It’s about good teaching

By its very nature, reflection is an opportunity to focus us on the journey so far, where we go from here and why, and importantly how we are contributing and adding to story of quality Catholic schooling in western Sydney.

As a system we have much to celebrate. This gathering of system leaders is itself a celebration. It represents an important aspect of the educational culture of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Parramatta: Together we’ve been working very hard to develop a concept of system leadership, based upon shared responsibility and mutuality around our work because we know that this interdependence is critical if we are to succeed in achieving our strategic intent.

This is the seventh year that leadership teams from schools across our Diocese have come together to launch the New Year in our shared mission to provide quality Catholic Schooling for each child in our Diocese.
You are here because what you do and can contribute to the shared work of your school and the system matters. And I thank each of you for your contribution to our collective moral purpose on behalf of the 43,000 children and young people we serve!

The promise and the challenge

2013 holds both promise and challenge. Over the past few years we have seen a major transformation in the built environment of our schools. Along with this physical change has come a heavy investment in technologies, growth in professional learning communities and ongoing exposure to good theory and practice from educators and experts from both here and overseas. This is a practice that we will have started with Bishop Anthony in his address this morning and will continue later today with Lyn Sharratt to develop a more detailed picture of the canvas we will be creating together in 2013.

We have faced many challenges and are continuing to face them on the local, national and international stage. To name some:

- the challenges that come from cultural change and new ways of working in schools and in the office
- the challenges arising from the implications of the massive changes to school funding which will confront us in the next few years
- the international data indicating Australia’s below par performance on the international stage in assessments such as PISA
- and as a Catholic system of schools, we will need to actively respond with our Church leaders to the Royal Commission into the historic handling of child sexual abuse

So what is our response here? Do we retreat behind the classroom walls or the school gates or do we face these and many other challenges with courage and conviction?

Personalisation and the shift from some to each

This time last year I launched our focus for the year, learning by inquiring and spoke about the compelling shift in the practice of schooling, and therefore of teaching, which underpins it: the shift from success for some (and by implication failure for others), to success for each student.

The shift from ‘some to each’ goes to the heart of personalisation, a key principle of our work throughout our journey of the past seven years. We know that there are no magic or simplistic solutions and no ‘one size fits all’ prescription for effective practice. Each year we have deepened our understanding of what personalisation means and how the practice of this principle in the instructional core, can honour the diversity and complexity of learners and their contexts in what and how we teach. A view of teaching as the obligation to provide the opportunity to learn cannot deliver the shift from some to each. The personalisation principle brings with it the obligation to make sure that it does (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2008, p.69).

![A view of teaching as the obligation to provide the opportunity to learn cannot deliver the shift from some to each](image)

Last year I shared my brother Gerard’s story and his experience of school. Today I want to share with you another story... this time of a young man; his name is Jacob, who is a now a Year 12 student in one of our schools. Jacob is a very capable young man, with a promising career outside of school in go kart racing, which he does with his dad every weekend.

Jacob will tell you that 2012 was probably the most important year of his young life to date, because of a life changing experience without which his future would have been unimaginably difficult. In 2012 for the first time, Jacob learned to read. Incredibly, he had gone through his whole schooling time, Jacob learned to read. Incredibly, without which his future would have been - was unequivocal feedback that new teaching that had gone before might have been - was unequivocal feedback that new and different teaching was required; that action had to be taken, and that failure for Jacob was no longer an option.

Jacob is now a success story: His teachers worked together to design a personalised program for him that capitalised on his strengths and interests and engaged him in a learning process that would only entertain success. High expectations both of Jacob and his teachers, building on his strengths and interests, accompanied by careful analysis and monitoring of data, made Jacob’s learning needs the driver of the teaching practice. Teachers learned to do things differently, and by working with each other and with him, they changed Jacob’s life, and it changed the instructional core!

This is a great example of what we know from the research literature about effective teaching in today’s world:

*The most effective teachers gauge the success of their teaching on how well their students are learning and take this as powerful feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching.*

They place assessment and analysis of data at the heart of the instructional core where they use it to instruct their teaching.

This is a theme that Lyn will expand on in her work with us today.

Of course you might say that Jacob’s story is an isolated one and that he is not the norm. But what if Jacob had continued on the same learning trajectory and had remained illiterate? His future would look very different.

Each of us here and the 4,500 teachers and staff in our schools have a collective responsibility to ensure that each of our 43,000 students experiences learning success. These are not just weasel words or an idealistic, implausible goal.

It is possible to meet the needs of each student. No, more than that: it is critical that we meet the needs of each student. Every student CAN and WILL learn. Of course, it isn’t easy and it is hard and focused work. The work is complex and challenging. But, when we put into action, the best of what we know from theory and practice, it CAN and it DOES make a difference in the lives of children and young people far beyond their years of formal schooling.
Even ONE child failing - as difficult to teach as he/she may be - does not bear thinking about. Too often, our work is informed by narrow measures and limited evidence. Let's think in terms of overall performance. Student learning is much more than a few test results or a report card or a certificate at the end of schooling. Student learning is about people, like Jacob and others like him who have a name, a face, talents, gifts, dreams, a family, a story...

Our view of the human person as Catholic educators operating within a Catholic worldview demands nothing less than success for each child.

What are the implications for us as leaders?

**A focus on good teaching**

Studies that take into account all of the available evidence on teacher effectiveness suggest that students placed with high performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low performing teachers (McKinsey, 2007, p.11).

Together we are both accountable and responsible for ensuring that teacher professional learning leads to changes in teacher practice and changed practice leads to improved student outcomes for each child.

The November 2012 Pearson Report, The Learning Curve, reminds us again that there is no substitute for good teaching: Good teachers exercise a profound influence: having a better one is statistically linked not only to higher income later in life but to a range of social results including lower chances of teenage pregnancy (p.7) .

But they recognise that there are 'no agreed list of traits to define or identify excellent teachers'.

When we talk about good teachers making a difference to student learning we often focus on the characteristics of the teachers themselves. And while these characteristics are important, our focus must be on the active process of teaching - what happens in the instructional core and how we can improve it.

In 2012, our emphasis on learning by inquiring was a strategic focus on the particular kind of teacher learning that results in changes in practice to impact positively upon student learning. In 2013, we will continue this work but our lens will be focused on the imperative for good teaching; the good teaching that is the result of engagement in the inquiry process and which becomes the 'new normal' for our teachers and their teaching.

Your leadership, as always is critical. You have an essential role to play in shaping the thinking and practices of teachers to build instructional and leadership capacity through personalising learning, de-privatising teacher practice and seeking and responding to regular, high quality feedback, including feedback from students about how well they understand what they are learning and the extent to which their interest, confidence and success are improving (Hattie, 2009; Aitken, 2011).

As school and system leaders together we must have a shared, relentless and laser like focus on the responsibility to act in response to the moral imperative of improving the learning and wellbeing of each child.

Together we must have the courage and conviction to continue to chart new waters.

To inquire, to respond (the knowledge building part of the cycle resulting in new routines of more effective practice) and to share as we learn our way forward in the cycle of continuous improvement of teaching, 'it's about good teaching - inquire, respond, share' will be our collective mantra for 2013.

Whilst we are charting new territory, we are not alone. Systems around the world are beginning to learn from each other about what makes the most difference and there have been some major international studies in 2012 that give us direction and assurance we are on the right path.

The Grattan Institute report, for example, highlighted that four of the world's five top performing systems in the world, Finland and South Korea, have in common? On many details they differ quite profoundly – the number of hours at school; their approach to homework; school autonomy; school starting age; formal testing and assessment and the list goes on. So how do we account for their successes? The Learning Curve report points to three things which I believe should both encourage and challenge us:

1. High quality teachers – we must build the capacity of all teachers through inquiry and sharing (collaboration and feedback)
2. A high value placed upon accountability - we must respond and check our collective efforts
3. And finally, a shared moral mission that underlies education effort (p.8) – we don’t do this alone - we share this sacred mission in Catholic education – our moral purpose.

We are basing our work this year as in previous years on what is known - not on ideology or assumption – it’s about good teaching and our courage and conviction to stay the course is worth it!

References

3. Hattie, J. (2009) Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. London: Routledge. Aitken, G. (2011) 'Excellence in teaching in a faculty of education: having a better one is statistically linked not only to higher income later in life but to a range of social results including lower chances of teenage pregnancy (p.7). But they recognise that there are 'no agreed list of traits to define or identify excellent teachers'.
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