In recent years governments and other stakeholders have increasingly paid attention to teacher education programs as part of their agendas to reform education more generally. Cochran-Smith (2004, p. 193) states that ‘in the early years of the twenty-first century, however, the intensity of public criticism and the degree of politicization of the issues related to teacher quality and teacher preparation may well be unprecedented’. In the United Kingdom and the United States new programs have proliferated and much pressure has been brought to bear to re-introduce more technicist models of preparation for teaching. Zeichner (2003) argues that in the United States there are currently three major reform agendas in teacher education. Firstly, there is the ‘professionalisation’ agenda, which focuses on describing the knowledge base for teaching in the form of standards and then accrediting institutions, programs and individuals accordingly. The justification here is that the status of the profession will be raised by articulating teachers’ work publicly. The second agenda, that of ‘deregulation’, characterises traditional university programs as irrelevant and too politicised, and promotes alternative and fast-track programs of teacher preparation and certification. These mostly private programs are based on ‘the argument that subject matter knowledge and teachers’ verbal skills are the main determinants of teacher success’ (Zeichner 2003, p. 501). Thirdly, the ‘social justice’ agenda is being pursued in a much less visible fashion within university teacher education programs by many teacher educators. This approach conceptualises schooling and teacher education as integral elements in constructing a more socially just society. It focuses on preparing teachers to work successfully with the social, economic, cultural and linguistic diversity that marks schools and students. Each of these agendas is also evident to some extent in the United Kingdom where Furlong (2005, p. 132) argues that the Blair government has finally ‘won their struggle to reduce teacher education to an unproblematic, technical rational procedure’.

Australia has not been immune from what is happening overseas. The Australian Federal Government has increasingly intervened in public schooling even though primary and secondary schooling are under state jurisdiction. There have also been countless inquiries into teacher education over the past twenty years (e.g. Australian Council of Deans of Education 1998; Ramsey 2001), many of which have been underpinned by deficit discourses about teachers and the quality of public education more generally (Thomas 2005). Notwithstanding the many government reports whose recommendations have not been implemented, in 2005 a Standing Committee of the House of Representatives was charged to inquire into and report on ‘the scope, suitability, organization, resourcing and delivery of teacher training courses in Australia’s public and private universities. To examine the
preparedness of graduates to meet the current and future demands of teaching in Australia’s schools’ (House of Representatives 2007, p. xi). The nomenclature of ‘training’ signalled ‘a narrower, more technical approach to learning which is primarily concerned with first order activities related to almost entirely to practice’ (Social Justice Research Collective 2005). Likewise, the terms of reference suggested that the focus of the Standing Committee would be on a technicist approach to teacher education.

The Standing Committee canvassed a range of organisations and received almost 200 submissions and more than 100 exhibits. It held public hearings across Australia, at which 446 witnesses appeared (House of Representatives 2007, p. 3). On 27 September 2005, four committee members visited Flinders University and took evidence from twenty-nine witnesses, among them seven final year students from the University’s Bachelor of Education programs. There were three from the Junior Primary/ Primary program, two from the Secondary degree, and two from the Middle School degree. This paper examines the student teachers’ evidence in detail and then comments on the final report of the inquiry which was published early in 2007. The main argument is that the seven student teachers were disruptive voices at the inquiry because they refused to endorse a technical model of teaching, choosing instead to promote education as a political process and teacher education that is committed to social justice.

Teacher education for social justice

The session opened with Committee Member Sawford asking the witnesses what they liked about the program at Flinders University. The first witness set the tone by claiming that they had had a ‘very strong intellectual training to prepare us as teachers’. She argued that prospective teachers are enabled to ‘interpret and understand the place of education within the broader social context’. Four of the witnesses supported her by explaining that teacher education at Flinders University is explicit about its commitment to social justice. The program was portrayed as an integrated approach to social justice that extends across the degree and includes a core course on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. One added that ‘I will be going to Yalata next year to teach in the Indigenous lands. Social justice is a very strong reason that I want to be a teacher’.

Sawford then redirected the conversation towards the technical content of teacher training with the comment that ‘I suppose it is about balancing the intellectual challenge of the courses you are doing and classroom management’. One witness had already stated that ‘the concept of teacher training being something that prepares us to make unit plans and to use behavior management in the classroom is not enough’. Now she responded to Sawford by saying that ‘there seems to be a very good balance between the intellectual capacity of the [program] and the [courses] that we study as well as the practical experiences.’ Four of the witnesses pointed to the program’s emphasis on ‘critical thinking skills’, and ‘more importantly, skills of critical literacy’. They added that ‘our literacy skills and ability to analyze things critically have really helped with selecting the resources for the classroom’.
At this stage the student teachers still had not produced the right answers so Committee Member Corcoran directed their attention to the practicum. Here the conversation was mainly about organizational matters and each of the witnesses recounted positive experiences. They also pointed to the professionalism of their supervising teachers. However, two noted that difficulties arose when supervising teachers were not consulted by administrators before being allocated a student teacher. Another argued that there should be more financial incentives for teachers to have student teachers in their classrooms. There was virtually nothing about student behavior management, lesson plans and needing more practicums. In fact one witness asserted:

I think the amount of time we have in schools is totally sufficient. I do not think we would gain anything more as students by spending any more time in schools. A lot of time you are just toeing the line, fitting in with what is at the school already and imitating what already goes on.

The ‘alarm bell’

By now more than half of the time allocated to student teachers’ evidence had elapsed and Committee Member Ferguson returned to comments made by two witnesses during their discussion of the program’s content. Here, the first had stated

I think the most important thing about this [program] is that it has made us very aware that teaching is a very political activity. It does not occur in a neutral environment. We have a lot of social influence and social power and we must be careful how we use them, because we are not apolitical in any sense.

Ferguson began:

I am a bit curious about [your] comments relating to social justice. You said something which really struck me: that schools are not apolitical and that schools are places where you have great influence and change society. I have not heard that for a while, in the sense that you are actually canvassing that in your future lives as career teachers you see yourselves as agents of social change. You did not say – although you probably do feel it – that you felt your primary function would be to help young people to learn and achieve their potential.

The fact that you did not mention that rings an alarm bell for me. What is it about the Flinders education course that has fostered that, which I think is a fairly strong theme coming through from most or all of you? … how appropriate do you think it is to see yourself in that light?

The first responded that there were a number of ‘progressive lecturers’ who tried to ‘offer a variety of perspectives on education’ and that
social justice is certainly something considered very important at this university. But we are being asked to consider how political teaching actually is and the fact that the majority of teachers are white, middle class and – as is probably evident here – female… The course asks us to interrogate ideas of what that brings to the classroom with us and asks: if the children we are teaching are not white and middle class, what happens? If we are unaware of the values and beliefs that we bring, how indicative and representative is that for kids? So, if children are marginalized – for example, Indigenous children, who have been marginalized in education since its conception – how are we maintaining the status quo if we do not ask ourselves?

Ferguson accepted her explanation but stated that ‘my question was more reflecting on your comment that you see your role as a teacher as an agent of social change – changing the society, not reflecting on your own’.

**Social change in practice**

The second student now translated her theory of social change into practice:

In a classroom when you are acting as an agent of positive social change, you have the students in your classroom engaged in real life learning, real-life activities. When you have students, say, writing letters to the editor of the local *Messenger* paper about an issue that they believe in, that is teaching them to be agents of positive social change but is also fostering the development of literacy. When kids are writing about something they care about, they are more likely to take it seriously and put value on that. So, in saying that we view ourselves as agents of positive social change, we are also saying that we see ourselves as empowering the students in our classrooms to engage in real life activities. That, in my experience, is when very good learning occurs.

Ferguson then expressed his concern that parents might object to such a stance. Indeed, they might ‘take umbrage at you directing your teaching that way?’ Both witnesses reiterated their positions on the politics of education and their intention to work for social change. Then one provided the following example of her politics in practice.

On my final prac I encouraged every one of the 58 Year 7 and 8 students I had to go out and do one day or two days of volunteering in the community, such as volunteering for Meals on Wheels or child-care centres, cleaning up rubbish and a variety of things. I would say that that is encouraging students to create positive social change or to make a difference. I had an extremely positive response from all the parents. They thought it was wonderful that their kids were getting out there and doing something real. Being an agent of positive social change does not necessarily have to mean that we are back to the protest era and we are putting words in the mouths of our students. All of the kids had the opportunity to choose what volunteering they
wanted to do. They loved it, the parents loved it and the school loved it. So it does not have to mean walking down the street with big banners and making them fight for things they don’t understand. That is not what we are about. We are enabling our students to do something real and to do something that has a purpose for them and the community that the school is located within.

The status quo as political

Next, a third witness asserted that ‘maintaining the status quo was also a political statement’. Ferguson was astonished. He conceded that while politicians were political in that they debated educational issues, how could she say that ‘schools are political places’? Five of the seven student teachers responded to this question.

The first respondent’s answer was that ‘schooling is socially constructed, and I think that does have to be acknowledged’. Furthermore, she let the committee know that she was a parent and said ‘perhaps the parents need to be educated’ about this. Committee Members Ferguson and Corcoran were flummoxed by her answer, and Ferguson commented ‘I think it is probably worthwhile for all of us after today to reflect a bit more on that’. The next witness stated that ‘what I have got out of this course is that you also have to teach the children to be critical thinkers and not just accept what they are told and that they should question and not be afraid of questioning – to have that confidence’. Another student offered an historical explanation for the politics of schooling by showing that mass compulsory schooling was originally the product of decisions made by politicians in the late nineteenth century. The fourth speaker repeated that teachers should examine their own social locations and values in order to work successfully with ‘Indigenous children, children from other countries, children who are English as a second language speakers or children who are disabled in any way’. Two more students reiterated their stances on the political nature of schooling, with the latter quietly conceding that they might not be ‘representative of all our classmates’.

It was now 11.00 am. Time was up. Committee member Sawford concluded ‘I found your contributions this morning outstanding and varied. I think you are a great advertisement for this university’s teacher education courses’.

On the day that members of the Standing Committee visited Flinders University they did not hear a technicist view of teacher education from prospective teachers. Instead, the seven articulate women were disruptive voices during their forty-three minutes of evidence. They spoke of a teacher education program that openly pursues social justice reform rather than a professionalisation or deregulation agenda. They portrayed the program as intellectually challenging, holistic and focused on teaching critical literacy and critical thinking skills. There was also an emphasis on prospective teachers interrogating their social locations, assumptions, values and beliefs as white middle class women. Bartolome (2004) claims that this must be a crucial aspect of teacher education programs that focus on social justice. She also maintains that ‘teachers need to develop political and ideological clarity in
order to increase the chances of academic success for all students’ (Bartolome 2004, p. 97). However, Zeichner (2003, p. 518) states that in the United States ‘many advocates of this agenda have too narrowly defined the task as only one of transforming White monolingual teachers to teach students of color instead of one of preparing all teachers to teach all students’. The evidence provided by student teachers does not substantiate a claim of narrowness in the case of Flinders University. Its student teachers were disruptive in their commitment to social justice and in their refusal to embrace a narrow, technicist training model, a ‘classroom management style of teacher education course’ to quote Committee Member Sawford. They set off the alarm bell with the statement that education is political and refused to be persuaded otherwise by members of the Standing Committee. Last but not least, one witness convincingly demonstrated her capacity to transform her politics into practice during her practicum in order to achieve success for all students and commendations from parents and teachers. Although these witnesses were deemed to be a ‘great advertisement’ for Flinders University’s teacher education program, there is little to suggest that committee members heeded their views. Suffice to say, these prospective teachers’ representation of social justice as central to teacher education programs was not what committee members had in mind when they produced their final report.

A professionalisation agenda for teacher education

The final report of the inquiry into teacher education, Top of the Class (House of Representatives 2007), was published early in 2007. In the foreword the Chair, Luke Hartsuyker, asserted that ‘research has established that the quality of teaching is the most important factor influencing student achievement. Therefore, better quality teacher education, including ongoing professional development, has the potential to improve the effectiveness of the entire school system’ (House of Representatives 2007, p. vii). His claim that teacher quality is the critical component in students’ success in schooling is common to several recent reports both in Australia and overseas (Cochran-Smith 2004; Whitehead and Wilkinson 2008). As Cochran-Smith (2004, p. 206) states, ‘this means that teachers are responsible for students’ learning despite the mitigation of social and cultural contexts, students’ backgrounds, school resources, learning opportunities, and the match or mismatch of school and community expectations’. It also means that teacher education programs will continue to be scrutinised by governments and other stakeholders in education.

In Top of the Class the Standing Committee clearly states that ‘the teacher education system is not in crisis’ in Australia but that it is problematic (House of Representatives 2007, p. vii). According to the Committee, there are many issues that stem from the fragmented approach to teacher education. These include inadequate links between theory, which is seen to be the on-campus component of pre-service preparation, and practice, that is field experience in schools. Initial teacher education is constructed as a first step in a coherent program of professional learning that should take place throughout a teacher’s career. Other problems, therefore, are the lack of induction programs and ongoing professional development for teachers. Although Top of the Class
makes no reference to any international literature on these matters, the agenda here is much the same as in the United Kingdom and the United States (Cochran-Smith 2004; Furlong 2005; Zeichner 2003). Top of the Class also points out that there is inadequate financial investment in educational research in Australia and advocates a significant increase in government funding to strengthen the research base in education. Such funds, however, should be devoted to 'evidence-based' research, which in Australia and overseas has come to mean scientific research of the kind carried out in the medical field (Yates 2004). Finally, the Standing Committee states that 'it is therefore appropriate that the Australian Government takes a leading role in shaping teacher education in the future' (House of Representatives 2007, p. xxii).

Having constructed teacher education as a problem, the Standing Committee then recommends that there be further research into teacher education in Australia. It claims that data on the effectiveness of teacher education is mostly based on surveys of recent graduates, teachers and principals. The section of the report which discusses these matters relies heavily on references from a very small number of studies and previous government reports. These include an evaluation of the Bachelor of Learning Management, a teaching degree with a strongly technicist orientation. Top of the Class does not call upon witnesses from the inquiry, and certainly not the student teachers from Flinders University who constructed a different picture of teacher education. There is also a massive body of research into teacher education in Australia which could have been accessed by the Standing Committee. For example, there are countless peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings which could have informed the deliberations of committee members. Nevertheless, ‘a comprehensive longitudinal study into the effectiveness of different models of teacher education across Australia’ is the first recommendation of the Standing Committee. It also recommends that a National Clearing House of evidence-based research be established for access by stakeholders. Presumably a longitudinal study will confirm that there are problems in teacher education.

Not content with constructing teacher education as deficient and assuming that longitudinal research will show this to be the case, the Standing Committee adopts the professionalisation agenda as the solution to the problem. It recommends that a common set of national standards for teaching should be developed to be used by all jurisdictions for the registration of teachers and the accreditation of courses’, thereby centralising the Australian Government’s role in teacher education (House of Representatives 2007, p. xxiii). The proposed national system of accreditation is seen to be a ‘key quality assurance mechanism’ (House of Representatives 2007, p. 29). The Standing Committee acknowledges the proliferation of attempts by many stakeholders in education to develop sets of standards in the past decade or so, but it recommends that the government support Teaching Australia to do this work. There are no reasons provided for its choice of this body over others such as the Australian Council of Deans of Education who also favour a national system of accreditation.
Inserting social justice into standards

The Standing Committee claims that ‘in describing what teachers know and believe, what they understand, what they are able to do and what they value, professional standards articulate the complexity of teachers’ work and assure the community of their competence’ (House of Representatives 2007, p. 20). Zeichner (2003) and Cochran-Smith, however, are not convinced that contemporary attempts to articulate standards encapsulate the complexities of teachers’ work with regard to meeting the needs of all students in schools, especially those who are not white, middle class and urban. Cochran-Smith (2004, p. 207) states that ‘we could easily imagine performance assessments, for example, that demonstrate that a teacher is reflective, collaborative and knowledgeable but have little or nothing to do with critiquing the inequities of the educational system or raising questions about the school as sorting machine that reinforces privilege and disadvantage based on race, culture, language background, and gender’. Zeichner (2003) adds that many sets of standards seem to lose sight of the moral purposes of education. Furthermore, he notes the high cost of implementing a national system of accreditation as proposed in Top of the Class. The Standing Committee does not seem to have taken these matters into account.

Given the concerns with social justice in this paper, a key issue in relation to the Standing Committee’s professionalisation agenda is whether professional standards will incorporate the kinds of dispositions, values and perspectives that were displayed by the seven disruptive student teachers from Flinders University. Will the professional image of the teacher ‘also include images of the teacher as activist, as agent for social change, or as ally in anti-racist initiatives’ (Cochran-Smith 2004, p. 207)? Will the standards conceptualise education as political? Committee members’ reactions to the student teachers imply that such images are not in keeping with their understandings about teachers, teacher education and schooling. Top of the Class had nothing to say about social justice and it acknowledges the diversity among Australian students only in so far as it recommends that the Australian Government establish a Teacher Education Diversity Fund to increase the number of entrants to teacher education from under-represented groups. These include men, Indigenous, working-class, and rural prospective teachers, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. In discussing incentives to encourage such entrants, however, it seems that only men require attractive salaries and vertical career paths. It could be that the concern with diversity in the teaching workforce had more to do with countering the image of teaching as white middle class women’s work than attending to diversity. The discussion was not framed by concerns about social justice and it did not take up the complexities of teachers’ social locations that were canvassed in the student teachers’ evidence to the inquiry.

Last but not least, although the Standing Committee advocates a common set of standards, it emphasises that it is not promoting a single model of teacher education or a national teacher education curriculum. Rather, there will be room for ‘great flexibility, innovation and diversity’ in future teacher education. If this is so then teacher educators who are committed to social justice will be
able to continue their work by inserting social justice into the standards. There is much evidence to suggest that the social justice agenda for teacher education has not disappeared with the advent of standards in the United States (Cochran-Smith 2004; Zeichner 2003), and Flinders University is certainly not alone in emphasising social justice in Australian teacher education (See for example Collins 2004). Zeichner (2003) argues that many advocates for social justice in teacher education in the United States operate within traditional programs. Although the Standing Committee seemed to favour a technicist approach to teacher education, *Top of the Class* does not prescribe such a model. It seems, therefore, that there will be spaces for teacher educators to continue making strategic alliances with like-minded stakeholders, not the least of whom are prospective teachers, to keep social justice at the forefront of considerations. If this is the case then the seven disruptive student teachers who unsettled the Standing Committee will ultimately be supported by successive graduates with similar dispositions. At this juncture in the reform of teacher education in Australia such political work is critical at all levels from the development of the standards to their implementation.

**References**


