

Theme 3: Teacher Quality

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Before we go any further, can I please acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects today to Elders past and present.

This is a very important and timely forum as it allows us to make an assessment together, as teachers, educators, policy makers, with respect to where we find ourselves two years into the Education Revolution.

I would like to make some opening remarks, and they will, by the end of what I've got to say, link in together to what I think are some key fundamentals with respect to teacher quality and what others make of teacher quality and teachers.

The first remark I want to make is this. I come from a tradition where a fundamental belief is held in the transformational power of education and what education can do for each individual child and the nation as a whole. It is a belief that recognises that education is the key that provides all children with the opportunity to break through, to lead rich, fulfilling lives and to make a contribution to Australian society and their communities and beyond. It is a fundamental belief in the realisation that there is no 'level playing field' and that there are therefore certain actions that we need to take to ensure that all children, regardless of background, get that equal opportunity to engage in our society. Education, of course, is the key for them to do so.

I consider low expectations to be the cancer of education and I consider that every child should have the right to a learning environment where high expectations drive everything that happens in a school. Given that belief I find it insulting and disrespectful, to say the least, when political leaders, policy makers, self-proclaimed experts and media commentators seek to taint the profession with what I call 'the bigotry of low expectations'. It makes me angry, to put it simply.

By way of illustration I would like to offer some insights with respect to what has happened in the last week. Last Tuesday and Wednesday the Deputy Prime Minister hosted a forum, a 'national conversation', for principals. She referred to it this morning in her presentation. It was a 'national conversation', and my understanding of a 'conversation' is one where people talk *with* each other and learn from each other, in an atmosphere of respect. During the first session last Tuesday the Deputy Prime Minister unveiled the Government's *My Schools* website, which will, without a doubt, result in the further creation and publication of league tables right across the country. If there's any doubt about that, just read a couple of newspapers today where media proprietors have made it clear that that's exactly what they intend to do.

During that presentation principal after principal, school leader after school leader, got up and expressed concern about the impact, not only of the website, but what may happen to the information contained on that website. Concerns were expressed about league tables, the narrowing of the curriculum and a deepening inequality in the provision of schooling in Australia. Concerns were expressed about the narrowness of the information which will the reductionism—of diminish the *life of the school* to a single figure Notwithstanding all that we hear about 'rich

contextualised information' that will be available for people to explore, all focus will be on a set of data constructed through the invalid, inappropriate use of what may be, at best, a one-point-in-time snapshot of student performance in literacy and numeracy. Now don't get me wrong: I'm a fundamental believer in all students being able to acquire the highest levels of literacy and numeracy skills. I don't think anyone disputes that; they are the foundation blocks of learning. But I think there's an important argument that the education community is putting forward with respect to *the life of a school* being more than that.

What occurred less than 24 hours after the conclusion of that 'national conversation' was nothing short of insulting and disrespectful to the country's principals. In a speech delivered to the EIDOS Institute 24 hours after the closure of that forum, having heard the concerns of education leaders, about the impact of the Government's agenda and the narrowing of curriculum and the effect it will have on the wellbeing of the child—the whole development of the child—the Deputy Prime Minister said this: 'I actually don't believe our aim to have schools full of happy, illiterate, innumerate children'.

You know, I've yet to meet a teacher, a principal or anyone involved in that noble endeavour of teaching and learning who enters a classroom, a school, with any intention other than to improve the educational outcomes of students. That's what defines us! That's what drives us. And it does so because of that belief we share in the transformational power of education.

And what's the relevance of that with respect to teacher quality? Well, fundamental to teacher quality is a respect; a respect for teachers, a respect for what we do, a respect for the professional judgements that teachers make. When that respect is afforded to teachers, when teachers can engage in that dialogue, when those enabling conditions exist where teachers can sit down and talk together and learn together, that's when we start seeing the emergence of programs that can be described as genuine 'quality' in nature. It's the most powerful professional development,

The other thing that was said by the DPM in that speech 24 hours later with respect to the concerns that the profession has with league tables, namely the narrowing of the curriculum, the 'teaching to the test' syndrome and everything that it brings with it, was

To those who will say that people will teach to the test, I say that if the test is appropriately integrated and testing the curriculum, then learning how to do well in literacy and numeracy tests is not a bad thing.

Our drive—our aim, our objective—is not that kids learn to do well in a literacy and numeracy test. Our objective is that kids *master the fundamentals*—the basics of literacy and numeracy as the building blocks for the future. You see, we aspire for the very best for our kids, and in aspiring for the very best for our kids, we recognise the place of a deep, rigorous, high-quality curriculum for all students. Every child should have access to that high-quality, rigorous curriculum—not one that is narrowed because of the high-stakes, low-quality path that this nation appears to be going on.

The National Partnership on Teacher Quality that was announced as part of the COAG announcements in November last year, in broad terms is not bad. The architecture of it, in terms of the general thrust of the planks contained within it, is not bad as a guide for us to start to achieve some genuine progress with respect to advancing teacher quality. Central planks of the National Partnership on Teacher Quality go to:

- the need to better prepare our beginner teachers, our future teachers

- the need for further professional growth of teachers
- and therefore, and through that process, better targeting of programs for school leadership.

I think they are all inextricably linked. What's disappointing is the fact that opportunity after opportunity has been missed by successive governments to get the fundamentals in place to prepare the future generations of teachers. We've had Senate enquiry after Senate enquiry about the needs of the profession into the future, and virtually all of the recommendations resulting from them have been ignored. But here's the opportunity for us, whilst ignored in the past, to seize upon the opportunity that has now re-emerged., or force politicians to seize upon.

The teacher demographic is such—and you don't need me to tell you about this—that there will be a massive exodus of teachers in the next few years. We've known about this for quite some time. The opportunity was previously missed to put the foundations in place to properly prepare our next generations of teachers. Now it's not too late, and certainly we've got to scramble to ensure that that's the case. We've had a ten year period of under-investment in universities, teacher education course suffered greatly as a result of that under-investment. We need to see a massive injection of funding in teacher education and courses; we need to continue the dialogue with our colleagues, the deans of education, in order to ensure that we are able to construct the necessary preconditions to properly prepare teachers so that they're classroom ready upon graduation. And having achieved that, we certainly don't let them swim on their own and possibly sink. We need to have in place—and all the research tells us this—all those necessary induction programs, those necessary mentoring programs, those necessary programs of support, not only for the beginning teachers themselves, but for those who will mentor and support them along the way, to ensure a greater longevity in their commitment to teaching in the future.

Because what's occurring at present and has been occurring for the last few years, is that whilst we've been seeing a massive exodus of our most experienced teachers, concurrently we've been seeing too many of our newer teachers leaving the profession as well. Hitting the wall at that 3-to-5 year period and leaving. We can't afford that. We've got to really focus on the preparation of teachers to make sure they're classroom-ready, and then put around them all those necessary supports that keep them there for the long haul, investing in this noble occupation of teaching and learning.

On this point, if I can return to my theme of respect, with all due respect to the Deputy Prime Minister—and she referred to it again this morning—*Teach for Australia* is not the answer. It is highly insulting to the profession as a whole and the traditions of profession to suggest that anyone—notwithstanding the fact that they may have graduated from particular courses of study— will be classroom-ready in six weeks. It's just wrong, but what makes it even more wrong are the comments that are associated with this program. She said it again today, that 'this program will lift the status of the profession, and deliver better student outcomes for students'. Please! Just stop saying it—you've made your announcement, but *please don't insult the profession*.

We don't have it for other professions. 'You got a spare six weeks—you might want to become a surgeon! You might want to become a nurse!' We laugh! But yet that's what's happening to our profession; it's devaluing our profession. It genuinely intrigues me, to the point where I sit back sometimes late at night and try to divorce myself from the subjectivity of it all, and I ask myself 'Why

are they doing this? What is it that's driving this? I'm genuinely intrigued. But *Teach for Australia* is genuinely not the answer.

So I believe that with respect to teacher quality, the major focus has got to be on better preparing the future generations of teachers. We've missed opportunities in the past; we certainly can't miss those opportunities now. We've got to put in place—and again the National Partnership provides the planks for this—more work on professional development for teachers; more work on better recognising and rewarding teachers in terms of additional career structures and paths to keep teachers in the classroom.

On that point, Julia again referred this morning to a matter that I consider in NSW to be nothing more than tokenistic: the NSW government announced the creation of 100 positions for 'highly accomplished' teachers. But if you unpack it, it's not 100, it's actually about 50, and the rest will not be funded through school budgets. Beyond that, it's hardly consistent with all the dialogue that's been happening around the country around the whole question of recognising and rewarding highly-accomplished teaching. This is a difficult issue, but degree of consensus that had been achieved in the last little while has now been undermined by the actions of the NSW government for one and by the Victorian government for another, which this week launched a trial of a 'bonus pay' scheme in a number of schools. A bonus pay scheme based on student test results. I thought we had reached the point where we've moved right past that. Julia said that we've moved past those 'hare brained'—I think those are my words—those hare-brained notions of Julie Bishop and others preceding her. Yet here we are, the Victorian government acting a way inconsistent with the dialogue, the consensus around this whole area of further recognising and rewarding teachers.

Lastly, as part of that continuum in terms of teacher quality, having put the foundations in place for better preparing our beginning teachers to be classroom-ready and subsequent mentoring support and induction, we must also support further professional development and growth of teachers throughout their teaching careers so that they can develop the necessary leadership skills that will be so necessary for our school leaders of the future. The complexities of our schools in the 21st century require deep leadership skills and support. Our school leaders can not be allowed to feel alone and isolated.