Submission of the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People on

Young People, Schools and Innovation: towards an action plan for the school sector

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General information about the Commission for Children and Young People

The Commission for Children and Young People was established by the Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998. The Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

a) the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children are the paramount considerations;
b) the views of children and young people are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and
c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

Some of the principal functions of the Commission include:

- promoting the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives and to encourage government and non-government agencies to seek the participation of children; and
- making recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

This submission

The Commission is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper ‘Young People, Schools and Innovation: towards an action plan for the school sector’.

The Commission makes no claim to specialist expertise in the area of teacher education but the Commissioner and her staff hear the views of many school students, both primary and secondary, throughout New South Wales.

The Commission also benefits from input from members of its Young People’s Reference Group, a group of young people aged from 12 to 17 years from across NSW. The Group meets regularly to give feedback and advice on the policies and work of the Commission and direction on specific issues affecting children and young people.
The Commission generally supports the development of an action plan for creating a culture of innovation in schools and developing innovative capacity in students.

In developing the action plan the Commission believes that the interests and well-being of children and young people should be the primary consideration in the debate about young people, schools and innovation.

The main thrust of the Commission’s submission is that there is a need for a reappraisal of the role of students in schools and of the relationship between students and teachers. Children and young people should be given every opportunity to participate in decision-making. It is only fair that students should have a say in decisions that affect them and involving them in decision-making processes is likely to make them feel valued and part of the school community.

The Commission sees it as a priority in developing the action plan to listen to the students themselves about the challenges faced in creating and maintaining innovative educational environments. Children and young people are the ultimate consumers of education and no doubt their insights and views will be of great value in developing the action plan.

**Innovation in schools**

Innovation in schools can involve progress and improvements in management, teaching and learning resulting in improved wellbeing and learning outcomes for children and young people.

For children and young people to learn effectively in a culture of innovation a degree of change will need to occur. This change will need to encompass a change in attitudes, expectations, behaviour and leadership from both children and young people and the broader school community, including teachers, principals and parents.

Any innovative organisation communicates with its key stakeholders, listens to their viewpoints, considers their needs and makes changes to meet their needs where appropriate. An innovative school environment should be no different.

**Learning in a culture of innovation**

The learning environment and class content provided by schools has to be relevant to children and young people for them to have the chance to learn effectively.
As noted in the discussion paper, students’ perspectives are changing and many students are working part-time and participating in a variety of activities and organisations outside school. Students are increasingly seeking relevance and connection between what they can do and learn outside school and what they do and learn in the classroom.

The Commission for Children and Young People recently published the report of its Inquiry into the Best Means of Assisting Children and Young People With No One to turn To.

The Inquiry focused on the relationships and supports that should be available to children and young people for them to develop and thrive and identified ways of improving help and support for vulnerable children and young people to strengthen their social relationships and improve their circumstances.

As part of its work on the Inquiry the Commission spoke with 240 children and young people from all parts of NSW. It was clear from these consultations that whilst educationalists see schools primarily in terms of teaching and educational achievement, the perceptions that children and young people have of their schools are more influenced by their feeling of connectedness with the school.

Children and young people have told the Commission that what they value most about school is the relationships it gives them. The social experiences, relationships with friends, the rapport they have with their favourite teachers and the links they develop with other members of the community connected to the school are of high importance to children and young people.

Children and young people are also more likely to develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the school if they feel they are welcome at school, that their teachers, know, like and respect them and if they are treated fairly and listened to.

One young person who participated in the Commission’s Inquiry said

“This school is really good. The teachers here are good friends with other teachers, but they’re also good friends with the students. They can build up relationships. You know they’re going to be there and that they won’t go and gossip to other people. Plus they’re adults. Although, some you can’t trust…”

This comment also resonates the work of Michael Resnick\(^1\) that has demonstrated that children who feel connected to their families and connected to their schools have more positive life experiences, including better educational outcomes and are less likely to leave school early, to suffer from ill health, to use drugs or to commit crime. Children who do not feel connected to their

school rate more highly against almost any measure of risk and more lowly against any measure of protective factors.

Another young person told us

“I think it’s good with this school that most teachers here do recognise everyone’s originality and personality and stuff like that. So we’re not all put in together.”

If schools are to achieve success in educating children and young people they must be enjoyable, stimulating and challenging places which instil in students an understanding of the benefits of education and an interest in the subjects being taught.

An innovative school will engage its students by providing an interesting and challenging environment. Some ways to make the curriculum relevant and teaching engaging is to get feedback from students and to encourage their participation in curriculum development, the choice of subjects offered and the manner in which subjects are taught.

Children and young people can also play a valid role in staff selection processes by sitting on interview panels. This gives children and young people the chance to assess whether potential staff demonstrate a capacity to relate to and ‘connect’ with children and young people.

Dr Gregor Ramsey noted in his Review of Teacher Education in NSW that teachers who connect with and enthuse their students make a substantial difference to the quality and extent of student learning.

The Ramsey Report however contains little reference to the contribution that students can make to curriculum content, subject choices and the teaching process, nor did it explore in any depth different learning styles and cultural factors in teaching.

The Commission for Children and Young People would like to see the action plan generate more thought and emphasis across all education systems on how children and young people can become more involved in these aspects of their school life.

**Developing a culture of innovation in schools**

Participation in a school environment is about ‘active learning’ rather than passive learning. It is about sharing opportunities, knowledge, skills and power

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so that children and young people can have a say in decisions about their lives. It is important because it builds connections between children and young people and their peers and between students and their teachers.

Allowing children and young people to participate in decisions that affect them motivates them to be involved in meaningful activities and demonstrates that adults trust in their ability.

Structures such as Student Representative Councils provide students with an excellent opportunity to express their views and ideas about issues which impact on them. Student Representative Councils are well established in public secondary schools in NSW and are now being introduced into public primary schools. They are one participatory structure for children and young people. Schools need to create and offer broader opportunities for a wide range of students to be involved in the running of their school.

A school management structure receptive to the ideas and suggestions put forward by the student body will help to foster a culture of innovation within their school community. Students will be more confident that their voices will be heard and that their views will be taken into account.

Opportunities for children and young people’s participation in schools exist not just in the governance of the school but also in the teaching, learning and curriculum choices available to students. These opportunities for broader participation in school life should be available to all children and young people, not just the privileged few.

Creating an inclusive and participatory environment for students is a big part of developing a culture of innovation in schools and the capacity for innovation in children and young people. Inclusive and participatory practices give children and young people a chance to express their views, gain new skills and contribute to their world.

An Innovative Schools Action Plan should advocate for systemic changes to the way schools foster and accept student participation in all aspects of their school community. For this to be successful it must incorporate respecting what children and young people have to say, listen to their views, considering their needs and making changes to address these needs where appropriate.
Teacher preparation, professional learning and development in a culture of innovation

In a period when large-scale industrial and economic changes have reduced the unskilled labour market and increased demand for highly skilled workers, education has become more important than ever to children and young peoples’ future chances of gaining employment. At the same time many students who once would have left school early now stay on and schools are expected to meet the educational needs of a much more diverse range of students. This is a difficult challenge.

The requirement for schools to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students has highlighted a need for changes in the professional learning and development opportunities available to teachers.

Schools and teachers must be sufficiently flexible to cater for the variety of needs, interests and career goals of different students. For this to happen, systemic changes will need to occur to enable schools to offer a broader curriculum which includes more vocational and work placement based courses for some students and extension courses in various subjects for others.

A school principal we spoke to during the Inquiry commented

“Kids will talk to some teachers and some counsellors. But teachers and counsellors get limited training and development to help them help kids – especially teachers in rural areas who might have been at the same school for 20 years – and their experiences is of society 20 years ago. Teachers have to go with the training they got 20 years ago and their experience – and sometimes that’s not enough.”

The Vinson Inquiry\(^3\) raised concern over the lack of funding available for the professional development of teachers and the lack of system level strategic directions for innovative pedagogy within schools.

The Vinson Inquiry identified that whilst there has been some great local level initiatives in pedagogy within NSW, at both a primary and secondary level, there is still a long way to go for pedagogic innovation to be demonstrated across the board.

Professor Vinson highlighted how changes in curriculum and pedagogy are influenced by changes in the student population ie – student retention rates, alternative education programs, generational changes and changes in a school’s cultural mix. Professor Vinson recommended the creation of a pedagogy clearinghouse to disseminate up-to-date information directly to teachers/schools.

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The Commission agrees with these ‘issues of concern’ raised by the Vinson Inquiry and supports the above recommendations for additional funding for pedagogic innovation in schools. The Commission believes that an ongoing and across-the-board commitment to innovative pedagogy should form a key part of the action plan.

Several points in relation to teaching quality and standards were made by Dr Gregor Ramsey in his Review of Teacher Education in NSW which the Commission concurs with, particularly that teachers who connect with and enthuse their students make a substantial difference to the quality and extent of student learning.

Throughout the Commission’s Inquiry into the Best Means of Assisting Children and Young People With No One to Turn To children and young people told us that interpersonal skills are very important and that they learn better from teachers they like and respect. If students are bored and unstimulated in class they are more likely to have a poor attendance record and/or to drop out of school.

One young person told us

“Having a bit of respect from teachers is important – if they treat you as a person, not just another one of the kids”.

This highlights that the ability of teachers to form positive relationships with their students is a critical factor in whether students feel connected to their schools and are resilient.

Teacher education should aim to select teachers that have the skills and temperament to engage and form strong relationships with children and young people. It is worth considering whether advice for young people thinking of a career in teaching and the criteria for acceptance into education degree courses should include some assessment of interpersonal skills in addition to academic attainment.

Finally, the setting of professional standards for teachers should be seen as a process of continuous and incremental improvement. All teachers, from beginning teachers to the most experienced members of the profession, have the capacity to improve their effectiveness and develop new skills.

The Commission is supportive of proposals in NSW to establish an Institute of Teachers to set and enforce professional standards. The creation of formal structures such as an Institute of Teachers would provide an opportunity for students to become active participants in the education process by involving them in planning and policy-making processes.
Leadership at all levels

Schools, particularly high schools, are places where many students feel that they are constantly told what to do by teachers, are governed by rules that seem petty or unreasonable to them, are rarely asked for their opinions and have limited opportunities to bring about changes. Many students respond by feeling discouraged and adults often mistake this for apathy.

The role of principals and teachers in supporting an innovative and participatory capacity in students should be one of flexibility, support and positive relationships. From speaking with children and young people it is clear that while they recognise that teachers need to manage the classroom effectively, they prefer teachers who are not unduly authoritarian and who do not create too much of a barrier between themselves and students.

Transforming attitudes towards leadership and decision making processes at all levels of schooling from a Departmental level, school level governance, student leadership and planning in schools will be essential if innovation in schools is to be successful.

Schools which embrace a participatory structure are giving students a chance to participate and have a say about issues which impact on them and the school community. Student participation is often conceived in terms of ‘student leadership’, a narrow view which restricts opportunities for the majority of children and young people to have their say.

In an innovative school environment, school level governance should recognise and value the contribution made by children and young people to their school and acknowledge that by participating they are gaining new skills and developing their innovative capacity.

The Commission would like to see an emphasis in the Innovative Schools Action Plan on a wholistic approach to participation which recognises that children and young people can and should make a valuable input to the governance, teaching, learning and curriculum practices of their school.