



BLACK DOUGLAS PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION SERVICES

8 Greenbank Drive Mooroolbark Victoria 3138 Australia
ABN: 34 620 211 772

Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning

Presentation by:

Doug. Williams

Personal Background

Members of the Committee, my name is Douglas Williams and I am a story-teller in mathematics education. Thank you for the invitation to present evidence to your inquiry. I hope the matters I raise in this presentation, which are supported by documentation previously submitted, will, in the short term, contribute to improvements in the Department of Education's approach to teacher professional learning, and in the long term, to significant improvements in student learning.

Currently my career is 100% professional development. Its focus is collecting and retelling stories of success from mathematics classrooms at all levels from K - 12. I work wherever I am invited to work, so my contact with teachers is not confined to Victoria. I have worked in every state and territory and several overseas countries.

The background which brought me to this role is a degree and Dip. Ed. at Monash, training as a secondary mathematics teacher. I spent 8 years in this role including 4 as head of department. Then I transferred to primary teaching and spent a further 14 years in primary classrooms, including 5 years as the school art teacher. During 1991/92 I spent a further year studying at the University of London Institute of Education courtesy of a Commonwealth Relations Trust Fellowship. Since returning to Australia the story-teller role has developed, initially through connections with Curriculum Corporation's Mathematics Task Centre Project.

I should add that although my career from that time became focused more and more on supporting teacher professional learning, I have been involved in, and was soon leading, professional development from the first year of my teaching.

It is from this limited background that I choose to make comments firstly about the 'professional' in professional learning and then about the 'learning'.

Thoughts about 'Professional'

The subject of this inquiry is effective strategies for teacher professional learning. There is an assumption there that teachers are professional. They are.

However they are not treated as professionals. The core business of teachers is no longer teaching - especially in secondary schools. A succession of structural, administrative and curriculum impositions by governments of both persuasions over, at least, the last twenty years - changes driven from the top down and often strongly influenced by the philosophies and experiments of academic educators - have left most teachers feeling that classroom preparation and teaching is either last on their 'to do' list, or at best, done under stress, and therefore done less well, due to the burden of a raft of external demands which contribute little to student learning.

Messages, subtle and obvious, from the Department make it clear to teachers that

- ◆ documentation is more important than curriculum,
- ◆ filling in forms is more important than teaching, and
- ◆ education is more about the budget than the quality of student learning.

Generally, teachers do not feel they are valued for their teaching - at least from the top down.

Two current examples which send such messages are contract teaching and teachers' current pay claims.

Contract teaching belies any talk of teaching as a career, because by its very nature it implies the teacher is disposable.

The current stand-off over teachers' salaries is, on the government side, argued only in terms of budget, not in terms of recognition, worth, reward, or value.

I repeat, teachers are professional, but they are not treated as professional. I believe that if this committee is serious about effective strategies for teacher professional learning it must report on changes to teachers' working environment that would uplift teachers and teaching. My personal preference is to see teachers in the classroom as the apex of the pyramid of education. Everything else exists, in the base of the pyramid, to assist and support teachers. From this viewpoint, the expression 'from the top down', which I used earlier, would have an entirely different meaning.

In summary, teachers' professional learning would be more effective if strategies were in place to encourage, develop and support teachers as professionals.

Thoughts about 'Learning'

In a more professional environment professional learning would be more effective. However, in the current environment, because of the dedication and professionalism of teachers, professional learning can still be effective. In the papers I have submitted you will find two stories to illustrate this. My assumption is that effective strategies in teacher professional learning would be demonstrated by improved learning among the teachers' students.

The INISSS report shows such change in a large group of secondary students from many schools over a long time, through research constructed in parallel with the professional development program. The equally important personal reflection on one of our

6-day programs shows such change in a small group of primary students from one school over a much shorter time. These apparently different professional development programs have many common elements. I invite committee members to read them and extract the elements that have led to changes in teaching practice, which in turn have led to advances in student learning.

These are two of many examples which illustrate effective strategies in teacher professional learning. The particular programs were designed using principles that have been public knowledge in mathematics education for a very long time. I have listed those, and their source in the supporting papers.

Also in the supporting papers you will see that I made a small attempt to seek information from those most knowledgeable about teacher professional learning. An extensive list of teacher responses has been included. Examining these responses will confirm many of the principles mentioned, and hopefully, help plan pathways and programs for the future.

Conclusion

I was surprised to be asked to present to this committee. I hope that my limited background has been able to add something pertinent and positive to your deliberations. I very much want to leave you with the thought that teachers in classrooms, whoever they are and whatever they currently know about their craft, are the starting point for effective professional learning. That very much means responding to *their* invitations, listening to and discussing *their* needs, encouraging them to engage in challenges, resourcing them to feel confident to do so, and retelling stories of success from colleagues to inspire them to continue with the career long journey of learning to teach.

Thank you. I invite your questions and comments.