at any time in history. The workload is intense. The needs of our students are more complex than ever. Parental expectations are sometimes unreasonable and contradictory. Media commentary is oftentimes loud, derogatory, and ill-informed. Change is a constant. Praise is not.

Yes indeed, what is so great about being a public school teacher?!

We might step back into the past to begin to examine this question.

In the western tradition formal learning is understood to have begun with the Ancient Greeks. Teachers such as Isocrates and Plato launched their private academies with exceedingly small and selective intakes. Education was to be predominantly for males and non-slaves. Peasants commonly had an extremely limited education. Girls stayed in the home to prepare themselves for a lifetime of subordination. The curriculum in the academies was narrow and tended to emphasise what were regarded as the masculine virtues and attributes along with a smattering of Mathematics.

The Athenian school had tinges of what we might describe as liberalism in their guiding thought and practice. The purpose of such education was to prepare sons of the elites to take their place as leaders in society – to create a stratum of philosopher princes. Or warrior princes. The Romans tended to follow in this Greek tradition relying heavily on Greeks as teachers and exemplars.

Formal western education was even more limited in the medieval period. Learning was largely dominated by the church and the monastic systems. Any spirit of open, intellectual enquiry or critical method was frowned upon or suppressed. The fields of learning were focussed on sacred texts, “great” religious thinkers, theology, the establishment and reinforcement of spiritual orthodoxy,

the perpetuation of social hierarchies, and the reinforcement of the unquestionable authority of the Church and its leaders. Latin was the language of intellectual discourse, and this had the additional benefit of excluding the huge bulk of the population who were illiterate in both Latin and their native tongues. Education was still overwhelmingly for male, self-perpetuating, intersecting elites of a religious or worldly nature.

Very little of this was to change until the coming of the printing press. This revolutionary development began the slow process of breaking the Church’s monopoly on learning. It led to a wider range of sources of thought and fields of study. It also led to the eventually irresistible urge for printed texts to be in the language of the common people and, hence, for the first time in history, opened up the opportunity for the mass of the population to become literate. This process however was to take centuries to achieve,

Church and State were to fiercely resist these developments and schooling for the many simply did not exist. Scientific investigation became more possible however, but the various Church Inquisitions were highly effective in quashing the inculcation of scientific understandings of how the world truly operated. Most famously Galileo was forced to formally recant his teaching that the Earth was not the Centre of the Universe. The Church militantly opposed this teaching as clerics saw quite clearly what the spiritual and intellectual implications this had in store for them. Most people continued to live in ignorance, illiteracy, with brief lifespans, governed by superstition and fear.

Slowly however, the new technologies and trading networks spread and with them a broadening of intellectual and human possibility became manifest.

By the eighteenth century doubt, pluralism, heterodoxy, evidence and reason became more prominent elements of human thought and exchange. The philosophical

movements associated with The Enlightenment spread widely and rapidly. The historian, Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Revolution*, describes its impact most tellingly:

“A secular, rationalist and progressive individualism dominated ‘enlightened’ thought. To set the individual free from the shackles which fettered [them] was its chief object: from the ignorant traditionalism of the Middle Ages, which still threw their shadow across the world, from the superstition of the churches, from the irrationality which divided [humans] into a hierarchy of higher and lower ranks according to birth or some other irrelevant criterion.” (Hobsbawm, 1962 pp34 - 35)

Inevitably, such thinking found its way into the practice and organisation of schooling. By the nineteenth century governments increasingly recognised that they had responsibilities for the provision of schooling based on an assumption that this was a human right for all young people.

In the Australian colonial period, as Manning Clark (1968 pp212-242) chronicles, this was acknowledged by Governor Bourke who set aside three thousand pounds in 1833 to establish a network of schools, “for the general education of colonial youth” similar to the Irish system of education then developing. The students in these schools, “would have their religion in textbooks which were Christian in context but free of dogma”.

Such an initiative was fiercely opposed by the forces of the old order. As Clark describes this backlash:

“The children of the respectable, they thundered, should not have to associate at school with those who would corrupt and destroy their morals.” (Clark, 1968)

Bourke had been long convinced that education should be based on the principle of equality of opportunity. Bourke wondered why government should be subsidising elite schools while neglecting the great bulk of the young population.

Manning Clark (1968) describes the way in which Governor Bourke saw the inconsistencies:

“One was the privileged position of The King’s School at Parramatta, conceived . . . as a school where the sons of landholders, professional people and merchants would be steeped in Christian apologetics, and in a study of those classical texts which had been found in the moth-

er country to be an excellent schooling for a governing class. Why, Bourke asked, should government subsidise a school for the sons of wealthy colonists and civil servants of the government when the children of the poor were being educated in mere hovels under convict schoolmasters?”

However, the voice and power of the privileged remained dominant and by 1848 there was only one public school in the colony of NSW teaching a grand total of 50 students. It was not until the latter stages of the nineteenth century as the spirit of The Enlightenment eventually prevailed that broad systems of public schooling were established and funded under the various Public Instruction Acts.

The guiding principles of these Acts were that education provided by the state was to be, “Free, Secular and Compulsory.” This was the historic breakthrough aimed to reset the course of education. For thousands of years schooling had been a privilege and sole birthright of elites. The establishment of public systems of education sought to change that.

The principle of *free* education was a recognition that it was the role of government to provide educational opportunity for all youngsters. The *secular* provision sought to establish the basis for freedom of personal belief so that no one belief system was given privileged access to the minds of school children. It was recognised that freedom of religion and personal belief was based on freedom *from* a particular religion. The *compulsory* provision identified the necessity for all children to have an education to achieve all that life might offer.

The architect of the NSW Public Instruction Act, Sir Henry Parkes, drove the formulation of this legislation and added the underlying goal of ensuring that all children from all backgrounds would learn and grow together, “side by side” as he put it. All state aid to private schools was withdrawn via this legislation as the newly created public system was open to all.

By the time of Federation in 1901, there were over 2,700 public schools in NSW serving almost every community in the state with over 280,000 students. (NSW Department of School Education, 1993)

So given this historical and ethical backdrop we can begin to reflect on what is so great about being a public school teacher. (Yet none of this is to disregard the huge and daunting difficulties under which we as public educators carry out our daily responsibilities).

We might however consider the following:

1. The ethical and moral basis of public education is of the highest order. It stems from a recognition of the equality of humankind and the consequent right of all young people, regardless of background, means, personal belief, gender, personal orientation or geographical location to have an excellent, intellectually profound, nurturing and broad education. It is inconceivable that our public schools would ever seek any exemption from anti-discrimination provisions.

2. The NSW public education system has endured and flourished despite decades of criticism, ignorant media commentary, occasionally unwise policy emphases and insufficient resourcing. NSW public education is one of the largest systems of schooling in the world. It reaches into just about every community in the state from large secondary schools to remote specks on the map wherein the local public schools might have fewer than a dozen kids. Despite generations of ignorant critique, public schools still educate a significant majority of the NSW student population. The Catholic share of enrolments is similar to what they were a century ago as is the enrolment share of elite, private schools. The growth in private schooling has been almost entirely in the “low-fee” schools that have attracted huge taxpayer subsidies.

3. This sturdiness can be viewed after over three decades of official bipartisan policies of privatisation which has deliberately attempted to remove the role of the state in public provision. Other social supports have also been wound back as governments have used multiple forms of privatisation – including outsourcing, divestment, withdrawal and public-private partnerships – to remove themselves from public responsibilities. This has included the fields of banking, transport, telecommunications, health, aviation, insurance, employment services, energy generation and distribution along with scores of local community support services. The one glaring exception in this sad litany is public education which was certainly in the gunights of policy “leaders” of the recent past. But public education’s deep community support prevented

this from unfolding. One can walk through a small country town or village today and see the consequences. So many of the public services and institutions that existed throughout these communities are gone, never to return. The only certainties to be still standing there now are the Digger at the end of the road and the local public school.

4. The profound ethical and moral principles of public education that have existed since its foundation are vindicated by modern developments in science. Some decades ago, the Harvard biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, was able to observe from his own work on genetics that human equality is a scientific fact. Gould was able to conclude that:

5. “Human equality is a contingent fact of history ... human races are not separate species or ancient divisions ...” and attempts to have assumed or declared natural hierarchies are scientifically false, “an account of barriers and ranks erected to maintain the power and hegemony of those at the top”. (Gould, 1985 p186)

More recently, the global Human Genome Project (1990 -2003) has provided incontrovertible proof of the equality of all peoples regardless of background. The findings of this massive enterprise established that all humans are 99.9% genetically identical. And that the human genome is the common heritage of humanity. As the project was able to conclude – there is one race, the human race.

The great comfort in this for public educators is the fundamental ethical basis for our system – the right of all children to have equal access to high quality education – is matched by the scientific reality of the equality of humankind and the capacity of all youngsters to flourish given the right opportunities.

6. It also gives us pause to reflect that if one were to invent a system of education today where, in a globalised world, youngsters must be best prepared to flourish in the changing reality – to meet, understand, respect and cherish other peoples and cultures, to travel, to adapt to change, to pursue careers, relationships and possibilities across the land and across the planet, to explore all of the possibilities that globalisation provides – then one would establish a warmly inclusive public education system quite like the one that public school teachers work in right now.

7. Public schools are highly effective intellectually. During

the school years and after, the deeply positive effects of public education have been proven in a succession of academic studies. The view that private schools outperform public schools is simply a myth. Numerous academic studies comparing similar socioeconomic backgrounds across systems during the school years are quite clear. The most recent, published in 2022 in the *Australian Educational Researcher* [Volume 50, January 3, 2022] found that there is:

“No significant difference between the academic performance of private and public school students”.

These conclusions have been further reinforced by studies of PISA results (conducted by the Gonski Institute at the University of NSW in 2019) and analysis of NAPLAN results across systems. (Baker, January 2 2022)

Once students get to university there are indeed differences. Public school students outperform private school students. Trevor Cobbold (2015) in his comprehensive review of the academic research concluded that:

“Six studies have analysed the impact of school sector attendance on first year university grades in the last ten years and all found that students from public schools achieved higher grades than Catholic and Independent schools”.

8. The public school system, since its inception, is inclusive of every child – from the academically gifted to those needing extra support and guidance.

9. The facts are that despite the pressures that public school teachers work under we produce outstanding results during the years of schooling, and we equip our students with superior capacities to succeed in their years beyond the school gates.

10. Over the course of a career a public school teacher will impact and improve the lives of countless students and will have the opportunity to teach in a range of communities and schools settings. The teacher will be remembered fondly for decades by their former students though this respect and appreciation might remain unrevealed to the teachers themselves. Such is a teaching life.

11. Public school teachers welcome every child

regardless of their background or life story. In a time of uncertainty, conflict and change we seek to bring their worlds together and equip each child with the intellectual and personal capacities they will need to thrive across this century. We seek to build a better world, one child at a time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denis Fitzgerald holds a 20 Year Teaching Certificate from the NSW Department of Education having taught in a range of government high schools across the state. Denis has taught extensively in Western Sydney including in several senior positions. His most recent role was as Deputy Principal (National Partnerships).

Denis has served on every statutory board in NSW since the late 1980's encompassing:

- NSW Board of Secondary Education
- Board of Studies
- Board of Studies Teaching and Education Standards
- NESA

At NESA, in addition to being a senior Board member he has served as the Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Committee that oversaw and helped lead the implementation of the Curriculum Reform process arising from Professor Masters' review of curriculum in NSW. He also served on the NESA Covid Committee for its duration and has chaired the Board committees that have developed the History and Geography syllabuses.

Denis has also been:

- Director, Aboriginal Education and Equity, NSW Department of Education
- Member, McGaw Review of the HSC
- Member, Board of the Curriculum Corporation of Australia
- President, NSW Teachers Federation
- Federal President, Australian Education Union
- Founding Director, Centre for Professional Learning
- Founding Editor, Journal of Professional Learning

Denis has been published widely on educational matters over many decades. His work has appeared in a broad spectrum of academic and popular outlets including the Australian College of Educators, *History Today*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, the ABC, *Education*, *The Australian*, *Education Review*, *Times Educational Supplement* and *Parent and Citizen*. The University of NSW Press published his history of education in NSW, *Teachers and Their Times*, in 2011.