



## THE PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING AND TEACHING P-12 BACKGROUND PAPER

### INTRODUCTION

The Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 were developed as part of the *Blueprint for Government School's* Flagship Strategy 1. They are designed to support teachers in working with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, another key component of this Flagship Strategy. The Victorian Essential Learning Standards details the knowledge, skills and behaviours that today's students will need to live fulfilling and productive lives. The Principles focus on the teacher's role in creating and maintaining a learning environment most conducive to meeting students' needs.

The Principles can be used independently by schools in a variety of ways. They also form the basis of the structured Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 (PoLT) program which schools may choose to implement.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PRINCIPLES

There has been an increasing focus over the past 10 years in Victoria and elsewhere on how students learn, and the implications of this for pedagogy.

The Middle Years Research And Development (MYRAD) project research showed that different teaching approaches often result in substantial differences in both the ways students approach their learning and in the quality of that learning.

The Quality Schools Project and the Schools for Innovations and Excellence initiative have both provided opportunities for teachers to collaboratively reflect on practice in ways that would improve learning. Indications from schools involved however, are that it can be difficult to find a fruitful way to structure reflection on practice because learning and teaching are complex, multifaceted and highly interconnected activities.

The Principles were developed to provide a structure to help teachers find a focus for their professional learning. They have evolved from similar sets of principles (or components as they were then referred to) developed as the basis for the Science in Schools (SIS) and the Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development Project (MYPRAD). The Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 are however applicable across all key learning areas and all stages of learning.

It is clear from research that there is no single 'right' or 'best' way to teach and it is important to recognise that the Principles are not an attempt to mandate a single 'one size fits all' approach. However, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of classrooms that can be characterised as 'learning communities'. In these classrooms, there is an emphasis on building rich meanings for ideas rather than completing tasks. Students in these classrooms are intellectually engaged, and they feel a sense of collaborative partnership with their peers and their teachers. Classrooms like these are extremely rewarding places to teach and learn in.

## **WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES?**

The Principles comprise six statements about the quality learning and teaching practices required for building effective learning communities. Each of these statements is accompanied by a subset of components that describe the teacher's role in relation to each statement. Whilst they have been developed through extensive consultation they are not, of course, incontestable. They are designed to be interpreted and interrogated against particular learning contexts and in this way to stimulate reflection and conversations about pedagogy that will provide starting points for practitioner research. Meanings of the Principles will be constructed differently by different groups of teachers as they connect them to specific examples of classroom practice.

The Principles are not standards or curriculum statements. They do however provide an effective basis for discussions about pedagogy amongst teachers who are jointly responsible both for delivering the curriculum and ensuring that their students reach the standards expected. The Principles focus on what teachers should do but they also flow from core beliefs about learning (eg 'All children can learn').

## **WHAT IS PEDAGOGY?**

Pedagogy involves much more than its most obvious component, the tasks that teachers set. It includes the ways in which teachers interact with students; that is how they question and respond to questions, use students' ideas and respond to students' diverse backgrounds and interests. It includes the social and intellectual climate that teachers seek to create and the types of learning that they set out to promote. It also includes the decisions they make about framing the content around a series of tasks to be completed or as key ideas and skills that are revisited and built on. Teachers also need to think about how they link and sequence activities and how and what they assess.

Professional learning teams will have rich and productive conversations and plan more effectively when they consciously address the many aspects of pedagogy described above.

## **HOW WILL THE PRINCIPLES HELP TEACHERS TO EXPLORE THEIR PEDAGOGY?**

One of the challenges faced by professional learning teams in conducting these conversations about pedagogy is that much of it is tacit. A teacher may share an innovative activity s/he has designed, but may not include subtle changes in some teacher behaviours that are crucial to its success. This means that when other teachers try it things may not be as successful. The thinking that informs teachers' actions and decision making is complex. Making this thinking explicit to oneself and other teachers in a range of ways can be very helpful to the development and sharing of practice. There is a growing recognition in the research literature of both the importance and the richness of the different types of knowledge generated by skilled teachers and of the difficulty of articulating and documenting such knowledge.

The Principles provide a scaffold for teachers to assist them in making explicit both the obvious and the more tacit aspects of their practices. They offer a stimulus for discussion and the sharing of experiences in ways oriented more toward articulating, sharing and documenting all aspects of pedagogy rather than just 'good activities'.

## **Key considerations**

Sustaining good professional learning in busy schools requires careful planning and an on-going commitment to its importance. There are a number of considerations for schools and teachers planning to use the Principles to promote effective professional learning. These considerations have been addressed within the structured PoLT program offered to schools.

### **1. Teacher ownership**

Teachers need to own their professional learning. This includes deciding on goals and determining how these might be achieved, and the desired timeframe. The PoLT program provides a structure for thinking about practice designed to help teachers set their own goals and develop action plans to explore issues that matter to them. Experience has shown that it can be very rewarding for teachers to feel a sense of personal progress in achieving classroom change.

### **2. Teachers as generators of knowledge**

Whilst there is a role for external ideas and partnerships with others, the most meaningful professional learning is done **by** and **with** teachers, not **to** teachers. The PoLT program is underpinned by a shift in thinking about professional development away from models that position teachers as the receivers of knowledge developed by others. This shift is a key reason for government support in the last few years for initiatives that encourage teachers to engage in action research. 'Action research' refers to a process in which practitioners, often in collaborative groups, research their own practice through a cycle of identifying an area of interest or concern, developing and trialling a relevant intervention, reflecting on the outcome, reframing, elaborating or extending the original concern and developing a further intervention. The 'research' goals do not remain fixed, but evolve and change as the teachers learn more about their own practice.

Teachers may begin with questions that act as prompts for inquiry and research. For example, *How can we formally encourage students to link ideas in their learning? What tasks will enable them to do this effectively? How do we get them to do this independently?* The questions should be quite specific and provide a clear impetus for innovation but not be so narrow as to be limiting. This type of questioning can sustain professional conversations and learning over a long period of time.

New understandings follow, rather than precede, new practice. Outside ideas can be valuable at all points of the cycle, but only when teachers adapt them by developing new variations appropriate to their own contexts. This means that the knowledge developed is personal to each teacher's practice. However, the kinds of knowledge that can be generated by teachers in this endeavour do deserve to be shared. The Principles provide a basis for teachers to articulate knowledge about learning and teaching in ways that can transcend subject and year level boundaries.

### **3. Collaboration**

Teachers cannot be expected to create a vigorous community of learners among students if they have no parallel community to nourish themselves. Group support and stimulation is critical for professional learning. An effective professional learning team provides time and space for the cycle of reflective practice; it promotes the social construction of new knowledge as existing ideas are

shared and new ones emerge from within the group. It also stimulates and supports innovation and risk taking.

Meetings and professional conversations matter. However, discussions where good ideas are shared **without** an explicit and agreed purpose generally wind down before any clear goals have been established. There is often little response possible beyond 'That was a good idea'. In contrast, when a group has developed shared purposes, the successful experience or idea can be questioned (in an affirming way) against how and why it met one of these purposes such as *students taking responsibility for their learning* (Component 2.1). The Principles provide a starting point for identifying and clarifying shared goals and purposes as well as providing a scaffold for later reflection.

#### **4. A willingness to question existing practice**

Most experienced teachers will get through their teaching week without crisis. The student learning agenda is not about resolving crises. It is about teachers identifying and sharing areas of apparently successful practice where they would like to do better. The Principles, together with an associated component mapping process that forms part of the structured PoLT program provide a framework and process that helps teachers do this. Questioning of practice cannot be forced. It flows from teachers being willing to inquire into their practice. The following reflection raises questions about two aspects of practice that offered new challenges to the teachers concerned.

*Asking good questions and higher order thinking are intertwined. We need to value the questions students ask and encourage it in our assessment. [we should] value, questions not answers. (I&E Cluster Meeting)*

These teachers realised that they needed to be seen to be genuinely valuing (and using) students' questions. This inevitably leads to classrooms that are more fluid, responsive and hence unpredictable and raises interesting challenges for their practice.

They went further and set out to see if and how they could value question **asking** in their assessment. The teachers challenged their existing practice, but did so in a way that provided them with an opportunity to achieve further affirming progress as they developed and shared ways of meeting this new challenge.

#### **5. Support for risk taking**

Proposing and implementing changes to their classroom practices can be risky undertakings for teachers. Planning to respond to students' questions for example, means that teachers will not know in advance what sorts of questions their students will ask and whether and how a range of student questions might be used. Both teachers and students need *self-confidence and willingness to take risks with their learning* (Principle 2) as they try new ways of working. They also need to be supported as they begin to step outside their usual comfort zones. For teachers, this willingness to take risks is enhanced when there is a group that can share experiences and encourage each other's efforts. Understanding and encouragement from the leadership team is also important.

#### **6. Evolutionary, not revolutionary change**

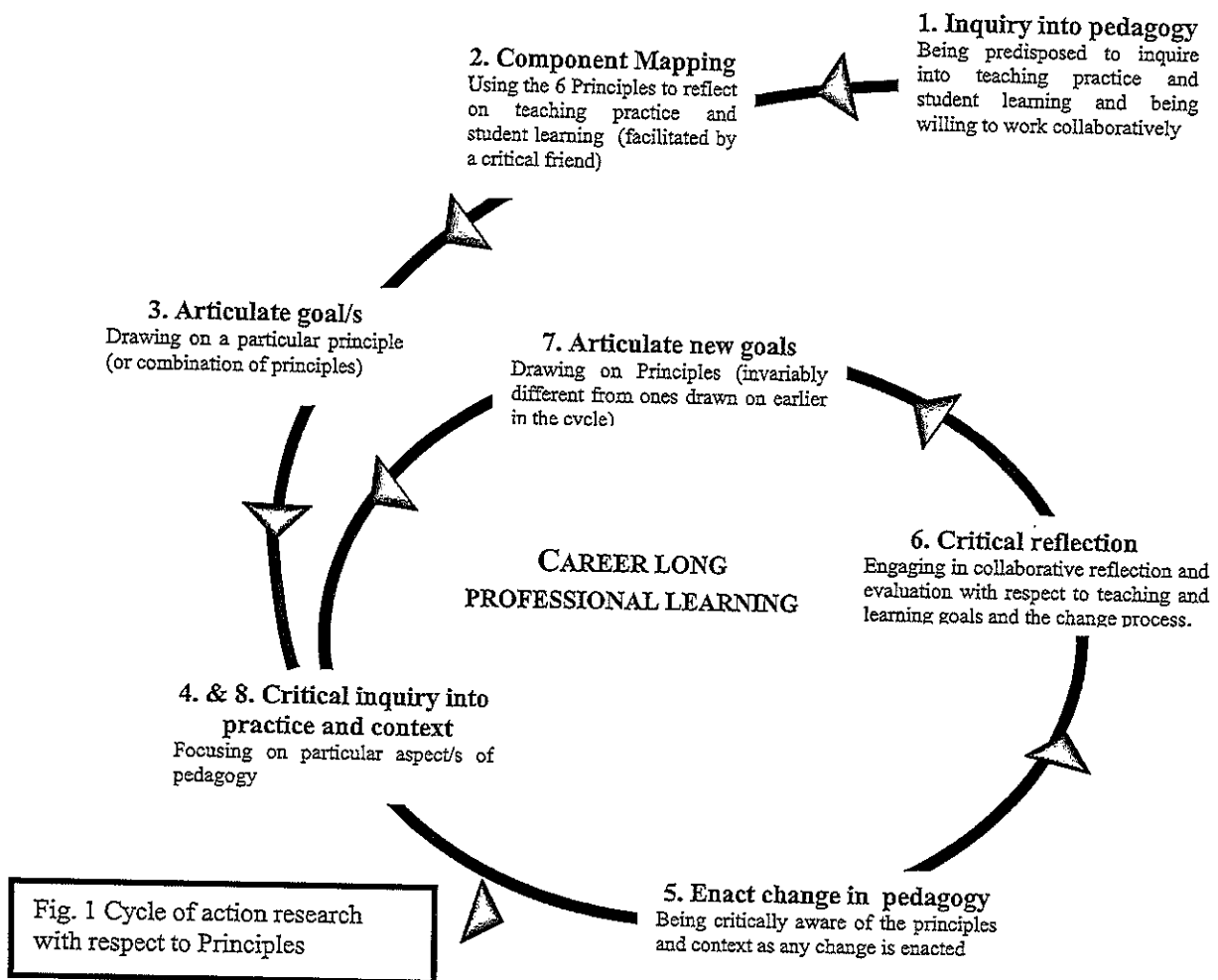
Attempts at educational change have not been successful when they assume that teachers and students can and will make immediate and large scale changes to how they operate in classrooms.

The Principles are intended to help teachers select a focus that matters to them and to begin and sustain a cycle of trying something new - with a purpose - in one aspect of pedagogy and then building on this for other, incremental changes. This is very different from following a prescriptive set of materials. It positions teachers not as technical implementers of overly neat packages, but as genuine professionals, valuing the authority of their experiences and taking charge of their practice.

## THE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Whilst concerns for student achievement and therefore accountability measures in crucial areas such as literacy and numeracy will always prevail, there are important outcomes of effective pedagogy that cannot be measured by standardised testing. The Principles offer a basis for personal and group reflection designed to generate improvements in pedagogy. These improvements should in turn improve student learning outcomes in a range of ways, only some of which can be directly measured. It will be up to the individual teacher and/or the school rather to determine the evidence for effectiveness of any changes and make appropriate judgements leading to further action.

The PoLT program incorporates mapping processes that will provide starting points for an action research cycle that is illustrated in Figure 1. However, the nature of action research means that initial goals will develop and change as teachers share and reflect on experiences. Teaching is a multifaceted and highly interconnected process: an initial focus on one aspect of pedagogy usually leads to reflection on many other aspects. The Principles can support teachers to embark on a journey of evolving practice.



For example, teachers may decide that Component 4.1: *Plans sequences to promote sustained learning that builds over time and emphasises connections between ideas* suggests a focus of interest to them (step 2 of Figure 1). They might set goals (Step 3) such as stimulating students to find the common big ideas in different lessons and different units. This could lead them to critically enquire into the extent to which they currently do this (step 4) and devise and enact some changes in

pedagogy that place greater emphasis on 'big ideas' (step 5). In doing this, they may well find (in step 6) that an important reason why their students do not make such connections is that it does not occur to them to think about the big ideas of a lesson, only about the tasks set. This critical insight provides a new challenge that results in new goals (step 7) that relate to other parts of the Principles such as *promoting substantive discussion of ideas*, or *challenging students to question and reflect*. This means that Step 8 is now focusing on different aspects of pedagogy than in the previous cycle. In other words, if the action research process is sustained over time, then an initial focus on one aspect of pedagogy will bring in many others.

In addition to helping to stimulate the action research process, the Principles can help teachers make more general sense of the different, context-specific experiences that are brought to any discussions about pedagogy. They are written in ways that transcend specific learning contexts. Exploring pedagogy in this way liberates teachers from discussion of context-specific activities where they feel they can only learn from others' experiences if they involve similar subject areas and year levels to their own.

The Principles may also assist teachers to articulate their tacit knowledge about the things that they already do that promote quality learning. Publicly offering and defending ideas about how and why teachers encourage *students to take risks with their learning* can reveal subtle, but important teacher behaviours.

Finally, the Principles can help provide a greater coherency and consistency in pedagogy, for individual teachers across a range of classes or learning areas, between different teachers in the same school, and between schools. When tacit understandings are made more explicit, this can help teachers to draw on these understandings more regularly. Moreover, the conversations that the Principles stimulate can help a school reduce the sometimes dramatic differences between classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

There are strong links and interdependencies between professional learning and classroom learning. How knowledge is constructed both in classrooms and in professional learning teams has a big impact on its quality.

This paper has explored some of the various understandings of meaningful student and teacher learning expressed in the Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 and has begun to articulate some of the rich complexities of effective pedagogy. The Principles provide a framework for making both learning and teaching more rewarding by encouraging teachers to build and enhance professional learning communities.