

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, A NEW WAY TO PROGRESS TEACHER SATISFACTION

### Introduction

The education sector is in crisis around the country. There are teacher shortages, lack of career paths, overstretched teachers trying to deal with curriculum and box ticking overload and confused expectations about what a teacher's role is. Young teachers are faced with huge workloads and lack of clear guidance or mentoring. Older teachers are subject to burn out and a lack of rewards and recognition.

Community in primary schools has been the glue that made schools happy places and effective learning locations. There has been a relaxed, positive environment where families have delivered their children to their local schools for generations of effective academic and social learning. Is this now under threat?

Professional learning is a key aspect of change in education. The current delivery is outdated and not fit for purpose. The Institute of Teachers needs to be disbanded. Real improvement in teacher performance will not be enhanced by professional learning that is a drain on teacher's energy and focussed on ticking off a long list of sub-sections of teaching standards.

When I retired in 2016, I registered to have a casual teacher number and it was granted. However, I was required to join the Institute of Teachers at my own expense and was then obliged to have 100 hours of professional learning each year to maintain my fitness to teach status. After teaching for over 30 years, that was discouraging and unnecessary. I didn't join the institute of teachers and did no more teaching and arguably my experience was wasted.

I list my professional learning throughout my career below as an example of what is possible

### Professional Learning

Professional learning, apart from health updates (CPR and Anaphylaxis etc) would be more effective if individual teachers chose their own professional learning, their own path of upskilling themselves. Despite what is currently available to teachers in this area, we now have an opportunity in Australia, post Jobs Summit, that highlighted jobs shortages, to develop a new approach. Unless we do, teachers will continue to leave the service and we will fail to attract new people. A must in this space is that any professional learning be linked to more pay for teachers.

The current situation for teachers is that professional learning is an additional load; teachers teach all day and then after school, they embark on professional learning. What is usually brought to the teachers is a mix of curriculum targeted programs where there is too often no discussion concerning the content of professional learning before it is put to them. It is often decreed from above forcing principals to implement. The choices are external and brought to principals who make decisions about priorities. Teachers often laugh at a 'brand new program' in a key learning area that is like what was brought in in a previous era. Let us be clear, any new program to the dedicated teacher brings a review of practice and new ideas which is positive.

But it is quite insulting to teachers professionally to increase workloads which inevitably affects morale, especially if led into a new program in which there is no investment. 'What is it this week,' is often a cynical comment teachers make amongst themselves when they gather at the end of a teaching day to 'professionally learn'. This does not enhance teacher standards or make teachers believe they can determine or at least have a say in their own career path.

However, if you turn this on its head and make professional learning representing what an individual teacher wants to learn to make his or her job more effective for their students, we have better motivation to extend learning.

The way teachers are seen by the general community needs to change. Professional learning alone needs to be brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Professional learning needs to be less top down, more bottom up. Let teachers be encouraged to make their own decisions about their own professional development futures. Leave it to the education authorities to organise the structures and then get out of the way. More on this below.

It is pertinent at this point to explain the way teachers progress in pay and status. In NSW there are 13 steps which are annual increments to their salary. After that the only way to progress in primary schools is to go for promotion to Assistant Principal, Deputy Principal and finally Principal. This only affects a fraction of teachers, and many aren't interested in promotion as they are happy in the classroom. That means most teachers can only advance their pay by general pay increases. Most teachers are very motivated in their job to improve learning for their students and financial concerns are not the only motivator for them, but not being adequately paid affects morale.

Morale in Primary education is very low, with young teachers deserting the sector now resulting in teacher shortages because of the workload and the perception that no one has their collective backs. Older teachers are asking themselves why should they stay and are retiring early. Of course, teacher executives within all schools offer support, encouragement, and guidance, but it is quite random as to how effective this is from school to school and is often beyond the resources the principal has available. The net result is that the job is too hard and young teachers are leaving for more lucrative positions in other areas. This is a tragedy in both human terms and financial terms as time, effort and money are spent getting an education degree that is wasted.

We can be thankful that well developed school structures, refined over decades that include clear hierarchies, areas of responsibility and collaboration between teachers and school executives, make primary schools good places to send children for an excellent education. We don't want to take these structures for granted, we must work hard to maintain and improve them. Teachers need to feel the structures are behind them, can support them and can help solve their problems in the classroom.

Returning to my proposal of how new professional learning modes can help solve these problems, I propose that through specially designed TAFE and University short courses,

teachers choose what to study, in their own time, to enhance their teaching practice, but significantly improve their financial situation. In this discussion money and resources are key. Teachers, like all employees, need to feel they are 'getting on' relative to their peers in other industries. You have a way of improving teacher pay, beyond the current step pay structure, teacher by teacher, if you attach increase in pay to new learning.

My suggested plan involves a significant shift and the adoption of a new department to oversee the courses, progress of students, evaluation of students and pay increases. A mentor program could be part of this new inspectorate.

This will cost money but there is so much money thrown at education now and in the past that is largely ineffective. The advantage of using professional learning as a means of rewarding teachers financially is that individual teachers take on more learning, they make the effort and they get the reward.

How will it be organised?

1. TAFE and Universities would work with a special curriculum and leadership group of teachers, principals and directors to ascertain what courses could be offered, which branch of tertiary education would be best served to offer what courses and how they would be run.
2. These courses could be organised like Certificate and Diploma courses by TAFE and degree units by universities. Ease of access to the courses and keeping them short would be paramount to encourage teachers to take them up. These courses would not replace an education degree that would still be the basic requirement to enter the workforce but be achievable extensions to it.
3. The courses chosen by teachers would reflect specific needs a teacher might have to be better able to improve learning in the classroom. For example, technology, literacy, numeracy, the arts, the social sciences, science, student welfare and sport are all areas that could have extension courses with specific, detailed learning, not offered in the base education degree in detail.
4. Currently teachers take on roles in the school through their aptitude or preference. Running choirs, organising plays, taking a sporting team, being the computer expert are a few. **No teacher has ever been paid an extra dollar to take on any of these roles and in fact many teachers outlay their own money to support them.** My plan wouldn't change those roles teachers take on voluntarily but would reward them for learning more in a specially designed short course that would be designed for them, and other teachers like them that have the same interest.
5. Courses would be designed in units that may include lectures face to face or online, practical exercises, academic essays, progressive assessment and reporting to a tutor or panel to prove the work was completed satisfactorily. These are ambit claim ideas and could be improved to be both implementable and rigorous.
6. On completion of the short course a teacher would be awarded points that would depend on the complexity of the course. Learning a specific reading program might be 5

points, a gardening course might be worth 3 points for example. The teacher on completion may choose another course the next term or not.

7. When a designated number of points is attained, it would convert to an increase in salary. A separate pay ladder would be established. When say 20 points are accrued, the teacher would go up a pay scale. Currently teachers finish at level 13, this plan would enable the teacher to go to level 14 and beyond, depending on how many courses they completed over time.
8. This all might sound cumbersome and expensive, but currently nothing a teacher does after their initial degree and the progress through the pay scales rewards them financially. (By the way it doesn't stop teachers putting much effort into their favourite extracurricular activity for example the school choir. Successful teachers love teaching children and watching their progress and put in extraordinary extra effort. Currently there is no reward for any extra effort).
9. The existing pay steps may need revising in addition to my plan not instead of it. The advantage of my plan is to get value for money and to keep teachers happy and in the service. You study more, and you get financial rewards. The alternative gives all teachers regardless of how much effort put in, the same increase in pay.

### In conclusion

My plan does not attempt to solve all professional learning problems, it is merely a way to reward dedicated teachers who are prepared to put in the effort to advance their knowledge of teaching.

The professional learning plan outlined above would enhance the skills of the teacher in their chosen interest field. This also enhances delivery of tertiary learning structures through TAFE, the department and universities, encouraging them to grow their teaching base.

With this plan teachers can feel their choices matter. Current professional learning delivery is too often insulting and soul destroying for teachers as they don't have a say in what they are required to do, and it is another load on their time because it is often done in the afternoon after a full teaching day. This too is insulting and contributes to the overload that teachers have been complaining about for at least two decades. Let's make teachers proud of their profession where their professional status is commensurate with the effort put in.

### Author

*I studied at Armidale Teacher's College from 1970-73 where I gained a Diploma in Teaching. I began teaching in 1974. In 1978 I left the teaching service and ran my own pottery manufacturing business until 1991 when I returned to teaching. I studied and received a Certificate in Ceramics through Brookvale TAFE 1987 - 1990.*

I taught in both private schools and public schools until I retired in 2016. I studied and graduated a Bachelor of Education (Primary) in 2001 through University of Technology, Sydney. I became an Assistant Principal in 2003 and remained one until my retirement.

Although it was demanding work having a full teaching load and the executive responsibilities of an assistant principal, I was able to stay directly in touch with children and teaching and learning by having a class throughout those years. I'm sure I did my best teaching between 2003 and 2016.

During this time, I completed a Counselling Certificate from the Institute of Counselling, training in Behaviour Modification Techniques designed by psychiatrist William Glasser, who wrote 'Choice Theory', 'Reality Theory' and Counselling with Choice Theory', in 2003.

In 2004 I worked as mathematics consultant in the New York City School System, employed by an Australian educational consultancy company, 'Australian United States Services in Education'. The aim was to improve teaching standards in schools in low-socioeconomic areas. The job was mentoring teachers and delivering professional learning to teachers that meant something to them and was effective.

I completed a mentorship in permaculture, enabling me to establish a permaculture garden in my final years of teaching at the last school where I was working (2011- 2016).