Connection, direction, teacher effectiveness and wellbeing

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Preamble

Visiting as a consultant in a number of schools in recent months, an observed key element for success in schools is teacher effectiveness. It is amazing to observe the breadth of connection across teachers from a multitude of training pathways and length of teaching (and other) experience. Recently, Dr Adelle Faull, Lecturer at Avondale University shared Chris Starrett's submitted assignment on this topic. In my view Starrett has delivered an astute summary, and the insights and conclusions are deserving of a wider audience. The conclusions and future directions for professional development and successful learning are worthy of serious reflection. After consultation Starrett has agreed for his paper to be published. I recommend it to you!

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Introduction

Teacher effectiveness is a multifaceted concept, which sits at the heart of successful educational programs. A balanced approach to evaluating and analysing teacher effectiveness must incorporate recognition and discussion of hard teacher skills, such as curriculum planning and procedural professionalism, and soft teacher skills, such as the capacity to build rapport with students, deliver content and instruct in engaging ways, which are all essential to effective teaching (Clinton, et al., 2018). Goe, et al. (2008) define teacher effectiveness through three categories: inputs (teacher quality), processes (teacher action) and outputs (outcomes

achieved) (p. 4). This paper will focus primarily on the first two of these categories, inputs and processes, which will be reframed as:

Inputs
- Boundaries – standards and expectations set for both teachers and students
- Stimulus – planned, organised, relevant curriculum and content

Processes
- Connection – rapport between teacher and student, which facilitates learning and a safe environment
- Direction – the effective and engaging delivery of stimulus content

Previously (C. Starrett, 2021), teacher effectiveness has been defined as;

> the capacity of the teacher to combine and translate these elements (inputs, processes and outputs) into something that inspires students to strive and grow. It is the intangible influence and impact that a teacher has on their students beyond the confined structures of the classroom and education system" (p. 1).

Using the four frames outlined immediately above, this definition could be more descriptively expanded to include: a quality schooling experience, and all effective teaching that occurs within this context, specifically a balanced combination of boundaries, stimulus, connection and direction.

These lenses will be used to gain further insight regarding how models designed to facilitate improved teacher effectiveness play out in reality - in the classroom. This paper will analyse and

compare the NSW Department of Education (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017) and the Four Domains of the Framework for Teaching (The Danielson Group, 2013) as "inputs", which provide both boundaries and stimulus. The paper will then discuss Faull's Dispositional Cluster Model (2008) and teacher effectiveness processes for teacher connection and direction, with reference to wellbeing programs such as the Invictus Wellbeing Program (2020) and the BITE BACK program (2020). These models will be evaluated and analysed in relationship to their general effectiveness, and their varying levels of implementation over recent years within the contexts of Agtech[1]— a rural technology school in country NSW and Zidon[2]— a K-12 school located in northern suburbs of Sydney, NSW.

Inputs: Models for boundaries and stimulus

Inputs are defined by Goe, et al. (2008) as "teacher background, beliefs, expectations, experience, pedagogical and content knowledge, certification and licensure, and educational attainment" (p. 4). These elements combined with the policies mandated by state, faith system or school bodies, generate the boundaries and stimulus that teachers work with and use as tools in the classroom each day. 'Boundaries' encompass the professional boundaries and expectations maintained by the effective teacher, and the boundaries regarding school policies and expectations as they are dictated by the school or governing entities. The key aim of both personal and organisational boundaries is to create a safe, inclusive and productive learning environment.

'Stimulus' inputs comprise elements such as curriculum, pedagogical content and teacher knowledge of content. This information is dictated, to a large extent, by national and state level curriculums, which are formulated and passed down by government education bodies, and school administrations. Teachers must take the prescribed stimulus, organise the information into effective sequences, including units and lessons that synthesise the content with the student's context and the world that is evolving around them.

The input elements of boundaries and stimulus are evident in both the New South Wales (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017) and the Four Domains of the New York Department of Education Framework for Teaching Components (The Danielson Group, 2013). These models are outlined in Table 1 and Figure 1 below.

[1]Pseudonym for the rural technology school.
[2]Pseudonym for the Sydney K-12 school.

The two models provide corporate frameworks for how education and teaching should function from an institutional perspective, and the models share numerous parallels. Both models emphasise the need for an environment conducive to learning, for the preparation of quality content and the need for this content to be instructed in a meaningful way – the basics of education. The models are not significantly flawed if they are analysed from a purely corporate and thematic perspective; each model outlines core elements that are well established as required elements for any successful educational system.

Table 1: *New York Department of Education Framework for Teaching Components* (The Danielson Group, 2013, p. 5)

The Four Domains - Education Framework for Teaching Components
1. Planning & Preparation
2. Classroom Environment
3. Instruction
4. Professional Responsibility

> *Teachers must take the prescribed stimulus [and] organise the information into … lessons that synthesise the content with the student's context*

Figure 1: *NSW Quality Teaching Model (NSW, DET, 2003)*
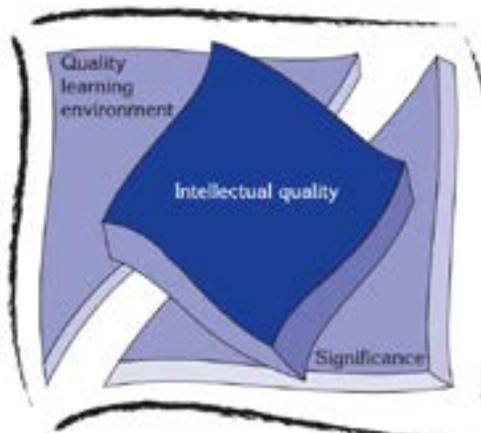
The Four Domains are categorised, with Domain 1 (Planning and Preparation) and 4 (Professional Responsibility) being viewed as activity external to the classroom, and Domain 2 (Classroom Environment) and 3 (Instruction) being activities that occur within the classroom (The Danielson Group, 2013, p. 4). This framework provides a broader

perspective than the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model, which focuses primarily on the classroom and teacher activity within this context. Although the full explanation of the NSW Quality Teaching Model refers to a broader school context and some teacher activity outside of the classroom, the three-phase model itself uses broad brush strokes, which appear to miss some of the key nuances of truly effective teaching.

For example in 2020, the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017) remains a staple element in the professional training and development of teaching staff. As recently as this year, the administration at Agtech, were using the model as the basis for teacher professional development, with the aim of addressing a significant decay in the safety and productivity of classroom environments, and subsequently, the intellectual quality being explored and achieved within the classroom. Given the context of the school; low socio-economic demographic, significant domestic trauma and criminal activity in the community, high levels of truancy, limited welfare support and a poorly planned and implemented behaviour management policy - the gross over-simplification of the issue as being a teacher-based problem served as a significant discouragement to teaching staff at the school. How are individual teachers expected to fix a totally broken learning culture across an entire school? How are individual teachers expected to generate a sense of significance about learning when the community and culture surrounding the school shows disregard for education in general? The NSW Quality Teaching Model was not the appropriate tool to address these community and school wide issues, nor is it effective in equipping teachers with functional ways to navigate the challenges of teaching in this environment.

In contrast, on the Zidon Sydney suburban campus between 2016 and 2020, the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017) has not been referred to or intentionally addressed at any point during professional development or staff meeting sessions. The Sydney campus is a private school, which sits in the higher socio-economic demographic of northern Sydney. The school does not face anywhere near the number of community based challenges that Agtech faces, however, the staff would greatly benefit from teacher effectiveness training and development, which could start with the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model, and build from that point. In the higher socio-economic context, it can become easy for teachers to take the attendance, compliance and motivation of their students for granted – thus

> *the gross over-simplification of the issue as being a teacher-based problem served as a significant discouragement to teaching staff at the school.*

overlooking the need to work hard at establishing quality learning environments, significance and intellectual quality. The affluent context, invested parents and competitive academic environment can lead teachers and administrations to "rest on their laurels", rather than continuing to innovate and strive for excellence – which has certainly been the case at Zidon.

Another factor impacting the success of teacher effectiveness models in the Zidon context is the significant overload of corporate level "input" models within which teachers are expected to comply: NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA) compliance and the Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) added layers, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Ledership (AITSL) teaching standards, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) requirements, Quality Adventist Schools (QAS) Framework, Association of Independent Schools (AIS) recommendations and NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model—there are multiple layers, a significant amount of overlap and yet a total lack of clarity or communication as to how teachers should navigate and use these models for their intended purpose—to serve students as learners in the classroom.

The NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model, unpacked in more detail, is comprised of 18 elements, which sit within the three initial

Figure 2: Expanded NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017)

Elements	Intellectual Quality	Quality Learning Environment	Significance
	Deep knowledge	Explicit quality criteria	Background knowledge
	Deep understanding	Engagement	Cultural knowledge
	Problematic knowledge	High expectations	Knowledge integration
	High-order thinking	Social support	Inclusivity
	Metalanguage	Students' self-regulation	Connected-ness
	Substantive Communication	Student direction	Narrative
The NSW Quality Teaching Model has 3 dimensions and 18 elements			

dimensions (Figure 2).

While this expanded model for teacher effectiveness contains relevant inclusions, adding 18 layers to an area of teacher management that is already overcrowded means that much of the language and its intended purpose is rendered ineffectual. The model is still overwhelmingly concerned with inputs, specifically regarding boundaries and stimulus. The concepts outlined are valuable, however, like the Four Domains Education Framework for Teaching Components (The Danielson Group, 2013), the model still misses key teacher processes relating to *connection* to students, and the way this facilitates engaging direction and delivery within the classroom.

Effective implementation is the key issue pertaining to both school and teacher effectiveness when assessing the value of models such as the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model (2003; Collins, 2017) and the Four Domains of Education Framework (The Danielson Group, 2013). Teacher effectiveness frameworks continue to expand and espouse increasing levels of corporate and institutional jargon, however, if the teachers in the classrooms are not trained, developed and mentored to implement quality processes in ways that connect with and direct their students effectively, the overarching models for effective teaching become inoperable ideologies.

Processes: Models for connection and direction

Processes are defined by Goe, et al. (2008) as "the interaction that occurs in the classroom between teachers and students" (p. 4), however, it could be suggested that effective teacher processes extend outside the confines of the classroom. The teacher's capacity to make connections with students, to "Know students and how they learn" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017, p. 4, 6, 10-11), must go beyond the classroom for teachers to be effective in the modern school setting. There is a link, which cannot be ignored, between teacher connection to students and teacher capacity to give students direction. Connection is the ability of the teacher to build a professional and authentic rapport with their students – to develop respectful and understanding relationships across the classroom, which lead to a healthy and productive learning climate. Direction is the fruit of this labour – healthy teacher and student connection leads to effective and engaging instructional teaching.

The Dispositional Cluster Model (Faull, 2008) provides significant insights regarding the essential nature of the teacher's capacity to develop connection with their students. The Dispositional

Cluster Model has a focus on five key traits possessed by exceptional teachers; the model is presented in Figure 3.

The elements of the Dispositional Cluster Model could be defined as a combination of "teacher inputs" and "teacher processes" (Goe, et. al, 2008), which primarily serve the purposes of connection and direction. Authenticity, passion and commitment are professional qualities in a teacher which lead to healthy connections with students (Chin Yin, et al., 2019). The first three elements combined with creativity and communication provide an excellent 'formula' for engaging direction of learning in the classroom. More specifically creativity provides "interest" and "the hook" ensuring motivation, while communication is a foundational essential teaching process that is dependent on the other four personal trait elements to effectively ensure learning. The processes a teacher employs to connect with and direct their students is the keystone to linking the corporate teacher effectiveness models—such as the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model—which are focused on inputs, boundaries and stimulus, with the diverse range of human beings that occupy seats in the classroom.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of training and resources available to improve teacher connections with students – the only real filters exist at the interview stage of job applications, at which point administrators attempt to gauge the temperament and character of applicants. When it comes to professional development, more often than not, the priority lies with courses focused on boundaries, stimulus and direction. This ignorance of professional connection building skills as an essential element of effective teaching can lead to extremely unhealthy outcomes in the classroom.

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Figure 3: The Dispositional Cluster Model (Faull, 2008)
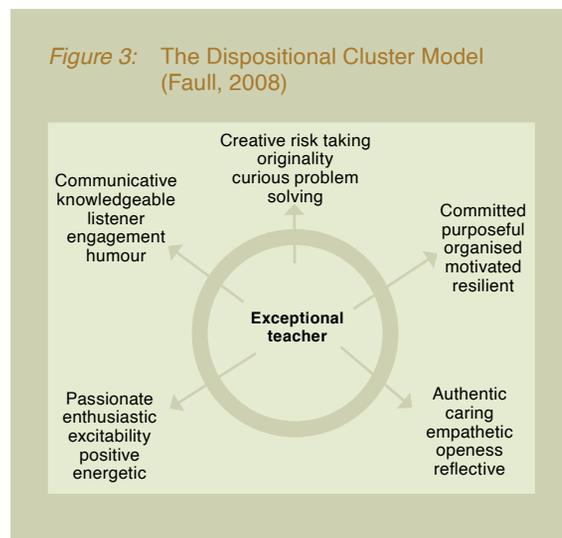
For example, in the volatile Agtech context, the staff appeared to be divided into three separate groups: those who had befriended the students to survive, those who ignored the students to survive and those who engaged in the challenge of building professional rapport. The faction of staff who had resorted to befriending the students appeared to have amicable conversations and exchanges with the students, however their capacity to shift out of this zone and give directions and explicit instructions was compromised. The faction of staff who survived by ignoring the students, operated to deliver boundaries and stimulus, but had essentially abandoned attempts at connection and any meaningful direction. The final group, those battling to find the balance, were constantly juggling efforts to build rapport without losing the capacity to uphold boundaries and direct students through content.

This challenge is also present in the Zidon school context, where certain factions of staff have built unhealthy connections with students that deviate into the realm of friendship, while ignoring other students who are less academically successful or socially dominant. This culture, fuelled by a poorly constructed attempt at streaming, has led to a scenario where some students appear to be favoured while others are overlooked, and teachers become recognised by their students as social figures, rather than professional educational instructors and mentors. This discrepancy in teacher's understanding of what it means to connect with students in a professional and productive manner leads to factions within the staff, also causing inconsistent boundaries and expectations for students. This toxic culture has even been observable from an administrative perspective, where those staff that have engaged in what are essentially teacher – student 'friendships', are affirmed for their "nurturing" attitude, while those staff who attempt to maintain professional boundaries have been viewed as harsh and lacking empathy.

Perhaps most damaging is the fact that this administrative oversight has fuelled the attitude among some factions of staff, that popularity among students is the currency of teacher success, rather than professionalism and quality teaching. The impact of these factors is that teachers who have attempted to maintain professional connections risk losing their capacity to direct and teach effectively due to student perceived limited support and affirmation from administration. Meanwhile, those teachers who have unhealthy connections sacrifice their ability to teach effectively in exchange for an easier time in 'getting along' with the students. This is a lose/lose scenario for the core business of

> *administrative oversight has fuelled the attitude among some factions of staff, that popularity among students is the currency of teacher success, rather than professionalism and quality teaching.*

schools, quality learning and education.

A final factor that contributes to these issues is a poorly implemented Middle School model at the Zidon Sydney campus., which sees the students treated more similarly to primary school students than high school students from year 5 through to year 8. The lower boundaries and expectations allowed over such a significant portion of the student's school experience leads to an outcome where students are grossly unprepared for the rigorous academic demands of senior high school and the realities of professional adult relationships as they enter their later teen years.

There needs to be far more emphasis placed on training and developing teachers to foster professional and productive connections with students. This key personal and professional skill is essential to facilitating effective direction in the classroom, linking the underpinning ideologies and structures behind teacher effectiveness to the reality of what is achieved in the classroom on a daily basis.

Outputs: Teacher effectiveness and wellbeing

The third component of Goe, Bell and Little's assessment of teacher effectiveness is "teacher outputs" (2008, p. 4). The desired outputs, or "outcomes achieved" as they are further defined, are important metrics for educational leaders to consider, a clear understanding of effective quality teaching will then inform the way outcomes are used to define effective teaching and learning. The outcome that is most valued will become the 'currency' by which teachers function, thus shaping what the most effective teachers will look like. As discussed previously, in the Zidon campus context, teacher popularity and capacity to nurture are the traits most valued and rewarded, therefore this culture of 'currency' spreads among the staff. In other school contexts, the most valued outcome is often academic success, in which case staff will come to focus heavily on their content and delivery of stimulus. For this reason, it is essential for educational policy makers and administrators to be mindful of what outcomes they 'push' teachers to achieve.

A recent movement in education has seen a significant focus on wellbeing.

> In the last five years, three in five parents (60%) believe the expectations they place on their child's school to support student wellbeing have increased (significantly/somewhat/slightly). This is up 12 percentage points from 48% in 2019.
>
> (Renton & Stobbe, 2020, p. 12)

This focus provides administrators and teachers with a valuable and important outcome by which

both school and teacher effectiveness can be evaluated. Wellbeing models and programs also provide an excellent resource for training and developing teachers in how to build professional and healthy connections with students, without crossing boundaries and lowering expectations.

In the rural technology high school Agtech, the BITE BACK (2020) wellbeing program was instituted once a week in the school timetable. This once weekly period generated *significantly* more engagement, meaningful discussion and healthy student–teacher connection than any other aspect of the school program. The program provided both students and teachers with resources, a common language to use when discussing personal and social issues, all aiding in creating a safe environment in which both students and teachers could discuss these issues and connect. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that this program and the student–teacher connections that it aided in creating were essential to being an effective teacher in this school context. Due to the challenging and traumatic backgrounds experienced by many of these children, the students need to trust and feel connected to adults in their life before they will follow their guidance.

The Invictus Wellbeing Program (2020) is an initiative that is in the process of being implemented at the Zidon school. The program revolves around yearlong modules titled: Network, Journey, Mastery and Serve. These modules are being integrated across various aspects of the school. An Invictus wellbeing lesson is timetabled once a week. The modules are mapped alongside the school camp curriculum purposes. Modules are integrated alongside themes in the Religious Studies curriculum and all staff have attended professional development so that they are aware of the purpose of the Invictus program, the language it uses and the ideas it explores. Programs such as this provide teachers with an excellent platform for professional, productive and healthy connection building with students.

Conclusion

Teacher effectiveness is an area of education that is clearly divided in two different segments; the inputs, boundaries and stimulus prescribed, and the processes, connections and direction that bring the former elements to life. The challenge facing education governing bodies, school administration and teachers is how to facilitate a balance between these core elements of education. There is obvious value in the overarching models for teacher effectiveness, such as the NSW (DET) Quality Teaching Model and the Four Domains Education

Framework, however further work needs to be done to increase training and development that equips and empowers teachers to reflect the traits outlined in Faull's Dispositional Cluster Model. While wellbeing programs, such as the Invictus Wellbeing Program, do not directly address this gap in teacher training and education, and are certainly not a 'fix-all', they do provide a framework, language and setting in which teachers can generate healthy, professional connections with their students – which appear to be a key factor in unlocking teacher effectiveness. In planning the future of education, policy makers, administrators and educators need to strike the balance that they expect teachers to find between boundaries, stimulus, connection and direction. **TEACH**

Due to the challenging and traumatic backgrounds experienced by many of these children, the students need to trust and feel connected to adults in their life before they will follow their guidance.

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