A closer look at education news and issues

Improving students’ learning

Every parent wants their child to have a “good education”, but just what comprises a “good education” in the 21st century?

The true test of a successful education is a young person’s appetite to know and their capacity to learn.

This is the view of one of the world’s leading experts in education, Professor Guy Claxton, head of Learning Sciences at the University of Bristol’s Graduate School of Education in the United Kingdom.

Most parents would agree that in the past the test of a successful high school education was the amount of knowledge a student gained, as reflected in their grades.

This view derived from a traditional approach to teaching based on delivering the content of the curriculum, leaving little time for students to think about what and how they were learning, and commending those students who achieved the highest marks by remembering the most content correctly.

Professor Claxton has a very different idea about what comprises a “good education” today.

During his week-long visit to South Australia in April, Professor Claxton suggested “education is about creating powerful and confident lifelong learners.”

“We should be placing less emphasis on content and qualifications and more emphasis on facilitating children’s learning.

“If we are interested in raising standards, we should be ensuring students become powerful learners, and not just teach to the test.

“We need to be producing young people with supple and nimble minds who are inquisitive and have the ability to cope with a variety of situations and the complexities life throws at them. Forcing children to learn or spoon feeding them is not the answer.”

Professor Claxton says school principals and teachers must revisit their core purpose, ensuring their focus is not just on teaching but on helping children become better learners.

“We should reward children for asking good questions rather than only when they achieve a good grade,” he says. “We shouldn’t be praising children just for being ‘bright’ but for the effort they put into the learning.

“Students’ work displayed around schools should be works in progress which say ‘we are a learning school’ rather than polished pieces of work that say ‘we only care about the end result’.

“Teachers should also be visibly and cheerfully taking on the role of lead learner, being unafraid to make mistakes or make a fool of themselves every now and then.”

Teaching children to become confident, independent learners and improving learning for children is at the heart of the Department of Education and Children’s Services’ Learning to Learn program.

The program was developed by the department’s Curriculum Services unit which is continuously looking at ways to improve learning for children by supporting innovative education in schools and preschools.

Learning to Learn manager Margot Foster invited Professor Claxton to South Australia to help develop a framework based on the concept of teaching for better learning, to support schools that wish to use the approach.

The Learning to Learn program started in South Australia nine years ago and to date more than 200 SA schools and preschools, together with their communities, have been involved in research, case studies and professional learning.

Ms Foster says schools which have trialled the Learning to Learn approach have realised many benefits.

“Schools who have participated in Learning to Learn have reported increased child engagement, reduced behaviour incidents, improved literacy and numeracy and a revitalisation of the teachers and principals involved,” she says.

Professor Claxton says the 21st century is changing so quickly “we cannot possibly teach young people all they need to know because we don’t know what that will be”.

“Education should be centred around giving young people the confidence and capacity to face all kinds of unanticipated complexities calmly and competently. This is what education in the 21st century should be about.”

-SARAH ROHDE

Learning to Learn

www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au

ACHIEVEMENTS

In public schools and preschools

Scholarship win

BRIGHTON Secondary School student Bradley Venner has won an $8000 scholarship to live with a French family and study in France for five months.

He was the winner of a Southern Cross Cultural Exchange, which offers one scholar per State for Year 10 students of languages in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

Bradley’s first step in winning the overseas opportunity was an essay on what he was doing to develop a better understanding of people and cultures across the globe.

He then had to write an essay about himself, his family and community, be interviewed by a panel of judges, present a five minute speech and take part in a debate and team quizzes.

Southern Cross Cultural Exchange SA co-ordinator Jenny Hanson says Brad was a great all-rounder who was flexible and friendly.

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