Vital, Elusive and Fantastically Complex: Teacher's Worth

Raewyn Connell captures the scope and place of the work of teachers in modern Australia...

This essay reflects on the nature of teachers' work and its value to society. It builds on recent debates about teachers and education, on my experience as a researcher concerned with schools, and on what I have learned as a teacher in universities. It is based on a submission I wrote for the 2020 Inquiry *Valuing the Teaching Profession*, sponsored by the NSW Teachers Federation.

Significant cultural players

In graduation ceremonies for Education degrees, the invited speaker often includes a fanfare for the teaching profession. Looking out at the rows of graduands, nervous in their academic robes, the speaker tells them they are bearers of cultural traditions, mentors of the rising generation, and gatekeepers to the future. Perhaps these are clichés, but there is an important truth in them. Teachers do have a central role in contemporary culture.

Ever since mass school systems became a reality, teachers have been responsible for the growth of literacy and numeracy, the 'basics' as politicians see them. That's not a small thing. But teachers have also been responsible for much more: forming skilled and professional workforces, spreading the knowledge of sciences, arts and humanities, and contributing a large part of young people's social learning.

When we look at it this way, teachers' work underpins our society's achievements in public health, economic and technological development, literature, music and art. It also underpins our social life, in ways less spectacular than Facebook or TikTok, but essential none the less. It's through schools that children and youth learn many of their capacities for making social connection, for dealing with difference, and of course for dealing with organisational life. The role is so broad that when social troubles emerge, politicians and journalists often blame teachers for causing the problems, or expect teachers to fix them.

Sociologists sometimes view teaching as the archetype of a 'new profession'. School teachers are trained knowledge workers, now usually with university degrees. They are mostly unionised, they earn wages rather than charge fees, they are employees rather than self-employed, and most of them work in the public sector. Compared with other professions, teaching has a high proportion of women, and of entrants from working-class backgrounds. Teachers not only perform important tasks for society but have themselves been significant players in economic and social change.

In one sense, teaching is the best-known profession of all. When almost every child has gone to school, almost every adult has had a close-up view of teachers doing their daily work (or at least, part of it). Many adults hold great affection for particular teachers who were important in their lives. But other memories may be negative, even angry. Many people also imagine, from a limited knowledge, that teaching is an easy job with short hours and long holidays, something that anyone could do with only some quick-and-dirty training. We know that is wrong; but we have to acknowledge that public images of teachers include myths and misrepresentations as well as real knowledge. We do not see a similar diversity of views of engineers or architects.

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All in a day's work

If you enter 'teachers' and 'work' together into the widely used database *Google Scholar* you will find over 4,000,000 references in the English language alone. Using the phrase 'teachers' work' as an exact search term, you will find 280,000 references. Teachers and their work are certainly widely discussed. We can see in these searches how often questions about teachers connect with other educational issues, from curriculum to public policy, assessment, and pedagogy.

However, the research literature that is closely focussed on teachers' work is much smaller than that. I would judge that at most 1,000 items, perhaps less, form the core. What this research shows, and what teachers know from direct experience, may be rather different from what's assumed by mass media and politicians.

Teaching involves connections: it consists of human encounters. These may be intense or formal, short or sustained, one-to-one or one-to-many, even some-to-many (in team-teaching). Sometimes, for instance in remote teaching during the COVID pandemic, the connection is made through machinery; but the element of encounter is always there. Encounter means interaction. Close-focus observation of classrooms shows this dramatically: the classroom is a busy place with lots going on at any given time. Pure top-down instruction is part, but only a minimal part, of actual teaching.

To play an effective role in someone else's learning, any teacher must learn what that pupil's current capacities and motivations are, and what the pupil needs to take the next step in learning, the step after that, and so on. The teacher's capacity to *learn about the pupils* is a crucial element in teaching, perhaps the most important element in effective teaching. The more diverse the cohort, the greater is the professional demand upon the teacher to sustain the pupils' learning.

Classroom work includes complex intellectual labour: understanding the pupils, and transforming the curriculum into classroom practice. This is an easily recognised part of the job. But the job also requires (as more recent studies emphasise) what has come to be called emotional labour. This means creating connection with class members through encouragement, humour and sometimes anger; keeping focus in the classroom by managing pupils' boredom, excitement or distraction; dealing with conflict in the class and the effects of tension and trauma in the pupils' lives.

As well as intellectual and emotional labour, teaching also involves administrative labour: keeping records, managing equipment, providing materials, administering tests, and more. There is evidence that this part of the job has increased in the last few decades, with growing official requirements for testing, record-keeping and compliance.

Then there are the tasks outside the classroom needed to keep a school humming along. They include preparation of classes, supervision in break times, organising sports, arts and hobby groups, arranging and supervising events, speaking with parents, keeping up with official circulars, participating in staff meetings, attending in-service programmes, and so on. A growing part of this is done via computers, smartphones and other devices.

A team of workers

Though media images of teachers emphasise colourful individuals, good or bad (the movie *Dead Poets Society* has both), no teacher really works alone. As with many other forms of labour, most effects in teaching are produced by a whole workforce. Any teacher in her classroom is building on the work of all the teachers who have worked with those pupils before.

What happens in any classroom is further shaped by what happens in the next-door classroom, by the routines of the whole school, by the planning in formal staff meetings and informal consultations. It is shaped by the work of school principals and senior teachers, the work of office and maintenance staff, the constant exchange of information in staffrooms and around the school office.

Researchers recognise this when they speak of schools as organisations and try to characterise school cultures, climates or atmospheres. That *collective* dimension of teaching is why attempts to measure 'teacher effectiveness' on an *individual* basis have so little grip. It is a strong argument against the attempts of market ideologists to make teachers' salaries depend on individual measures of 'performance'.

Across a large school system, teachers deal with very varied groups of pupils. One school is located in a quiet, mostly White suburb with a high proportion of professionals and managers. Another is in a crowded, multi-ethnic city area with a high proportion of recent migrants. Another is in a depressed rural area with high youth unemployment and very few resident professionals. Some of the students will be academically engaged, others will be bored or distracted, others in outright conflict with the school. In any age group there will be students with disabilities, behaviour problems and complex wellbeing needs.

It is important to recognise that social differences and inequalities are *educational* issues. Poverty and wealth, rural remoteness, urban tensions, ethnic and religious difference, Indigenous or settler background, racism, sexual harassment, physical difference and disability all confront teachers with specific social conditions and educational tasks in different schools. There are no one-size-fits-all answers to educational questions.

New pressures

Teachers and their work have always been subject to controls: religious, political, managerial and professional. Not far back in history, teachers were expected to show rigid conservatism in dress, manners and attitudes, in private life as well as during working hours. Some of this has changed, as teachers asserted their citizen rights. But teachers can still be targeted in moral panics. Concerns about sexual abuse of children, for instance, have required teachers to observe much more restrictive rules about physical contact with pupils in everyday school life.

In the last few decades, new means of regulating teachers' work have developed. They generally involve control at a distance, euphemistically called 'accountability'. Schools and teachers are supposed to have easily-measured goals to achieve, as if they were Dickensian firms counting up their cash. School league tables are now familiar, such as those constructed from the appalling *MySchool* website ('supports national transparency and accountability' according to its front page, giving the game away). Teachers are

confronted with a tension between government demands for competitive standardised testing, and their students' need for assessments relevant to their *actual* learning situations and patterns of growth.

Education systems have been subjected to requirements imported from other industries, with little attention to their educational effects. There is formidable pressure to standardise teaching practices, to discourage the messiness of experiment and local engagement, and to re-define teaching as a measurable technical performance rather than a complex human encounter. A few decades ago, we laughed at the insulting idea of a 'teacher-proof curriculum'. We should laugh no more, since current information technologies, combined with corporate strategies for centralising knowledge and control in the hands of managers, make it more feasible to *reduce* the skills of teachers, while still maintaining a facade of performance.

Careers and lives

There is an ideal image of the teaching career, from initial training, through the baptism of fire in the First Year Out, through professional learning and promotion, to senior roles and finally retirement. Of course, in practice it is much more complex.

One reason for complexity is teachers' lives outside school. Work/life balance can be very problematic for beginning teachers, given the pressures of the early years in the job. Forming a family often comes at the same time as starting professional life. In Australian society, work/life balance is constructed mainly as a dilemma for women, given the long-standing gender inequality in the load of housework, child-care and care for elders (this was little changed even in the COVID19 lockdowns). We should be alert to the way apparently 'family-friendly' policies may actually reinforce this division.

Fifty years ago, teachers in Australia came overwhelmingly from White English-speaking backgrounds. But it was also true then that teaching provided upward mobility for a significant group of working-class entrants. Now, more students from both Aboriginal and non-English-speaking migrant backgrounds have come through teacher education and into the profession. The public sector has probably changed faster than the private sector.

But with the end of teaching scholarships, the rise of university fees and the growing weight of student debt, recruitment may become more restricted again, at least in social class terms. If we value the sharing of experience through education, then having a socially representative teaching workforce seems an important goal.

Final thoughts

Teachers, as a group, have a formative role in social and economic processes. The central purpose of their labour is to help the rising generation develop their capacities: intellectual, social, practical and creative. This task is simultaneously vital, elusive and fantastically complex. Teachers have to deploy a wide range of their own capacities to do the job, which involves intellectual work, emotion work, practical skills, and organisational and social know-how. Though pupils encounter teachers as individuals, the work is in fact strongly collective and powerfully shaped by the institutional system. It is no wonder that

teachers' public image is contradictory and that governments often reach for showy short-term solutions to tough long-term educational problems.

Teachers today have to deal with changing technologies as well as declining government support for human services and rising management demands. Yet it is at the human level that teachers most immediately deal with social change. Pupils have needs shaped by colonisation, poverty, racism, domestic violence, disabilities, social conflicts and changing job markets, as well as the universal problems of growing up. It is the job of teachers to work from the actual conditions of young people's lives towards educational outcomes. It is an impressive sign of teacher professionalism that so much good and thoughtful teaching is found in our public schools.

Raewyn Connell is one of Australia's leading social scientists. Her writing on education includes the books Making the Difference, Teachers' Work, Schools & Social Justice, and The Good University. Her work is widely cited and has been translated into twenty languages. She recently retired from an academic career to focus on subversion. Raewyn has been active in the labour movement and in work for gender equality and peace. Her website is www.raewynconnell.net and Twitter @raewynconnell.