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Tapu Misa: To get better teachers, we need better conditions

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By [Tapu Misa](#)

I would have been an accountant if it hadn't been for the teacher I got in the fifth form. He was a nice man, but hopeless as an accountancy teacher, thanks to a thick Eastern European accent that no one could understand, and the fact that he was really a geography teacher who didn't know anything about book-keeping.

There went my As and that brilliant career in accountancy. It was my sixth form history teacher who came up with an alternative: "You should look into journalism," he suggested. And I did, just as soon as I'd looked up "journalism" in the dictionary.

I can remember every teacher who made an impression on me, six in all, from 13 years of schooling, which doesn't seem like many. They were nearly all men, which may have had something to do with the fact that teaching was respected enough and well-paid enough back then to attract a good many men.

At primary school, there was the fatherly Mr Stuart, who always put my stories on the wall, and the hip, socially conscious Mr Fox who first told me about apartheid in South Africa. At high school, there was Mrs Manchester, my social studies teacher who took me to my first protest march (against French nuclear testing in the Pacific); the kindly Mr Jacquery who made maths seem easy; and Mr Turner, my sixth form English teacher, who turned me on to writing. #Teachers, teachers, teachers, someone said when asked what made a good school. Good teachers. But a recent review of teacher education suggests that a significant number of our new teachers aren't good enough.

With three children going through the public school system, I'm sorry to say this didn't come as a great shock to me. Those of us here at the lower-decile coalface, who can't or won't send our children to privileged private schools – which is most of us – get a mixed bag. My children have been taught by both first-rate teachers and those who probably shouldn't have been teaching.

The best gave out her telephone number so her students could call her at home; another gave encouragement so over-the-top his students couldn't help wanting to excel for him. But at the other end were teachers who not only couldn't spell but couldn't construct a sentence. Teachers who seemed burned out after just a few years of teaching, or seemed not to like children overmuch. And some who were teaching subjects they weren't qualified to teach.

It makes a difference, but schools, especially poorer schools where good teachers are needed most, aren't spoiled for choice. How do we fix this? The simple answer is better people, as Jane, an exhausted and broke teacher at a low decile South Auckland school, wrote on the *Herald's* website.

"We don't need more training or supervision ... We need better people. People who are



enthusiastic, committed, willing to go the extra mile. People who are intelligent, articulate and really care about their students ... How do we get these people? Make teaching more attractive. Lower class sizes, put in better support for students with behaviour or learning difficulties and pay more. Improving conditions leads to improved quality of teachers and improved education for your children." We need only look at the world's most admired education system to see the truth of this.

There are no private schools in Finland and education is free all the way through university. But Finnish 15-year-olds top the OECD in educational achievement, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

And a major difference is that in Finland, teaching is a high status profession, which reflects the value that Finnish society puts on education. Even primary teachers need a Masters degree. Teaching is so highly valued that it was the most popular professional career choice in a recent survey of school leavers.

Why is teaching so popular? It's not so much the salaries, which are at the OECD average. Dr Reijo Laukkanen, policy adviser to the Finnish National Board of Education, puts it down to three things. First, raising the standard of teacher education has led to teaching being seen as an academic profession; second, teachers are trusted and have considerable autonomy; and third, education is highly valued in Finnish society so teachers command considerable respect.

We could learn a lot from Finland, not just in the way it treats its teachers but in the way it reformed its education system from the late 1960s.

Could we replicate their success? Naysayers often point to the fact that Finland's population is more homogenous than ours, but Massey High's principal, Bruce Ritchie, who visited Finland on a study tour, points out that it was a more monocultural society 40 years ago, when its education system had similar problems to ours.

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