

Inquiry into effective strategies for teacher professional learning

Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria

Introduction

Doxa Youth Foundation commends the Parliament of Victoria for its inquiry into effective strategies for teacher professional learning and is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry.

Doxa's experience in the delivery of education services, (see Appendix A) and professional teacher learning, gives us the authority to respond to the following terms of reference:

- the relationship between ongoing professional learning for teachers and teaching expertise;

Background to Doxa Youth Foundation

Doxa Youth Foundation, (Doxa) was established in 1972 to assist disadvantaged young people to achieve their potential.

Doxa's mission is to create opportunities for disadvantaged young people by investing in education related programs that help them achieve their potential and meaningfully participate in the community.

Major programs that Doxa provides include:

Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo – unique, leading edge schools providing 2 terms of intensive educational support with 12 months follow up to disadvantaged young people at risk of becoming disengaged from education with the aim of assisting them to continue their education. *See Appendix A

Doxa Cadetship Program - gives talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to pursue a university education and gain graduate employment.

Doxa Malmsbury Camp and Doxa City Camp – giving urban children the opportunity for an affordable school camp and rural children the opportunity for an affordable city experience.

The relationship between ongoing professional learning for teachers and teaching expertise

Doxa Youth Foundation is committed to providing support to students who are at risk of becoming disengaged at school and leaving education early. This commitment includes Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo. Both schools provide a six month alternative program for students who are at risk of becoming disengaged from school with an additional 12 months support in the form of fortnightly visits by a Doxa Youth Worker when they have returned to the mainstream school. (See Appendix A)

Doxa recognises that two schools do not come near to meeting the need of students at risk of becoming disengaged. It further recognises that no one strategy will work and that any initiatives must include a focus on strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools. An important aspect of strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools is ensuring that teachers, (and new graduate teachers in particular), have some knowledge and skills around working with students at risk of becoming disengaged. This is particularly pertinent given that many new graduate teachers leave teaching within 5 years as they are ill equipped to teach disengaged students.

Why keep young people at school longer?

There are good reasons for doing all that is possible to keep young people at school. There is clear evidence that the longer young people stay at school the better the outcomes are likely to be in terms of going on to further education or employment. In its report on How young people are faring 2007 (Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2007) highlighted that in May 2006, 20% of school leavers who had completed Year 12 were not fully engaged in study or work compared with 45% of Year 11 completers and 50% of Year 10 or below completers. The report also showed that 14% of 15-19 year-olds are neither in full time study or full time work. This statistic has barely shifted over the past decade, despite a 30 year low in the unemployment rate. (National Industry Skills Committee 2007)

In addition, early school leaving and lower levels of education cost Australia an estimated \$2.6 billion a year in higher social welfare, health and crime prevention costs and lower tax revenue, productivity and Gross Domestic Product. (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004) It has been estimated that for every dollar that government invests in retaining early school leavers, the expected return is as much as 3.2 times more. (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005)

How important is the teacher/student relationship?

One of the key criteria in keeping young people at school for as long as possible is the quality of the teacher/student relationship, reflected by a sense of belonging and being valued, and a friendly and mutually respectful relationship. Whilst in contrast, a poor relationship, conflict with teachers and the student going unnoticed contributes to disengagement. (Butler et. al. 2005) Failure to provide and build satisfactory teaching relationships removes the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for the young person to stay on at school. (Lamb et. al. 2004)

Yet building such relationships with students at risk of disengagement requires a level of expertise, experience and commitment which is often lacking in teachers in mainstream education.

Student teachers are given little formal training on supporting at risk students. Many feel ill-prepared to teach and support these students, and there is a

worrying drift out of teaching during the early years of a teacher's career. A 2003 Victorian Department of Education and Training report found that in the United States a third of teachers leave the profession within three years almost half within five years. In Britain, a 2003 survey by the University of Buckingham found that 30% of teachers who left teaching that year had been in the profession less than five years. A recent Australian Education Union survey showed that 47% of beginning teachers did not see themselves teaching in 10 years. (Education Age 2007)

Teacher training is critical

It is essential that tertiary institutions provide student teachers with greater support to prepare to teach students at risk of disengagement. Subjects on this topic should be mandatory during teacher training, rather than an optional extra. Also, there is a significant amount of research which highlights the importance of effective mentoring and induction of new teachers in terms of improving professional practice and addressing high attrition rates. (Johnson et. al. 2005; Boyer et. al. 2004) This also requires additional attention.

Schools also need to identify and facilitate the training and professional development necessary for teaching staff to respond to research on how to more successfully engage children in the later years of primary and early years of secondary schooling. Such support can be through professional development which focuses on building their capacity to learn from each other and their students, and professional teams within schools to assist staff to reflect on progress and problems. (Butler et. al. 2005)

Hattie's research on 'Teachers make a Difference' (2003) suggests that up to 60% of the variation in student learning outcomes is attributable to what takes place in the school or classroom. The Victorian Middle Years Research and Development Project found classroom teaching and learning practices are the most critical factor in the achievement and engagement of students during the middle years. (Russell et. al. 2003) Similarly, Butler et. al. (2005) found that factors which promote engagement relate directly to curriculum and the catering for a diversity of learning styles, creating opportunity for co-operative learning and providing content that is meaningful, significant and part of the real life of young people.

Fullarton (2002) found that if teachers believed that their school was broadly successful it was found to be a significant predictor of student engagement. It relates to teachers assessment on the success of their school in providing a curriculum that caters for all students. It would seem that a strong feeling among teachers that the school is inclusive and successful is a positive influence on student engagement.

Ongoing Professional Development

Such is its concern regarding these issues that Doxa Youth Foundation partnered with the Catholic Education Office Melbourne and Doxa School West Melbourne to develop ***Making Adjustments***, a professional development course aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in supporting difficult to engage students. The Pilot Program of Making Adjustments is currently underway and has thus far received very impressive feedback. (See Appendix B)

Summary

In summary, Doxa Youth Foundation is committed to strategies that keep young people engaged in education and therefore prepared to stay at school longer.

There are sound economic and financial reasons for prolonging young people's education.

The student/teacher relationship is a crucial factor in keeping young students engaged. Teachers require specialised pre – teacher training and on-going professional development to ensure that they are professionally equipped to identify at risk students and have the skills to keep them engaged.

Doxa's ***Making Adjustments*** is a Professional Development programs that has been successfully developed to fill a gap in teacher knowledge and training.

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Appendix A

Doxa Schools

Doxa Youth Foundation funds Doxa School West Melbourne and Doxa School Bendigo, both alternative schools that work with children at risk of becoming disengaged.

The Doxa Schools provide an alternative time-limited education program for 11-14 year olds who face various forms of disadvantage that make staying at school challenging for them.

The Doxa Schools provides six months (two terms) in an alternative school setting where intensive educational and personal development support is available. After the student returns to mainstream schooling a further 12 month's follow up support is provided by the Doxa School.

In 2006, Doxa commissioned Australian Youth Research Centre, Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne to evaluate Doxa School West Melbourne which has been in operation since 2000. (Formerly operating as Marist Transition School)

Key research findings showed that:

- The Doxa School provides an excellent program consistent in most respects with principles for good practice in alternative education settings derived from the literature.
- Given the level of disadvantage experienced by young people referred to The Doxa School, it is remarkable that the majority of students stay at school for at least another two years after attending the program.
- Of the 98 graduates tracked through this research, 71 (72%) were either found to be still at school or were still in school on last contact with the school (usually at least 12 months after attending the school). Twelve students (12%) were working (eight in apprenticeships in building and construction).
- Only eight of 98 graduates about whom we were able to access information were known to be looking for work.
- Some barriers to school retention (for instance severe family conflict, learning difficulty or economic disadvantage) are not amenable to change within a six month placement in an alternative setting. The experience of many graduates was that while they greatly enjoyed their time at The Doxa School and had remained within the education system, they still disliked mainstream school and thought they were under-performing.
- Aspects of the program which were most appreciated by research participants include the mentoring program providing 12 months support to graduates after attending the Doxa School, and intensive and caring support provided by volunteers and staff. The opportunity for young people to connect and feel supported by a number of significant adults was seen as critical in The Doxa School's success.
- Participants were clear that what The Doxa School does particularly well is to work on the students' barriers to education. These include monitoring their behaviour in an educational setting, conflict and anger management.
- The research literature highlights a concern that aggregating 'at risk' young people in a common setting may function to compound behavioural

problems, thus placing young people further at risk. Nonetheless this risk is well managed by the Doxa School staff and program structure and participants report positive outcomes from the program.

- The program is highly regarded by graduates, parents and staff of other schools. It is significant that among a group of young people all of whom had difficulty maintaining school engagement, almost all survey respondents identified enjoying their time at The Doxa School and could identify achievements they felt proud of as a result of the intervention. (Full research paper, Doxa School West Melbourne: Outcomes for Students 2000–2006 Attachment A)