

Exploring the  
experiences of  
new teachers  
in working with  
students at risk of  
disengagement.

**FULL REPORT**

**Ian Seal**

**2009**

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Doxa Youth  
Foundation  
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# Foreword

Doxa Youth Foundation was established as a philanthropic organisation over 35 years ago, and since that time, has worked hard to create opportunities for disadvantaged young people, with a particular focus on education.

Research shows very clearly that a young person's life outcomes will be improved as a result of every year they stay connected to education. Of course, for many of the young people that we see, that can be difficult.

Students can become disengaged from education and leave school early for many reasons – inappropriate curriculum and learning activities, a failure by schools to cater for a diversity of learning styles, the quality of teacher/student relationships, the background and family lives of students, and a young person's own capabilities, are all factors that can play a role.

It is obvious that no one single initiative will work, and that a range of strategies are required to promote greater engagement with education which involve students, schools, families, and other organisations within the community.

However, one strategy that we believe is fundamental, is increasing the capacity of teachers in mainstream schools to effectively work with students at risk of disengagement. This report highlights that many pre-service teachers feel ill-prepared for this role and the need for further action is evident.

Our great hope is that this report will provide a catalyst for greater attention to be directed towards addressing this issue, and as a result more young people will stay connected to education enabling them to fulfil their potential and lead productive and meaningful lives.

**Julie L Rolfe**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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# Introduction

In November 2008, Doxa Youth Foundation (Doxa) commissioned a study to investigate the extent to which newly graduated teachers are prepared by their pre-service training for working with, supporting and engaging those students at risk of disengagement from mainstream schooling. Doxa has significant experience in the provision of programs targeted at young people marginalised from mainstream education, and funds two schools that provide alternative education programs for students in Years 5 to 9 referred from mainstream schools due to their at risk status with regard to educational engagement. Doxa recognises that such alternative education settings are but one of a number of strategies required to ensure that all students enjoy the greatest opportunity to remain engaged in and connected to education, and wish to identify strategies that strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools to work with those students at risk of disengagement. From this research, Doxa hopes to encourage and support tertiary teacher training institutions to provide greater curriculum emphasis on student engagement and meeting the needs of disengaged students, and on connecting pre-service teachers to alternative education settings.

Engagement in education is consistently shown to be a strong predictor not only of academic outcomes from schooling, but also of a range of long term outcomes, such as overall health and wellbeing, employment status and income level. Those young people who disengage from school and learning at an early age are at increased risk of various health and social concerns, which in turn leads to a number of social and economic costs. Behavioural issues in the classroom, arguably an outcome of student disengagement, have been shown to be the most significant cause of concern for new secondary school teachers and are strongly implicated in the decision that many new teachers make to leave teaching for another career (AEU, 2009). Under the new *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools Student Engagement Policy Guidelines* (DEECD, 2009) all Victorian government schools are required to develop a Student Engagement Policy and this requirement will be included on the School Compliance Checklist from 2010. Government schools and school networks are accountable for 'student engagement and wellbeing' as one of three key student outcomes under the School and Network Accountability and Improvement Framework (DEECD, 2009).

Specifically, the aim of this research is to *explore the extent to which graduate teachers are adequately prepared to teach school students who are disengaged or at risk of becoming disengaged, and identify strategies to facilitate changes in tertiary institutions to address the issues identified in the research*. In developing such research, it must be recognised that the term "school engagement" is used in the education sector to describe broad, complex and multifactorial issues, behaviours and circumstances. While considerable evidence (Hattie, 2003; Rowe, 2003) shows us that the quality of teaching is a crucial element in determining academic outcomes for students, there are a range of other important factors. The success of each teacher in maintaining and supporting students at risk of disengagement is due not just to their skills as a teacher, but also to their relationships with families in the school community, their attitudes and exposure to diversity, their personal experiences of schooling, the broader school culture in which they work, and many other factors. To take just one of these, a school's culture may either support or undermine attempts by teachers to work with the specific needs of at risk children, encourage or discourage critical exploration by teachers of issues at the school level that impact on student engagement, and, of course, may support or undermine attempts by any individual teacher to build positive connections to schooling for those students marginalised or at risk. The best efforts of a skilled teacher in developing an enabling, nurturing and stimulating learning environment in their classroom can be undermined by a negative culture across the school more generally. For this reason a focus on building teacher skills through pre-service training needs to be seen as just one amongst several strategies required to ensure that students at risk of disengagement from schooling have every opportunity to remain connected to and engaged in mainstream education.

This report explores the understandings of 12 teachers in their first or second year of teaching regarding engagement and its causes, and the skills and strategies that they feel they need in order to work effectively with students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement. It draws from the literature on student engagement as comparison to the teachers' comments, to clarify why a focus on engagement is vital, and to identify the skills, expertise and characteristics required of teachers to engage, support and work with those students at risk of disengagement.

The 12 new teachers interviewed for this study are currently teaching across a number of suburban Melbourne schools. Eight are in secondary schools and four in primary. The tertiary institutions in which they gained their teaching qualifications are not identified in this study as a sample size of 12 can in no way be said to provide a representative sample. It was also very clear from the interviews that what was common in the experiences of these teachers in their pre-service courses was much greater than what was different - similar strengths and similar weaknesses were identified across all interviews. Further information about the interview process is outlined in Appendix One (Methodology).

As this study is intended as a catalyst for change, a range of key stakeholders were contacted regarding the study and its intended outcomes. These key stakeholders included six of Victoria's major tertiary teaching institutions, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Catholic Education Office, the Australian Education Union, the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals and the Victorian Principals Association.

The six universities with whom discussions were held provided valuable input to this report. They share Doxa's concern that graduate teachers may not be fully equipped for working with those students at risk of disengagement, and provided their own assessments of how this may best be addressed. Those assessments are detailed in this report, and contributed to some of the recommendations made at the end of the report.

All the key stakeholders contacted as part of this study expressed interest in the development of collaborative arrangements that may work to improve the learning experiences of students at risk of disengagement from school. This also informs the report's recommendations.

Overall then, this report develops an argument that it is essential that teachers have a comprehensive understanding of engagement, its causes and appropriate ways to tackle it; that currently many new teachers feel that they don't have that knowledge and those skills, and that pre-service education and training courses are a primary, but not the only, site at which these things must be learned and developed.

### **A note on terminology**

This report, along with a significant body of academic literature and practice wisdom, describes students as engaged in their learning, as disengaged, or as at risk of disengagement. It must be recognised that these are not three discrete and unchanging populations in our schools, and that a student's level of engagement in their school and their learning is a product of the social environment of the school, the quality of the learning experience and a range of other factors, not simply a characteristic of the student themselves. This means that the use of these terms as labels for individual students is generally inappropriate, particularly where it leads to expectations about that child's behaviour or academic outcomes that shift all responsibility for such behaviour and outcomes away from the teachers and the school, and solely on to the child themselves. In a stimulating, affirming and nurturing learning environment, less students will be disengaged or at risk of disengagement. In this report, the three terms are used as shorthand to describe the needs of students, and do not depict any actual cohorts of students.

# Understanding student engagement

## 1.1 What is “student engagement”?

Education theorists and classroom school teachers agree that engagement of students in the experience of learning is strongly associated with academic success. Much evidence would suggest that students who are strongly engaged in their learning also have a more positive sense of emotional wellbeing (Glover *et al.*, 2002). *Student engagement* is a concept discussed widely in many Australian classrooms and schools, but little interrogated. While graduate teachers interviewed for this project had similar ideas about how an ‘engaged’ or ‘disengaged’ student might behave in the class, they had diverse (and sometimes narrow) understandings of what might lead to disengagement from education and learning, and therefore how it might best be addressed. This diversity of opinion amongst graduate teachers is reflected in the academic literature on the subject, which proposes various and diverse conceptual frameworks for understanding and responding to student disengagement (Tadich, B. *et al.*, 2007; Harris, L., 2008; University of Minnesota, 2003). Any but the most broad definitions or frameworks may reduce our understanding of the complex processes that lead some students to learn effectively in the classroom while others do not.

Harris (2008), reviews a number of studies attempting to classify and understand engagement, and notes that whilst “one dimensional” models for describing and defining engagement (primarily focused on psychological or cognitive aspects of engagement) exist, several multi-dimensional models have also been described -

*Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) classify 44 engagement studies into behavioural, emotional, and cognitive categories. Behavioural engagement is student participation in academic, social, and extracurricular activities. Emotional engagement is considered to exist when students have positive attitudes and reactions towards school, teachers, learning, and peers. Cognitive engagement is thought to be present when students make personal investment into learning in a focused, strategic, and self-regulating way. Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that all three categories represent important dimensions of engagement and that more multidimensional research must be conducted..... However, this is just one multidimensional classification of engagement. Anderson, Christenson,*

*Sinclair, and Lehr (2004, p. 110) divide engagement into four types: behavioural, academic, cognitive, and psychological.*

In Anderson *et al.*'s classification, *academic* engagement refers specifically to time spent on learning, as opposed to *behavioural* engagement, which includes time spent participating in non-academic activities. The value of behavioural engagement has been questioned by some writers (Newmann, 1992) who point out that while a child is behaviourally engaged no actual learning may be taking place, and indeed that while their physical behaviour suggests they are engaged they may be thinking about or doing something other than the intended learning. Emotional (or psychological) engagement is similarly criticised, especially as a single-dimension model, as having positive feelings about one's school and one's self does not of itself guarantee improved learning or academic success. Also, as Harris (2008) points out, “*If the focus at school is on making students feel successful, there is the possibility that students will not be adequately challenged as the emphasis will be on easily mastered concepts where little failure would be anticipated*”. While, of course, student success can be achieved in other, more appropriate, ways than “dumbing down” the curriculum, this criticism remains valid while some teachers do not have the tools or the expertise to develop learning tasks that are scaffolded and supported for the diverse learning needs in the classroom.

The broader criticisms of behavioural and emotional engagement identified above are also valid, if one assumes a direct and linear path from these types of engagement to academic improvement. It must be recognised, however, that cognitive and academic engagement are both supported and facilitated by behavioural and emotional engagement, which create the conditions under which focussed, active learning can best take place. Behavioural engagement means that a student has the physical presence, readiness and focus necessary to learn best; emotional engagement creates functional psychological conditions for learning, and supports the relationships within peer groups and with teachers that facilitate robust academic interaction.

Multi-dimensional models of engagement inform the 2009 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Student Engagement Policy Guidelines, *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools*, that defines student engagement as having “three interrelated components: behavioural, emotional and cognitive”.

At the individual level, the term *student engagement* has been used to describe a willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending and participating in classes, completing work tasks, and following teachers’ directions (Chapman, 2003); showing sustained interest in learning activities, attempting challenging academic tasks, staying focused on complex challenges, and demonstrating enthusiasm, optimism and curiosity with regard to learning (Fletcher, 2005) and taking pride in their growing understanding and knowledge (Newmann, 1992). Willms (2003) describes student engagement as “a disposition towards learning, working with others and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students’ feelings that they belong at school, and in their participation in school activities”. Disengaged students are those seen to show little or no interest in learning, to not try or to give up easily, to express boredom, anxiety or anger about their presence in the classroom, and to be withdrawn or rebellious in their attitudes towards teachers and many of their peers (Chapman, 2003).

### How do graduate teachers identify engagement and disengagement?

Generally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, when asked to define or describe disengagement the graduate teachers in this study described those behaviours that disengaged students may display that impact most directly and immediately on classroom management -

*A disengaged kid is someone who is bored and because they're bored they look around and bounce off each other, and if they're told what to do they get angry... (Teacher 1)*

*The disengaged kids, even when they're set up for the work...they'll do anything but the work...they'll even sharpen their pens ten times, their eyes wander, they distract other people...as soon as you turn your back you see that they start playing with something else. (Teacher 2)*

*They're throwing paper around the room, talking to the other kids, not knowing what they need to do because they haven't been listening... (Teacher 4)*

*A disengaged student is someone who isn't paying attention, isn't doing the work and is not participating in any shape or form. They get distracted easily, fall asleep in class, can't sit still, and are moving around all over the place. (Teacher 5)*

*The disengaged students don't really wanna be there or don't like my subject. They say "I don't need maths", and if they feel that way, then they don't want to try. They just sleep, or they talk to the students next to them, or they get really loud and boisterous and just distract everyone...Then there are those that don't talk to anyone but just doodle in their books and are not focused. (Teacher 6)*

*A disengaged student is a student who is not interested in the school, the teacher or the work, who shows physical signs of being bored or unimpressed and is refusing to do work. (Teacher 7)*

*Engagement is the level to which a student is interested in their learning...asking questions, connecting their learning to other facets of their life, feeling enthusiastic and supported. A disengaged student is one who isn't listening, iPod in, being disruptive in class, sleeping, not coming to class, not submitting any work or doing any work in class...and shows no signs of caring about it when I talk to them about their experiences in the classroom. (Teacher 9)*

*The engaged students see the point of school and are willing to adjust their behaviour as a result. (Teacher 10)*

*They're disruptive, not achieving in any aspect of assessment, not questioning anything...it's not a singular problem, it's a mixture of these little things. (Teacher 11)*

*Someone who doesn't relate to content, teacher or peers; and may or may not be struggling academically. (Teacher 12)*

This focus on seeing disengagement through the lens of particular (and generally disruptive) behaviours in the classroom may mean that teachers are not identifying many of the students at risk of disengagement. Only Teacher 9 identified “not coming to class” as an indication of disengagement, and school refusal was not mentioned at all. Social isolation, in the classroom and/or the playground, was not identified as a concern by any of those interviewed. Similarly, classroom readiness (arriving on time, having the correct books and materials, etc.) was not mentioned. Concerns that may arise after knowing a student for a period of time (i.e. changes in level of participation or academic achievement) were also not mentioned.

While none of those interviewed referred to the multi-dimensional models of engagement described above or appeared to couch their responses to this question in ways that suggested a familiarity with such models, a number of interviewees identified both cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement, alongside the behavioural component, as indicators of a student's overall level of engagement in learning. That these aspects of engagement were described less often than behavioural concerns probably reflects the reality that both cognitive and emotional disengagement are likely to be expressed behaviourally.

The focus on the behavioural expression of disengagement ('acting out') is evident not just in the way that teachers identify students who are disengaged, but also in the ways that teachers, and schools, respond to disengagement. In a thus far unpublished study of a small number of schools in a community of low socio-economic status, Seal (2009) noted that whilst the annual Attitudes to School survey indicated that girls in a number of schools were significantly more disengaged than boys, a number of special programs had been established to support disengaged boys *and none for girls*. The acting out behaviours of the boys were responded to through new programs, but the disengagement of girls as determined through surveys was not. It is interesting to note that none of the graduate teachers interviewed for this study identified gender as a factor in the types of behaviours they expected to see in disengaged students.

A number of the comments from graduate teachers (Teachers 2, 5, 7 and 10) above, imply conscious choice by disengaged students to be disengaged. While choice clearly does play a role in someone's participation in learning and other activities, this must be seen against a good understanding of the underlying causes of disengagement; the ways in which anxiety, depression or lack of academic understanding may be expressed by students; and the myriad ways in which curriculum choice, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, school culture and many other issues impact on student engagement. In order to respond appropriately and in a timely manner to students at risk of disengagement, teachers need to be aware of the range of ways in which these students may present. They need to understand the complex interplay of emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement, such as persistence, enjoyment, the feelings of mastery that come with academic success, challenge, meaning and relevance, social participation and confidence.

### Overlapping terms and concepts

Doxa Youth Foundation's interest in engagement is in ensuring that young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have the greatest opportunity for participation and success in education. Engagement is thus seen as a broad and encompassing term, aligned with the multi-dimensional models described above. Other terms such as *school connectedness*, and concerns such as *school attendance and school retention*, are seen as important components of engagement. This section briefly outlines an understanding of these terms and issues and their relationship to engagement.

### School connectedness

The term school connectedness corresponds with definitions and understandings of emotional or psychological engagement, as they are identified in the models described above. While school connectedness, or emotional engagement in schooling, is not of itself seen as indicative of a disposition towards learning and academic achievement directly, evidence suggests a clear and strong relationship. The *Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness* (University of Minnesota, 2003), a significant summary of the evidence based research on engagement from the University of Minnesota made the following key point –

*Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The critical requirements for feeling connected include students' experiencing:*

- *High academic expectation and rigor coupled with support for learning*
- *Positive adult-student relationships*
- *Safety: both physical and emotional*

Programs focused on building student connectedness to school, such as the Gatehouse Project (Glover *et al*, 2002), aim to improve both academic outcomes and emotional wellbeing by strengthening the positive attachments that students have to their school.

### Student wellbeing

Student wellbeing and engagement, particularly emotional engagement, share a clear and strong relationship. Having positive attitudes and reactions towards school, teachers, learning, and peers (a definition of emotional engagement) is a component of emotional wellbeing. Teachers and schools that demonstrate appropriate care and concern for the wellbeing of their students strengthen their relationships with those students.

Engagement and wellbeing thus have a range of common antecedents. A stimulating, nurturing classroom has benefits for both engagement and wellbeing.

### **School attendance, retention and refusal**

Whilst student behaviour provides teachers with the most stark indication of student disengagement, school attendance and retention act as proxy measures of engagement that are comparable between classrooms, schools and communities. School refusal, where it is identified as such and associated with anxiety, hatred or other negative attitudes towards school, is perhaps the most obvious and extreme measure of disengagement -

Conceptual models for understanding school retention, such as Lamb *et al*'s (2004), accord strongly with our understandings of the causes and co-factors of student disengagement -

*...patterns of student retention are based on a complex interplay between a range of factors including social and demographic (e.g. gender, achievement, student aspirations and motivations, family SES\*, ethnicity, indigenous status, health and disability, homelessness), regional and economic (e.g. urban, rural or remote, youth labour market, unemployment, part-time employment, industry structure, community links), school policies and context (e.g. sector, school quality, teacher quality, pedagogical effectiveness, school resourcing, school organisation) and the policy environment (e.g. system, state, and commonwealth policies, curriculum and qualification framework, income support). Regional and school context is important. Basic patterns of retention linked to individual and demographic factors are modified by regional and economic factors as well as by school policies and context, and by broader policy setting at a system and State or Territory level. (Lamb *et al*, 2004)*

## **1.2 What causes disengagement?**

Tadich *et al* (2007) identified two “explanatory frameworks” in the literature to account for student lack of engagement in schooling -

*The first, drawing predominantly on curriculum development and pedagogical theories embedded within a broader context of social change, proposes that a major problem is an inappropriate curricular content for these learners (Luke *et al.*, 2003; Pendergast *et al.*, 2005), with the need for students to engage with rich tasks and meaningful activities in an integrated curriculum that focuses on big ideas, rather than piecemeal, segmented, trivial content.*

As noted by Tadich *et al*, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), and curriculum frameworks in various other states, have been designed with these concerns in mind. They note that -

*Researchers within this broad curricular focus, drawing on Bernstein (1996), Bourdieu (1998), and others, have proposed the need for altered pedagogical practices, with debate focusing on different options, such as an integrated curriculum, group learning through project work, and more student oriented choices in teaching and learning methods (Hunter, 2007; Wallace, Sheffield, Rennie & Venville, 2007).*

One of the graduate teachers interviewed for this report drew predominantly on such understandings in providing explanations for disengagement amongst students at her school -

*Not receiving work that's appropriate for them. Understimulated by the work....(At uni we) ... looked at learning styles, the thinking curriculum and integrated curriculum, and that's what engagement is all about. I think that was perfect learning for engaging kids. (Teacher 7)*

As the quote identifies, this teacher, unlike any other interviewed, felt satisfied that her pre-service training had given her the skills required to work with students at risk of disengagement. Her definition of a disengaged student was “a student who is not interested in the school, the teacher or the work, who shows physical signs of being bored or unimpressed and is refusing to do work”.

The second framework identified by Tadich *et al* sees psychological and socio-cultural factors, including factors such as the backgrounds and family lives of students, as causal in student disengagement. This includes research that identifies “learners’ lack of generative adaptive strategies for knowing how to improve their learning (Dweck, 2000; Sullivan, McDonough & Prain, 2005; Zimmermann, 2000, 2001).” More broadly within this second framework, Tadich *et al* identified researchers, such as Munns and Martin (2005), who “claimed that motivation to succeed at school related to how students perceived themselves, school, and schoolwork, whereas engagement was defined as behaviours arising from these perceptions. Students may be motivated to value school and be effective learners through such behaviours as persistence, planning and student management, or they may dislike school, or be anxious, or avoid failure through behaviours such as disengagement and self handicapping.”

\*Socio-economic status

A number of the interviewees for this report responded to questions about the 'causes' of disengagement in ways that drew on such understandings -

*Perhaps (they) don't quite have the IQ needed and they're going home and they're not privileged at home with the sort of substantial conversations and support other kids might have...It's about their social situation and their background... I've got kids who are up til 1am on school nights watching TV, and they come and tell me about it the next day. It's about their ability, and whether their teacher is addressing their ability group. And underneath it all, I think it's about their self-worth and how they perceive themselves... (Teacher 3)*

*The Afghanis, the Iraqis, the Sudanese, they've had such different experiences of schooling, we need to know how to work with them and also where to seek outside support if the school can't provide it...half the time these kids just sit in class doing nothing, and it's sad because it's not their fault that they've come from a war torn country and lived as refugees for years of their lives....(Teacher 6)*

*They're often disadvantaged at home...socio-economically, emotionally...They have got so much else going on in their lives that they really can't even focus on what's happening in the classroom. (Teacher 11)*

The greatest number of respondents gave responses that showed they understood disengagement as coming from both the areas identified by Tadich et al. Most commonly, what linked the two frameworks (integrated and relevant curriculum content and teaching methods, and psychological and socio-cultural issues) was discussion about the impact that socio-economic status and family problems had on levels of school engagement -

*...They don't see the point of the subject, just have no interest - it doesn't connect to their life, they just don't care, they don't see education as important...as valuable... as something no one can take away from them..they don't have pride within themselves when they learn something or know something, I don't think it's been encouraged or ingrained at home, I don't think they have good role models at home...(Teacher 6)*

*I try really hard to put myself in these kids' shoes. They make me understand how really lucky I was growing up that I had parents who loved and supported me and were always there for me, and who had the money to enhance my educational opportunities and show me so much....and I know a lot of these kids don't get all that. (Teacher 12)*

*They tend to have trouble with things like reading or understanding what it is you're asking them to do...or they take it in a different way..and they get in to this big mess in their head and get frustrated 'cause they can see everyone else getting it and if that's been going on for years they can see themselves getting further and further behind, and frustration, boredom and anger kicks in and you've got a fairly mixed up individual that is in a spot where they don't want to be and they're forced to be in that spot for 6 or 7 hours a day, and that can be fairly difficult. And I guess the home life of some students can be difficult as well, and, I haven't personally seen the home life of my students, but I can sort of assume it's not the ideal situation for some of them and ...yeah, if you're being sent to school without breakfast or lunch it's gonna be pretty tough to try and learn anything, you're just worrying about how hungry you are. (Teacher 1)*

As will be discussed later, graduate teachers who identified these types of concerns were the ones who felt least able to address disengagement in their classrooms, and least satisfied with the skills and knowledge their pre-service teacher training provided them.

A number of the interviewees suggested that disengaged students were "bored", "don't really wanna be there" or were "not interested". While these attitudes may all be real, only two respondents suggested that these, and other, more disruptive, behaviours, may mask learning difficulties, psycho-social difficulties or other concerns. No teacher referred to specific learning difficulties, and the impact that these may have on engagement.

A number of other concerns are crucial in conceptualising disengagement and its causes. These include the risks inherent in creating and using a term like "disengaged student"; the ascription of blame on to young people for their disengagement ("A disengaged student is a student who is not interested in the school, the teacher or the work, who shows physical signs of being bored or unimpressed and is refusing to do work." [Teacher 7]) or on to teachers, or families; and the tendency to seek simple, singular reasons for the complex circumstances that lead to disengagement.

Defining disengagement and using such definitions to identify “disengaged students” risks pigeon holing and stereotyping some young people. The ways in disengaged students are responded to by some teachers may in turn exacerbate the very conditions that lead to disengagement, such as exclusionary practices, low expectations and poor teacher-student relationships. As noted by Owen, J., McLeod, J. and Andrew, P (2008) “the term at risk can sometimes be used as a ‘catch-all’ phrase to exclude difficult students because they do not fit the structures of the school or the comfort levels of teachers and school leaders”. Hixson and Tinzmann (1996) suggest that “too many educators have become satisfied with not reaching certain students”. As well as creating additional risks for those students who aren’t engaged, such practices, combined with a limited recognition of socio-cultural differences, narrow understandings of what is appropriate learning behaviour, misrepresentation or misunderstandings of particular young people’s behaviours and attitudes, stereotypes and the teacher’s failure to recognise particular student needs may all lead to the incorrect identification of students as disengaged, with potential negative consequences for their future learning.

Blaming young people, teachers or families for disengagement misrepresents the complexity of the processes and circumstances that, over time, lead some students to disconnect from education and formal learning. Focusing too much on the behaviours and attitudes of individual students may lead to a failure to recognise social and systemic concerns in the classroom and school. Holden and Dwyer (1992), describing the reasons that some young people leave school early, use students’ own perceptions to move away from blame to understanding systemic concerns. They identify early leaving as caused by -

- A non-stimulating environment that has no discernible relation to the wider community or the adult world to which the young person is beginning to gain access;
- The lack of support and referral to appropriate agencies for young people who are experiencing problems in their personal and academic lives;
- Negative teacher / student relationships which are propped up by rules and regulations which disallow young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community.

Critically too, the “blame game” limits the possibilities of creating collaborative, participatory solutions to disengagement that include and value the input of students, teachers and families.

Simplistic understandings of disengagement and its causes lead to simplistic, and often misguided, attempts to address it. As Butler *et al* (2005) note “...disengagement from school is best considered not as an event but rather as a process influenced by interaction between a young person, his or her parents / carers, teachers, and the school and community contexts in which he or she lives and grows. Disengagement is therefore likely to be best addressed by multiple integrated strategies involving students, schools, families, and other organisations within the community”.

### 1.3 Why does engagement matter?

The Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness, a major literature review from the University of Minnesota (2003), explored the positive impacts of school connectedness, which (as previously discussed) equates with emotional engagement. They found that the evidence from research supported the following -

*Increasing the number of students connected to school is likely to impact critical accountability measures, such as:*

- Academic performance;
- Incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism;
- Absenteeism;
- School completion rates.

*Strong scientific evidence demonstrates that increased student connection to school promotes:*

- Educational motivation;
- Classroom engagement;
- Improved school attendance.

*These three factors in turn increase academic achievement.*

*Likewise, there is strong evidence that a student who feels connected to school is less likely to exhibit:*

- Disruptive behaviour;
- School violence;
- Substance and tobacco use;
- Emotional distress;
- Early age of first sex.

Associations such as these (particularly substance and tobacco use, and emotional distress), beginning in early adolescence when the risk of disengagement is greatest, have been shown to have long term impacts on health and wellbeing through adulthood. Other long term impacts have been noted by the Foundation for Young Australians and the Education Foundation (2008), such as that in May 2008, 20% of school leavers who had completed Year 12 were not fully engaged in study or work compared with 40% of those who left school before Year 12 completion. A third of early school leavers were found to be only marginally attached to the labour market seven years after leaving school. This in turn was found to lead to significant social and economic costs in higher social welfare, health and criminal prevention costs and lower tax revenue. These costs mean that it is economic good sense to develop alternative education settings for those young people most disengaged from mainstream schooling, but even more appropriate, on economic, social and equity grounds, to prevent disengagement from schooling through altered practices in mainstream schooling. Alternative settings are relatively expensive, unable to meet the demand for their services, and prevention is always better than cure.

The Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2006) state that “Engagement in learning is critical to academic achievement and providing students with the understandings, knowledge, skills and confidence to move on into training, employment and higher education. ... Engagement is critical because it makes a difference to academic achievement and fosters in students a sense of belonging and self-worth.”

The disengagement of a minority of students also impacts on others in the school - teachers and fellow students. Students who are not engaged are likely to be disruptive of the learning of others, and in many classrooms the behaviour of a minority leads to reduced opportunity for all. Student behaviour is majorly implicated in teacher dissatisfaction, “burnout” and leaving. The Australian Education Union, in its annual survey of new teachers found that in 2008 behaviour management was the second most significant concern for all new teachers (66.1%), and for new secondary school teachers it was the biggest concern (71.4%). 50.3% of new teachers said that they would not stay in public education for longer than 10 years, and 5.8% said that they would not stay 3 years. Again, student behaviour was cited as the second most significant reason for this (AEU, 2009). A considerable majority of those saying they would leave public education insisted that they would leave the education system altogether.

Recent policy and legislative changes to the compulsory schooling age mean that disengaged students will remain at school longer. This increases the responsibility of teachers and schools to work effectively with these students.

Disengagement, and the ways in which many teachers and schools understand and respond to it, considerably undermines public education’s stated goal of creating greater equity, and increasing opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and communities. West-Burnham, Farrar and Otero (2007) point out that in “the decade of school improvement”, while average academic achievement has improved, the gap between those who achieve and others is getting wider. As many of the graduate teachers interviewed for this report identified (see previous discussion) socio-economic disadvantage and family problems are seen as causal in many cases of disengagement, and there are strong associations between disengagement and the social context of a child’s life. This understanding must not lead to stereotyping and lowered expectations for these students. This issue is addressed further below.

### 1.4 Preventing and responding to disengagement

In the context of this study, “responding to disengagement” refers to supporting individual students to stay engaged or to become re-engaged in learning, and addressing underlying causes of disengagement at individual, classroom and whole-school levels. This clarification is added here because many models and strategies for addressing disengagement focus only on one or other of these aspects, and also because this writer has, in other projects, observed and interacted with teachers who respond to individual students who are disengaged or at risk by isolating them or providing “dumbed-down”, time - and attention-filling activities that have no connection to the curriculum being learnt by other students, but enable them (the teachers) to work with the bulk of their students without distraction. “As long as they are quiet so that the other students can learn” seems to be the philosophy here.

Tadich *et al* (2007) identified three broad approaches from the literature that aim to address concerns with student disengagement. These are (a) *large scale curricular re-conceptualisation to make learning tasks more motivating, meaningful, and attuned to students' developmental needs*, (b) *an emphasis on teaching strategies that focus explicitly on how students can succeed as learners*, and (c) *programs that address negative student attitudes, beliefs, understandings and values that impede engagement with learning* (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Munns & Martin, 2005). Others focus much more on the relationships students have with their teachers, their peers, and others in the school (Butler *et al*, 2005). The Wingspread Declaration (University of Minnesota, 2003), focussing much more on school and classroom level interventions and strategies, summarised the research evidence on what promotes school connectedness as follows -

- *Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students.*
- *Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.*
- *Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families (such as those supported by SEL programming).*
- *Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.*
- *Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.*
- *Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.*

Irvin (2006), in her review of the literature in this area, identified the need to develop student skills for participation, build student relationships with teachers and other adults in the community, improve curriculum and pedagogy, and, additionally, to create community programs to meet student's physical and psychological needs. She points out that each of these strategies implies a different focus for the work of engaging students, and that even within these categories, there are different and sometimes competing ideas regarding how engagement is best supported. These differences can be seen in system wide approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, such as those promoted by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, which on the one hand recommend individual learning pathways and curriculum tailored to specific needs, and on the other promote standardised testing as the primary measure of student success and age rather than academic ability as the criteria for promoting all students to the next level of their schooling.

A number of the graduate teachers interviewed for this research appeared to be strongly influenced by arguments for improving engagement by focusing on pedagogy, curriculum content and diverse learning tasks -

*Some of what we teach is a bit boring. It's gotta be hands on and visual. Using games, and computers...making it practical and meaningful for them...focusing on their interests. (Teacher 2)*

For some of those interviewed, adopting this framework suggests the need to trial a smorgasboard of approaches for presenting curriculum content, in order to find those that engage the particular cohort of students in each class. This was leading to considerable frustration -

*The disengaged students are the ones who haven't got the passion for the subject or...haven't found something to connect with. I do visual stuff, and writing and testing, and try new things all the time, but nothing works. (Teacher 4)*

*I try to make the subjects interactive, to give the kids ownership over what they're learning, to make stuff really visual...I try to explain why each topic is useful and relevant...I try different methods and strategies for getting content across...Some kids hate school with a holy passion, and there's nothing you can do about it...like, with one class I was trying every single multiple intelligence and I was still getting nothing from them...and I understand why uni says that every student can be engaged but I think it's also important to be realistic rather than just utopian...They beat multiple intelligences into us, if nothing else, and I tried everything over a period of a few weeks, and sure, different things worked for different kids, but I never had a period where all the students were engaged. (Teacher 5)*

Other teachers identified teacher-student relationships and classroom culture as the major focus of their attempts to engage all students -

*Firstly, I try to use diagnostic tools for the first week, the first couple of days, but see, I'm more relationship driven, and I try to get to know the kids, and if the student is not interested in who I am or if I've shown that I'm not interested in who they are they're not gonna be interested in what I have to say. (Teacher 1)*

*...every kid gets some praise from me every day, and every kid gets a laugh, or at least I try and make 'em laugh...We have a class song, and when we play sport against other classes we sing our song first...and I always say that we're all a part of the class, and no one is bigger than the class...and I reckon that thinking you're part of the class makes it easier to stay engaged in your learning...they need a bit of love from their teacher, a teacher who enjoys having them. They need praise. And they need to know that they are good kids. (Teacher 3)*

*I like to build positive relationships with the students, to really work on that. I try to make things a bit fun too. With the students who struggle I offer a lot of praise for every small good thing they do, and display their best work on the walls. (Teacher 12)*

The literature in this area suggests that positive, respectful relationships in the classroom assist young people to feel valued, to seek help and support when they require it, and to attempt learning tasks in which there is a risk of failure (Butler et al, 2005), and provide intrinsic motivation for staying at school (Lamb et al, 2004).

A significant and stark difference between those teachers interviewed for this study who approached the issue of student engagement from a curriculum / pedagogy perspective and those who focused on building and sustaining more positive relationships with the students was that those in the former category felt that they had a repertoire of strategies and ideas to run through, and once they'd done that, even in the early months of their teaching careers, had become disillusioned and frustrated. Those focused on building positive relationships, rather than having a set of tools and strategies to work with, were engaged in an ongoing process of learning and deepening their understanding of their students' needs -

*I've got a kid who is quite low, and he'd prefer to watch a fly buzz around, and I've given him work at his level and I tell him how proud I am of him when he gives it a go, and he's still miles behind but at his level, forget about his chronological age, at his level he's performing really well. And he and I spend a bit of time every week kicking a footy around or just mucking around a bit and having a laugh. And he does his work in the classroom, at least partly, because he wants to please me...It's just about the individual child. I know it's hard when you've got lots of kids in the class, but it's always about the individual child and what they need... (Teacher 3)*

While such anecdotes ultimately tell us little or nothing about whether the teachers' attempts translate in to increased academic success for their students, there was enough evidence, even in this small study, to indicate that the teachers themselves felt more able to meet the challenge of working with students at risk of disengagement if they had an explicit focus on building positive relationships, rather than an exclusive focus on curriculum and pedagogy. At the same time, none of these teachers indicated that they felt that a focus on curriculum and pedagogy was unimportant.

Three teachers also spoke about the need to engage with parents in order to support students at risk of disengagement. All three thought that, while they considered these approaches important, they did not have the skills or support to enact them -

*They tell you that it's really important to work with parents, and you've gotta understand the community and be part of the community, but did they ever try and help you make community links? I don't think they did, I mean...they've got all the right ideas, but they don't show you how to put them into practice or provide the environment for you to put them in to practice. (Teacher 1)*

*They talked about parents and community, and just said, "Make sure you have a connection with these people", but they didn't say how. (Teacher 5)*

*We talked about parents as stakeholders in education, but not the practical stuff about how to work with them. (Teacher 6)*

While one teacher (Teacher 3, above) spoke about relationship-building as a way to address the needs of one particular child already struggling to engage with school-based learning, generally respondents to this study described whole-class, preventative strategies to address disengagement, and felt ill-equipped to identify and work with those students already disengaged or at risk of disengagement -

*It's a challenge for me to know when my students are engaged. Sometimes I don't know that. I can fall in to the trap of thinking that the student who has their head down and appears to be working is engaged, and they're not, and vice versa, sometimes the kid who looks like they're mucking around...I can take that for lack of interest and then they make a comment that shows that they are taking it all in... (Teacher 10)*

*There's a teacher here who can really identify the kids in class who are struggling, and, she's really spot on, and I can't do that because I don't have training in that area, and then she's got ideas about how to modify work, which is really good because then I'm not trying to swim in the dark kind of thing...I need examples to show me how it's done, and then I can go off and do my own. I have no idea how she does it but she's spot on...(Teacher 6)*

*They always talked about catering to individual needs, but never what that meant exactly...never to any depth for us to understand. They'd throw some ideas at us but there'd never be any frameworks or templates or any clear strategies...(Teacher 6)*

*They talked about how important it is to have a relationship with a student but not how to actually sit down and resolve a situation with a student...and a lot of it was about how to make sure we don't get in trouble as a teacher, like, make sure there's always another teacher in the room if you're talking one-on-one to a student, especially if they are the opposite sex, and always maintain at least one foot of distance from a student. (Teacher 5)*

Those respondents who did identify particular strategies for addressing the needs of individual students talked about the need to manage particular student behaviours within the classroom, and the need to moderate curriculum to meet individual needs, learning styles and abilities. Unanimously, these graduate teachers felt underskilled in these areas, and that their pre-service teacher training had provided them with little or no understanding of how to address these needs. The lack of content in these areas in pre-service teacher training is mirrored by a paucity of academic literature focused on them.

The Principals of the two Doxa Schools were able to identify and describe a range of strategies and approaches that are effective for working with those individual students at risk of disengagement. These included the development of positive behaviour plans and individual learning plans, basic counselling approaches, restorative practices, developing relationships with parents, understanding and responding to the needs of children and young people with specific conditions (eg ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome, ODD) and specific learning difficulties (eg dyslexia, auditory processing concerns), anger management strategies and scaffolding recreation time. The concepts and actions that frame the work of the Doxa West Melbourne School are further described by Owen, J., McLeod, J. and Andrew, P (2008).

The disparity between the graduate teachers understanding and use of whole class, preventative approaches (particularly focussed on pedagogy and curriculum) and their lack of familiarity with strategies and approaches for supporting individual students at risk is striking. There was almost unanimous agreement amongst respondents that, particularly in the area of behaviour management, they did not have adequate skills for responding to difficulties. One respondent knew of another graduate teacher for whom this was leading to a decision that teaching was perhaps not for her -

*A friend I went to uni with and who's in her first year of teaching had a chair throwing incident in her first week. Now she's really capable, and really wanted to teach, but she was never taught how to deal with this stuff, and five weeks in to the year she's having to ask the Principal to come in to her class. And now she's saying "Maybe I'm not meant to do this job". The fact that we don't have these skills when we start in schools is leading to teacher disengagement! And the main difference between her and me is the students we teach. (Teacher 9)*

It is significant and disturbing that all but one of the 12 graduate teachers in this study felt ill-equipped for dealing with behavioural issues in their classrooms, and that, at least in the case of this teacher known to one of the respondents, it had undermined her confidence and enthusiasm for teaching. Below, this issue of teachers feel ill-equipped for their role will be explored in further detail.

Importantly, it is possible to learn from young people themselves about the best approaches for supporting their engagement in school and with learning. What Kids Can Do.org in *Students as Allies in Improving Their Schools* report on a survey of high school students in five cities across the US. They recorded the following summary of student opinions -

*Start by including us in your planning and conversations, knowing that we care just as much as you do about creating high schools that bring out the best in students and teachers. Invite our ideas and perspectives. Let us explore together where we agree and differ, what's doable and what's not. Make us part of the solution and not the problem.*

If you asked what we most want, here's what we would tell you. We want policies that produce schools where . . .

- Teachers know their subject matter well and know how to explain it so that students understand.
- We see the connections between what we are learning and the real world.
- There is at least one person we can go to for support and advice, for both academics and personal issues.
- The relationships between and among students and adults in the school are grounded in respect and trust.
- Discipline is applied equitably and meaningfully across the student body.
- We receive regular feedback on how we're doing and how we can improve.
- Our teachers and counsellors talk to us one-on-one about college or other plans for after high school.
- The bathrooms are clean.
- There are enough textbooks and educational supplies for every student.

And where . . .

Our voices matter.

The Australian Centre for Equity through Education and the Australian Youth Research Centre surveyed young people identified as at risk of disengagement from education in their 2001 study. These young people talked of three factors that helped them to stay connected or to reconnect to school. Most important was their relationship with a particular teacher. Second was the opportunity to participate in particular programs, generally with a "hands on" approach. Third was the relaxed and laid back atmosphere that those who attended community schools experienced. (ACEE and AYRC, 2001)

The *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools Student Engagement Policy Guidelines* (DEECD, 2009) describe a set of responsibilities and a policy framework for addressing the needs of students at risk of disengagement. These recognise the need for a staged response in working with students at risk, including the need for intervention programs and support. Whilst they do not specifically identify the skills and understandings that teachers need in order to do this work, they make it clear that the first line of response in such interventions is in the classroom. More information on the Guidelines is located in Appendix Three.

### 1.5 What skills, strategies and understandings do teachers require to work effectively with students at risk of disengagement?

From the broad and diverse approaches to preventing disengagement and working with disengaged students described above, is it possible to identify a particular skill set that new teachers need? How can teachers create the conditions that foster emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement in learning and school, for all of their students? What do they need to know, and what do they need to be able to do?

Graduate teachers interviewed for this study spoke about the skills, strategies and understandings they have for working with students at risk of disengagement, and also those skills and strategies in which they felt they were lacking. As identified above, several respondents felt that they had a repertoire of strategies and processes based on an understanding of diverse learning styles, pedagogical frameworks and a comprehensive curriculum, but were still frustrated by their inability to engage all their students. Several described the central importance of developing positive relationships with their students, and an affirming classroom culture. A number identified the importance of understanding student diversity in terms of culture and socio-economic status. The vast majority felt they did not have sufficient skills in classroom management or one-to-one behaviour management. A small number felt they did not have the expertise to modify work for a mixed-abilities classroom (while others did not comment on this at all). Two identified explicitly that they did not have sufficient understanding and skill to identify students at risk of disengagement, and others indicated by their comments that this was also the case for them. Overall, 11 of the 12 teachers interviewed felt that they did not have sufficient skills, strategies or understandings to work with students at risk of disengagement.

To determine the skills, strategies and understandings that teachers need in this area, it is possible to consider the two "explanatory frameworks" that Tadich *et al* (2007) identified from the literature for understanding the lack of student engagement in schooling - curriculum development and pedagogical theory, and psychological and socio-cultural factors - and explore how teachers need to respond at three levels - the whole-class, preventative level; the identification of students at risk of disengagement; and the development of responses for individual students who are disengaged. This gives us six areas in which teachers need skills and frameworks for understanding, as follows -

	prevention / whole class	identifying students at risk	intervention / re-engagement
curriculum / pedagogy			
psychological / socio-cultural			

A brief overview of the territory of each area is below. Developing a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge, skills and strategies that would assist teachers in each of these areas, and from where teachers are generally expected to learn them, would be a significant and useful task of a collaboration of key stakeholders in education.

**Curriculum / pedagogy  
- prevention / whole class**

The use of appropriate teaching strategies and sequences for each class's stage of learning, understanding and catering to multiple intelligences, interactive teaching and cooperative learning, and diverse methods of assessment, are all elements of this key area of preventing disengagement. They intersect with authentic, relevant and rich curriculum within which students are given opportunities to negotiate particular areas of content, and teachers have good content knowledge. Developing curriculum and learning activities that enhance critical thinking skills and are appropriate to the developmental stage, prior learning and interests of students is also crucial.

From the graduate teacher interviews, it seems that this is the area for which teachers feel most comprehensively trained and resourced during their pre-service education.

**Curriculum / pedagogy  
- identifying students at risk**

Respondents to this study overwhelmingly nominated difficult behaviours as the thing that enabled them to identify students at risk. Noting the way in which individual students respond to new areas of curriculum content and different teaching styles, to particular subjects and particular teachers, and the impact this has on their work output, their attendance, their level of participation and their academic achievement provides useful data for identifying students at risk of disengagement, but this was not mentioned by most respondents.

Getting to know students and to understand their individual needs is an important strategy for identifying students at risk of disengagement and preventing any escalation in their risk. This includes ensuring that particular areas of curriculum

content and particular teaching styles do not inadvertently marginalise some students. Seal (2008) describes, for example, how an activity focused on the development of each child's family tree may be an engaging and interesting activity for most students in a classroom while at the same time potentially exposing children such as those adopted or in foster care to a range of negative, even traumatic, emotions. Considering how learning activities cater to students with specific learning difficulties is also crucial.

**Curriculum / pedagogy  
- intervention / re-engagement**

The learning activities and teaching styles that have been seen to work in keeping students engaged are, of course, the most effective ones to use in re-engaging those disengaged. With that said, the needs and interests of the particular students who are disengaged need to be understood and taken in to account. Two graduate teachers in this study indicated that they felt they didn't know how to moderate work in order to cater to differing abilities and needs in their classrooms. Remedial support, mentoring, tutoring and small group work may be necessary to support some students; these must be developed and delivered in ways that do not stigmatise those participating. Alternative curriculum and programs may need to be considered. Developing and working to Individual Learning Plans helps to clarify and monitor strategies that are put in place to assist.

**Psychological / socio-cultural  
- prevention / whole class**

Glover et al (2002), Butler et al (2005) and others describe processes and activities for developing a positive classroom culture and the centrality of positive teacher-student relationships for maintaining student engagement. The Victorian Secondary Schools Principals Association and the Doxa School Bendigo (in conversation with this writer) highlighted the importance of professional understanding of the impact of socio-economic status on education. Knowing each student, and understanding their particular needs and interests is key in maintaining engagement.

Strategies that enhance student confidence in their abilities, encourage persistence and independence, and assist in the development of processes for critical thinking, planning, staying focused and problem solving, all help to maintain student success, and student engagement.

Classroom and behaviour management were highlighted almost unanimously by respondents to this study as a crucial element of preventing disengagement in which they felt underskilled. While some also made reference to some of the other strategies mentioned here, it seemed that generally the graduate teachers were not aware of how to enact them.

Getting to know families, proactively and positively, is identified in the literature as important in maintaining engagement (Butler *et al*, 2005). A number of respondents mentioned this, but none felt that they understood how, practically, to achieve such ends.

### **Psychological / socio-cultural - identifying students at risk**

A sound knowledge of each student and their needs is critical in this regard. A good relationship between a teacher and his or her students, and facilitative classroom activities and structures, enables and encourages those students to express their needs and concerns. Understanding where behaviours come from, and why a particular student may behave as they do is important (Seal, 2008). Working with parents, other teachers and the Student Wellbeing or Pastoral Care Co-ordinator to share critical information is important.

Disengagement has a range of emotional and behavioural symptoms. Recognising and addressing such concerns as social withdrawal, changes in level of participation, unexplained tiredness and absences is critical. These require a teacher to communicate with individual students in a sensitive and nurturing fashion.

### **Psychological / socio-cultural - intervention / re-engagement**

While teachers identify behavioural issues as the most obvious symptoms of disengagement, responding to disengagement requires much more than a disciplinary response. As identified above (ACEE and AYRC, 2001), the factors that best assist young people at risk to reconnect to education are their relationship with one particular teacher, their participation in special programs and a relaxed social environment in which to learn. If disengagement is seen

primarily as difficult behaviours, and disciplinary procedures are the response, it is precisely these types of factors that are undermined. Similarly, exclusion serves only to increase the disengagement of at risk students. Instead, a sensitive process that works with the student to identify what unmet needs are being addressed through difficult behaviours is needed. Negotiating and maintaining positive relationships is at its most challenging, and its most important, during the periods in which young people are 'acting out' their frustrations and concerns.

Many young people who are disengaged from schooling struggle with social relationships in the school environment, with the structures and processes of the school day, and with the high energy social and physical environment. Responding to this involves working directly with the individual to look at skills and opportunities they may require, and also focusing on how the environment itself can be changed to be more affirming of individual need.

The interviews with graduate teachers for this study suggest that pre-service training provides teachers with skills and knowledge in some of these areas, but that there are significant gaps in others. Respondents were able to identify skills and strategies they had to work in the prevention - whole classroom areas of this work, but had few ideas for working effectively with those individual students at risk of disengagement or disengaged -

*On rounds I went to schools where there might be one difficult student in the class, but coming to this school there might be four or more in one class...and it's totally different, and I have to watch other teachers and just figure it out for myself how I'm gonna deal with this. (Teacher 2)*

*They talked about how important it is to have a relationship with a student but not how to actually sit down and resolve a situation with a student... We were told classroom management is really important but we were never given any strategies like - Here's how to pull a class back together, here's how to work with disengaged kids - it's basically just "Learn on the job". (Teacher 5)*

*They always talked about catering to individual needs, but never what that meant exactly...never to any depth for us to understand. They'd throw some ideas at us but there'd never be any frameworks or templates or any clear strategies. (Teacher 6)*

For at least one respondent (and her university student peers), this meant that they felt better prepared for working with the students who were “really engaged and interested” than with those at risk of disengagement -

*All my methods lecturers, as lovely as they were, all came from private school backgrounds, and I remember having the conversation with my peers that that meant very much that the focus of what we were learning was on the kinds of kids who were really engaged and interested in a subject and we didn't feel that we were learning anything about the kids who might be working a hell of a lot slower, and who might never get to those interesting reflective questions we were talking about. (Teacher 9)*

This creates real equity concerns in a school system in which overall academic success is high, but the gap between those who achieve and those who don't is wide and getting wider (West-Burnham, Farrar and Otero, 2007). One respondent noted this in relation to the particular expertise that teachers need in order to work with students at risk -

*To be a great teacher, you've got to be a great teacher anywhere. You've got to be able to work with these kids who are disengaged, or who missed out on the basics or whatever, not just with the kids who will stay connected no matter what. (Teacher 8)*

Tadich *et al* also interviewed teachers with regard to the skills they felt they needed in order to address student disengagement -

*More than half the teachers (n = 13) considered that they needed to increase their range of effective teaching strategies to address student disengagement. They indicated that they wanted to manage student behaviour more effectively, encourage students to be successful, enable students to be more independent in their learning, make tasks more relevant, cater to the range of abilities in the classroom, and develop assessment criteria as the basis for multiple pathways for knowledge and skill development. They considered that these specific goals could be achieved through the following strategies: managing multiple small group activities, making more effective use of learning technologies, learning about and using a greater range of resources and strategies to engage students, more innovation in structuring tasks, and increased variety in methods of presenting material, and being more adventurous in their approach. (2007)*

While Tadich *et al*'s separation of curriculum and pedagogy from psychological and socio-cultural explanations of disengagement is useful for identifying skills, understandings and strategies teachers need, recognising the overlap and synergy between the two is also important. Hawkins, Doueck and Lishner (1988) found, for instance, that a comprehensive program of proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning methods improve the engagement, behaviour and attitudes of “low achievers” in mathematics.

The literature thus tells us that there are clear, concrete and practical skills and strategies that teachers can be provided with that assist them to work successfully with all their students, including those disengaged or at risk. Engaging children and young people in their learning is much more than the ability to sing, dance and in other ways entertain students, but for many graduate teachers their skills for working with struggling students are limited -

*I know the reward system isn't the best but at the moment I'm trying to give house points as a way to keep them engaged... or to play games and stuff with them..we also watch some TV and try to connect their learning to stuff they are interested in, but...at the end of the day I'm still training them to become engaged in copying off the board and stuff, so I'm slowly weeding them off all the fun stuff and on to the boring stuff so they understand it. (Teacher 4)*

The skills and expertise that teachers have (or don't have) has a major impact on the outcomes for their students. Hattie (2003) found that what teachers do and how they work with their students accounts for 30% of the variance in student academic outcomes, and combine with other classroom and school factors to account for up to 60% of variance. The Victorian Middle Years Research and Development Project found that teaching practices and learning activities are the most critical factor in the engagement and achievement of students in the middle years of schooling (Russell *et al* 2003). Skilling teachers to work preventatively and proactively with students who are disengaged or at risk is vital.

### Other factors in student engagement

The majority of respondents in this study related positive experiences in their own history of schooling and felt that this made them less able to understand the very different experiences of disengaged students. An awareness of this is, of course, a useful attribute in beginning to explore the needs of students at risk. It is clear that those teachers who work best with all students, including those at risk, will have a range of attributes distinct from the skills, strategies and knowledge they have learned. This is recognised by the Victorian Institute of Teaching, who provide the following advice to teacher training institutions -

Institutions should encourage applications from students who have, or are likely to develop, such attributes needed for teaching as:

- effective interpersonal communication skills
- motivation to help children and adolescents learn
- an inquiring mind and willingness to learn
- flexibility and a preparedness to adapt
- patience and a capacity to listen to others
- cultural sensitivity and empathy
- a focus on outcomes and how these best can be achieved
- enthusiasm and initiative
- being well organised with an ability to meet deadlines
- an ability to work independently, with others and in teams
- an ethical approach to their work. (VIT, 2007)

This recognises that teachers' own emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities will impact on their ability to form positive, respectful relationships with their students. This can be discussed, its importance can be promoted, it can be effectively modelled, but it cannot be taught. For this reason, selection processes for students in to teaching courses should consider overall suitability for the teaching role, not simply ability as measured through VCE scores.

As well as teacher attributes that assist their work with students at risk of disengagement, school and system level attributes have an impact. Graduate teachers interviewed for this study identified frustrations with time spent on administrative tasks and away from the classroom, standardised testing regimes that undermined individual student progress, prescriptive curriculum that was boring and irrelevant, inconsistent responses across the school staff to behavioural and other concerns amongst students, and school structures and processes that made experimentation and innovation in curriculum delivery difficult or impossible. These frustrations can undermine the enthusiasm of new

teachers, and exacerbate any lack of skills they may have for working with students at risk. As noted by Luke (2003) *"where many youth in the middle years are not already 'at risk' because of these (new) conditions, it is quite plausible that unresponsive, irrelevant and inflexible educational structures can make them 'at risk'"*.

School culture, the attitudes of staff and other students to those students who are at risk of disengagement or who are disengaged, and the presence or absence of whole-school processes and approaches to support students at risk, will either support or undermine the attempts of individual classroom teachers. A teacher who introduces restorative practices\* in the classroom, for instance, will find that their level of success in this regard is in part due to the attitudes of other staff in the school to such processes.

**\* Restorative practice, or restorative justice, in schools, focuses on supporting the student who has done wrong to understand their wrongdoing and to take responsibility for it, through processes that often include conferencing and supported meetings with those affected by the wrongdoing.**

These issues are significant, and their impact on levels of student disengagement are significant. While these must be addressed at the school and systems level, they are not an argument against the need for teachers to be skilled and resourced for working with students at risk. On the contrary, they highlight the precise need for teachers who have a clear, strong understanding of the factors that lead to disengagement and a comprehensive understanding and strategies for how to address it.

# 2

## The role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills for working with disengaged and at risk young people

### 2.1 What are pre-service teachers learning about student engagement?

As we have seen, the graduate teachers interviewed for this study, generally felt underequipped for working with disengaged students or those at risk of disengagement, and for several this was leading to frustration and concern. Each was asked whether they thought that their pre-service training had given them the knowledge, strategies and skills necessary for working with such students. Their responses were extensive, but are documented here in full because they provide useful data in considering how new teachers can be better equipped for working with disengaged students. They have been themed under headings which arose from the interviews themselves as key to understanding the issues, and include -

- a) overall impressions
- b) practicum
- c) diversity and individual needs
- d) modifying work for mixed abilities classrooms
- e) classroom management
- f) methods and content learning
- g) teacher quality vs academic ability
- h) alternative settings
- i) suggestions for improvement.

#### a) Overall impressions

Generally, respondents indicated that they were not satisfied overall with what their pre-service course provided in regard to working with students disengaged or at risk, though some did find aspects useful and one was very satisfied. The general consensus was that theory dominated and that provision of practical strategies and skills was lacking -

*I don't think that uni taught me how to work with disengaged kids, and this is something I brought up with them so many times...I learned how to write great essays, I learnt all the philosophy and theory, but I didn't learn how to deal with a student who's just told you to get f\*\*\*ed or a student who's just not interested in anything you've got to say to them, and what I got from that is "We don't want you to be a technician we want you to be a philosopher", which is all well and good, but a bit of the practical experience would've been better...cause I don't think anything that I've written down, or any assignment that I've done has helped me even one bit in the six months I've been at this school, because it's just fantasy land and it's so far-fetched to say "If you do this your students can do anything they want" and they don't take*

*into account the....you know the two or three generations of unemployed adults in the house and the drugs and alcohol and the savage effects that that can have on a growing child... and lack of a proper diet, and they don't explain any of that, and that's the real world, and that's what's happening and that's what's affecting learning...and they don't teach you how to combat that, but they do teach you that if a child is raised in a perfect environment and you provide them with this then they can do this, and I've found that that just hasn't been relevant to my experience as a teacher...the parents of some of these kids are at about the same level as their 12 or 13 year old kids, and that's multigenerational, and all the theory and philosophy in the world doesn't tell me how to deal with that... (Teacher 1)*

*My teacher training didn't prepare me at all [for working with disengaged kids]...there was nothing...nothing practical, it's all theory....even my teaching rounds didn't help because I was sent to schools near where I live where there were no real problems...and so when I got to this school on the first day of this year...and the kids were kicking each other and throwing things, I thought, OK, this wasn't in the book... Theory's all well and good, but I think we need more hands on, more practical, seeing the skills you need to work with disengaged kids...I mean, the theory...that's when I and all of my friends were disengaged...I learnt more in my first few weeks here (at school) than I did in four years of study. (Teacher 2)*

*I can't really say what uni gave me. I was just there to pass. But I do think that there were two teachers there who were really good about teaching disengagement...and they didn't necessarily give us strategies, but they did help us to identify it and understand it, like, to ask "Did they have breakfast this morning?" There was very little in terms of student management, but we did really explore the question of "why?" Not the "how?" And at the time I just wanted to know how, but I guess I needed to know the why and work out the how myself. (Teacher 3)*

*The actual theory of uni, I don't think it helped much...some of it's interesting, but at the end of the day...when you're in the class it's the last thing you remember...you don't think "What would Piaget suggest I do now?"....We talked a lot about understanding kids who were being bullied and that sort of stuff, that was really useful...(Teacher 4)*

## The role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills for working with disengaged and at risk young people

*The teacher training was very utopian...they say every student can be engaged, but I think that's not true...and I understand why uni says that every student can be engaged but I think it's also important to be realistic rather than just utopian. (Teacher 5)*

*I had no training at all to work with disengaged kids...there was none at all...there was no discussion on it except really briefly in tutorial discussions after our teaching rounds...no unit or subject...nothing as a formal part of our learning. (Teacher 6)*

*We looked at learning styles, the thinking curriculum and integrated curriculum, and that's what engagement is all about. I think that was perfect learning for engaging kids. (Teacher 7)*

*I don't use a lot of the stuff I was taught at uni...I don't see the relevance...so much was just the language of education, but not the strategy...The good stuff I learned at uni was the little teaching ideas, like, when we shared lesson plans and successful activities and stuff. (Teacher 8)*

*Wow...when you first asked that [what did you learn at uni that helps you to work with students at risk of disengagement] I thought, well nothing really. I mean, I did Student Wellbeing as an elective, and that covered things that would affect a student's wellbeing, and of course a lot of those things also affect their ability to be engaged, so I've referred to that a bit in terms of thinking about how to talk to a troubled student, and I guess, just being aware of the plethora of things that can affect them and their lives. But beyond that I'm not sure that I learnt anything really, except through the practicum. (Teacher 9)*

*Yeah, I don't think we learnt a lot about these kinds of kids. We learnt a hell of a lot about pedagogical theory, and I guess they thought that the practical base was being covered at the school. There wasn't much in regard to practical tips for how to work with disengaged students. (Teacher 10)*

*I did an elective on middle years curriculum, and it was supposed to be all about how to engage students in the middle years, and, at the end of it, I still didn't know what engagement was, in that it seemed we were hearing "if you provide variety, it'll keep people engaged" or "If you teach in different ways, it'll keep people engaged", but there was nothing that said, sometimes disengagement has almost nothing to do with what you are doing in the classroom, it*

*was always "Change what you're doing to target a different way of learning". And I remember we had just one lecture where a guest speaker came in to talk about those kids that have got so much else going on in their lives that they really can't even focus on what's happening in the classroom, and that was great but again, it was just one lecture and we just talked about the fact that the issue existed, not about what to do about it. And so we got nothing about what do you do with the student who's constantly disruptive or who just never does any work, and I feel like I don't even know what they could teach us about that stuff. ..So the overall message was "To deal with disengagement, provide variety", and there wasn't a Plan B. (Teacher 11)*

*We definitely didn't learn enough about disengagement, or more generally about classroom management and all those bits that hold the class together. There was so much on what to teach, how to teach, but not about the in-between stuff... like, how can you set up an environment that enables you to teach? (Teacher 12)*

A clear message from these quotes is that graduate teachers feel that universities are providing whole-class, prevention-focused frameworks for engaging students (though some respondents question the use of these in practice), but they are not providing, at least to any comprehensive extent, the knowledge, skills and strategies for re-engaging those who have disconnected from their formal learning or are at risk of doing so.

### **b) Practicum**

Unsurprisingly, the practicum experience was seen unanimously as the most useful learning experience for the development of teaching skills. Several respondents commented on the value and importance of experiencing diverse types of school during this period, and felt that the learning of those who had done a practicum in a 'tough' school was greater than for others -

*Teaching rounds were good....they taught me a lot. (Teacher 6)*  
*My teaching rounds were at (prestigious private school) where the biggest student management issue was that not all students put up their hands to answer a question. On your teaching rounds you need to see different types and models of schools and teaching. It gives you better experience and you can learn new ideas, and it can help you decide the kind of school you want to work in. (Teacher 5)*

## The role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills for working with disengaged and at risk young people

*It would be way better to spend time in alternative school settings and systems rather than doing all your practicum work in mainstream schools. (Teacher 8)*

*I reckon that those who had placements in really tough schools would say they did learn a lot about this stuff, but for those of us who were in cushy schools the experience was all about teaching content, not about student management, and that's already hard enough so you're not thinking what else do I need to learn? So in those tough schools they got real experience, but not the rest of us. (Teacher 9)*

*The uni wants everything to work for everybody, so they're not gonna send their students to rabble schools, and we miss out on that experience. (Teacher 11)*

*Teaching rounds should throw us in deeper with...like... behavioural issues...at uni there's nothing talked about behavioural issues...on rounds I went to schools where there might be one difficult student in the class, but coming to this school there might be four or more in one class...and it's totally different. (Teacher 2)*

One respondent, who did have a practicum at a 'tough' school, felt that there was no expectation on him to engage particularly with the students at risk of disengagement, and that the requirement of the practicum was to display whole-class management skills, rather than an ability to engage any particular child -

*On my teaching rounds I saw a lot of disengagement, but I really didn't have to do anything about it. I just had to teach. (Teacher 3)*

Another commented that while the practicum was a useful learning experience, its utility was minimised by the lack of relationship it had to her university based study -

*I think the practicum was the best thing in all of uni, except, someone from uni only comes out and sees you on one day... and then back at uni you talk about your experience for one tute and there's 30 people in the tute and the same 5 people do all the talking and the rest don't get to say anything and don't build on what they learnt in practicum. You could have a whole subject just debriefing what you learned in practicum - at the moment it's very separate - you do your subjects, then you have 3 weeks off to do your practicum, and then you do your subjects again. (Teacher 4)*

That this occurs is very much to the detriment of pre-service teachers and their learning experience.

The pre-service practicum is generally assumed to be the period in which the practical skills of teaching and classroom management are learned, and the pedagogical theory and content knowledge developed at university is made real by practical classroom experience. The Victorian Institute of Teaching makes the following statement in relation to what is expected of the practicum -

The practicum should include opportunities for pre-service teachers to work with a range of learners at a variety of year levels and in a variety of educational settings. Where possible, this should include placement in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and opportunities for engagement with cultural and socioeconomic diversity. (VIT, 2007: for further detail, see Appendix Two)

The universities struggle to place teaching students in schools for practicums, and ensuring that students have diverse teaching experiences during these periods is difficult. It appears from the comments of respondents to this study that many pre-service teachers find that their practicum does not give them the depth of experience they need, and that perhaps an emphasis on diverse teaching experiences is not prioritised in their placement in particular schools, nor is the most made from the practicums when they return to university.

### c) Diversity and individual needs

Several respondents identified that they had learned about particular cohorts of students and their learning needs, but generally they thought that this had not been in enough depth and did not have a practical focus -

*We had a subject on kids with special needs, but it just skimmed over things...it was all about the language we should use to talk about kids with special needs, not about how to actually work with them and what their needs are. (Teacher 2)*

*We had a subject about dealing with different demographics, but I found it really utopian and not very practical, like..we were told that Aboriginal students don't want to be treated differently, then we were given a list of particular things we needed to do with Aboriginal students, and they talked about how to work with gifted kid and disabled kids, but none of it was very practical. (Teacher 5)*

## The role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills for working with disengaged and at risk young people

*They always talked about catering to individual needs, but never what that meant exactly...never to any depth for us to understand. They'd throw some ideas at us but there's never be any frameworks or templates or any clear strategies. (Teacher 6)*

*They asked us to do things like consider pedagogy through Erikson to see whether we were catering to all types and needs, and I guess that that was implicitly about engagement. (Teacher 8)*

*We had a subject where we did stuff around particular types of kids...and we talked about Aboriginal students, about sexuality...it feels like we did everything except disability. And you could do a whole elective just on Indigenous issues. (Teacher 9)*

One respondent found that an Indigenous Studies elective subject that she took had broader application than just for Aboriginal students -

*Doing Indigenous studies as part of my course really opened my eyes...I learned so much about the impact of disadvantage and about different cultures... and we looked at models of schools that had real success with some of the most disadvantaged Aboriginal kids in remote communities... and that was really useful but we talked about it as though it was just an Indigenous issue and mainstream schools are all rainbows and little fluffy clouds...uni didn't prepare me for a lot of things, let alone for working with disengaged kids...just the theory behind engagement, but not any practical stuff. (Teacher 11)*

Understanding student diversity and responding to the needs of individual students are highlighted as important principles for promoting student engagement in the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's new policy guidelines on engagement, Effective Schools are Engaging Schools (see Appendix Three for more detail) and are components of the "Teachers know their students" standard, one of eight measures by which the Victorian Institute of Teaching assesses pre-service education and teaching courses in Victorian tertiary institutions (see Appendix Four). It appears that generally graduate teachers feel that the importance of understanding student diversity is being stressed to them in their pre-service courses, but the practical skills for working with diversity are not being provided.

### d) Modifying work for mixed abilities classrooms

Two respondents felt that they were not given the opportunity to learn how to modify curriculum and learning tasks in order to meet the needs of all students -

*You learn about VELS, and how to teach to VELS standards, but not what to do if the kids aren't at those standards. You don't talk about modified work, or what to do if the kids don't hand work in... (Teacher 4)*

*Trying to work out how to moderate curriculum is a real challenge...there really is no text book to help. If you don't have someone to help you you're really just left floundering around. At uni we didn't get taught how to modify work. It was just straight from the textbook kind of thing. (Teacher 6)*

These two understood intellectually the concept of 'scaffolding' new areas of learning, but did not feel that had been given the practical skills for doing this.

### e) Classroom management

As identified above, classroom and behaviour management were of concern to a number of respondents in their current teaching. Three commented that they were not given skills in this area in their during their pre-service training -

*We were told classroom management is really important but we were never given any strategies like - Here's how to pull a class back together, here's how to work with disengaged kids - it's basically just "Learn on the job". (Teacher 5)*

*We had an entire subject on assessment! Surely we could do half a subject on assessment and at least half a subject on this stuff, on behaviour management. The uni wants everything to be academic and rigorous, and teachers want to be professionals, and I reckon the uni thinks that because behaviour management is vocational...it's a skill...you can't get some great research study from it...The uni doesn't want to acknowledge that there are parts of the job that are just about skills - they don't want to teach a vocational course.... (Teacher 9)*

*The theory is important, and in a couple of years when I've got the time I'll be able to think about that and to build on it, but...behaviour management...if I haven't got that I'm never gonna get to the point that I've got the time to think about the theory. (Teacher 11)*

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Others had little or no opportunity to learn about alternative education settings -

*No discussion about alternative settings - I don't know what goes on in those places, so I can't talk to the kids about it when they come back. (Teacher 6)*

*We did get to hear about a school that had themed curriculum so that for one whole semester all the subjects revolved around one topic, and we learnt about VET and VCAL, but we didn't talk about alternative settings at all. (Teacher 11)*

### **i) Suggestions for improvement**

Respondents had a range of suggestions for how their pre-service courses could be improved -

*We need better assessment, more assessment of the time we spend on teaching rounds, and to see different kinds of classrooms, and just...more of the real world. (Teacher 2)*

*I really feel like we needed workshops...real scenarios, not just piddly 30 second role plays but really hard workshops, and practice, and saying "OK, what could we have done differently here?" Good, hands on role playing and strategies. And we need children's services in, and child psychologists in, to say "If you've got this kind of kid, a kid with Asperger's or whatever, here's how to work with them". (Teacher 3)*

*Knowing what I know now, I really think there should've been more about working with disengaged kids...I mean, sign me up...give me frameworks, strategies, templates, structures, whatever...the nights I spend now trying to work out stuff I should already know...They should chuck out some of the core subjects and make a specific subject for teaching disengaged students, and migrant students... the Afghanis, the Iraqis, the Sudanese, they've had such different experiences of schooling, we need to know how to work with them and also where to seek outside support if the school can't provide it...yep, migrant students, disengaged students, Aboriginal students - we need a subject at uni specifically about working with these kids, and how to modify work to suit them. (Teacher 6)*

*Getting teachers in, who are still in the classroom and talking about today's issues, that's what we need more of...like, how are you dealing with that particular kid right now? (Teacher 8)*

*I think what the uni could do is just really value the learning that comes from experiencing different types of schools. The placements were all about methods, not about getting diverse teaching experiences. (Teacher 9)*

*I reckon we could have learnt a lot about body language and how that works, and how to defuse difficult situations...what to do if someone threatens you or threatens other students. We need to know more about how to get the kids sitting down and learning in the first place, and not about whether they're learning at the sixth or seventh level of thinking. (Teacher 10)*

*It would've been great to get a group of teachers and other professional from schools that work well with disengaged kids to come in to uni and work with us so we get the real stories and the practical strategies...and to break us in to small groups and send us out to schools that do this stuff well so that we can just observe, or maybe help out. (Teacher 12)*

In 2004, Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz and Elliot undertook a mapping study of the structure and content of pre-service education and teaching courses across Australian tertiary institutions. They found that the universities themselves, while reporting overall that their students were adequately prepared for teaching, were concerned that they did not have the resources to provide as much professional experience through school-based practicums as was most desirable. The suggested response, to strengthen the relationships between schools, universities and other key players in the education sector, is an important one in the context of addressing graduate teachers' skills for working with disengaged students and those at risk.

In a separate paper Ingvarson, Beavis and Kleinhenz (2004) surveyed 1124 beginning teachers in Victorian schools and 749 principals who had a beginning teacher at their school. This showed that overall both principals and the teachers themselves felt that they had been prepared for professional teaching practice "to a moderate extent" by their pre-service education, except in the area of working with parents, where they felt prepared "to a minor extent". The principals were also invited to provide comment and ideas for improving pre-service courses. Two areas of their comments are worth quoting in full for their relevance to graduate teacher readiness for working with students at risk of disengagement. The first focuses on the practical skills that principals feel teachers need, and the second identifies issues related to student wellbeing and pastoral care and the importance of positive teacher- student relationships -

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Classroom and behaviour management are fundamental to quality teaching and crucial for teachers from their first day in the classroom and throughout their teaching career. That these skills develop through experience is not in doubt, but equally it must be recognised that these skills can be taught and practised pre-service, honed through authentic practicum experience, and extended by debriefing and discussion post-practicum. A number of respondents commented that complex role plays of significant duration (*"not just piddly 30 second role plays"* Teacher 3) were useful, or would be useful, in developing behaviour management techniques.

### f) Methods and content learning

One respondent thought that his pre-service course focused too much on curriculum content at the expense of "practical experience in schools" -

*We had nowhere near enough practical experience in schools and too much time on content...I mean, when you get into a school you end up teaching everything anyway so I reckon they should teach everyone as generalists and not teach about specific subjects, and use that time for more practical experience. (Teacher 5)*

The Australian Education Union in their 2008 survey of 1545 new teachers (in their first three years of teaching) found that almost one-third (32.6%) were teaching outside of their area of content expertise or qualification. Ingvarson, Beavis and Kleinhenz (2004) similarly found that 25-30% of teachers were teaching outside of their area of expertise. These statistics perhaps suggest that greater emphasis pre-service must be placed on generic teaching skills, such as classroom management and curriculum modification, and less on specific curriculum content.

For two students, their methods specialisation was the area in which they developed skills for classroom and behaviour management -

*The stuff I did get from uni was through Outdoor Ed, and some of the techniques you learn there, just about taking a group of boisterous kids to a new environment and having to maintain their safety. (Teacher 1)*

*It was great in my Drama subject because we got to re-enact classroom situations and to do worst case scenarios, and the naughty kids and the talking back and...even though it was so exaggerated it was a lot like what I deal with some days here so that was really great...if nothing else it took away the shock value when I saw these things in real life. (Teacher 4)*

While clearly Outdoor Education and Drama lend themselves to particular teaching techniques, and have some unique requirements in terms of teaching practice, the way they are taught also appears to develop in teachers a range of useful, generic teaching strategies.

### g) Teacher quality vs academic ability

Two students expressed concern that their pre-service courses overemphasised academic ability at the expense of practical teaching skill -

*I'd advise that you need more work placement, I mean, if you can't stand up in front of 15 of your peers and give a five minute speech, if you can't do that after 3 or 4 years, how come you are passing your placements? How are you going to go in the real world? Half my peers were getting HDs in every subject, but you couldn't put them in front of the class 'cause they just didn't have it, and I think (name of university) prepares you for doing Honours and Masters more than it prepares you for teaching in the classroom...and the attitude seemed to be "Don't worry about it, you'll learn how to teach once you're out there in the classroom", and there was much more interest shown in the students who were gonna stay at uni and do further study. (Teacher 1)*

*If you're the kind of person who can write a great essay about working with disengaged students, that doesn't necessarily mean that you can work well with them in the classroom. (Teacher 11)*

### h) Alternative settings

Several respondents had been encouraged during their pre-service course to visit and to learn about alternative education settings, and one did so as part of a formal subject -

*We did a subject where we had to go and visit different kinds of schools and report back on them and share what we'd learned, and that was pretty useful because most of us had teaching rounds at mainstream schools, but this way we got to hear about different kinds of schools and different learning environments. (Teacher 2)*

### **Practical/skills/strategies**

- Cater for range of student abilities and differences including cultural differences and boys education. Learn to develop differentiated curriculum. 'Coping' with students with special needs, e.g. ADD. (Many comments on this.)
- Classroom/behaviour management that aims to engage students. Incorporate.
- 'Learn the realities of discipline'
- 'So much of the graduate's knowledge and expertise gained at university was suppressed, while all effort was put into classroom management'
- (Many comments on need for classroom management strategies.)
- Psychology and counselling, especially of difficult children
- Mentors to advise on classroom management issues
- 'Develop a mentoring program in 3rd or 4th year to get students in touch with the classroom and school life on a regular basis'
- More practical and fewer 'academic' subjects. Link theory with practice. How to use 'real' school curriculum and other documents
- Learning to read data and tests (e.g. TORCH)
- Pre-service teachers to attend PD that teachers go to
- More on using ICT in the classroom (A number of comments on this.)
- Knowing how students learn and teaching accordingly
- Learn how to teach reading, Early Years, Middle Years, Reading recovery WA First Steps, Thinking Curriculum, social skills and values, de Bono's hats, Blooms, PMIs.
- More Early Years Literacy and Numeracy experiences – it seems what lecturers are telling schools it is irrelevant.

**(Ingvarson, Beavis and Kleinhenz, 2004).**

### **Pastoral care and the importance of relationships**

- More emphasis on relationship building and understanding the views of others
- Maximise potential of successful learner. Promote self esteem. Value themselves and others as learners
- Build communication skills
- Understand isolation that can occur in a smaller school
- Student welfare, social, cultural, emotional issues
- Develop interpersonal skills. Dealing with difficult children and parents.
- Personal organisation and learning to work as part of a team
- Learn how to build 'code of co-operation'
- Focus on teamwork and reflection
- Conflict resolution
- Dress, language and reporting techniques
- Better awareness of the work of support staff e.g. guidance officers

**(Ingvarson, Beavis and Kleinhenz, 2004).**

These ideas and concerns from principals in the Ingvarson *et al* study about the general needs of new teachers mirror many of the ideas and concerns that this study has raised in relation to new teachers and students at risk of disengagement. It is significant and disturbing that all but one of the 12 graduate teachers in this study felt ill-equipped for dealing with behavioural issues in their classrooms. While classroom behaviour was nominated by respondents as their primary way of identifying students at risk of disengagement, it appears that many new teachers do not feel that they have the skills required to manage this behaviour, and a shared belief amongst teachers and principals is that pre-service teaching courses are not doing enough in this regard. As identified above, this is a most significant, but not the only, concern that respondents in this study identified as a gap in their pre-service knowledge and skills in relation to their work with disengaged students.

## **2.2 What is the role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills and expertise for working with disengaged students?**

As with any professional role, the pre-service training provided to teachers is expected to raise them to competence in their work, and "on the job" experience, combined with mentoring and collegiate support and ongoing opportunities for formal professional development, is expected over time to raise each teacher beyond mere competence towards excellence. Given that every teacher interviewed for this study indicated that they encountered students who were disengaged or at risk, a pertinent question to ask is "How much of the professional knowledge, skills and strategies that teachers need in order to work effectively with students at risk of disengagement needs to be provided through pre-service training?" Answering this question needs to take in to account the experiences and opinions of new teachers, such as those interviewed for this study; the pressures on tertiary institutions to cover and prioritise many other content areas; the expectations of the Victorian Institute of Teaching as the body that registers individual teachers and approves tertiary courses in education and teaching; the opportunities provided through other avenues to develop these skills and strategies, such as in-service professional learning; and the data that tells us that student disengagement is a significant concern that needs to be addressed.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the strengths and weaknesses of in-service professional learning offered to teachers and focused on student engagement, it is clear that there are excellent in-service programs available. Likewise many new teachers will find themselves with supportive and knowledgeable mentors and strong collegiate support as they settle in to their new roles. And of course as they receive this support and have the opportunity to work with students over time they will improve their practice and work with students at risk of disengagement more effectively. As this study has shown, however, many new teachers are struggling to work with students at risk, and feel ill equipped for this role.

A conventional wisdom is that many of the skills and strategies that teachers need to have cannot be taught, and must be learned “on the job”. This idea informs many of the expectations of the practicum, and was also reflected in comments from two respondents to this study -

*I know they say there's things that you can't teach, and that we need to learn when we get in to the classroom... and that's true, but they need to...set us up for it...there's so much you don't know how to do when you start teaching and that's a real issue...(Teacher 2)*

*The uni seems to think that their job is just about theory, and you learn all the practice from the school. (Teacher 10)*

Yet clearly there is much that can be taught in this area. Professional learning programs delivered in-service have the advantage in that teachers are likely to have already experienced students who are disengaged or at risk, but such an experience can also be provided through hypotheticals, role plays and workshops, and can be discussed as part of debriefing post-practicum. Lecturers and guest speakers with real and practical experience in this area can detail particular frameworks, strategies and ideas that they have found of use. Practicums can be geared more strongly towards a focus on working with students at risk of disengagement. Opportunities to learn about and to visit alternative education settings can be encouraged and supported.

Developing stronger pre-service professional learning on this issue rather than relying on in-service work has significant and obvious advantages - pre-service learning is universal whereas in-service learning is almost never so; new teachers begin their teaching careers with the necessary skills, thus reducing the stress of the new role; and students at risk of disengagement are provided with an effective response sooner, and with less potential damage to their relationship with a new teacher.

## 2.3 Partnerships in change

### Engaging tertiary education institutions

There are ten tertiary institutions in Victoria with courses in education and teaching that are accredited by the Victorian Institute of Teaching to train people to become teachers in Victorian schools. Between them, they deliver 96 education and teaching course options across 21 campuses, with a further three off-campus options (For further details, see Appendix 2). Of the 10 institutions, eight are Victorian-based universities. These eight were contacted during the course of this study, and discussions were held with staff from the Education Faculties of six (the other two did not respond to requests). This section reflects those discussions.

Discussions across the six universities were similar in that each identified similar strengths and similar limitations across their course content and structure. All concurred that the issue of student disengagement from schooling was a significant concern. The ‘crowded curriculum’ and limitations on teaching time; difficulties in organising and resourcing practicums; and the dominance of what were understood to be ‘education fundamentals’, including curriculum content (‘methods’), were seen as challenges to the need for curriculum focused specifically on the needs of at risk and disengaged students.

The complex nature of the concept of ‘student engagement’ and the multiple ways in which it is understood and responded to creates particular challenges in framing content on engagement in teaching and education courses. The broad working definitions of engagement, as we have seen above, include much that is already central to education courses, such as pedagogical theory, content knowledge, learning styles and so on. Other concerns, such as understanding student diversity, student wellbeing and pastoral care, and whole-school approaches, are also addressed to some extent. Issues such as behaviour management, modifying curriculum, building positive relationships and working one-to-one with students at risk appear to be discussed, but much less effectively taught. So is “student engagement” best addressed as a new, stand alone subject, or as an explicit through-line across all subject areas?

A common concern of those with whom discussions were held was that this complexity meant that there was often little coherence to education and teaching courses - each unit had its own internal logic, but this was not reflected across courses as a whole. Mapping where engagement was taught and what it might look like was thus impossible.

## The role of pre-service training in developing teachers' skills for working with disengaged and at risk young people

Developing a comprehensive focus on student engagement is made even more difficult because, as identified above, differing and sometimes contradictory frameworks for understanding student engagement exist side-by-side in academic literature and in school policy. As Tadic *et al* (2007) commented in relation to their study - “*there cannot be any “assumed” shared knowledge about engagement among academics, policy makers, or teachers. This means that the concept of engagement must be explicitly defined within academic research and government documents to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations.*”

In spite of these complexities and difficulties, there was real interest and support from all those with whom discussions were held across the six universities for the development of collaborative effort to address these issues. There was unanimous interest in exploring opportunities to engage with Doxa and other key education stakeholders in order to facilitate this. The particular focus of Doxa on reconnecting students who are significantly disengaged was acknowledged as a particular gap in current pre-service training, and one that is of real importance in maintaining and improving equitable education outcomes.

### **Other key stakeholders**

Key staff from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Catholic Education Office were briefed about this study and its purposes. Discussions were held with the state school Primary and Secondary Principal Associations (VPPA and VASSP), and the Australian Education Union. These briefings and discussions were primarily to inform key stakeholders of the study and Doxa's interest in working towards improving the knowledge, skills and strategies that teachers in mainstream schools have for working with students who are disengaged or at risk.

All key stakeholders with whom discussions were held as a part of this study shared Doxa's concerns regarding the skills that new teachers have for working with students at risk of disengagement. There was broad interest in collaborating with Doxa to identify strategies for increasing the opportunities that new teachers have for learning these skills, both through changes and improvements to pre-service education courses, and through other strategies. These have thus informed the recommendations in this report.

## Recommendations

These recommendations reflect the views and ideas of the graduate teachers interviewed for this study, staff in the Faculties of Education at six Victorian universities, and key stakeholders from the organisations identified above. They range from recommendations that can be actioned immediately and with little resource need, through to those that would require significant time and/or financial input.

### Doxa's role

1. That Doxa actively promote their availability for delivery of lectures and/or workshops to all Victorian tertiary institutions with education and teaching courses, building on their existing professional development programs - *Making Adjustments and Teaching Adjustments* programs.
2. That Doxa develop a simple resource for pre-service teachers summarising key statistics on engagement and promoting the Doxa Engagement Wiki.
3. That Doxa approach one or more university Faculties of Education (depending on capacity) with a view to shared subject planning and co-ordination of a Unit focused on disengaged and at risk students.
4. That Doxa seek funding to create a position that provides both pre-service and in-service training to teachers, and works with universities and other key stakeholders in education to promote the role of student engagement and the skills and knowledge that teachers require in order to facilitate engagement.

### Partnerships for change

5. That a network of alternative education settings be established to work specifically on strengthening mainstream schools' responses to the issue of student disengagement. This network could collaborate to maximise the promotion of the skills and expertise that alternative education settings have for working with disengaged young people to pre-service and in-service teachers.
6. That Doxa, in collaboration with other key education stakeholders, hold a symposium focussed on strengthening mainstream schools' responses to the issue of student disengagement.
7. That such a symposium develop and agree to an 'engagement map', identifying how teachers best develop the knowledge and skills required to work with students at risk of disengagement, through pre-service learning, the practicum, mentoring and collegiate support and in-service professional learning.

8. That Doxa, in collaboration with other key education stakeholders as appropriate, enter into discussions with the Victorian Institute of Teaching with a view to clarifying and further detailing the standards for pre-service training and teacher education and the characteristics of effective teaching.

### Pre-service teaching and education courses

9. That co-ordinators of pre-service teaching and education courses consider ways to overtly encourage and support enrolment in their courses of people with the emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills that teaching requires, and ways in which to encourage the further development of such attributes.
10. That skills-based content focused on working with students at risk of disengagement be included in mandatory curriculum. Practical strategies for classroom management must be included, with input from current school teachers and others with extensive experience in working with students at risk of disengagement. Role plays, including some that work directly with school-age young people (such as the University of Melbourne program that pairs medical students with secondary school students) are particularly useful.
11. That practice in working with students at risk of disengagement be a specific and overt aim of the practicum experience.
12. That the rich learning experiences of practicum be enhanced through extensive post-practicum debriefing.
13. That practicums in diverse education environments and visits to alternative education settings be encouraged, promoted and supported.

### Supporting new teachers

14. That a collaboration between Doxa and other key education stakeholders develop models for supervision, support and mentorship of new teachers in schools. These should be separate from and additional to the mentorship and collegiate support that new teachers receive in their schools, and may take the form of once-a-term facilitated group discussion either within local school networks or at the university in which pre-service training was undertaken.

**Scoping - Survey of Victorian teacher training institutions**

A list of all tertiary teaching courses in Victoria was obtained, and an Internet search was undertaken of the course details of a small sample of these, in order to determine in which subjects curriculum related to student engagement may have been taught. This proved to be of little use as there was scant detail available for most courses, and it was unclear where curriculum focused on engagement might be.

**Scoping - Focus interviews with Doxa School principals**

To identify and explore the skill set required of teachers in working with disengaged young people discussions were held with the principals of the two Doxa schools. These were informal and used to identify both the broad territory of “working with disengaged students” and specific examples of skills and strategies.

**Literature survey**

An initial broad Web search was undertaken to determine the parameters of the terms “student engagement” and “disengagement” and to identify key areas and concepts for further search. From this, and following discussion with the Doxa principals (above) further literature was surveyed under the following themes -

- Definitions of engagement, disengagement, at risk, other key terms
- Why does engagement matter?
- Recommended strategies for supporting at risk students
- Skills set required of teachers to identify those disengaged or at risk, and to address the issues
- Attitudes, values, school culture - what else impacts?
- The role of pre-service training in developing teacher competence

**Informing key stakeholders**

A Project Information Sheet was developed. Key relevant personnel at DEECD and the CEO, the AEU, and the primary and secondary school Principals’ Associations were identified through this writer’s professional networks and through Internet searches. Unstructured face-to-face and telephone discussions occurred with each, and the Project Information Sheet was distributed.

**Graduate teacher interviews**

A Project Information Sheet for teachers, consent forms and an interview schedule were developed. Nine schools were approached and principals or other senior staff asked if

there were teachers in their first or second year of teaching who might be willing to be interviewed. Seven schools responded positively to this. From these seven schools, fifteen first- or second- year teachers were identified and approached individually. Of these fifteen, twelve expressed interest in being interviewed.

Schools approached were selected on the basis of being known by this writer and/or Doxa as catering well to at risk students and/or with high numbers of at risk students. Two-thirds of the schools were secondary colleges and one-third were primary schools. In the primary schools three of the four teachers were teachers of Grades 5 and/or 6.

Interviews followed a formal interview structure, were recorded, and notes were taken. Average interview length was 50 minutes. While it is clear that the experience teachers have had in their schools will impact on their perception of their pre-service professional learning experience (Ingvarson, Beavis and Kleinhenz, 2004), the interviews were not critiques of the school experience.

The interviews were transcribed, and analysed using themes focused on Doxa’s key concerns, as well as on the issues highlighted by the respondents as of most significant concern to them.

**Discussions with Faculty of Education staff at major teaching universities**

The eight tertiary institutions that train the bulk of new teachers in Victoria were contacted. Six responded and engaged in discussions. Three of these discussions were face-to-face (two with groups) and three were via telephone. Initially it had been considered to formally interview appropriate academic staff, but in discussion between this writer and the Doxa CEO it was considered that these discussions were better to be informal and focussed on the possible development of collaborative approaches to addressing student disengagement in schools by developing the skills of new teachers. Thematic data from graduate teacher interviews was used to inform and shape discussions. Notes were taken but the discussions were not recorded. Discussions focused broadly on directions in teacher pre-service education and how this is reflected in each tertiary institution, rather than on specifics of any particular course.

# 5

## Appendix 2

**Pre-service teacher education programs currently approved for teacher registration in Victoria and with current students**  
(accessed from VIT website, May 2009)

### AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

#### Ballarat campus (Aquinas)

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) - a 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

#### Melbourne campus (St Patrick's)

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) - a 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Master of Teaching (Primary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Master of Teaching (Secondary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

#### Geelong campus (Waurin Ponds)

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Teaching (Primary) - 1-year equivalent postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

#### Melbourne campus (Burwood)

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary)/Bachelor of Arts - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Teaching (Science)/Bachelor of Science - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Physical Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Teaching (Primary and Secondary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) for international students - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

E460 Bachelor of Education - 4th year (Primary Conversion) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for qualified secondary teachers or qualified early childhood teachers to also become qualified primary teachers in Victoria

### **Warrnambool campus**

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

### **Off campus**

Bachelor of Teaching (Primary and Secondary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

E356P Bachelor of Education - 4th year (Primary conversion) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for qualified secondary teachers or qualified early childhood teachers to also become primary teachers in Victoria

## **LA TROBE UNIVERSITY**

### **Albury-Wodonga campus**

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Science Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (P-12) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Technology Education - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### **Bendigo campus**

Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Bachelor of Physical and Health Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Physical and Outdoor Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Science Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Technology Education - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### **Bundoora campus**

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Arts Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Science Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Technology Education - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Master of Teaching - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary or secondary teaching in Victoria. This program has a formal internship towards the end of the program.

### **Mildura campus**

Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Graduate Diploma in Technology Education - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### Shepparton campus

Graduate Diploma in Education (Middle Years) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

## MONASH UNIVERSITY

### Clayton campus

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Commerce/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Visual Arts/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### Gippsland campus

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Business and Commerce/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Visual Arts/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### Peninsula campus

Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria (some of the Music units are taught at the Clayton campus)

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria (some of the Science units are taught at the Clayton campus)

Bachelor of Sport and Outdoor Education/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Visual Arts/Bachelor of Education (Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria (some of the visual arts units are taught at the Clayton campus and some are taught at the Caulfield campus)

Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Sport and Outdoor Education/Bachelor of Education (Secondary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### Off campus

Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### RMIT UNIVERSITY

#### Brunswick campus

Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria CURRENTLY BEING REVIEWED FOR ACCREDITATION

#### Bundoora campus

Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria CURRENTLY BEING REVIEWED FOR ACCREDITATION

Bachelor of Education/Bachelor of Applied Science (Disability) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and special education teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Applied Science (Physical Education) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

#### Bundoora and City campus

Bachelor of Science (Applied Science)/Bachelor of Education - 4 year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria. This program is taught in alternating semesters at the City and Bundoora campuses.

### TABOR COLLEGE (Ringwood campus)

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

#### Parkville campus

Master of Teaching (Early Years) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program may be completed over 1.5 years accelerated full time or 2.5 years reduced load full time.

Master of Teaching (Primary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Master of Teaching (Secondary) - 2-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary) exit point which may be taken after 1 year accelerated full time or 2 years reduced load full time. Pre-service teachers who complete this Master of Teaching program have the option of completing an internship in the final stage of the program.

Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary) - 1 year accelerated full time or 2 years reduced load full time program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT (Mount Helen campus)

Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria. This program has an optional pathway approved for teaching to Year 10.

Bachelor of Education (Physical Education) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Technology Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Mathematical Sciences/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education - 4-year undergraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

### **UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA (Off campus)**

Bachelor of Education (In-Service) - 4-year undergraduate program offered via distance education and approved for primary teaching in Victoria

### **VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**

#### **Footscray Park campus**

Bachelor of Education (P-12) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

#### **Melton campus**

Bachelor of Education (P-12) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood/Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (VET/Secondary teaching strand) - 2-year program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

#### **St Albans campus**

Bachelor of Education (P-12) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

#### **Sunbury campus**

Bachelor of Education (P-12) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (P-12) Accelerated program - 2-year program approved for primary and secondary teaching in Victoria

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood/Primary) - 4-year undergraduate program approved for primary teaching in Victoria

Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education - 1-year postgraduate program approved for secondary teaching in Victoria

## Appendix 3

### Victorian Institute of Teaching statement on the purpose of the practicum experience

VIT provides the following advice to tertiary institutions that are approved for the delivering education and teaching courses, in relation to the practicum experience (emphasis added in bold) -

*The purpose of the practicum is to enable the pre-service teacher to put into practice the theoretical components of their course and engage in experiential learning and school-based research related to:*

- **teaching and learning approaches**
- *stages of child development*
- *theories of learning and methods of teaching*
- **successful classroom management**
- *assessment and reporting of student learning*
- **different school contexts and operations**
- *applying content knowledge.*

*The practicum should include opportunities for pre-service teachers to **work with a range of learners at a variety of year levels and in a variety of educational settings.** Where possible, this should include placement in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and **opportunities for engagement with cultural and socioeconomic diversity.** Pre-service teachers are expected to have opportunities to practise teaching in all of the discipline areas they are being prepared to teach. The time spent in each setting should be sufficient to get to know the teachers, students and school learning environment, and to enable the pre-service teacher to plan, teach and assess student learning and reflect on that experience.*

*Course coordinators are encouraged to seek ways of involving pre-service teachers in additional professional experiences, such as **observational visits to schools of different types,** school-based research for curriculum units, undertaking school-based projects and **visits to community support services.***

(from VIT, 2007)

## Appendix 4

### Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines DEECD, 2009

In March 2009 the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development published the *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*. These outline the responsibilities of schools in preventing student disengagement and developing staged responses to address the needs of those at risk of disengagement.

The *Guidelines* provide a broad understanding of engagement, which is defined as having behavioural, emotional and cognitive components. The following statements from the *Guidelines* give the flavour of the document and its relevance to this study -

*Learning takes place within the social context of the school, which has a significant impact on both the quality and the opportunity for learning. Schools provide a strong foundation for student learning when student engagement and wellbeing are a whole-school priority. This requires a clearly stated philosophy, translated into practice, that student wellbeing is everyone's responsibility, is a high priority and that social and emotional wellbeing underpin effective student learning and positive behaviour.*

And -

*Many young people will encounter some difficulty, including learning difficulty, during their school life and will need to be supported by targeted strategies to address such challenges. It is imperative that schools have in place processes to identify and intervene early when an individual student is at risk of disengaging from learning or from school. Risks for students may involve individual, social, emotional or physical factors, or may be related to family or community factors.*

*All teachers have a responsibility to respond when students experience difficulty with their schooling. Teachers will need to be supported by a planned, sequential and detailed whole-school approach to student support **and by professional learning to assist with implementation.***

(DEECD, 2009, emphasis added)

## Appendix 5

### VIT Standards for pre-service training and teacher registration

The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) has developed standards that specify what graduating teachers should know and be able to do as a result of their pre-service course. They thus inform the content of pre-service courses, as any such course, in order to be approved by VIT, must be able to demonstrate that their graduate students are able to meet the standards.

The eight standards are divided into three broad themes which, “together, describe the essential elements of teaching.” (VIT, 2007)

The three themes and associated standards are:

Professional knowledge	Professional practice	Professional engagement
1 Teachers know how students learn and how to teach them effectively.	4 Teachers plan and assess for effective learning	7 Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice.
2 Teachers know the content they teach.	5 Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments	8 Teachers are active members of their profession.
2 Teachers know their students.	6 Teachers use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning.	

(from VIT, 2007)

Each of the eight standards is then defined by the “*characteristics of effective teaching*”. The standards thus provide clear guidance to tertiary institutions on the content and structure of the courses they provide.

VIT specifies that teacher preparation be through four-year undergraduate programs in either a single education degree (e.g. Bachelor of Education) or a double degree where two degrees are completed at the same time (e.g. Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts) or, for graduates of a non-teaching degree, through a postgraduate course of one or two years duration (e.g. Graduate Diploma of Education, Graduate Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Teaching). The practicum component must be no less than 45 days, and is usually longer.

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