

The case for establishing a national centre for pedagogy

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Based on a feasibility study undertaken for Teaching Australia by
Monash University

Teaching Australia

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP LIMITED

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The report of the feasibility study undertaken by Monash University
is available in full at www.teachingaustralia.edu.au

OVERVIEW

In September 2007, Teaching Australia commissioned Monash University to undertake two feasibility studies:

1. Assess the need for a national centre for pedagogy, to provide and make use of evidence about effective teaching and school leadership strategies and practice, and the benefits that would flow from establishing a centre;
2. Assess the need for a national clearinghouse for educational research, to make research findings on effective practice available to teachers and school leaders, and the benefits that would flow from establishing a national clearinghouse.

The Monash University report, separately published, makes a strong case for the establishment of a national research centre for pedagogy, incorporating a clearinghouse function.

The essence of the argument is that by building up and disseminating evidence, knowledge and expertise about the practices of teaching and school leadership in a national research centre of excellence, a centre for pedagogy would make a significant contribution to quality teaching, leading to increased student achievement and national productivity gains.

The quality of school education is influenced in large part by the three related elements of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These are distinct but closely interdependent. Australian public policy recognises the importance of curriculum and assessment. It also recognises the important role of teachers and teaching. To date, little attention has been given to pedagogy, the actual practice of teaching. The fundamental aim of the centre would be to develop an 'evidence base' for advising schools about the most effective processes.

WHAT IS PEDAGOGY?

Pedagogy is considered to be more than just teaching. It is defined as “the art and science of educating children,” the strategies for using teacher professional knowledge, skills and abilities in order to foster good learning outcomes.

Inherent in the definition of pedagogy is the relationship between teaching and learning and how that relationship is played out in practice. It involves developing a repertoire of strategies as well as understanding that their application depends on making judgments about content and context as well as unpredictable classroom moments.

WHY DOES PEDAGOGY MATTER?

There are strong economic and non-economic benefits that come from improved student outcomes. Quality teaching and quality school leadership are at the heart of improved outcomes. The economic benefits of even a small increase in the quality of teaching are sufficient to justify the establishment of a centre for pedagogy. As knowledge about effective pedagogy increases and is made more widely available, these benefits will grow exponentially.

Greater education participation and better school outcomes bring national economic benefits

Research shows that if the academic performance of children can be improved, then a range of education, labour-market and social participation outcomes also improve. Improvements in these outcomes are associated with significant savings in costs to government (particularly health and welfare) and gains in national productivity and competitive innovation.

The arguments fall into four categories:

- Improvements in educational attainment result in higher labour productivity, stimulation of new business activity and increases in GDP.
- Increasing education results in innovation, contributing to higher levels of production, adoption of new knowledge, ideas and techniques and economic growth.
- Higher levels of education in the population result in indirect benefits that free up government revenue and enable reductions in taxation. The foremost of these indirect benefits are a reduction in unemployment and welfare dependency and better health outcomes.
- Higher levels of literacy and of general education are associated with reduced crime, improved civic cooperation and improved institutional stability and trust. Trust in institutions and improved knowledge by consumers converts to greater efficiency in personal consumer and investment behaviour.

Access Economics has explored the contribution to national productivity of increased schooling. If Year 12 completion and participation in apprenticeships in Australia were increased to 90%, by 2040 this would result in an increase in the average years of schooling of the total workforce of 0.15 years. Through increased productivity (0.62%) and higher labour force participation (0.48%), GDP would be 1.1% higher than it would otherwise have been (implying that one additional year of schooling increases GDP by 7.33%). Australian Government revenue would increase proportionately by 23% of this increase, or 0.27% of GDP, as a consequence of increasing educational expenditure by only 0.05% of GDP. The multiplier of revenues to expenditure is therefore a little over five, showing **the high leverage of educational expenditure**.

Building teacher quality is the most efficient way to influence student outcomes

Research also shows that **teacher quality** is the single most important policy sensitive school variable influencing student achievement. Student differences, including family background, are important but hard to influence significantly through policy, while the education process - including school organisation and resources, class size, curriculum content and structure as well as teachers' skills, knowledge, attitudes and practices - is more susceptible to policy change.

Given the strength of effects associated with teacher capacity, improving the quality of teachers is probably the most **economically efficient policy** approach to improving student performance. Ways of expressing this efficiency gain vary:

- Moving students from a class taught by an average teacher to one with a teacher at the 85th percentile of teacher quality can raise student performance by four percentile rankings in a given year - equivalent to the effect on learning of reducing class size by 10 students.
- Students taught by the best teachers improve by the equivalent of 1.5 grade levels in a year compared with only a 0.5 grade level for students taught by the worst teachers.
- A teacher in the 90th percentile can achieve in half a year what a teacher in the 10th percentile can achieve in a full year.

Expanding the evidence base about effective teaching strategies is an important step in raising teacher quality

Four of the critical components of quality teaching are teacher preparation, the curriculum, teaching strategies and professional development.

Building knowledge and understanding about effective teaching strategies – the evidence base about effective pedagogy – and its incorporation in initial teacher education and professional development is a key to improving quality in teaching, for better learning outcomes.

Teachers' pedagogical skills – their verbal and communication ability, skills in teamwork, organisational and self-management skills, problem-solving, classroom management, repertoire of teaching methods and research skills - combined with their content knowledge, correlate strongly with student achievement and retention.

There is however little systematic study of the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches and classroom strategies. Like other professionals, teachers need to be supported by a solid evidence base about the impact of different practices and their relationship with curriculum, assessment and outcomes.

More evidence about successful school leadership strategies will have an important indirect influence on student achievement

Principals as well as teachers play a vital role in student learning. Quality leadership is recognised in research as second only to quality teaching as an important factor influencing student outcomes. Principals have a salient indirect effect on student outcomes through the goals they establish, the quality of the curriculum, and the teaching and learning environment they encourage within their schools.

Too little attention has been paid to different leadership approaches and their relationship to student outcomes. More evidence, drawn from practice, is needed on leadership strategies correlated with higher student outcomes in different settings and contexts.

Knowledge of what works in different contexts can break the cycle of disadvantage

The effects of teacher quality are not only large but **cumulative** over time. The cumulative impact is felt most strongly in the most challenging schools, where turnover of better, more experienced teachers can be high.

Having a succession of effective teachers can substantially narrow the average achievement gap between low and high performing students. Low performing students benefit more from effective teaching than high-performing students do.

What constitutes quality teaching varies in **response to the particular needs of individual students** and groups of students. The way a teacher works within a particular context has a dramatic influence on the nature of student learning.

Strategies to **build the capability and quality of all teachers**, particularly those in disadvantaged and challenging school settings, are a worthwhile national investment.

WHAT WOULD A NATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEDAGOGY PROVIDE?

A national centre for pedagogy would increase understanding and knowledge about teaching and learning in different contexts, settings and subject areas. It would have a range of benefits:

1. A centre for pedagogy would be a centre of excellence for research into educational practice

A national centre would draw together expertise from various fields of educational inquiry to increase the body of knowledge and evidence about effective teaching in different contexts and for different groups of students. It would optimise Australia's research effort in support of best-practice teaching and quality school leadership, generating new knowledge to inform teachers and principals in their work.

This deeper knowledge of teaching and leadership would be made available so as to better inform practice, public policy and theory. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, in the 2007 report of its inquiry into teacher education, *Top of the Class*, supported a National Centre for Pedagogy that “could fulfil a comparable role to the ARC Centres of Excellence and also perform something of a lighthouse function for the profession”.

This would involve the systematic collection of evidence about, and analysis of, teaching, learning and leadership. Research that is relevant to teachers and principals and grounded in everyday practice provides insights and understandings about teaching and learning that help to engage learners more effectively and enhance outcomes.

Generally teachers' and principals' knowledge of practice is embodied rather than articulated, tacit rather than explicit. This knowledge, generated through experience, is rarely disseminated beyond individuals, even though such knowledge can provide important insights into the complex nature of teaching and learning. Too often it remains with the individual teacher, or at best a specific school.

Once articulated, that knowledge becomes more accessible and usable, and as a consequence, is better valued, both within and outside of the profession. Analysing and describing pedagogical knowledge helps develop a meaningful shared language for communicating understandings of teaching and learning.

Providing ways of 'making the tacit explicit' can have a significant impact on other teachers' practice and influence understandings of those interested in teaching and learning. One way to bridge the gap between research knowledge and teaching practice is by involving teachers directly in research, having teachers document what they do and what they find effective. Research by and with teachers has the goal of better understanding educational practice. By investigating the relationship between teaching and learning in real settings, teachers make accessible their expertise and provide unique perspectives on teaching and learning that

contribute to the knowledge base in education and are valuable and informative in assisting in educational change.

2. A centre for pedagogy would strengthen the link between research and practice and inform practice in different contexts

There is little doubt that research that is conceptualized and conducted by teachers and principals will have the most impact on practice in classrooms and schools. Being informed by evidence drawn from practical experience is a powerful tool for educational change.

A significant barrier to the uptake of educational research and its transfer to classroom practice has been a perceived divide between knowledge created by academic researchers (formal knowledge) and the knowledge created by teachers through their experiences in classroom teaching (practical knowledge). Those who study education from ‘the outside’ and those who are immersed in its everyday practice on ‘the inside’ are not well connected. Finding a balance between both perspectives is important if the construction of knowledge and the value of theory in practice are to be more responsive to the needs of the educational community and lead to meaningful change in pedagogy.

Through their daily interactions, teachers are continually reminded that what and how they teach in one context does not always work in the same way in another. The way a teacher works within a particular context has a dramatic influence on the nature of student learning, including the ways in which that learning might be applied and further developed in other settings. Recognizing and responding to the challenges inherent in quality teaching and learning across a range of contexts is complex and teachers are confronted by such challenges on a daily basis.

By bringing together experience and knowledge geared to different contexts, building up a research and evidence base, and making this evidence available through a clearinghouse function, a centre for pedagogy will inform and support teachers and principals, in a wide range of different social and cultural contexts, educational systems and physical, geographical and personal learning contexts. It will also identify those areas where further research is needed.

3. A centre for pedagogy would inform the preparation and continuing education of teachers

Quality in teaching and leadership are developed through both initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning.

Teacher educators need a strong and current knowledge of practice in different contexts, in order to create a learning environment in which understanding teaching and developing skills as a teacher are seen as ways of becoming more informed about practice – not simply developing routines and scripts “that work”.

While initial teacher education contributes to teacher effectiveness by laying the foundations for pedagogical skills and expertise, ongoing professional development and growth is needed

throughout a teaching career. As professionals, teachers need to innovate and change practice in response to the dynamic nature of the pedagogic interactions they create and experience. Teaching is never the same. A commitment to examining and improving pedagogical practice is at the core of engaging in, and contributing to, the teaching profession.

A centre for pedagogy will draw on this practical knowledge of pedagogy in different contexts to inform both initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning.

4. A centre for pedagogy would lead to improvements in educational equity

Research has consistently demonstrated that many factors affect the achievement and participation in education of students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. One response to issues of participation and achievement for particular groups of students is the development of more appropriate, inclusive and culturally sensitive pedagogy.

The way a teacher works within a particular context has a dramatic influence on the nature of student learning. Developing understandings and approaches to pedagogy that are sensitive to context and to the diverse needs of learners requires research and practice to “speak” to each other. The focus of a centre for pedagogy will be to inform practice through research and evidence about what works in particular contexts.

5. A centre for pedagogy would raise the status of teaching

The establishment of a Centre for Pedagogy will draw attention to the importance of pedagogy and the links between the act of teaching, curriculum and assessment. It will help reframe discussions about teaching by providing evidence about teaching practices and illuminating the links between teaching, school leadership and student achievement.

Taking pedagogy seriously in this way signals a valuing of pedagogy and the teaching profession, creating an environment in which teachers are respected for their professional expertise. The focus is on the practice of the profession. This will improve the attractiveness of teaching as a career and retention of the teaching workforce.

WHY IS A NATIONAL CENTRE NEEDED?

A national centre has the advantage of scale, cross-fertilisation and status, providing the opportunity to bring expertise together in a way that benefits teaching across the country, regardless of jurisdiction and teaching context.

A national centre would consolidate and distribute knowledge about pedagogy, raising teachers' interest by engaging them in documenting effective practice and contributing to shared knowledge.

It would bridge the theory-practice gap through the work of teachers as researchers, practitioners who purposefully engage in systematic exploration of their knowledge and practice, providing insights into teaching and learning in different contexts and encouraging reflective practice in others.

It offers a possibility for pooling the knowledge of national professional associations representing specific areas of teaching and exploring practice.

Greater collaboration among teachers is an effective way to improve the quality of teaching, breaking down professional isolation and fostering learning communities within and between education workplaces.

KEY FEATURES OF A NATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEDAGOGY

The major activities of a national centre for pedagogy would be to:

1. initiate, conduct and broker research into pedagogy and gather evidence about effective practice
2. disseminate relevant findings to teachers, principals, teacher educators and other stakeholders
3. develop an evidence base and operate a clearinghouse function in support of teachers, principals, parents, policy-makers and other stakeholders
4. develop a relationship with teacher education and related faculties and provide input to programs for teachers and school leaders
5. provide and inform professional learning activities
6. foster partnerships and collaborative research arrangements
7. communicate the results of research within and beyond the teaching profession

THE MODEL

The Centre could be established either as a university - hosted centre or as a new stand-alone institution, playing the role for pedagogy that the Australian Council for Educational Research plays for national testing and assessment and the Curriculum Corporation and the National Curriculum Board play for national curriculum.

The Monash report favours a university based model. While acknowledging the importance of the Centre being perceived as independent and noting that its work 'could be diluted and diminished if it was integrated too deeply into an existing institution', it argues that university partnerships of this kind are common and the independence of such a Centre could be preserved by an experienced university partner.

The Monash report costs a university hosted centre for pedagogy, incorporating a research clearinghouse function, at about \$5.4 million when fully operational. A stand-alone model is assumed to cost about 10% more. These costings are broken down in the Monash report, which also suggests the possibility of a staged approach to establishment, growing from approximately \$2.1 million in the first full year to \$5.4 million by year 3.

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