

# Anti-intellectualism and teacher education in the 21st century

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# Anti-Intellectualism and Teacher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**(Red.) Im nachfolgenden Beitrag vertritt der Australische Erziehungswissenschaftler James G. Ladwig die These, dass das schulische Feld stark von Antiintellektualismus geprägt sei und deshalb seiner Aufgabe nicht nachkomme, die intellektuellen Kapazitäten der Schüler adäquat zu fördern. Den Grund dieses Defizits wird in der Lehrerbildung gesehen, die nicht zuletzt aufgrund öffentlicher Erwartungen sich mit einer intellektuellen, rationalen Ausrichtung schwer tue. Die provokative These wird im Anschluss von Kolleginnen und Kollegen aus verschiedenen Nationen diskutiert.**

• James G. Ladwig

Writing in 1962, in his then widely recognised analysis of anti-intellectualism in America, Richard Hofstadter wrote «in so far as the teacher stands before his pupils as the surrogate of the intellectual life and its rewards, he unwittingly makes this life appear altogether unattractive» (Hofstadter 1962, p. 313). This comment was simply a small note in a larger analysis of the ways in which public education contributes, and would continue to contribute, to a broad social hostility toward intellectual life and intellectuals that had become so apparent in the *McCarthyism* of the US 1950s. For Hofstadter and many of his contemporary social commentators it was clear that public education generally and teacher education more specifically was destined to produce intellectual mediocrity so long as there was insufficient political will to invest in these institutions at levels yet unseen, then and now.

Given the historical context in which Hofstadter was writing, as the «McCarthy years» waned on the seemingly cyclical horizon of the United States' national sensibility, it seems most appropriate to ask again what role public education generally and teacher education specifically might play in any future attempts to avoid the clearly unfortunate consequences of the central role of anti-intellectualism in US life.

This concern is premised on several propositions which are admittedly disputable, but about which I

have little doubt. First, it seems evident that the public willingness to support governments embarking on highly questionable foreign and domestic policies has recently played a significant role in several «Western» governments that would not have been supported if the intellectual dispositions to persistently pursue reason and good judgement had prevailed. I take this to be evidence that, among the general populous, anti-intellectualism is alive and well in many places, at least in the Anglophone world, if not most of the developed countries of the world. Were this not true, public opinion in countries of «the coalition of the willing» would not have willingly accepted what were clearly very weak arguments in the first place, for example, nor changed as dramatically as it has. Whatever reason governments had for going along with the Bush administration, post-Watergate, it is most remarkable that any population ever accepted the claims justifying that administration's actions. Second, it seems evident to me that teachers and schooling play a significant role, both through processes of political socialisation and in the more active roles teachers could play in public, political debate. Of course this does not imply teachers have played a significant role in the past, in most historical contexts; but, it does suggest their role could be very different and influential in many nations. Third, my concern also rests on a simple consideration about the role public education ought to play, as a normative issue, in relation to the promotion of intellectual dispositions. In primarily secular societies, apart from education, no other public institution has either the job or capacity to improve the intellectual engagement of a given society's population. If schools and universities do not dedicate themselves to this task, as I think has happened at least in the US, Australia and the UK, those societies suffer grave consequences, as does the rest of the world. Admittedly, each of these propositions could be debated, perhaps in terms of the degree to which they are true and right; but to the extent they carry any force, what follows may be of concomitant public interest.

The first point of departure from which I would like to raise my concern is the simple acknowledgment that since the development of mass education, the place of intellectuality and academic aptitudes has always been a source of significant tension in teacher education. In normative terms, it is

clear that many proponents of mass education publicly argued that schooling was most needed as an agency of moral education. That this position had to be articulated, however, along side of arguments for schooling to serve the purposes of industry, suggests a debate did exist and that alternative positions were considered of serious concern, including those who were arguing for a need for mass education to promote academic and intellectual endeavours. Dewey's (1916) famous Hegelian synthesis of academic interests with «the practical» stands as a simple reminder that at least some, but by no means all, educators desired a strong intellectual focus for schooling.<sup>1</sup>

Dewey's own view on this issue is really not a major concern, but the timing of his analysis is notable, given that it was articulated in the dawning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's massive expansion of secondary schooling and subsequent massive expansion of tertiary training for teachers. It is possibly most important to keep in mind that the notion of teacher training, *qua* training, was significant. Whether we consider *École Normale*, Normal Schools, Manual Training institutions, Seminaries, or any other stripe of specialist teacher training institution spread in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (of which there are a huge array around the globe), the segregation of trainee teachers from University life was by no means accidental, and the door was wide open for legitimating anti-intellectual dispositions in teacher education. Thus, the second point of departure for the present analysis is the recognition that the institutional politics which created teacher education as an institution, *sui generis*, have carried significant consequences for any consideration of anti-intellectualism in teacher education.

Lest some wish to debate whether or not the creation of distinct teacher education institutions carried intellectual consequences, consider how the certification of teachers played out in England and Scotland at the turn of the century. Consider this observation from a then contemporary commentator on teacher training in England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: Before a candidate can enter for the examination of the Cambridge Teachers' Training Syndicate, he or she must have given evidence of something of the nature of a sound general education. The test is not, as at London and Edinburgh, that the candidate must be a graduate of the university. Some nine fairly simple examinations are named, one of which must have been passed; or, to make the condition still more elastic, the candidate must have «been presented for examination by a training-college approved by the syndicate.» This lowering of the initial test, no doubt, still further removes education from the status of a university subject; but it renders the examination far more widely available, especially for women, who form about nine-tenths of the candidates as a rule (Bowen 1887, p. 211).

Of course, England was not alone in its allotment

of teaching to lesser academic pursuits. Even Dewey himself acknowledged, and indeed accepted, that teacher training itself was distinct from the sort of pedagogy he sought to study and promote in Universities. Dewey opens his famous essay *Pedagogy as a University Discipline* with a sombre note on the then-current situation of teacher education in the US: «A distinct division of labor is indicated as regards training in the science and art of education. There must be some schools whose main task is to train the rank and file of teachers – schools whose function is to supply the great army of teachers with the weapons of their calling and direct them as to their use» (Dewey 1896/1972, p. 281).

Here Dewey is clearly establishing the ground work for his argument that there is a need to establish pedagogy as a higher study, belonging justifiably within the realm of the lofty provinces of a University. To Dewey, such a study would be appropriate for the leaders of education and larger schools, about whom he later notes: «They are, moreover, as a rule persons who have already had a college training, and who know what disciplined scientific work is. Such students are necessarily repelled if they find work adjusted to a lower intellectual level than they have become familiar with, or carried on by less orderly intellectual methods than they have mastered. Because of these facts college graduates very rarely seek a normal or training school after having had a college education; if they become dissatisfied with their pedagogical horizon, there is, at present, very little resource save a journey to some German university which has recognized the need of advanced as well as elementary pedagogics» (*ibid.*, p. 281f.).

Two things are important to note here. First, it is clear that educators on both sides of the Atlantic saw teacher education as largely a matter that was quite different from the level of intellectual engagement one might expect in university study, to the extent that The University of London didn't actually provide teacher education, but merely tested potential teachers (in a less than rigorous fashion by the account above). Second, while this was generally noted in several Anglophone countries, it is also clear that some saw the residue of Prussian state developments as providing a more rigorous alternative.<sup>2</sup> The question this leaves for today is just how widespread the more obvious training based models of teacher education have circulated around the globe and just what is emerging for teacher education on the broader global scene.<sup>3</sup>

Without even considering the contemporary situation of teacher education in Universities, about which much could be said, consider the current discourses of teacher education evident in the now internationally ubiquitous calls for better quality teacher training amongst educational policy agents and institutions. In the state of New South Wales, Australia, to work from a local example, there has been substantial educational policy and governance

shift in the recent past which has seen this state follow the lead of several other accrediting jurisdictions in the English-speaking world. That is, New South Wales has been very busy developing teaching standards and establishing a new Institute of Teachers. While the specific content of the documents claiming to articulate just what quality teachers are and do is unremarkable, it is worth noting that this institute was very much a response to a NSW government review of teacher education known as *The Ramsey Review*.<sup>4</sup>

What is most interesting about the link between the current policy moves to improve the quality of teachers and teaching in NSW and its Ramsey Review origins is just what has been lost in translation. That is, in the Ramsey Review, the place and need to promote the intellectual development and command of teachers was central. With more than a dozen direct comments on the topic, beginning from the very first page, the *Ramsey Review* clearly argued that the intellectual development of teachers was crucial in the overall mix of improving the quality and publicly perceived quality of the teaching profession (Ramsey 2000). In the new NSW Institute of Teachers standards, however, there is literally no mention of teachers' intellectual development or command at all.<sup>5</sup> How a government appointed body missed one of the central points of the Review whose recommendations it is ostensibly implementing is a matter for debate, detailed historical narrative. For now it suffices to simply note the absence of any concern about the place of intellectuality in teaching and teachers.

If this concern were limited to one state in one country, educators would have little to worry about, but as our historical notes indicated above<sup>6</sup>, from its very inception mass teacher education has always included a strong measure of international policy borrowing. The recent development of *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications* offer a case in point. Released by the European Commission in 2007, this work at least identifies a need for teachers to have 'extensive subject knowledge,' in some measure hinting at intellectual demand in a manner not dissimilar to other Institute standards around the globe. However, these principles of teacher competence also carry all the hallmarks of our current global teacher education policies that emphasise the need for 'lifelong learning', professional mobility, capacities to work 'with communities' in 'partnerships', and to do so with the latest technology.<sup>7</sup> Given the tendency for each of these principles to become standards and then content in programs, I think it is safe to question wherein lies any commitment to truly understanding the need for teachers to be intellectuals and to promote the virtues and rigours of intellectual life.

In Australia, the Institutes of Teachers<sup>8</sup> are now positioned to make major claims on Universities in the content, structure and delivery of teacher edu-

cation programs. In light of the absent presence of any serious acknowledgement of the need for intellectual approaches to teaching and teachers, one has to query whether we have moved far beyond the historical origins of teacher education, or done much to lessen Hofstadter's cutting observations and concerns.

#### Footnotes

- 1 I dare say that it would, of course, be readily possible to trace similar arguments in most countries – each with its own variant and interesting foibles.
- 2 Dewey's rather nostalgic view of this is well known.
- 3 Before jumping a century forward, I should point out that this characterization of teacher education is evident throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the USA at least, in that the debates about connecting teacher education to 'practice' and 'the real world' have been present as debates in every decade of the US education journals of the day concurrently with repeated concerns about the relative status of teacher education in universities about which Hofstadter's comments are a stern reminder.
- 4 Australia has a habit of naming these review exercises after the chair, in this case Gregor Ramsey.
- 5 Cf. <http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/Main-Professional-Teaching-Standards.html>
- 6 It should be noted that the general theme of a lack of intellectual focus within teacher education has been with us for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least in the US and UK, from early comparisons with the continent, in which Germany was an object of envy (rightly or wrongly) precisely over this issue, (Finlay 1893), through mid-century debates on the structure of teacher education in the US (Wert 1940), through to late century teacher education reforms – even when considering just how to test teachers (Porter/Freeman 1986). A full treatise on this question alone would undoubtedly be voluminous and multi-national.
- 7 The principles and their background can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education\\_culture](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture).
- 8 There are several now, caught in the ever present tensions of state and federal political battles endemic to Australia federalism.

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