GOOD TEACHING

Great teachers are very special people. Many individuals and groups of students, teachers, parents and community members praised the work of good teachers. They described the critical relationship between the teacher and the student-learner as one which shapes attitudes about particular subjects, engagement with learning and staying on at school. Teacher-student relationships were described as vital for the ultimate success of students, particularly young people and students in second chance education. Respondents stressed that quality professional learning helps teachers develop and maintain strong and flexible teaching skills. This facilitates successful learning for groups of students with diverse needs, talents and abilities, all of whom need guidance, support and encouragement.

LET SCHOOLS, TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS FOCUS ON THE CORE BUSINESS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING. (SCHOOL PRINCIPAL)

THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHING PROVIDED IS KNOWN TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN HOW STUDENTS PERFORM. (LADWIG AND GORE, 2005: 121)

HAPPY AND CONTENTED TEACHERS ARE GREAT TEACHERS. (REGIONAL TEACHER MEETING)

A TEACHER WHO MAKES THE CLASSROOM THE FIRST PRIORITY. (PRINCIPALS’ MEETING)

GREAT TEACHERS ARE ABOUT THEIR SCHOOL AND STUDENTS. GREAT TEACHERS HAVE A CLASSROOM WHERE ‘TEAMSHIP’ IS EVIDENT, THERE IS MUTUAL RESPECT. (PERSONAL SUBMISSION)

GREAT TEACHERS MAKE LEARNING GREAT

Quality teaching and learning was seen as the core business of schools and TAFE. Responses from teachers, schools, parents, students and the community constantly emphasised the importance of a quality teacher:

The re-orientation of the DET to ensure that teaching and learning is at the core of all its operations is critical. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Dinham and Bhindi (2005) support this in their reference to An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project (AESOP) based on 38 schools in NSW:

The key finding emerging from AESOP is the enacted belief that the core purpose of school is teaching and learning … Schools where ‘outstanding’ outcomes were being achieved were relentless in their quest for enhanced student achievement. (Dinham and Bhindi, 2005: 171)

One student expressed similar ideas in a more personal way:

A great teacher is someone who will talk through the maths exercise with you, and stop if you have any troubles, to go through each point step by step. A great teacher is one who doesn’t make you feel stupid and useless but helps you to understand every concept of the task, even if it requires giving up lunchtime. A great teacher will get straight into the work as soon as the bell goes, and will stop for casual conversation if there’s time left at the end of the period and everyone is confident of completing the exercise independently. A great teacher will never laugh at your understanding of the concept but will help provide a clearer vision of it, and a great teacher will always have time to answer your questions. (School student)

Another respondent stressed the personal and interpersonal skills of a great teacher:

Great teachers seem to exhibit abundant patience, kindness and commitment. Above all else, they are able to enthuse others and make a significant impact on the achievement of students. (Personal submission)
Respondents are clear that it is in the classroom that great teachers can both ‘bridge the gap’ and ‘lift the bar’ for their students.

Current, evidence-based research also supports the fundamental importance of the classroom in improving learning. Rowe (2003) is quoted or referred to in many group and individual responses including those from the Primary Principals Association, the Secondary Principals Council and the NSW Teachers Federation. Rowe argues that variance in students’ achievements due to the effects of class and teacher exceeded 40% in several countries while differences between schools, including socio-economic factors, accounted for much smaller variance ranging between 0-9% (Rowe, 2003: 18). There is, he says, more variation within schools than between schools. (Wilms, 2000; in Rowe, 2003: 20) specifies that pressure and support for change needs to be directed at particular teachers within schools, not simply at entire schools.

Rowe says:

*Teachers can and do make a difference and that consistent high quality teaching, supported by strategic professional development can and does deliver dramatic improvements in student learning.* (Rowe, 2003: 27)

He argues that structural interventions such as single-sex schooling, types of schools and even class size have, per se, small or negligible effects on learning and that what has to change is what happens behind the classroom door with a total commitment of all staff to new ways of working (ibid: 26).

**GREAT TEACHERS ARE LIFELONG LEARNERS**

There was strong support for student learning needs to be met by teachers who are themselves lifelong learners. Ladwig and Gore, in their companion paper to this consultation said:

*In a general sense, quality teaching is something that requires continual reflection and renewal.* (Ladwig and Gore, 2005: 122)

Parent and student representatives from one school saw the link between professional learning and classroom performance when they described great teachers as those who:

- Have been both professionally and personally supported
- Are up to date with and implement effective teaching strategies that cater for equity for all students
- Understand the needs of all students that they educate
- Support each other at faculty and executive levels
- Create a supportive, safe environment for all students to achieve their best results. (School SRC/P&C meeting)

Another view was:

*Great teachers love learning and are able to impart this love of learning to their students.* (School staff member)

One school staff pointed out that teachers complement and compete with a range of technologically driven choices, information and Great teachers are those who can turn around difficult classes. (Parent)

The reality to be faced squarely is that adults cannot be developed unless they want to. (Catholic Education Commission)

They maintain their professional standards by actively engaging in professional development, are enthusiastic, creative and adopt a life-long learning approach for themselves. (TAFE staff meeting)

Teachers need to be committed to life-long learning not only for their students but also for themselves. (DET staff member)

They display a real passion for their profession, are life-long learners even when the learning is a challenge, want the best for students and parents and are prepared to put the effort in to achieve that best. (School staff member)
entertainment. Modern young people expect their learning to be entertaining, fast moving, interactive and rich in variety. If teachers are not up to date in their methodology, students will lose interest:

*Schooling is no longer the main source of learning and developing knowledge and skills for many adolescents. Their multi-media saturated world is much more cutting edge than teachers.* (School staff meeting)

Responses refer to disengagement and alienation as the price of poor teaching and emphasise that this is not an option for the future. Confident and competent teachers, themselves lifelong learners understand that how one teaches is inseparable from what one teaches, from what and how one assesses and from how one learns. (DET, 2004: 4)

**A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

There were divergent opinions on responsibility for professional learning and the provision of time for it. Some responses stressed the importance of the teacher taking control of professional learning:

*Teachers must become autonomous learners – willing to embrace change.* (School staff meeting)

*The ability to work alone and focus on issues of student learning.* (School staff meeting)

Membership of professional associations was seen as valuable because of:

*Access to professional learning that meets the needs of highly experienced teachers, particularly of senior courses such as those conducted regularly in the metropolitan area by professional associations.* (School community meeting)

In their Companion Paper, Letts et al said that professional learning in rural and remote areas:

*… requires an initiative on the part of the school and teacher to fully utilise such development opportunities and for the DET to acknowledge the difficulties faced. Information and communications technologies are proving useful …*

*Due to the nature of the place, school personnel often establish their own professional links, employing creative ways to operationalise and maintain these … Networking … teachers within and across rural townships engenders productive partnerships for professional development …*

*New teachers gain their professional support eclectically.* (Letts et al, 2005: 238 - 239)

It was recognised that the learning styles of teachers vary as do the locations where teachers live and work. There needs to be flexibility in offerings to reflect this.
A number of respondents saw incentives such as Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme (PELS) support as encouragement for teachers to complete postgraduate studies. There was a feeling that:

*If teachers felt their time and professional learning was valued they would do more.* (Regional teachers meeting)

Many respondents stressed the need for time to embed curriculum changes and to share professional dialogue. There were different views on how this time should be provided. Some said that time provided for professional learning based on funded release presents children with discontinuous learning provision. They pointed out the paradox of frequently taking teachers out of classrooms to improve their classroom performance and argued for provision of professional learning while maintaining stability and continuity in classrooms:

*Training should be either conducted on-site or outside of school hours. Teachers could be paid for hours in the evening or on Saturday. Their professionalism would be recognised, (and) their students would continue to be taught… I believe most teachers, given the chance, would sign up for this win-win opportunity.* (School principal)

*Payment for professional learning conducted on weekends should be made directly to teachers involved. This would solve a number of problems: shortage of casual relief; teachers increased reluctance to attend courses during school time (and) reduce demands on teachers by not having to prepare and mark lessons which they do not deliver.* (Personal submission)

Others saw the responsibility as being more with the DET as the employer to develop courses, fund relief and travel for teachers and deliver programs in school time:

*Professional development courses should be in school hours.* (School staff meeting)

*Need a pool of casuals or district relief to allow staff to engage in Professional Learning.* (School staff meeting)

*Quality professional learning opportunities in school time need to be available to all staff to move towards best practice.* (School staff meeting)

Shared responsibility was advocated very often. Time for sharing, collegial discussion, mentoring and induction was usually seen as desirable in school time and with the necessary resources devolved to the school:

*Time at school for collegial networking and mentoring. Sufficient funds to support professional learning plans.* (School staff/P&C meeting)

*It is essential that professional learning funds are based in schools. In the past, regional or central based funds meant that professional learning was like the Titanic – looks good but really impractical when under pressure.* (School community meeting)
There was some support for an additional school development day (either in term 4 or as agreed with the local community) to be devoted to school determined issues related to learning. Other respondents argued that:

*Schools should choose their own pupil-free days to ensure the involvement of Departmental consultants.* (School community meeting)

Many teacher respondents wanted professional learning programs to be more sustained rather than one-off days. They saw the DET having a role to develop and deliver courses and on-line programs of professional learning to meet teachers’ needs.

**WHAT TEACHERS WANT IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

Respondents clearly indicated that the classroom teacher and the school should be the primary focus of professional learning. In this they saw their school and collegial networks as more important to them than centrally developed programs:

*Develop a culture of reflection, discussions of classroom practice, learning new strategies to support the learning needs of students.* (School staff meeting)

In their Companion Paper, Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis wrote about:

*… ‘the educational development of schools as knowledge building institutions’ where teacher professional knowledge is recognised, affirmed, challenged and debated under conditions of mutuality and trust that permit both teachers and the schools themselves to grow and flourish in times remarkable for the pace and nature of social and material change.* (Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis, 2005: 177)

Many respondents saw assessment of learning outcomes and developing skills in ICT as key needs in their professional learning. This will be explored further in the section of this chapter on Information Communication Technology (ICT).

For primary teachers, respondents wanted professional learning to help them uncrowd the curriculum. This would better meet the needs of individual students and:

*teach students how to learn, not what to learn.* (School community meeting)

They want to learn to develop and deliver flexible, connected units of work to better meet individual needs and relate to local communities. Given the higher levels of operational literacy required in an information rich society, a focus on literacy was preferred.

In the middle years respondents want strategies to counter disengagement of some students, especially boys. There was support for professional learning to improve student literacy and provide more variety and excitement in learning.
Secondary teachers wanted an emphasis on meeting the needs of non-academic students and help with delivering, assessing and reporting the outcomes of the syllabuses for stages 5 and 6.

Many respondents commented on the critical role of school administration and support staff (SASS) and Aboriginal Education Aides (AEAs) in schools and the importance of provision for their professional learning by both the DET and schools. Primary and Secondary Principals groups stressed the importance of providing for SASS and AEAs in the professional learning budgets provided to schools. There was also support for accredited learning and skill development programs linked to salary and career advancement for SASS. Specific suggestions for training included skills in customer service, ICT, and dealing with challenging parents and students. Respondents also stressed the importance of teachers’ aides working with students with disabilities to be appropriately trained and accredited.

**THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE DET**

The DET’s role in the professional learning of teaching and non-teaching staff was seen as critical and strategic, developing a policy framework and supporting schools to make local decisions on implementation.

In their submission, the Secondary Principals Council said:

> Great teachers are best developed and supported in a school culture which is focused on quality teaching and student learning. The DET at all levels needs to build a strong culture of teacher development and leadership in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy focused on ensuring relevant, challenging and effective classroom practice. (Secondary Principals Council)

Referring to rural and remote NSW, Letts et al said in their Companion Paper:

> … a ‘one size fits all’ approach is inadequate for addressing the educational issues of rural and remote New South Wales. (Letts et al, 2005: 237)

Their response argues that for many teachers, attendance at externally offered professional development activities is hampered by distance, time and even safety. There is and will be a reliance on ICT and creative ways of operating and maintaining professional links for learning and renewal.

This was also an issue for others:

> More interaction between schools sharing resources and sharing ideas. (Regional students meeting)

> Networking and being professionally generous is essential to support all teachers to be great teachers. (School staff meeting)

Respondents asked for DET support for mentoring and inter-agency partnerships as well as support to establish and maintain websites including learning circles on specific issues such as improving literacy in K - 2 or dealing with disengaged students in stage 4.
Action research projects also require support. In his Companion Paper, Fullan advocates:

... lateral capacity building, where the state invests in and facilitates focussed networks that learn from each other, as they implement priorities in the context of state policies. (Fullan, 2005: 233)

There was strong support for the DET and pre-service training organisations such as the universities to coordinate to ensure that teachers are suitably and effectively prepared for teaching. One response said pre-service training should:

Place more emphasis on teaching university students how to teach. (School staff meeting)

There was also support for DET to partner universities in higher degree courses for teachers.

Several suggested appointing targeted graduates above establishment to some schools as a way of capturing talented young teachers who would otherwise accept employment in non-government schools.

A number of respondents saw induction into the profession and support for beginning teachers as a critical issue in professional learning. Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis go further and stress that the newcomer is:

... a genuine resource – perhaps a source of new ideas encountered in a teacher-education course, or, at the very least, a new set of eyes through which current ways of working can be re-evaluated. (Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis, 2005: 179)

Internship, reduced teaching loads, and mentoring programs were all advocated as were incentives to attract the best beginning teachers available.

A few responses referred to the establishment of the NSW Institute of Teachers (IOT). The comments were generally positive:

The IOT is a great first step. Embedding professional practice with early alignment to a portfolio of professional learning at the outset of a teacher’s career is critical to development and career path. (School principal)

There was support for the Department’s School Leadership Capability Framework and the discussion paper, Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools (NSW DET, 2003). These documents were seen as part of a broad policy framework and even as a direct scaffold on which school leaders could build local initiatives.

Provision of time and funding to schools were seen by most respondents as the key responsibilities of the DET. Funding for more consultants, reduced teaching loads (especially for beginning teachers), buying expert time from other schools, mentors, pools of casuals and teacher exchanges were consistently requested.

Pre-school, primary, secondary and TAFE teachers have discrete as well as common needs related to improving their teaching.
Professional learning is therefore an issue arising in other sections of this chapter as well as other chapters in this report.

Teacher Professional Learning is one of the key components of improved student learning outcomes. This is an individual as well as a system responsibility. It needs to be available in a variety of forms with flexible modes of delivery in order to meet the many and varied needs of staff and schools and TAFE colleges. Every staff member should be supported through individual professional development plans which are developed collaboratively with their manager and within the local context. By participating actively in professional development, teachers model their commitment to lifelong learning to their students.
References


