Education deans oppose Teach for Australia

“Teachers need a depth of theoretical understanding”

Laura Tiernan
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Since the Rudd government’s Teach for Australia program was first publicly mooted at the start of 2008, it has been condemned by education deans at universities in Sydney and Melbourne. The program, which will place unqualified teachers in disadvantaged schools after a six-week “intensive training” course, has been deplored by the president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE).

In February this year, ACDE president Sue Willis told the *Australian* newspaper that Teach for America was a proven cost-cutting measure, compromising teacher quality for the poorest students: “In America this is a solution that says the government is not prepared to do the right thing and invest sufficient funds in education to ensure that kids in disadvantaged areas have well-qualified teachers.

“It seems highly unlikely to me that we’d ever suggest putting someone—just because they’re bright—into a hospital as a nurse or doctor. Why would we allow our children to be in that sort of situation? Of course we want capable bright teachers, but we need them to be teachers and that does not occur in a six-week starter course.’’

University of Melbourne’s involvement with Teach for Australia—its Faculty of Education won the contract in April to provide the program’s curriculum—has been contentious. The university recently received an $8 million grant from the Rudd government to boost what is described as its “clinical model” of teacher training, an approach piloted in the new Master of Teaching course devised by faculty dean Field Rickards. The “model” favours in-school training and represents a departure from the Academy’s traditional emphasis on a complex range of theoretical subject matter.

La Trobe University’s Professor Lorraine Ling has been a vocal critic of Teach for Australia. She has decades of experience as an educator, in primary, secondary and technical education. She is La Trobe University’s Dean of Education and co-chairs the Professional Development Working Group of the Association for Teacher Education in Europe. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Professor Ling in August.

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WSWS: You’ve raised some quite serious concerns about Teach for Australia that centre on the issue of professional training and I’m just wondering if you’d like to elaborate?

Professor Lorraine Ling: In order to become a teacher, you need to have—I believe—a depth of pedagogical and theoretical understanding, as well as the practice. These don’t have to be undertaken in a linear kind of way, but they need to be happening in parallel. So it’s not just a matter of giving someone a six-week crash course in what can only ever be recipes and prescriptions. You can’t go into any great depth about the philosophy, the sociology, the psychology and the pedagogy that underpins the whole profession of teaching in six weeks. It’s got to be how to survive in a classroom, particularly since they’ve said that they will put these graduates into disadvantaged or hard-to-staff schools. In disadvantaged schools, you frequently need highly-trained professionals, more so than in a more mainstream school. So to take people who have done a six-week crash course and place them in contexts which are so professionally demanding seems even more dangerous to me.

WSWS: It seems, from all the points that you’ve been making, that while the Rudd government is marketing this as part of measures to improve “teacher quality”, what’s involved here is a real de-skilling of the teaching profession…

LL: Yes, it’s a de-skilling and a de-professionalising, because one of the problems that the teaching profession faces is a lack of high status in the eyes of society. If we are going to professionalise teachers and raise the quality of teaching, and bring high quality people into it, we’re not going to do that by saying you too can be a teacher in six weeks.

WSWS: I’d like to pick up on this point you made in your press statement: “With such limited exposure to teacher theory it would be virtually impossible for [TFA recruits] to properly engage with the bodies of theory and knowledge which are essential to teacher preparation.” What do you mean by teacher theory and why is this so critical?

LL: Well when you’re in a classroom, just like any other profession, there are theories, understandings, ideas which have been developed over hundreds and thousands of years about that profession and how to teach and about the best conditions to learn and how to deal with a diverse array of learners and what kinds of learning are best in particular contexts as distinct from other contexts.

What someone has to be able to do as a professional teacher, is to make some extremely informed and quite complex judgements about approaches that are going to suit particular cohorts of students and particular contexts. Until you know the range of theories, or models, at your disposal, you haven’t got any repertoire from which to choose. Unless you understand the range of possible options and possible approaches very clearly, and know theoretically as well as practically

what they are suited to, you can't make an informed decision. You'll jump on any bandwagon that comes by that looks like it's a good idea, whether it is or it isn't, because you have no basis to judge it by.

WSWS: We contacted the Faculty of Education at University of Melbourne to try to obtain curriculum information concerning Teach for Australia, and they said that it was not available publicly at the moment—that it was still being finalised, although it needs to be submitted to the Victorian Institute of Teaching quite shortly. What is your understanding of the curriculum being prepared?

LL: I have no idea what they would try to include in it…it's hard to know… I feel there is going to have to be a level of survival in the classroom… recipes and prescriptions that might work that you could have in your bag of tricks. And that really means seeing teaching as a technical exercise, and that we don't need to have those depths of understanding in pedagogy and all of those other disciplines that underpin teaching and learning.

WSWS: A spokesperson for University of Melbourne's education faculty explained that it is adopting a "clinical approach" to teacher education, one which emphasises classroom practice and face-to-face teaching as a large component of any course. I have spoken to a number of teachers about this, and they point to a significant shift in the Diploma of Education over the past twenty years, a drift away from educational theory towards precisely the kind of approach you are describing—a narrower, more "practical" approach. Would you care to comment on that?

LL: I would agree, and I think it is a very sad day when we think of teaching as a clinical activity. This is part of the problem, of people being sent out after six weeks, to have the odd dabble in distance learning, and then to just get out there and survive in a classroom. One of the things we do in teacher education, traditionally, in a good teacher education program, is to allow students some formal reflection time, and some guided reflection, following periods when they have had some face to face experience in a classroom. They will come back into a university context where they will be formally required to reflect on those experiences away from the school context.

One of my real problems is that we don't necessarily want to perpetuate the status quo. We need to strengthen the good things that are going on in schools now, but we also need to take head-on those things which are happening that we might need to change. My concern is that if we enculturate these neophytes to the existing teacher culture, uncritically and unreflectively, then what we've got is a continuation, ad nausea, of the status quo as it currently exists.

WSWS: In the United States, with the Teach for America program, it is clear that many of the graduates have gone on to occupy leading posts in the school system and their role has been to undertake significant attacks on public education. You raised in your press release the involvement of these private consulting firms, such as the Boston Consulting Group or the Cape York Institute… I mean, these people are not professional educators…

LL: No, they're not, but what they are able to do is bring corporate on board to back these kinds of schemes. The corporate see this ultimately as a way to get people into their own camps. If they put money into this, they get people out there, learning on the job, about people skills, and really it doesn't worry them if they know nothing about the pedagogy of education, because if they want to get these people into their corporations later on, they want to train them in what skills *they* need.

WSWS: And of course, there is a broader involvement, for example the Boston Consulting Group with the various Victorian government educational blueprints….

LL: One of the problems with the profession of education that has helped to de-professionalise it, is that the standards that are set and the policies that are set about the profession are not necessarily made by the profession or the professionals themselves. One of the definitions traditionally accepted of a profession is that it has control of the standards and code of conduct, and all those kind of things, of its own profession, rather than these being externally directed. Bringing in consultants, external forces which have so much influence over what happens in a profession, instantly de-professionalises the people inside.

WSWS: How do you see the broader agenda of the Rudd government's "education revolution"?

LL: It's not about the things that I am talking about. It is about trying to win votes quickly; governments are in there for their own ends. If what we see the UK and the United States doing, as educators, we deplore, because we don't feel they're educationally sound, that's just us. Governments, for their part, see them as having been very successful, because what they've done is to have achieved the aims of an economic rationalist government that wants to do more with less, that wants to spend less on training people, that wants to get them out there, doing something, with less training.

WSWS: The reforms in New York and in other parts of the United States have been met with enormous opposition by parents, teachers…

LL: But they suit the government's agenda, and ultimately when push comes to shove, the policy that drives education, as with any other social process, comes out of the political arena. We can bleat all we like, but if the particular initiative suits the government agenda of economic rationalism and market forces, and all the values that underpin economic rationalism and micro-economic reform, then the government is going to give it a big kick, whether we like it or not. At the same time, they're trying to say quite contrary things, such as: "We must improve teacher quality". Well, if you want to improve teacher quality, you don't just drop people after six weeks into hard-to-staff and disadvantaged schools and hope that they are going to be able to be professional.

WSWS: There is a related issue here in terms of the narrowing of the curriculum. Teachers are complaining that they are being forced to teach to the test, you have this whole NAPLAN regime, and it seems to me that with reforms such as Teach for Australia, you're bringing in teachers who do not have the pedagogical and theoretical background who are much more amenable to this narrowing …

LL: You mentioned that they see teaching as a clinical exercise. It's a clinical, technical exercise, so you're reducing teaching to some technicist approach, and of course once teachers are forced into this business of teaching for the test, it is just another example of economic rationalist thinking, where everything is about provincialism, everything is about competition and everything is about competencies, and you tick boxes: you're either competent or not competent… It's kind of all formula, and technically driven. Teaching is an art, it is not a science.

WSWS: You've raised that there are many criticisms of Teach for Australia among professional educators, and I imagine that it has been a very contentious issue, this new program…

LL: Yes, it has. It has been very contentious among a lot of deans… I think that many of the deans are concerned about it, but clearly others are much less concerned about it and are prepared to take the programs on and that's the way it is always going to be. There'll be debates and issues about it, but I'm afraid that I see it as a band aid and a quick fix, and something that suits government agendas for trying to get things done quickly and cheaply.

WSWS: Do you know of any universities other than Melbourne which tendered for the TFA program?

LL: No, I don't know who did tender, although I was asked if we were going to tender, and I would have looked rather hypocritical had I done so.

WSWS: Are you aware of any other educational organisations that have spoken out publicly against this program?

LL: There have been several articles in the press some time ago when this was first mooted. There was one in the *Australian* probably eight months ago where other deans of education, apart from me, were saying similar things. I know Sue Willis, the president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, seemed to be saying very similar things to what I was saying at that particular point. It's one of those things about which there is not total agreement. I just speak out because I care about the profession, and I care about the way teachers are prepared, and I just don't think that this can be seen as a good move.