COMPANION PAPER 1

The Future of Quality Teaching in NSW Government Schools

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When the NSW Department of Education and Training began developing its Quality Teaching initiative in late 2002, it was doing so in response to a growing interest among schools and teachers in furthering their work on improving the quality of the core business of schools. This emphasis on core business was made explicit and public in Vinson’s recommendation that the Department develop initiatives to assist teachers in their efforts to continually improve their professional practice. In order for teachers to teach well, they need a clear mandate to focus on improving their teaching and they need the resources to support their efforts. When looking toward the future of NSW government schools, a critical question is, ‘what is needed to help schools and teachers to consistently produce high quality teaching?’

What’s needed

A shared understanding of what quality teaching can contribute: It is important to speak of quality teaching in both the general sense and in relation to the NSW Quality Teaching initiative that is already in place. Whatever the specific contents of any programmatic initiative to improve the quality of teaching, if that initiative is based on a sound, comprehensive research base, there are some clear benefits that will come from increased levels of quality teaching.

In general terms, of the things that schools can influence, the quality of the teaching provided is known to be the most important factor in how students perform (Mortimore, 1993). While there are ongoing and justifiable debates about the relative size of this influence and about how it interrelates with the broader social context of schooling, there is no question that in functioning school systems such as those in most of Australia, the quality of teaching is the most decisive factor in what students achieve in school.

More specifically, quality teaching can contribute in the following ways:

- For schools, establishing a systematic program to support quality teaching declares a clear priority to focus school plans and teacher energies on core business.
- For teachers, a systemic focus on quality teaching reinforces the important recognition that all teachers have the capacity to deliver high quality teaching.
- For students, high quality teaching provides improved educational outcomes. This includes students from social backgrounds normally associated with educational disadvantage.
- For both teachers and students, high quality teaching provides more satisfying classrooms.

A shared vision of what Quality Teaching is: There are several reasons why a shared vision of Quality Teaching matters. First, such a vision places an emphasis on what teachers actually do with students and provides a framework for them to make judgements about the quality of their interactions in terms of the learning that is promoted (Darling-Hammond and Youngs, 2002; Rowan, 1996). While this may seem an obvious point, it provides a level of specificity beyond most professional standards frameworks for teaching (which tend to focus on general, broader components of professional practice than what happens in classrooms).
Second, having a shared vision of teaching means that teachers have a common, professional language for discussing, analysing, and debating their core business (Louis, et al, 1995). Having a shared vision of teaching does not necessarily mean that all teachers agree with that vision, nor should we ever expect full agreement in a lively profession; but, it does mean teachers have a shared language with which to articulate their disparate views about teaching and with which to both enliven and deepen their professional conversations in the interest of student learning.

Third, having a shared vision of teaching provides a means by which teachers can make their work explicit to students and parents. It is reasonable to expect that teachers will develop a specialised language for talk with each other about their work – but if that language is not widely shared among teachers, it is more difficult to communicate effectively with students and parents (who do not necessarily share the professional understanding of teaching expected of teachers themselves). The fact that Quality Teaching was designed to work in all year levels, and across all KLAs, is a strength in this regard. No doubt, teachers have even more specialised understandings of their work based on the area of expertise. Parents and students, however, communicate with all teachers, across all professional lines. Having a professional language representing a shared vision of teaching will facilitate teachers’ efforts to assist parents and students in understanding why things are taught as they are (Louis, et al, 1996).

The importance of a shared language about teaching has been demonstrated many times in research, for all of the reasons noted above. Selecting only parts of the current Quality Teaching framework or re-working specific elements or dimensions of the model might satisfy the desire of some people to align Quality Teaching with their own professional preferences, but it does so at the expense of the benefits that come from a shared vision and language. The Quality Teaching framework offers considerable scope for professional judgement and individual style to shape its translation into specific school, classroom, and community contexts. We recommend engagement with what it does offer, reiterating its basis in solid research about how best to improve student outcomes (see Ladwig and King, 2003).

A mandate for schools to dedicate resources and time to the improvement of teaching:
Schools face demands from a plethora of legitimate sources. In the midst of these demands, schools need a clear mandate from the highest authority possible to legitimate the local use of time and resources for the continual improvement of teaching. Teaching is a highly complex and dynamic practice. It isn’t something that is learned once and done well forevermore. In a general sense, quality teaching is something that requires continual reflection and renewal. School leaders need to exercise the authority and refine the necessary skills with which to drive such productive use of school resources in relation to pedagogy. Without a clear central mandate, that recognises teaching as the core business of schools and quality teaching as the means to strengthen that core, school energies are to easily diverted and fragmented among a host of other concerns that have relatively little impact on student learning (Newmann and Associates, 1996; Newmann, King and Rigdon, 1997; Newmann, King and Youngs, 2000).

In a more specific sense, the NSW Quality Teaching model has been designed to advance current teaching practices and set very high standards for teachers in NSW public schools. At the same time, schools now have the responsibility to set their own professional learning agendas. The Quality Teaching model provides a direct scaffold on which school leaders can build their local initiatives. It is readily possible, and has been the experience of many newly decentralised systems, for schools to exercise a mandate to focus on improving teaching by adopting all of the latest educational fads, or by responding to the latest headline. The NSW Quality Teaching model outlines enduring characteristics of teaching, built on the knowledge generated by respected
traditions of educational research that can support longer term strategic planning for teachers
professional learning that can yield lasting improvements in pedagogy and student outcomes.

A reasonable, consistent and manageable set of systemic demands and supports: For schools
to be able to manage a mandate to focus on *Quality Teaching*, the system needs to manage more
strategically and parsimoniously the competing demands placed on, and supports provided to,
schools in the interest of improving pedagogy. These competing demands and supports include
many legitimate and necessary functions of the school system. However, the centrality of quality
teaching as the core business of schools needs to be continually reiterated. Maintaining this clear
focus includes minimising the number and impact of passing government interests and fashionable
reform trends brought to bear on schools, as well as providing practical support to schools in the
form of highly trained, skilled personnel who can guide schools in their programs to improve
pedagogy (Newmann et al, 2001).

A coordinated curriculum – assessment – pedagogy system: One of the most difficult sources of
competing interests faced by schools is the complicated nexus of required curricula and assessments
in NSW. A simple observation is that some of the existing mechanisms for student assessment and
some parts of state syllabi are not internally consistent with each other, or with what is known about
how to best help students learn well (King, Youngs, Ladwig, 2003). While substantial work has
been directed toward bringing syllabi into a more coherent alignment, those efforts will always be
open to competing interests since the Board of Studies in NSW must represent all sectors of
schooling (which by definition have differing clienteles). Bringing the assessment system into closer
alignment has been at the heart of the Secondary Principals’ current concerns for reviewing the
School Certificate. Initiatives from new national assessment mechanisms similarly may not be
obviously consistent with the demands of NSW syllabi. Thus, teachers in NSW government
schools are faced with many tensions, if not direct contradictions, from the various systems
designed to support teaching and learning itself (even before we consider all those that are not about
teaching and learning directly) (Hatten, 2001).

Teachers need a reasonably consistent set of professional instruments with which to work. When it
comes to improving students’ learning, that set includes curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.
Since the current NSW *Quality Teaching* model builds from the same body of research that has
guided some of the recent shifts in the HSC and its accompanying syllabi, there is substantial
consistency from which further efforts can move forward.

Schools need instructional leaders: Teaching is fundamentally about applying high level
principles and deep professional knowledge in concrete, everyday situations with real people in
diverse contexts. High quality teaching requires the exercise of extensive expertise. For such
expertise to be exercised in schools, there need to be strong professional communities bound by a
strong sense of collective responsibility for improving student learning. Such school capacities
depend on active, highly competent, and confident instructional leaders working everyday in
schools with teachers to refine teaching (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood and Prestine, 2002). At the
base of such instructional leadership must lie the firm belief that all teachers are capable of
delivering high quality lessons and assessment tasks. In sites where only certain teachers are seen
as highly capable, the instructional leader feels no mandate to work closely with all staff. In the
same way that *Quality Teaching* is premised on the capacity of all students to learn, so too is
*Quality Teaching* premised on the capacity of all teachers to teach well.

A reasonable pace of change: The rapid pace of change in education over the past few decades has
come at a price. In systems around the world, teachers and school leaders have experienced change
fatigue. One of the strengths of the NSW *Quality Teaching* model is that it acknowledges and
builds on what many high quality teachers are already doing. Pursuing improvements in teaching, seeking quality teaching, does not require wholesale change, but does ask teachers to carefully reflect on their current practices and refine what they are doing. It is readily possible to begin engaging in the processes of quality teaching by taking small steps: redesigning one lesson, refining one assessment task, teaching differently for one day. For this to happen, however, the overall pace of change schools and teachers face needs careful management, steering, and a clear ordering of priorities.

**Time for developing, enacting and analysing pedagogical experiences and outcomes:** Teachers would be the first to recognise that much of what they have experienced in the name of teacher professional development has had little impact on their teaching practice. This means that many teachers have not experienced truly effective professional learning and, because of its differences from much common practice, they may not recognise certain activities as professional development at all. Unfortunately, solid research findings about effective teacher professional learning are as rare as teachers’ experience of it. However, recent research has begun to tease out some essential characteristics of professional learning that does positively impact on teaching (Borko, 2004; King and Newmann, 2000; King, 2002).

While external knowledge and fresh stimuli are sometimes very useful, professional learning is not just what is delivered by those from outside of a particular school. One of the best ways to improve teachers’ professional learning is for teachers themselves to reflect on records of what they are doing. Records of practice, such as student work samples, assessment tasks and programs, are powerful tools for the analysis of professional practice. Some of the most effective professional learning involves teachers working in groups, intensively, to interrogate and refine their teaching work. Practices such as these are not complicated, but they are all too rare in the daily work of teachers. They do require a shared language, a defensible set of quality criteria about teaching, (such as are provided by the *Quality Teaching* model), and time. Each of the needs identified above will assist in freeing up and making the time needed for deep professional learning about *Quality Teaching*; but there needs to be a much broader recognition of the need for time to be dedicated to professional learning and deeper understanding of effective ways to use that time. As a specific instance, in addressing the increasingly urgent challenges of recruiting and retaining good teachers for NSW public schools, there are no better tools than those which assist teachers to do their main work well.

**How can the system further support these needs?**

The NSW Department of Education and Training has made a bold and critical commitment to quality teaching as a long-term strategic priority and has put substantial resources and structures behind that commitment. Professional learning funds are now in schools, with quality teaching as one of the named priority areas around which schools are advised to direct their own professional learning needs. This represents an important opportunity for schools to solidify their priorities. Regional support is available to schools to assist in their pedagogical improvement efforts, through personnel dedicated to quality teaching, but also through the host of regional structures and programs designed to support schools. Keeping quality teaching as a main priority at the regional level will be critical in supporting school improvement of pedagogy (Leithwood, 1995; Floden, et al, 1988). As noted above, principals are central in guiding priorities and practices at the school level. Just as the system needs to support principals in operating as instructional leaders, principals can make decisions to both free and require teachers to focus on the quality of teaching.
The Department has also developed accessible materials designed to enable schools to work fairly independently in engaging with quality teaching. These materials not only lay out the NSW Quality Teaching model and provide teachers with tools which can be used for the analysis of classroom practice and assessment practice, but also provide guidelines for how the materials can be used. Schools that have not yet engaged, or engaged deeply, with the available resources should find the tools useful. The resources provide schools and teachers with practical ways of moving toward higher quality pedagogy. The Quality Teaching website and Teaching and Learning Exchange are also important resources provided by the NSW DET to assist in this agenda. The NSW DET has in place many programs that can support, and have in the past supported, pedagogical reform. These include the Priority Action Schools Program, the Priority Schools Funding Program, and the good use that has been made of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program.

Quality teaching, in both the general and specific sense, depends on the commitments, planning, and professional judgements of teachers and school leaders. Quality teaching requires deep understanding and hard work. Given the complexity of teaching, there can be no simple recipes or clever tricks that will deliver improved outcomes for all students in all year levels and in all subject areas. Teachers’ enormous capacities for producing good teaching must underpin serious efforts to improve pedagogy.

What is in place in the NSW system is a good balance of both central and local supports. Current school reform research suggests that the most effective system is one in which central authorities establish standards, provide clear models and expectations, and accountability mechanisms, but leaves the specific issues of implementation to the professional judgement of those who know the local setting best, namely school leaders and teachers (Leithwood and Duke, 1999; Leithwood and Earl, 2000). In a sense, the current NSW system will provide a test of that thesis, if it continues to provide central leadership that matches the de-centralised and localised financial and structural arrangements implemented from the beginning of 2004.

**Steps for the Future**

The current work on quality teaching in which NSW teachers and schools are engaged will undoubtedly lead to further and new developments in relation to pedagogy. In the first instance, The University of Newcastle and the Department of Education and Training are currently conducting a longitudinal study of the implications of the quality teaching initiative for student outcomes and teachers’ professional learning. The findings of that study will assuredly lead to modification of the Quality Teaching model and to recommendations about how best to support teacher professional learning.

In addition, however, there is a range of questions related to quality teaching that need substantial attention and more research. In general, there is a need to bring to lasting fruition Vinson’s recommendation for the development of a clearinghouse of curricular and instructional material developed by teachers, as they work with the Quality Teaching model. Pedagogy can not live apart from what is being taught, and quality teaching can only be made real in the synthesis of instruction, curriculum and assessment. The material developed by teachers in the coming years will represent enormous effort and professional generosity on the part of a generation of teachers that ought not be lost as the teaching force evolves.

Further, three specific areas in need of attention are, 1) working through the implications of quality teaching for specific KLAs and stages of schooling, 2) understanding the degree to which, and manner in which, quality teaching meets the needs of special educators and their students, and 3)
developing a deeper understanding of how quality teaching works for Indigenous students across the full range of contexts in which they study. Each of these specific areas has solid grounding on which to work toward a more coherent systemic understanding of quality teaching for students in all NSW government schools; but at the moment they are relatively independent from each other. The opportunity now exists to clarify where commonality can exist for all teachers in understanding the core of their profession in NSW; and, in so doing, clarify what needs to be unique across the various contexts and classroom of NSW.

The future of quality teaching in NSW government schools is bright. As a system, NSW government schools are well positioned to improve on what they already achieve and to carry that work much further, well into the future. If the core business of schools and teachers truly is maintained as the core business at all levels of the NSW government school system, advertisements about the quality of teaching in the public schools of NSW will not be needed. It will be general knowledge that NSW government schools ‘teach your children well.’

REFERENCES


