



Editorial: The Quality of Being a Teacher

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JOHN O'NEILL & PAUL ADAMS

Massey University

In 2011, Warehouse Stationery launched a first call for nominations to find New Zealand's Most Inspiring Teacher (Search for New Zealand's most inspiring teacher begins, 2011). The company's media release summarised the results of a survey the company had conducted of several hundred teachers. Over half reportedly worked at least an extra 10-20 hours per week. Just under three-quarters of those surveyed spent their own money on school supplies, while a fifth 'spend their own money on breakfast or lunch for needy students' (n.p.).

The criteria for nomination are straightforward. Quoting the criteria more or less verbatim, inspiring teachers must have: (a) the 'drive' to come to school every day committed to providing the best learning experiences for students; (b) the 'enthusiasm' to practise their love of teaching and pass on this enthusiasm to students; (c) the 'creativity' to engage their students in original thinking and new ways of looking at learning; and, (d) the 'dedication' to use their own resources when necessary to ensure children succeed (<http://www.inspiringteachers.co.nz/about/>).

In 2012, a spokesperson reported that over 7,000 nominations had been received on behalf of 5,000 teachers, a sevenfold increase over 2011. Ironically, the newspaper report on the winning teacher chose to describe her as driving 'over-achievement'. The logic of this appears to be that if achievement is the be-all and end-all of teaching and learning, then inspirational teachers are different because they demand 'over-achievement', and this is to be lauded (NZ's most inspiring teacher drives over-achieving students, 2012). Where might this bizarre, worryingly narrow view of the purpose of teaching have come from?

Typically, Ministry of Education discourse refers to 'effective teaching' or 'quality teaching', not 'inspiring teachers'. On this account, good teaching is about improving student performance and increasing learning outcomes. Hectares of trees (physical and virtual) have been pulped to proselytise the ideology that evidence of learning must be measurable, and that teaching must be accountable. The overblown rhetoric of the effectiveness-quality discourse is well-captured in a recent OECD document:

Teachers need to be agents of innovation not least because innovation is critically important for generating new sources of growth through improved efficiency and productivity. This is also true in the education sector, where innovation applied to both curricula and teaching methods can help to improve learning outcomes and prepare students for the rapidly changing demands of the 21st-century labor market. (Schleicher 2012, p. 36)

We beg to disagree. To inspire learning, as opposed to measuring crude proxies of learning, teachers need to have drive, enthusiasm, creativity and dedication. These are qualities of being. Inspired teaching is about helping students in turn to develop the qualities of being driven, enthusiastic, creative and dedicated in all aspects of their lives, not just to prepare and sort them for industry. Education officials, and newspaper editors, forget that at their peril.

REFERENCES

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