

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

**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Ian Seal**

**2009**

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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.

This document is a condensed and edited version of the original research report. The full report is available from Doxa's website at [www.doxa.org.au](http://www.doxa.org.au).

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.

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.

### Understanding engagement and disengagement

The full report of this study explores both the opinions of the teachers interviewed, and the literature, to develop an understanding of the nature of student engagement and its importance in both academic outcomes and a range of long-term social and wellbeing outcomes. It examines a range of conceptual models, adopting a framework that describes engagement as having three components - *behavioural*, *cognitive* and *emotional* engagement. Overlapping terms and concepts, such as school connectedness, student wellbeing, and school attendance, retention and refusal are also identified.

Factors leading to disengagement are explored, utilising "explanatory frameworks" identified by Tadich *et al* (2007). These note that the literature explains disengagement as caused by (a) inappropriate curriculum content and structure, and learning activities that are not sufficiently rich and meaningful, and (b) psychological and socio-cultural factors, including the backgrounds and family lives of students, and the personal abilities of individual students to stay focused and on task. The understandings of the 12 graduate teacher respondents to this study are also documented. It is also noted that 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".

The full report develops a structure that uses Tadich *et al*'s explanatory frameworks and considers the skills, strategies and knowledge that teachers require to work on student engagement at three levels - the preventative / whole class level; the identification of students at risk of disengagement; and the development of responses for individual students who are disengaged. This creates six areas in which teachers need skills and frameworks for understanding and responding, as follows -

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

Other, “non-teachable”, attributes required of teachers are also explored, noting that the Victorian Institute of Teaching states that universities should encourage applications for teaching courses from “students who have, or are likely to develop, such attributes” (VIT, 2007). Appendices provide further detail of VIT’s standards for pre-service training and teacher registration, and expectations of the practicum experience, as well as an overview of the 2009 policy guidelines for student engagement from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools*, a list of VIT-approved teaching courses, and a methodology for this study.

### 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.

# 2

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

As we have seen, the graduate teachers interviewed for this study, generally felt under-equipped 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)*

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

*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 schools 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)*

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

*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)*

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 kids and disabled kids, but none of it was very practical. (Teacher 5)*

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

*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 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* (2009) 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. 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 they had been given the practical skills.

### e) Classroom management

As identified above, classroom and behaviour management were of concern to a number of respondents current teaching. Three commented that they were not given skills in this area 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)*

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

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)

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

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 professionals 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 -

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

### 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.

# 3

## 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 provide with an effective response sooner, and with less potential damage to their relationship with a new teacher.

## 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. 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.

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 Tadich 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.

# Appendix and References

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### SECTION ONE

- Understanding student engagement
- 1.1 What is “student engagement”?
- 1.2 What causes disengagement?
- 1.3 Why does engagement matter?
- 1.4 Preventing and responding to disengagement
- 1.5 What skills, strategies and understandings do teachers require to work effectively with students at risk of disengagement?

### SECTION TWO

- 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?
- 2.2 What is the role of pre-service training in developing teachers’ skills and expertise for working with disengaged students?
- 2.3 Partnerships in change

### Recommendations

#### Appendix One

- Methodology

#### Appendix Two

- Pre-service teacher education programs currently approved for teacher registration in Victoria and with current students

#### Appendix Three

- VIT Statement on the purpose of the practicum experience

#### Appendix Four

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

#### Appendix Five

- VIT Standards for pre-service training and teacher registration

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