

## Theme 4: Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting

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### *Chair's response: Cheryl O'Connor, former Chief Executive, Australian College of Educators*

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I, for one, am greatly in favour of the less somebody tells me what to do, the more I like it, because it leaves me huge freedom to interpret and to work in the way that I think best for the students that I'm teaching in any particular area, so there is that one aspect that I think is important.

The other area where I think that Brian Caldwell gave the Government three out of 10, was in the area of innovation, and I have to say that this is an area where I feel bitterly disappointed that more work isn't being done to support innovative and new approaches.

It happens on a fairly ad hoc basis—you know, extending a cap for money year after year, or month after month, depending on how the finances look at it at any particular time—and yet you can see the issues, for example, that Andrea raised, where even with a small amount of money and determination, a school can actually go about developing the confidence and the professionalism of the people who work together, creating a dialogue, and I think that that part is an extremely important area if we are really going to change what we do. Because despite what people say, you go into schools and they look exactly the same as they did 50 years ago, or whatever the case may be—some schools do look like that, and some are organised like that, but we all know perfectly well that the students we are dealing with, the communities that we are dealing with, are nothing like 50 years ago.

I mean, it was nearly 50 years ago that I started teaching, actually, and I can tell you, I could have done almost anything to those children in my class and the parents would have said, 'Good on you, we love it. Don't care if you hit them, don't care if you keep them in until 5 o'clock, don't care if you make them go and pick up dirty grubby rubbish from the playground, good on you, it's discipline'—didn't care if they were all in rows and they sat from the brainiest, the brightest, the highest achiever through to the slowest non-achiever in the classroom—that was okay. They liked it.

The community doesn't think like that any more, and I think that we have to face up to those issues, and look very carefully at the pedagogy we are expecting.

So the issue of innovation, where we actually manage and measure the processes and the effect of new ways of teaching children and young people, where we actually measure the level of risk that we are taking in relation to a student group with change, and look at the benefits and the negatives that come with those things. We must be prepared to step out.

The other area that I'm particularly interested in is the demands that are made on teachers by any form of change, and I'm going to put that in the context where people have said over the period of the morning, for example, 'We've been through two decades of intensive reform'. Well, I for one don't believe there's been much reform at all.

I actually believe that what we did was correct teachers, fix them up, and in part of that it was really with formulaic approaches: 'This is how you will do this, this is how you will do that. Here are five strategies, five steps, two months of work that you will use in your classrooms.' And in the process of doing that, what we've done is actually deprived teachers of their professional judgment, their professional confidence, and their ability to actually make decisions without feeling that they are being watched, to make sure that they are following the approaches as they were set out.

What concerns me about that particular side is with the new generation of teachers coming through, how are we working to make sure (a) as Angelo said, that they are classroom-ready, and we need to look hard at what aspects of their preparation are they not classroom ready; and (b) how do we give them the courage and confidence and resilience to put into practice the things they know to be good and sensible and right, and backed by evidence, backed by research in the face of doubt. And it might be doubt that comes from within their particular school or institution, it might be doubt that comes from the parents where they see their children doing something different, and it might be even their own doubt when they see a kid play up, despite the best that they might have done in preparation, et cetera.

So those things really are going to come into force much more strongly as the national curriculum is being implemented. Implemented it will be. It's how we as a profession actually seize upon that, those opportunities that are there.

I suppose in summing up here, I'd say—since we've been into quite a few quotes today—Nora Roberts said, 'If you don't go after what you want, you will never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is always no.' There's always the other side too: if you don't ask, you can always say sorry and have done it anyway, and there's also, 'If you don't step forward, you are always in the same place'. There's also Dillon Thomas' slightly paraphrased—and, Clive, not just as a tribute to you here—'Oh, when we burn our bridges, what a mighty fine fire we make'. And I think that there's quite a time right now for us to burn a few bridges, and actually start doing again the things that we as trained professionals—and let's remember that one thing—as trained professionals actually take on the job we were trained and inclined to do.

Every study of teachers says that overwhelmingly people become teachers because they want to make the world a better place. They want kids to actually have more and be extended beyond what they have, and beyond what their families have had. And I remember an interview very clearly with a parent who said to me when I asked her, 'What do you expect this school to do, remembering they are not perfect places?' She said, 'I only want

the teachers in that school to want for my child what they want for their own children', and it stays with me very, very strongly.

I do believe that is what most teachers want to do, but they are frustrated on the way because of the professional learning. As the community and its expectations change, they are not being matched by what teachers are being offered. I hear teachers so commonly say '*... literacy* and numeracy, never in my initial training. I want good, strong work that allows me to do it.' Is it there? Is it there in ways that, as Angelo said, and Penny Gilmore also, that they can take the time out to study that seriously, as opposed to a quick 5-week grab of experiences that we can offer.

When we run out of the 5-week grab, we are out of strategies.

It needs to be done, I believe, in an initial training that is perhaps more to prepare people for classroom, and later forms of training that are paid or subsidised in some way—I mean, it is crazy to be paying HECs. Teachers have to pay HECs to learn how to do their job better. It just makes no sense in my brain at all, but there are things like that that we say after a certain amount of time—give them time out, subsidise time out, give them permanent part-time work and study, but these are the things we really need to keep looking at if we expect teachers to stay ahead of the game and not perpetually trying to catch up.

So I'd say let's burn a few bridges and see what fires we can make, not only in the way that education is structured, but also the fire in our own hearts, and bellies for the work that we do.

So, thank you, Clive.