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Publication details

Graham, A & Phelps, R 2003, 'Report on a survey of professional development approaches and needs of teachers in the Lismore Diocese'. Unpublished report.

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Report on a Survey of Professional Development Approaches and Needs of Teachers in the Lismore Diocese

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April 2003

1.1 Background

The Catholic Education Office, through Dr Berenice Kerr, approached the School of Education in June 2002 to undertake professional development in ICT with a group of 40 teachers from secondary schools in the Diocese. The research associated with this professional development initiative is the subject of a separate report recently submitted to the Director of Schools. In preparing to undertake the ICT initiative, broader discussions took place concerning the approaches to professional development preferred by teachers in the Diocese. It appeared there was little data available on teachers' views of professional development, the types of activities they have been involved in, the perceived areas of need, nor the approaches to learning deemed to be most effective for improving practice (knowledge, understandings, skills and attitudes). Such data was considered mutually beneficial for both the CEO and the School of Education in determining strategic directions for the delivery of quality professional development to teachers and administrators. It was subsequently decided to survey all primary and secondary teachers across the Diocese to elicit their views on professional development.

1.2 Significance

The issue of creating a quality teaching profession has been on the political agenda in Australia throughout the 1990s (Kennedy, 2001). In particular, teacher professional development has come under the spotlight at the state and national levels with the release of two key reports in the past three years. Whilst the Report of the Review of Teacher Education in NSW (Ramsey, 2000) highlighted a number of proposed policy directions for initial teacher education, there was also a considerable focus given to the ongoing professional development of experienced teachers. It has been suggested that the Ramsey Report highlighted 'a notable lack of genuine, sustained collaboration between employers of teachers and universities in the provision of initial teacher education and ongoing professional development' (McMorrow, 2001, p.17). In so doing, Gonczi (2001) suggests the Ramsey review, unlike earlier reports, makes a serious challenge to teacher education across the board, including the way in which teachers are supported in their ongoing endeavours to foster quality learning and teaching in their classrooms.

One of the developments resulting from the Ramsey Review was the establishment of an Interim Committee to investigate the establishment in NSW of an Institute of Teachers. This Committee will be advising on the establishment of a body to regulate the quality of teachers and improve their professional status and will include recommendations regarding professional standards for teachers. The Interim Committee is due to report to the Minister for Education and Training in June 2003. The report is likely to carry significant implications for ongoing professional development of teachers.

In addition, a recent report by Esson, Johnson & Vinson (2002) in NSW has highlighted significant concerns with the retention of experienced teachers and their availability to mentor beginning teachers. Key issues cited in this review were teacher stress and burnout. Esson et al (2002) emphasise the critical importance of professional development and ongoing opportunities for learning for teachers as a way of counteracting the issues facing the profession.

It would appear from such reports that the professional development of teachers will continue to be a major financial and strategic issue for employing organisations, as well as state and federal government. Yet Gore (2001) suggests that with only a few notable exceptions, 'extant professional development programs have shown a remarkable inability to demonstrate lasting benefits at the school level' (p.8). In a similar vein, Richardson (2003) points to a growing body of research that could potentially inform the planning and implementation of effective professional development but fail to be utilised:

> Indeed, most of the staff development that is conducted with K-12 teachers derives from the short-term transmission model; pays no attention to what is already going on in a particular classroom, school or school district; offers little opportunity for participants to become involved in the conversation; and provides no follow up (p.401).

The decision to survey the teachers in the Lismore Diocese to elicit their views and needs regarding professional development is consistent with Kennedy's (2001) assertion that 'employers can play a productive role in the professional lives of teachers by involving them in decision making, policy development and direction setting' (p.10). We hope the data from the surveys as presented in the report below will contribute in some small way to any strategic planning the CEO may undertake in relation to the professional development of its teachers.

1.3 Methodology

A survey concerning the general professional development (PD) needs and current learning approaches of teachers was distributed to 1047 primary and secondary teachers in the Lismore Diocese.

A total of 184 surveys were returned representing a return rate of 18%. Of those returning the survey 68 were males (37%) and 116 were female (63%). The majority (72%) of teachers had been teaching for between 10-29 years; only 26 had been teaching for less than 10 years and 24 had been teaching for more than 30 years. Forty-four percent (44%) were aged between 41-50 years; 22% were aged over 51 and only 29% were below the age of 40. Respondents were reasonably evenly distributed between primary and secondary sectors with 52% of responses from primary teachers and 45% from secondary teachers. Those from secondary schools were from a range of curriculum areas including: 16 from English/HSIE; 12 from science; 4 from PDHPE; 6 from maths; 6 from TAS; 3 from CAPA; 1 from LOTE; 4 from special education and 3 from libraries.

1.4 Findings

- **The Importance of PD**: As might be anticipated, the majority of teachers saw their ongoing PD as very important (32%) or extremely important (63%). Only 5% saw it as of moderate or little importance.

- **Effectiveness of Initial Training**: Initial teacher training (DipTeach, BEd, DipEd etc) was perceived by only 21% of respondents as preparing them very well or extremely well for the realities and demands of teaching; 38% indicated it prepared them moderately well while 40% indicated that it prepared them a little or not at all.

- **Nature of PD Activities**: The types of PD activities which teachers had been involved in were diverse and included conferences, school development days, curriculum development days, meetings, TAFE certificates, QTP project work, and specific programs such as *Count me in too*, *SNAP*, *First Steps* and *Seasons for Growth.* An overwhelming number of teachers (41%) mentioned involvement in some form of PD in ICT while 52 presumably secondary teachers mentioned HSC assessment or marking activities. In-servicing in particular KLA/Curriculum areas or new syllabus documents was also frequently mentioned. Twenty-eight teachers mentioned OH&S and 30 mentioned first aid.

  Small numbers of teachers had been involved in a wide range of PD programs related to student welfare, including child protection/ protective behaviour (n=17), drug education (n=3), bullying (n=4); boys education (n=8), parenting (n=7), behaviour management (n=4); aboriginal education (n=3) and middle schooling (n=5). Thirty-six (36) teachers mentioned PD related to special education, with a further 5 mentioning gifted and talented education. Only 5 respondents did not list any PD activities that they had been involved in.

- **Involvement in Postgraduate Study**: A number of teachers mentioned undertaking postgraduate study including 27 undertaking Masters of Education (including 3 in librarianship, 3 in leadership, 2 in special education, 3 in religious education and 3 in computing). Sixteen teachers mentioned graduate diplomas including 15 in religious education/theology and one in librarianship. 9 teachers mentioned undertaking TAFE Certificates and 2 were completing PhDs.

- **Effectiveness of PD:** When asked to indicate the effectiveness of the PD activities they had been involved in 21% saw them as extremely effective, 47% as very effective, 22% as moderately effective and 6% as of little or no effectiveness.

- **Value of Various PD Approaches**: Teachers were asked to indicate the value of various approaches to PD, as summarised below:

	Little or no value	Moderate Value	High to very high value
School-based meetings/workshops	11%	28%	60%
Regional workshops	6%	29%	62%
Reading professional literature	22%	44%	34%
Learning with and from your work colleagues including mentoring	6%	14%	80%
Conferences or involvement with professional groups	4%	17%	79%
TaFE courses or other 'training' programs	18%	21%	50%
Postgraduate courses	13%	29%	43%

Other approaches to PD which were valued included train the trainer, practical experience, practical hands-on workshops, exchange programs, interschool exchange, industry experience, meeting with peers/informal conferencing, in-service model learning, community based courses and private personal time.

- **Priorities for further PD:** Teachers were also asked to indicate what issues or areas they saw as being a high priority for their further PD. ***An overwhelming 98 respondents mentioned ICT related PD***. Also of particular interest were suggestions regarding the need for PD in ***conflict resolution, stress management, time management and teacher morale*** (n=30). Other areas mentioned by a significant number of teachers included: teaching children with special needs (n=23); curriculum issues or implementation (n=23); teaching and learning strategies (n=22); teaching social skills (n=20); child protection (n=16); literacy (n=15) and HSC and HSC marking issues (n=14). Again, a wide range of student welfare issues were mentioned, but by small numbers of teachers, including counselling (n=7), early childhood development (n=3), building self-esteem (n=2), family break-up/violence (n=2), bullying (n=1) and drug education (n=1). Twenty-two teachers mentioned wanting to network with teachers or other schools. Twelve teachers did not list any priorities for further PD. Four mentioned wanting monetary help to attend courses. One mentioned retirement!!

- **Processes for Identifying PD needs**: Teachers utilised a wide range of strategies to identify their PD needs. The majority (73%) identified personal reflection as a principal strategy; 40 referred to advice from the principal; 35 indicated advice from peers, staff meeting discussions, networking and 30 mentioned performance reviews or reviewing processes in school. Sixteen teachers mentioned the needs of students and 15 mentioned changes in curriculum, syllabus needs as driving their PD involvement. Fourteen mentioned the need to fulfil a requirement and 14 referred to reviewing what professional development days had to offer. Ten or less teachers mentioned being motivated by personal goals, desire for personal development, ambition or professional reading or personal interest. Other sources mentioned by a small number of teachers included classroom observations, advertisements, student reflection or weaknesses in certain teaching areas. Four teachers mentioned having a mentor and 11 teachers did not respond.

- **Learning Strategies**: Teachers were asked to indicate the relevance of a number of learning strategies in their practice as a teacher. These are summarised below:

	Little or no relevance	Moderate Value	High to very high value
Lifelong learning i.e. focus on continued learning throughout one's life and career	1%	6%	94%
Self-directed learning, i.e. taking responsibility and making decisions to direct your own learning	1%	12%	87%
Directive learning i.e. being instructed by someone else on knowledge or skills	1%	8%	84%
Experiential learning i.e. reflecting on your own experiences and adjusting your teaching practice to make improvements.	2%	12%	85%

- **Valued Aspects of PD:** Teachers were asked to indicate what they saw as important in a PD initiative, as summarised below:

	Little or no importance	Moderate importance	High to very high importance
Having fun with other teachers	20%	30%	48%
Networking with other teachers	4%	9%	86%
Listening to an expert	2%	29%	68%
Gaining new ideas to try out in the classroom	-	5%	94%
Being challenged to think creatively and critically as a learner as well as a teacher	1%	9%	90%
Being energised and affirmed to set goals in pursuit of teaching excellence	2%	4%	92%
Quick fixes to problems or concerns	50%	33%	16%
Instruction from 'experts'	14%	32%	54%
Reflecting on your own practice	2%	10%	88%
Learning with and from your colleagues	2%	5%	92%
Opportunity to apply your learning in your classroom	2%	3%	97%
Certificates as evidence of your learning	54%	27%	20%
Accreditation toward a postgraduate qualification	35%	26%	39%

- **Level of Pro-activity in PD**: A series of questions were asked to determine how active teachers were in their own, or other teachers', PD. They were asked to indicate how often they engaged in a number of self-development activities as follows:

	Occasionally or never	Moderately Frequently	Very or extremely frequently
Set your own learning goals to improve yourself professionally	19%	38%	43%
Reflect on your practice as a teacher	4%	20%	76%
Seek out professional literature to address your professional learning needs	26%	41%	34%
Approach colleagues to provide you with professional help or guidance	11%	30%	59%
Provide assistance to a colleague to help them solve a problem and/or improve their teaching practice	9%	27%	66%
Share new and innovative ideas with your colleagues	12%	23%	65%

- **Value for Reflective Practice**: A number of questions were posed to elicit the level of value teachers placed on reflective practice. They were asked to indicate the degree of importance they gave to a number of statements.

	Little or no importance	Moderate importance	High to very high importance
I reflect regularly about my teaching practice	2%	15%	84%
I reflect regularly about my priorities/needs regarding my own professional development	5%	28%	67%
I reflect on what other teachers do to develop themselves professionally	30%	41%	28%
I reflect regularly about my effectiveness in the classroom	1%	10%	89%
I regularly adapt my teaching skills and strategies to meet changing needs and requirements	3%	17%	80%
I think I am an effective teacher	-	11%	89%
I learn from my successes and failures in teaching	-	6%	94%

- **Factors Impacting on Involvement in PD**: Teachers were also asked to indicate factors that would deter their involvement in particular PD initiatives, assuming that the focus was a priority for them. Responses were as follows:

	Little or no importance	Moderate importance	High to very high importance
Attending workshops outside school hours	37%	4%	60%
Undertaking 'assessment' tasks back in the classroom	22%	17%	59%
Paying fees	62%	7%	31%
Travelling outside your local area	44%	7%	50%
Being required by your Principal (or other) to attend	23%	19%	59%
Too many competing demands on your time	62%	6%	33%

1.5 Other issues Raised by Teachers

An open-ended question on the survey allowed teachers to raise other issues in relation to PD. The majority of teachers (59%) made some response in this area. Their comments are summarised here.

- **Excessive Demands on Teachers:** 20 teachers indicated that there were already too many demands on teachers "from parents, children and those in authority". One teacher commented that they were "expected to solve the world's problems" and another that they were "overloaded by continual demands in the classroom". As one teacher phrased it, "expectations too high, stress levels to the max".

- **Time available for PD:** More than 40 teachers mentioned that there was not enough time to undertake PD. One mentioned that there was only one PD day a year; another that there was "not enough time as demands at school are constant"; and another that it was "difficult to leave (their) class behind as there is no relief teacher in my area". Some commented in the context that "employers should show value of PD by releasing teachers from teaching to attend PD", referring to the need for support and release time. A number of

positive ideas were flagged including being "able to go to a research station or university for a term and learn new theories, IT etc, like a sabbatical". Another mentioned that "while traveling I noticed educators were given 5 weeks annual leave and other student free time for PD". As one teacher stated: "in an ideal world we should all be given a few weeks a year to improve teaching". Three teachers indicated that more PD should be available out of hours.

- **Inequities in PD:** Inherent inequities in PD were mentioned by 20 teachers. Some noted that "PD courses don't get past the principal" or middle management, that is wasn't advertised to all staff or that it was not supported by the school's executive. There was a perception that the "principal (was) not always supportive (of) another day out". Others noted that "some staff get 6 or 8 days PD a year (while) others only get one" or that "10 teachers want to go but only 2 chosen". There was a sense that "those who need it most rarely get to go". A couple of teachers commented that PD was "difficult for country teachers".

- **Expenses and Remuneration**: At least 26 teachers mentioned that PD was too expensive: "the pay is so poor that paying fees should be out of the question". Three teachers recommended that more school funds be devoted to PD. Eight teachers commented that there is little incentive to undertake PD: "some teachers never do any PD but they get the same money".

- **Compulsory versus Mandatory:** Eleven respondents indicated that PD should be mandatory because "many teachers are stale', that "some teachers have not done any in-service for ten years" or that "many have not learnt other ways except what they have always done". One noted that "a predisposed commitment to education is essential". Two respondents indicated that PD should be optional as teachers "need to feel free to select PD based on perceived needs and time we have".

- **The 'So Called Experts":** Around 26 teachers made comments about "experts" who deliver PD. Some perceived them as "detached and experimental" or commented that they "don't have to deal with children day in and day out" which was seen as a "turn off for teachers at the coal face". The essence of such comments were that "top down, externally imposed" PD was not valuable. A number of respondents commented that PD "needs to be relevant to the classroom and practical". One teacher noted that the "best PD comes from other teacher's reflection" and another that "teachers should be consulted and involved in PD".

- **The imperative to address social needs of students**: A significant number of teachers (more than 10) referred specifically to the need for PD to address social issues in the context of the "demands of rapidly changing society". As one teacher stated, "teachers deal in areas they have little training for". Four teachers indicated the need for more skills to cope with "students who defy all suggestions".

- **Rapid rate of change**: A number of teachers referred to the "rapid and constant pace of change" as impacting heavily on the need for PD. Eight teachers referred to changing curriculum and teaching approaches and noted that it was "hard to keep up" and that "PD needs to incorporate new teaching and changing practice". Such issues were particularly highlighted in relation to ICT with its "rapid and constant change" and the "burden" to "always have to be on top".

- **The 'Quick Fix':** A number of teachers felt that not many PD courses were worthwhile as there were "too many fads" or that they were "only a quick fix approach". One noted that "better use of money should be considered".

- **Professional Networking and Mentoring:** Five respondents noted that PD is a means of interacting with other teachers and that "meeting with teachers from other schools is essential". Three indicated a need for more PD concerning mentoring other teachers or team teaching. Mention was also made by 3 teachers regarding the desire to learn from the "best practice of other teachers". Three respondents commented that PD information should be shared amongst school staff: "those doing the PD should pass knowledge on to the rest of the school".

- **Level of Challenge:** Two teachers indicated that PD should be more challenging – that much of it is "not appropriate for my level of qualifications" or that "most PD revisits things I've done/seen".

- **More Information Required**: Four teachers indicated they wanted more information about PD availability.

- **PD as Imperative:** Quite a number of respondents took the opportunity to emphasise the importance of PD… that it is essential and worthwhile for teachers and that PD "promotes life long learning". Two respondents noted that PD should be more concerned with leadership. Four teachers indicated that accreditation should be given for PD.

1.6 References

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