

## Questions for David Zyngier

1. The Great Debate on Private v Public Education featuring yourself and Dr. Kevin Donnelly is hotly anticipated and will be a capacity crowd. For those who will not be able to make the event, are you able to sum up your stance in no more than 200 words?

The growth of the private school sector both in size and in public funding at the expense of the public school system, together with the continued prioritisation of “choice” policies by government, has put our “free, compulsory and secular” public education system under threat of marginalisation and residualisation as those with the “right stuff” exit for greener fields.

The increase of public funding of private schools over the last decade has led to the decrease in our international education ranking as the students who most need additional resources – of whom 80% are in public schools - are denied these while schools that are already resource rich and whose students are already socio culturally advantaged actually have grown richer.

Our public schools are in danger of becoming the place for those children unable to access or unwanted by the private school system. This has serious implications for the future of Australian multi-culturalism and democracy as our public schools face becoming urban ghettos or sinks of disadvantage leading to an ever increasing decline in educational achievement in those schools as the flight of cultural capital takes its toll.

2. As a Senior Lecturer with the Faculty of Education at Monash University, what are your thoughts on the discussions appearing in the media over the last twelve months around teacher quality; and admission to and the quality of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs (including proposed raising of minimum entry standards)?

The problem is not necessarily with *teacher quality* but with the need for *quality teaching*! While the media has been led to believe by successive federal ministers of education (Gillard, Garrett, Pyne and Birmingham) that teachers have the most impact on a child’s education achievement. This is a misreading of the research – usually misquoting John Hattie’s seminal work *Visible Learning* – which shows that the main influence on a child’s academic outcome is the family, the parents’ education levels and their socio-economic status. Teacher impact makes only up to 25% of the difference – still significant – but not what we are led to believe.

Teacher education is apparently the most reviewed area of society undertaken by state and federal governments with on average at least one each year over the past 30 odd years! Each review makes the same basic recommendations to improve ITE – student teachers need more time in the classroom and more practical experience - but the funding required to do this is never forthcoming.

I am on the record stating that if we as a nation want to improve the standard of our teaching we must make teaching harder to access as a career. However, we have too many universities using

teaching courses as a cash cow to cover the costs due to diminishing federal funding of research. If that means raising the entrance level for undergraduate teaching courses such as early childhood and primary where the vast majority of student teachers are coming directly from secondary school. And it is specifically early childhood and primary educators who establish the basic frameworks of the 3 R's – remember that teaching a child to read is not only the most difficult thing a child will ever learn but also the most significant factor in their future educational development and life long learning. So raising the ATAR should be combined with personal aptitude interviews, and we should be doing that as soon as possible. Of course we must always make allowances for students from under represented communities to gain access to teaching courses. Again such a process costs additional money. All teaching degrees should be at a Masters level with a research component in it. Tacking on a literacy and numeracy test at the end of a course is too little too late!

3. Finland is often looked to as a beacon of light within education, yet their context is vastly different to ours. Should we be looking to them given our two nations' disparate contexts, and if so what aspects of the Finnish education system (including ITE) should be implemented here in Australia?

It is often claimed that Finland is very different to Australia – and yes in many ways it is – it's much colder for a start – and smaller in size too – but the essential differences between Finnish and Australian education has been the policy trajectory. In Finland education policy is seen as non-political and is determined by education experts using evidence based research. Here in Australia every new government and even within a government a new minister wants to put their very own stamp on education policy based on the own ideological preferences. In Finland the education policy was based on equity first through which overall high quality has been achieved. Teachers are highly valued (not highly paid) and trusted and left alone to do what they do best – teach. Teacher unions are heavily involved in education as a major resource for policy and practice. Private schools in Finland are few and if they charge additional fees they lose public funding. Almost all children attend the local suburban school. In Australia the emphasis has been on quality outcomes first with equity very far behind. The major education policy driver in Australia has been *school choice* meaning public funding of private schools at the expense of our public school system. This has led a 3 tiered system of public schools – those fully funded by the public (state or government schools) – those with more than 50% of their recurrent income derived from public funding (most Catholic schools and low fee religious schools) – and schools that receive less than 50% of their funding from public sources (elite independent schools).

4. The alternative that is often cited in regards to high-quality education systems is Singapore, a vastly different education system, both in structure, focus and national context. What can we learn from the Singaporean education system (including ITE)?

The so-called *Asian Tigers* – Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan – appear to have excellent international outcomes from their public schools but the way that high standard is achieved is rarely discussed. Research into all these high achieving Asian countries found

that almost all students are attending intensive *cram schools* after their normal school day. Many students also have private tutors. And in Shanghai school researchers found that not only are these schools by and large for the elite of society, but that they actively exclude lower performing rural students whose parents do not have the necessary residency permits that will enable them to attend these schools. And it is not uncommon for underperforming students to be told to *stay home* on the day of tests. Students from Chinese backgrounds have found to outperform their Australian (and American and European) borne peers indicating that cultural attributes are perhaps more significant than previously thought. It's not the school or the teaching but the family once again making the most significant impact.

5. The Australian National Curriculum has not been implemented universally in all states and territories. What are your thoughts on the reasons behind that?
  - a. Should a National Curriculum have been a goal? Why/not?

Other countries of our physical size and political structure do NOT have a national curriculum (Canada, USA). It has never been made clear why the imperative for a national curriculum was so high on the agenda. Surely it is far more important to have nationally agreed competencies and skills for our children graduating from our schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century rather than actual factual knowledge which was the subject of the overtly political review led by Donnelly & Wiltshire in 2014. After many years of consultation with experts in the field, State and Territory ministers of education, subject associations and education experts, the result of these two conservative cultural warriors was predetermined by their selection by then minister Pyne. They found too much emphasis on Asia, Indigenous Australia, the Environment and not enough reference to Australia's European and Christian heritage, a lack of focus on *the basics*, and too much *faddish* constructivism.

6. A Bachelor level ITE program is typically four years in length, with courses of study focusing on each of the Key learning Areas, varying levels of professional experience placements (I received 90 days total in my 4 year program), as well as some study in some pedagogical, philosophical and sociological courses. A Post-graduate ITE program is typically only two years in length, with, anecdotally, less focus on any of those areas.
  - a. Given the body of research citing teacher-quality as the leading school-based factor influencing student learning outcomes, what are your thoughts on the impact on teacher-quality that results from having some teachers undergo a Bachelor ITE program comparative to a Post-Graduate ITE program?
  - b. Should all ITE programs be the same, at both Undergraduate and Post-Graduate level, as well as nationally across all institutions? Why/not?

As previously indicated my preference is that ALL ITE courses be of a Master length – five years - with at least 3 months' continuous experience in a school toward the end of the degree in addition to shorter 2 week placements during the course.

7. Social media is playing a strong role in the ongoing professional development of educators internationally. What are your thoughts on the role that free professional development via social media can play comparative to often-expensive and often mind-numbing and poorly delivered professional development sessions that are typically received by teacher, both internally and externally from School provided professional development?

On-going PD is essential and key to a teacher's professional responsibility and needs to be built into annual appraisal (as it is in many states) in the same mandated way as it is for doctors, lawyers and other professionals. The best PD takes place in the classroom alongside a mentor. While there is a role for social media and online courses here as part of PD adequate time and support needs to be made available to teachers to choose PD that meets their own specific needs – this might be working alongside a mentor, visiting another schools, doing an online course or attending a university or other external PD sessions.

8. What advice would you give to new teachers to assist them in NOT joining the 40% of new teachers who leave the profession within five years?

Don't become a teacher if you are not committed to very hard work, long hours, being blamed for all the ills of society. And most of all you must like being with kids!