



Great teachers: the fulcrum of life-long education

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Professor Collette Tayler, PhD, Chair of Early Childhood Education and Care, Melbourne Graduate School of Education delivered the keynote address at the NEiTA 2008 ASG National Teaching Awards presentation event held on 29 May 2009 at the Windsor Hotel, Melbourne.

Professor Tayler holds the Chair of Early Childhood Education and Care in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Her on-going research includes the establishment and tracking of an affiliate researcher program comprising Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) candidates within the School. The primary focus is to build and sustain program effectiveness research in diverse early childhood settings and use the evidence gathered to improve child and family outcomes and grow the expertise of professionals.

It gives me real pleasure to be with you on this special occasion when some of Australia's top teachers receive awards that recognise their great work. The theme for 2009 year nominations - *great teachers change the future today* - strikes a special chord. We are almost at the close of the first decade of a new century, systemic change is underway in the name of an *Education Revolution* and the profession is addressing complex challenges related to participation, curriculum, pedagogy, equity and outcomes on a planet about which we continue to learn. Teachers *are* changing the future today.

Because my particular work is focused on the education, care and upbringing of the very young, (children from birth through to age eight), this is an especially exciting time. In the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) field we are commencing the first major longitudinal study of the effectiveness of Australian ECEC programs on young children's health, development and learning, and their social inclusion - the biggest EC research project ever funded by the Australian Research Council and the Victorian and Queensland Governments.

We are bringing diverse ECEC programs together under a broad education concept - a National Early Years Learning Framework. For Australia at this time, this is a big idea! And we are transforming our relationship with statutory school provision, working in a more integrated way with primary education. The complex challenges of life-long learning are being addressed across the education spectrum through new, powerful, empirical studies set to reveal much more about the mechanisms of teaching and learning. The education profession of the 21st century, the profession in which our award recipients are pathfinders and beacons of excellence, is in a process of transformation.

Education work is unfolding the mechanisms of effective learning in diverse settings, pin-pointing critical dimensions of skill development, discerning the most effective applications for diverse learners and matching teaching activities to particular situations, places and time. There is no doubt in my mind that all of those working with children and adolescents have the power to change student's life trajectories.

There is very good evidence that high-quality early development and learning positively change children's futures. So it is vital that we ensure that very young Australians have optimal learning opportunities from birth, both at home and in ECEC programs. And we know that effective primary and secondary teaching and learning is essential if the benefits of optimal early development and learning are to be realised. Across the spectrum from birth to adulthood, effective teaching and learning is perhaps the best assurance one can have for living well on this planet and for ensuring on-going life and learning for future generations.

Four decades ago, when the late Professor Peter Karmel and his committee were charged with re-thinking education (and establishing the Australian Schools Commission) he focused on the fundamentals that might ensure equality of opportunity - a core social goal. At the time, the profession was encouraged to employ more varied approaches in response to student underachievement, to value all students based on our common humanity, to emphasise the right of all children to receive help as they develop attributes that give both personal satisfaction and a higher quality of community and cultural life.

At the time, less centralised control of the education system was favoured. Professor Karmel recognised the importance of *subsidiarity* – national vision, goals and outcomes combined with local agency, direction and application. Today the vision and goals of Australian education have been refined again. And today, we still grapple with *subsidiarity*. Ably led by my colleague professor Barry McGaw, the new Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has to achieve both national and local engagement if we are to realise Australia's education goals. Barry McGaw brings extraordinary international experience to this task as well as his great respect for the critical role of excellent teaching. It is a privilege to work close-by such a leader, but also testimony that the Australian Education system turns out educators who are recognised among the best in the world. Barry's leadership of the Education Directorate of the OECD followed that by another great Australian educator, Professor Malcolm Skilbeck.

While it is for the nation to aspire to the best possible education for every citizen it is teachers, working with families, in communities, across the country, who drive every child's learning success, every community and state's educational progress. Without the transformation of everyday experience into passion for learning, development and social participation we risk under-achievement. Building social cohesion and new knowledge for life, in environments that understand and respect nature, is the *core work* of the education profession.

Today, teachers still balance inconsistencies between democratic ideals, educational goals, education resourcing and different, competing practices. Because of shortfalls in any of these areas, teachers cannot always give optimal support to the diverse learners with whom they work. But no matter the politics of the time, or the relative size of an Education budget, or the locality in which teachers work, Australian teachers address the challenges, one on one, of fostering equity, respecting diversity, providing equality of educational opportunity and ensuring optimal learning outcomes so that all children and students can thrive.

Whether teachers work in early childhood, statutory, or post-compulsory education, unequal life-beginnings mean that effective teaching is never simplistic and never uniform. Human diversity, matters of social equity and equality of educational opportunity make teachers' work both complex and critical to the social and economic fabric of Australia. How deeply this is understood in the community at large remains a question. At the least, naming an Education Revolution has placed life-long learning squarely on the public agenda and roused much more interest in the media about education in this country today.

I worked for a period in the OECD on the 20-country review of ECEC policy and provision, closing with the Starting Strong II report in late 2006. From the mass of evidence, it was clear that high-quality early years provision is not only a very good investment, it underpins broad learning, participation and democracy. The countries with high quality and high equity education systems (from early childhood through to tertiary) have well developed programs guided by a strong education concept, embrace child/student heterogeneity and develop every student. And these systems avoid very early selection of children into streamlined programs that can result in reduced expectations for some groups. In a nutshell, education that matches high expectations for all with a clear vision of the intended outcomes pays rich reward to the individual, society and nation. Further, comprehensive approaches that are open to, and including of, all students have the greatest effect, both for individual learning and for social cohesion. Inspirational teachers clearly hold high expectations of learners. They work for the right of every child to be educated. They work to broaden the experience and mind-set of learners, including themselves. They value diversity for the enrichment it brings – the varied ideas and ways of seeing everyday events and issues. They *connect* with students and their families. They produce exceptional outcomes.

When you think carefully about the role of education – in view of the complexity of the human species, in light of our relationships across communities and societies, in light of humans who, for our survival, must share a fragile planet with other species – it is easy to be daunted by the task of working well with children, students, parents and colleagues.

It is a great challenge indeed to teach with humility, embody the quest of life-long learning and improvement, and respect those who have gone before and those who will follow.

I acclaim the NEiTA 2008 ASG National Teaching Award recipients for what they have achieved already and wish you the very best as you continue in this profession. We are all charged to improve and refine teaching and learning. We need to do the best empirical research possible, apply the evidence-base to decision-making and adjust curriculum and pedagogy for the best outcomes that can be achieved - and share our successes with colleagues, community and the public at large. Great teachers are at the fulcrum of life-long learning – they change the future, today.

Thank you

Professor Collette Tayler

More information about Professor Tayler and her work can be found at:

The University of Melbourne's web site from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education section by clicking [here](#) or at www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au.