

**“Improving learning outcomes for all students: Strategies for teachers who don’t claim to be super heroes”**. Keynote address to the University of Sydney “*Successful Learning Conference*”, Harold Park Conference Centre, Glebe, Sydney, 25 & 26 June 2007.

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### **Abstract**

Although teaching is often described and experienced as important, rewarding and satisfying, those who actually do it rarely describe the work as ‘cushy’. A teacher’s daily experience is one of high expectations, challenging demands and considerable scrutiny, with recent policy focus on the performance of *individual* teachers. Student diversity is a particular challenge and students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or social disadvantage require considerable, skilled input to achieve or approximate current benchmarks and standards. In today’s context therefore, teachers are advised to adopt practices that are (a) effective with a diverse student enrolment and (b) efficient, feasible and personally sustainable. This paper reviews and summarises relevant research and provides examples of successful strategies used by Australian teachers and schools to support the learning of all students.

### **Introductory comments: Why the title?**

Australian teachers are not exactly clamouring for more diversity and challenge, particularly those who are teaching a wide range of students in contemporary mainstream classrooms. As long ago as 1985 Liberman commented, “The inclusion movement is like a wedding in which we, as special educators, have forgotten to invite the bride (regular educators)”. (p.513) Commenting on the United States’ experience, Gallagher (2006) observed “The Regular Education Initiative met with limited success primarily because it never was a ‘regular education initiative’ but rather a special education initiative for general educators, who appeared to have little enthusiasm for the move.” (p. 266)

There is no doubt that mainstream teachers are working in challenging contexts (Noble & Macfarlane, 2003; NSW/ACT Independent Education Union, 2002; & Trent, 1997). Factors such as anti-discrimination legislation and school retention policies result in teachers responding to a level of diversity never before experienced. The Australian Government has expressed concern about “the vast numbers of teachers choosing not to teach, choosing to work overseas or depart the profession – many within just a few years” (Nelson, 2003, p1). As teaching is clearly demanding, teachers should ensure that they not only teach in ways that are known to be successful but they should also adopt strategies that do not require ongoing, heroic effort. As this paper focuses on efficiency, feasibility and sustainability at the personal and school level, the title could have been *‘Improving learning outcomes for all students: Where inclusive practice meets positive psychology’*.

### **Overview**

This overview is going to take some time because I want to use a successful learning and teaching strategy you may want to try with your students, particularly when you have had little opportunity to appreciate their unique learning needs. Bulgren & Schumaker (2001) have found that all students, including secondary students with a disability in mainstream classrooms, benefit when the teacher introduces new topics by carefully and systematically attending to the following nine, ‘advance organizer’ points.

### *Purpose of advance organizer*

This audience is diverse and I want you to appreciate what's coming up so that you can relate it to your personal situation – as consultant, mainstream teacher or parent.

### *Actions to be taken by teacher & students*

I'll summarise research. You'll reflect, analyse your own situation, react and discuss your views with those near you and with me.

### *Topics and sub-topics*

- Demands of inclusive practice.
- Importance of effective teaching for struggling learners.
- What skills do I need/need to impart if I am to be effective, efficient and satisfied?

### *Related background knowledge*

Your personal experience as an educator provides you with relevant background.

### *Concepts to be learned*

- The balance of challenges and skills = 'flow'.
- Personal sustainability at work.

### *Reasons for learning the information*

I hope you are

- more effective *and* more realistic about the demands you place on yourself.
- more strategic.
- make efficient with your time.
- more comfortable and relaxed as an educator.

### *New vocabulary*

'Flow', 'life balance'.

### *Organizational frameworks for the information*

- Balancing professional and personal aspirations.
- Inclusive education.
- The role and importance of 'learning support'.
- The *teaching strategies* used by individual teachers are important but they are only part of the picture.

### *Desired learning outcomes*

- You will value the work you do even more.
- You will have an increased understanding of 'what works' for students with learning difficulties and those who teach them.
- You will be more realistic, focused, effective, efficient, confident and relaxed.
- You will answer this question for yourself: "What will I do differently t as a result of participating in this session?"

Now that you have been thoroughly organized in advance, we can move on.

## **Supporting students with disabilities and learning difficulties is important**

Those of us who work in the field of disabilities and learning difficulties do so for a wide variety of reasons – ranging from deeply held convictions about equity and equality of access to education, to the effects on us personally of family experiences of disability, through to the need to make a difference or even 'it was the only job available when I applied'. I would guess that when most of us chose to enter this field our primary concern was not the needs of the economy for skilled workers or the contribution our students could make to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

However, we live in times when the value of everything is considered in monetary terms and so the 'value' of support for students who struggle with the curriculum has also been subjected to

the economic gaze. Fortunately for these students – and for those who believe they too need a fair go – these economic analyses suggest that investing in these students is highly justifiable from an *economic* perspective, as well as from a *social* and *moral* perspectives.

The evidence for the economic benefits of focusing on struggling students has come from a number of quarters and I raise this topic here because services provided for those who find school learning hard-going have not usually been given high priority or status, particularly by economists. Firstly, the ‘school reform’ literature has provided comparative data on educational outcomes and processes in western countries, has identified highly achieving education systems, and has attempted to explain the differences on key indicators such as students’ literacy achievements (Stoll, Bert, Creemers & Reezigt, 2006). Given that the Finnish education system has been a standout performer in international school achievement comparisons (and that the knowledge-based Finnish economy is quite robust) analysts have attempted to account for its success. Possible reasons include that teachers are more highly valued in Finland, that the Finnish system has been unstreamed for nearly two generations and that since 1970 the policy has been that “it was better to push up the bottom level to the middle than to push the middle to the top”. (Power, 2007, p.2)

Secondly, Fullan (2006), drawing on the research of Coulombe and Tremblay (2005) explains why schools should develop the skills of all students, *and particularly the bottom third*. Coulombe and Tremblay conclude that, “A country’s literacy scores rising by 1% relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5% relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per head. These effects are three times as great as for investment in physical capital. Moreover, the results indicate that raising literacy and numeracy scores for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates (p.8). Fullan argues that “We are talking about hard-nosed economists who are essentially saying that improving education for all from day one, and raising the (economic) bar and closing the gap, has a double pay-off for society, namely economic prosperity and social cohesion (p.8). In drawing attention to the ‘gap-closing’ role of education, Fullan proposes that we need to work on the three basics of literacy, numeracy and well-being<sup>1</sup> of students, the latter defined as “emotional intelligence, character education, and safe schools” (p. 10).

So even those who believe that social justice is “so yesterday” are taking a closer interest in what you do and how effectively you do it. Once governments, and particularly treasurers, fully realise the economic advantages of lifting the performance of the bottom third of students, teachers - and the consultants who support them – will experience heightened expectations and increased scrutiny.

### **“Oprah’s desperately lonely life”**

I do not need to convince this audience that supporting students with disabilities and learning difficulties in inclusive settings is rewarding but it can also be difficult. However, when you see evidence that even highly competent teachers find it challenging, you may be reassured or comforted (in the same way that editors get us to buy their magazine by headlining that the rich and famous experience the same disappointments in life as we do – the rationale presumably being that our misery may be alleviated by reading that Oprah is miserable too!)

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<sup>1</sup> Australian school reform policy has tended to give considerable attention to literacy, somewhat less to numeracy, and less again to student well-being as a contributor to learning outcomes.

The literature on inclusive practice over the last fifty years has shown that teachers across the world have been concerned about including students with disabilities, learning difficulties and/or challenging behaviour in mainstream classrooms (Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998; Harris & Stephenson, 2003; Jahnukainen & Korhonen, 2003; NSW Public Education Inquiry, 2002; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996; Wright & Sigafos, 1998). In fact the difficulties of responding to student diversity have prompted some analysts to conclude that inclusive practice has gone too far (Tronc, 2004), has not worked (Warnock, 2005) and/or may have to be redefined (National Association of Head Teachers, 2003). While the preliminary findings of research conducted by my colleagues and I suggest that Australian teachers may be generally more positive, particularly in the primary grades, we found only one teacher, among the hundreds we surveyed or studied, who said inclusive practice was easy.

### **How are you coping?**

I have been talking for fifteen minutes and now it is your turn. With the assistance of Pat Hodges, Deputy Principal of Macquarie Fields Public School, and her colleagues, I have been developing a questionnaire for learning support personnel and would be interested in your formative feedback. Would you please spend two minutes completing the 10-point scale and if you do not want to do it on yourself, could you possibly do it on 'a friend'? I would be most interested in your reactions. See Appendix A for 'The GILTS'.

The evidence from the literature – and apparently from this room – that supporting students who have difficulties in learning is demanding suggests the need for teachers to engage in practices that are not only effective for students but also efficient, feasible and personally sustainable for themselves.

Attending a conference like this one gives you new teaching skills and insights and also the opportunity to reflect on how you are going and where you are going personally and professionally. As a psychologist interested in life coaching and positive psychology, I frequently use one of the many versions of life wheels – ways of thinking about how all the bits of your life could fit together. For example, an example of a life wheel, this one from "Co-Active Coaching" by Laura Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House and Phil Sandahl: Davis-Black Publishing, (1998) can be found on Dr Stanbury's website at <http://www.drstansbury.com/wheel.htm>

The beauty of life wheels and similar is that your self-assessment provides a basis on which to readjust your priorities and behaviour so you take better aim at achieving a more balanced and satisfying life.

But there's another approach to self-monitoring that is more closely related to our professional lives as educators and it relates to the extent to which our skills match the challenges we face<sup>2</sup>. I am going to apply this model directly to those who teach students with disabilities and learning difficulties in an inclusive education context or who assist others to do so.<sup>3</sup> According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) our experience on any task will be optimal, i.e. we will experience

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<sup>2</sup> There is considerable evidence that there is an inverse relationship between teacher burnout and teacher competence, e.g. Pillay, Goddard, Wils (2005).

<sup>3</sup> It is also informative to apply the Csikszentmihalyi model to our students and appreciate how they feel when they don't have the skills to cope with the learning environment.

'flow', when the level of our skills just about matches the level of our challenge. According to the Csikszentmihalyi model, a low level of skills in a challenging environment will produce worry and anxiety. This analysis begs the question "What skills are needed so that our day-to-day experience in learning support is going to be less 'worry and anxiety' and more 'control, flow and optimal experience'?"

### **What skills are needed?**

#### Teaching skills

It may be self-evident but I have to state that the most crucial set of skills relate to 'how to teach', and if you are a consultant, how to assist others so that they teach successfully. Most of the presentations at this conference focus on this topic. There is plenty of evidence that good teaching make a difference; that really good teaching make a huge difference; and that good teaching makes a difference even when it occurs in contexts that are less than ideal (e.g. as concluded by Fullan, 2006; Hattie 2005; Rowe 2003).

Although good teachers attempt to meet the individual needs of each of their students, they typically have to work with *groups* of students. This fact complicates our response to individual needs, e.g. by 'differentiating the curriculum' as proposed by Tomlinson and many others. Differentiating the curriculum is desirable (and I deal with this topic in some detail below). Differentiation is a recommended element of quality teaching (NSW Department of Education, 2003) and some students require essential modifications (Smyth King, 2005). However, because this paper addresses the issue of *effective and sustainable* teaching, I should add that running a highly differentiated classroom is very demanding and that there is strong empirical support for whole-class teaching that incorporates the features of *Productive Pedagogies* (Queensland) and *Quality Teaching* (NSW). Just in case you need reminding, these principles include that teachers should

- be outcomes-focused
- use conspicuous strategies
- teach essential principles
- link and integrate material
- engage their students
- provide students with direct and scaffolded support when needed
- systematically monitor students' performance

(Adapted from Braden, 2004; Kame'enui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons, & Coyne, 2002; Westwood, 2002.)

But let's return to the topic of differentiation, Tomlinson (2000) describes differentiation more as a philosophy than a teaching strategy. She makes the point that differentiation is not a substitute for, high-quality curriculum and instruction but a way of enhancing teaching and learning. Tomlinson (2001) outlines a variety of ways teachers can adapt their teaching in response to student readiness, interest or learning profile. She stresses that differentiation requires ongoing assessment of learning outcomes, meaningful activities for all students and flexible groupings of students.

There are many rubrics to guide teaching adaptations and they are all quite similar, but Westwood (2002), being a good teacher, has proposed a comprehensive one that is easy to remember. Westwood suggests that in planning and teaching, we can consider adapting, processes and activities according to the CARPET PATCH mnemonic, i.e. Activities, Resource materials, Products, Environment, Teaching strategies, Pace, Amount of assistance, Testing and grading, Classroom grouping and Homework assignments (p. 204-205).

We will leave that there for the moment and consider another body of literature on what adaptations teachers are able, or prepared, to make and what they see as barriers to their not doing more. This research shows that, in general, most teachers will make 'process adjustments' for the whole class, e.g. changes to groupings, support for positive behaviour and differential levels of assistance, but they are less likely to make changes to content, materials or to their usual approach to instruction. So the very sophisticated 'CARPET PATCH' is more like 'PACE' in practice. It seems that most teachers are unlikely to implement strategies that involve a lot of planning, preparation or individualization.

Why might that be so? Mainstream teachers consistently state that their biggest barriers are demands on instructional time; lack of time for preparation and planning; the diversity of students; the high stress level of teaching; and the challenging behaviour of students. Teachers' lack of time is a major issue and may explain why most report little use of time-demanding differentiations to activities, resources, products and assessment. Many teachers view such strategies as incompatible with their current work situation in which everything is done in great haste, in little disconnected bits of time, and where they juggle multiple demands.

Obviously more time for planning would help. The important issue of time – how to generate it, save it and use it well – is implicit in what follows as I explain what else highly competent teachers routinely do.

#### Relationships

In addition to teaching in ways that are consistent with the quality teaching literature, and being creative and flexible, good teachers put considerable effort into building relationships – with students, colleagues and the whole school community. Having good relationships at school, particularly with students, is one of the factors that many teachers cite as making it all worthwhile (NSW/ACT Independent Education Union, 2002).

Good relationships with *students* are intrinsically valuable and instrumentally valuable. According to Hattie (2005) teachers account for 30% of the variance in student learning and student variables account for a whopping 50%. I don't think there is enough consideration of the potential that that statistic offers. If 50% of the variance in student learning is attributable to student variables, surely that is an invitation to teach to students' strengths and interests, to interact with them in ways that stimulate their engagement, and to foster their motivation through the positive relationships we have with them!

Students, and particularly senior students who are considered 'at-risk', want teachers who are friendly, helpful, caring, fair and enthusiastic; they want teachers who build relationships and who inspire them to work hard and achieve (Rowe, 2003; Slade, 2002; & Te Riele, 2006). Similarly, disaffected students say that their major school problems included "relationships with teachers; the way teachers treated them; (and) teaching methods used which they felt were barriers to engagement and continuation (p.1) Australian Centre for Equity in Education & the Australian Youth Research Centre (2001).

The importance of relationships is often overlooked by those who adopt a technical-rationalist approach to school improvement, yet as observed by Te Riele, (2006) in her study of students and teachers in two alternative schools, "The friendly attitude of teachers was not a minor benefit for students but made a genuine difference to their education". (p. 64) Borman and Rachuba (2001) that "resilient students tend to develop much stronger and supportive

relationships with their teachers than do non-resilient students” (p.20). Finally, in a major study of the characteristics of successful preventative programs for marginalized students and those likely to drop out, Nation, Crusto, Wandersman, Kumpfer, Seybolt, Morrissey-Kane and Davino, (2003 p. 453) concluded that, “Providing opportunities for children to develop strong, positive relationships was consistently associated with positive outcomes.”

Skilled teachers also work hard to have good relationships with *their colleagues*. Many team up with like-minded colleagues to try out new (for them) strategies such as team-teaching, different student groupings, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and ways of generating more time for intensive effort with some students.

Effective teachers tend to be expert in ‘managing up’ – a term that describes the assistance provided by teachers to their executive in order to achieve the school’s goals. I regard ‘managing-up’ as a professional responsibility and certainly not subversive. If teachers are highly competent in an area that is important to their executive then their expertise gives them considerable influence. This influence can be used to get more time for writing reports, more time for planning with their assistant, reduced class size, increased resources and similar benefits because their principal appreciates their role in the school, or more accurately, because the teacher successfully demonstrates to the principal the value of what they are doing for the school. Obviously, if support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is not high on the agenda of your school, your advocacy has to be more sophisticated, strategic and streetwise in order to bring about change in your school’s culture. But that’s a professional responsibility also!

Good teachers also work hard at establishing good relationships with *parents* and in ensuring that the parents of students with disabilities feel part of the school community. These good relationships sometimes lead to parents having greater involvement in their child’s education, e.g. having them pre-teach concepts and skills that are central to upcoming lessons. So, good relationships with students, colleagues, executive, parents and the wider community are not just good in themselves *but* they also can be used to help students learn more efficiently. Good teachers conceptualise teaching as a cooperative effort and not something you do alone ‘behind closed doors’.

### **From superhero to hero**

Supporting students with learning difficulties and disabilities is already hard and we should not make it any harder. If you feel that the way you are currently supporting struggling learners is very difficult, draining and possibly unsustainable, it is time to take stock.

#### *Care for yourself*

Although your principal and those above may care about you, you actually have to care for yourself. So, examine your life wheel. Unbalanced? Unsatisfactory? Should any aspect be given more or less prominence? Are you putting too much time into work? The statistics on the Australian workforce would suggest you probably are overworking (Horin, 2007, p.1).

#### *Simplify your role*

Have you made your role unnecessarily complex? Are you trying to do it all on your own? Are you the victim of your own expectations? Can you simplify your objectives and strategies?

#### *Teach to your strengths*

Teachers are urged to teach to student's strengths but what about teaching to, and building on, your own? The point is that if most of your students are achieving satisfactorily, perhaps you need to make only minor adjustments so that all of your students achieve. Oakeshott (cited in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.38) writes: "... learning a technique does not consist in getting rid of pure ignorance, but in reforming knowledge that is already there" (Oakeshott, 1962, p.12).

#### *Check the match between your role and your skills*

Do you have *all* the skills you need – not just teaching strategies but other essential skills such as building and utilising relationships for the benefit of your students? How are your relationships with students, colleagues, executive, parents and the school community? If the relationships are strong, are you using them effectively to improve your students' learning? If some of the relationships are not strong, what can you do to improve them?

#### *Use relevant strategies from outside education*

In elite sport and big business the performance of individuals and teams on key outcomes is efficiently monitored so as to identify areas for improvement. While your P&C may take exception to your using the term 'All Ordinaries Index' to describe the performance of students at your school on key outcomes, the principle of carefully and efficiently keeping data that informs educational practice is thoroughly recommended.

Another useful strategy is to make greater use of visualization in the way elite athletes do. Visualize what your class will look like when you are responding to individual needs in effective and feasible ways; and/or how you will feel when you have patched up your relationship with a particularly difficult student.

#### *Experiment & reflect*

*Experiment* with, and then *reflect on*, some of the recommended differentiation strategies you have not yet tried - maybe don't aim for the full CARPET but perhaps a small carpet square! Do it with a friend. 'Critical friends' and 'friendly critics' are fine once you have made some progress but at the beginning you need 'friendly friends'. Take Tomlinson's (2001) advice – plan; start small; give clear directions; be clear about the learning outcomes you want; monitor students' learning closely and efficiently; take time off to reflect on how it is working; and enjoy your growth as a teacher.

#### **Conclusion**

I'll conclude with a short anecdote about the other keynote speaker, Professor Freebody and I. Peter and I recently did a weekend fishing course together. There were only three in the class and Peter and I asked a lot of questions, perhaps more than we should have – at least I did. After patiently answering our questions for some time, the tutor – a very experienced and successful fisherman – said, "Guys, don't make it too complicated. Remember that all that fish want to do is to eat; to avoid being eaten; and to have sex." Although some of my former students immediately flashed into my mind, I would like to apply his 'Keep it simple' advice more generally to teaching in an inclusive classroom.

So, I leave this 'moral' with you:

- Focus on the main objective.
- Make it as uncomplicated and as straightforward as you can.
- Use the full range of effective strategies available to you.
- Do it with friends.

- Enjoy it!

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