

THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF RELIEF TEACHERS

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Abstract

Teachers working in casual relief and emergency positions (CRTs) struggle to establish an identity within the profession. The nature of their work and professional isolation often means that they are marginalised by their colleagues and perceived to be a 'lesser' group of teachers. While this view of CRTs may have been justified in the past, CRTs deserve to be respected, as members of the profession because all teachers registered in Victoria are now required to meet and maintain professional standards. However, the perennial issue of access to available and appropriate professional development so that CRTs can maintain their professional knowledge and practice as defined by the standards, remains. CRTs in Victoria are poorly served for professional development. In part this is because there is no centralised system of employment for CRTs and school sector authorities devolve responsibility to individual schools. This has led to a situation where there is little recognition that anyone other than the individual CRT has a stake in their professional learning. When the emphasis placed on sector and school directed professional development for teaching staff is considered, the lack of support for CRTs is extraordinary. After all, they teach the same children.

This paper outlines the work of the Victorian Institute of Teaching in developing support structures and negotiating opportunities for the professional development of CRTs. Focus will be on initial identification of the professional learning needs of CRTs and the subsequent work to provide these. Institute seminars have been used to bring CRTs together and initiate CRT networks. The Institute has facilitated links between networks and schools willing to support the professional learning of CRTs. This paper will discuss examples of where this has been successful, the resulting benefit for all involved and the value of this approach in fostering a pro-active and professionally relevant learning community for CRTs.

Background

The establishment of the Institute in 2002 acknowledged the professionalism of teachers across all school sectors through the process of registration and the application of consistent, professional standards. All Victorian teachers are now required to meet and maintain professional standards and these have been very important in articulating what's important in teacher practice. The Institute registers a broad and diverse group of teachers. Institute statistics indicate that 10,000–15,000 registered teachers in Victoria are CRTs (casual relief and emergency teachers) or teachers looking for work. This group represents around 10–14% of total registered teachers. (FJ & JM King & Associates, 2008, p17) In the Victorian Institute of Teaching legislation, they are not identified as a separate group of teachers and therefore must comply with the same requirements for registration as all other teachers, regardless of employment circumstances.

The Institute's legislation acknowledges that all teachers granted full registration have met standards of professional practice and are required subsequently to renew their registration every five years. This renewal demonstrates to the community that teachers maintain high standards of professional practice and continue to be suitable to be a teacher. It also recognises and acknowledges the continuing professional learning of teachers in Victoria and their currency of practice. To renew registration teachers must be able to demonstrate that they have maintained their professional practice and this means that in the previous five years they have undertaken:

- at least 50 days teaching, educational leadership or equivalent practice; and
- at least 100 hours of professional development activities that relates to the standards and is informed by current research and knowledge.

Teachers are also required to have continued to be suitable to teach through maintenance of their National Criminal History Record Check and declarations at the point of renewal. The requirements of professional practice for renewal of registration are directly linked to the standards and teachers need to reference these in the professional development activities that they undertake. Professional standards articulate what teachers know and are able to do. There are eight standards within the domains of professional knowledge, practice and engagement that teachers must address to renew their registration and they provide a means for teachers to investigate their practice and identify activities that will enhance and support their professional knowledge and practice. (See Appendix 1) This is something that CRTs rarely do and often it is in relation to these standards that CRTs struggle to understand their practice and the ways they meet the requirements for renewal of registration.

Professional standards and CRTs

Many CRTs find it difficult to recognise their practice in the standards. They assume that their practice is different from that of teachers in full time school employment and don't see how they can meet the standards. This causes anxiety about their registration and the renewal process, which requires them to maintain the standards of professional practice. CRTs also feel that the nature of their work restricts them from having opportunities to demonstrate all standards. For instance, they don't believe that they plan or assess for effective learning. Often CRTs fail to recognise that they are continuously making assessments of prior learning and engagement with learning tasks as they teach and that the revision of their practice in response to these assessments involves planning on the run. Their view of planning and assessment relates to the formal documentation of curriculum and reporting of results. At seminars and meetings the Institute has with CRTs the conversation about standards can be opened and they can discover and celebrate how they do meet the standards in the context in which they are teaching. They can discuss the many forms of informal assessment strategies, such as observation, that they are involved in throughout the day and the passing of that information to the class teacher in written form at the end of a teaching session. The Institute has been able to make strong inroads into an understanding of practice for these teachers through discussion of the standards and what they mean for different teaching contexts. For many CRTs, this is where the 'light goes on' and they begin to appreciate their practice and its place in the teaching and learning of students. It also puts the CRT in a professional space where there is an expectation that they will be teaching and not just babysitting.

The understanding that they have responsibility for the currency of their professional knowledge and practice is not necessarily a realisation some CRTs wish to embrace and some see the Institute as the regulator wielding a big stick. There is also a view among some CRTs that they should only have to

undertake a proportion of the requirements for renewal of registration because they work less than other teachers. However, the Institute has been at pains to explain to these teachers that the basis for renewal of registration is not the employment context of a teacher but their currency of knowledge and practice as articulated by the standards of professional practice for renewal of registration. Therefore all teachers should maintain a minimum level of professional expertise if they are to continue to be registered and the students they teach and the public have a right to expect this. However, it is important to acknowledge the disadvantage CRTs face when it comes to meeting the hours of professional development activities required for renewal of registration. When developing the policy for renewal of registration the Institute consulted extensively with the profession. It became apparent that teachers who were not employed on an ongoing basis or on a contract with schools but who worked in casual relief were disadvantaged. They did not have the same access to information about available professional development activities and did not enjoy the benefits of school based and school supported professional development. It is apparent that “access to professional learning is an issue of significant concern for many CRTs.” (Australian Research Group, 2007, p.25)

As a response, the Institute has worked with these teachers to support their professional learning since 2004 and has recently developed an integrated approach that will provide a more relevant and self-sustaining professional community for these teachers.

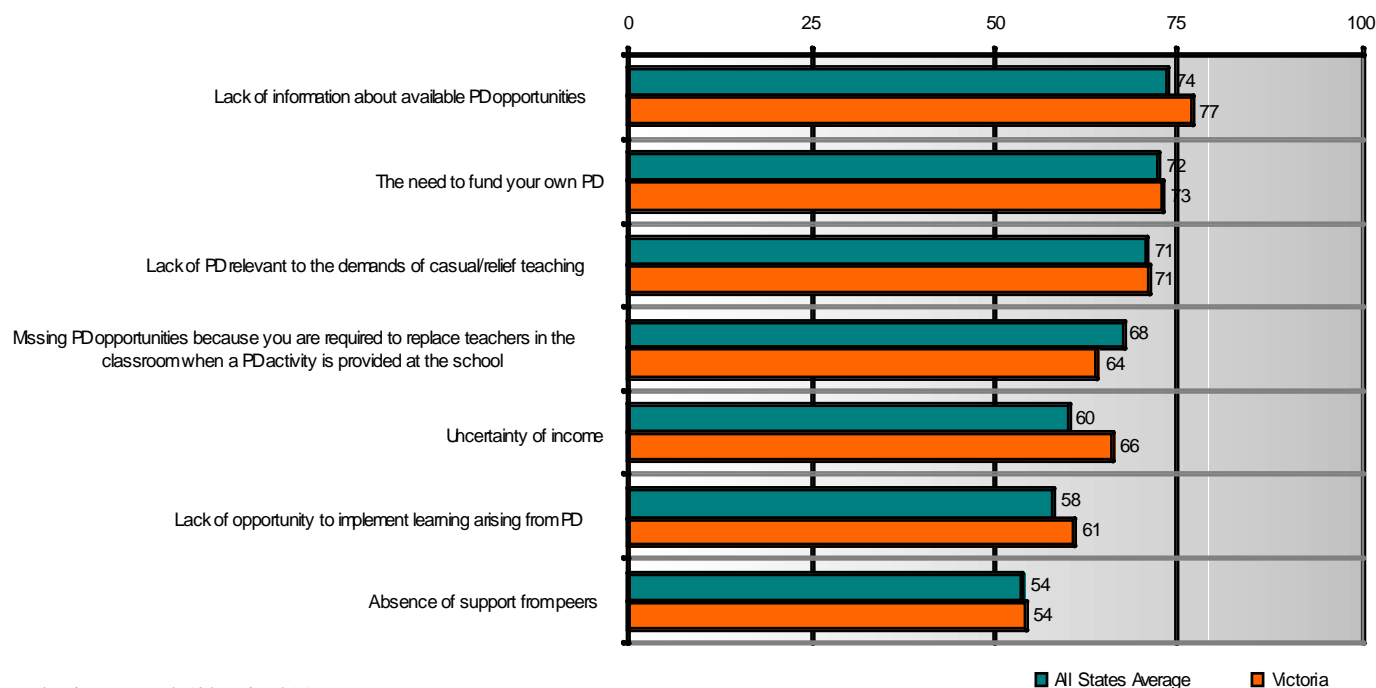
The CRT cohort in Victoria

CRTs and other teachers who are employed in schools on a short-term basis represent between 10-14% of registered teachers in Victoria. This amounts to over ten thousand teachers and yet they seem to be left out in the cold when it comes to support for them to maintain the currency of their professional knowledge and practice. Unlike many other Australian states there is no central authority responsible for the employment of casual relief teachers in Victoria. In the government and catholic sectors responsibility is devolved to individual schools for the employment of teachers who meet their casual or emergency needs. CRT rates of pay are negotiated outside the certified agreement for government school teachers and this gives an indication of the ‘hands off’ approach the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) takes to these members of the workforce. CRTs generally seek employment by approaching schools directly or enter into an arrangement with a commercial teacher employment agency. In essence, many of these teachers come very close to being self-employed contractors, responsible for all aspects of their employment. These circumstances make it very difficult for CRTs to access professional development opportunities that other teachers in schools may have and makes it incumbent upon the CRT to use their own resources to source relevant activities that will support their professional learning. It is no wonder that many of these teachers feel disenfranchised and marginalised when it comes to keeping in touch with current curriculum and policy developments in education, let alone addressing their own professional learning needs.

This cohort of teachers is by nature transient and ever changing. Their identity is complex and they vary in background and experience, from teachers who have recently graduated through to those teachers with a bevy of knowledge and experience in the profession. The CRT cohort in Victoria comprises mainly beginning teachers, international teachers new to the Victorian system, those returning to work from leave after many years absence, career change teachers, recently retired classroom teachers and career CRTs who are very experienced and have made a choice to work in this capacity. Some CRTs are actively seeking on-going employment while others enjoy the flexibility and variety of teaching in different settings with different students. Some have a well-developed relationship with one or two schools. The professional learning needs of this diverse group are not easy to meet and this has been a challenge for the Institute in developing and co-ordinating a program of support. One of the first measures taken was to separate out those teachers who were newly graduated provisionally registered teachers working in casual relief. The Institute delivers a support program for all provisionally registered teachers who are required to develop their practice to meet the standards of professional practice for full registration. Options for evidence gathering to meet the standards have been developed to accommodate the teaching context of new teachers working as CRTs and specific seminars and support processes have been developed. This allows these teachers to come under the wing of the Institute as they start their careers and keeps them together with provisionally registered teachers who are working more permanently in schools. Many of these teachers pick up teaching contracts after a period of CRT work and for those who don’t they know that there is on-going support from the Institute.

The barriers to professional learning for CRTs

The realisation of the diverse needs of CRTs was highlighted in 2007 through the findings of a project conducted by the Australian Research Group on behalf of six teacher registration authorities in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. The key object of the study was to provide an understanding of the experience teachers had with professional development, the underlying values that might have influenced their perceptions and the nature of the professional development that would be regarded positively by teachers. The results of this study indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with professional development among CRTs compared to their colleagues in more permanent employment. (Australian Research Group, 2007, p106) Victorian CRTs reported that they faced a number of barriers to accessing professional development, which are shown in Figure 1.



Sample size – Total 532, Vic. 211

Q54: As a casual/relief teacher, how much do the following issues act as barriers to your participation in professional development?

Figure 1: Barriers to PD Among Casual Relief Teachers

Furthermore, the Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, through their *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning*, highlighted the supply and demand issues that may arise from the lack of access CRTs may have to professional development activities.

“...that the barriers CRTs experience in accessing professional learning may deter them from maintaining full teacher registration. This may further reduce CRT supply in areas that already face significant difficulties in covering teacher absences, especially rural and regional areas.” The committee believes “it is therefore essential for strategies to be implemented to ensure that the new requirements for teacher professional learning serve their intended purpose as a support for, and not a disincentive to, professionalism in the Victorian workforce.” (Parliament of Victoria, 2009, p.125)

Overall only 24% of CRTs considered that the schools they worked in regularly provided good support for their professional learning. Very few CRTs were included in school-based PD or invited to participate in teamwork at a school. As Neville Johnson states “If staff PD is to be the cornerstone of building a learning community then it will need to be more broadly conceived as ‘opportunities for staff learning that occurs naturally in the workplace’ as well as outside it on appropriate occasions” (Johnson, 2003, p.13)

To develop new knowledge in the context of their teaching practice it is clear that CRTs need to be included in formal and informal learning opportunities such as planning meetings, sharing of action research presentations, collegial discussions and peer observations. This inclusion would be of mutual benefit to teachers and schools by building relationships and developing familiarity with programs.

Casual relief teachers fulfil schools' needs often on very short notice but the reality is that generally they are not treated as true professionals in the school community. It is not surprising that Lunay and Lock reported that 95% of the twenty CRTs they interviewed from Western Australian State schools felt alienated. Many suffered 'persistent negative feelings' about their work in schools (Lunay & Lock, 2006, p.171). Factors such as negative relationships, low expectations of their abilities and perceived lack of classroom information contributed to feelings of isolation, powerlessness and meaninglessness. These views have also been expressed by CRTs the Institute has worked with. In developing a program of support for CRTs, the Institute recognised that the issues identified in the research need to be addressed and the simple delivery of professional development programs wouldn't necessarily do this. The intention was to ensure that this group of teachers, who are important to the operation of schools, do not become marginalised within the professional teaching community. By bringing them together to interact with each other, and to develop CRT networks that work with schools these teachers can overcome some of the circumstances that see them marginalised by their peers in schools and leave them feeling powerless.

The Institute support program for CRTs

As the first part of a support program, the Institute delivers professional development seminars for CRTs, at no cost, across metropolitan and regional Victoria. Due to the diversity of the teachers who attend the seminars they're not content-based but more generic in presentation. The seminars are designed to provide CRTs with new strategies they can use when teaching in a variety of different settings. CRTs are encouraged to consider their practice against the standards and to identify their professional learning needs using the standards. Often highly regarded educators will facilitate sessions at the seminars and CRTs appreciate the opportunity to interact with these people and to be recognised as professionals within a learning community. The Institute has been delivering these seminars since 2004 to an average of 800 – 1,000 CRTs a year. Initially the seminars covered a range of relevant topics but since 2008 the Institute decided to offer these as the one seminar in different locations across the year. This ensured that a greater number of teachers were provided with access to the seminars as teachers could only attend one per year and it established the basis for teachers to pursue further independent and collegial learning. The Institute was concerned that some CRTs had begun to expect all their professional development to be delivered by the Institute and had begun to take the role of passive recipients. With potentially 10,000 CRTs to cater for, the Institute knew that this was neither sustainable nor desirable.

During the seminars the concept of CRT networks is discussed as a relevant, low-cost, and viable way to meet with their peers and this is then initiated and supported within their own local area. CRT networks have grown from the need for these teachers to belong to a professional community. At the present time there are 12 networks meeting regularly across the state. (See figure 2)

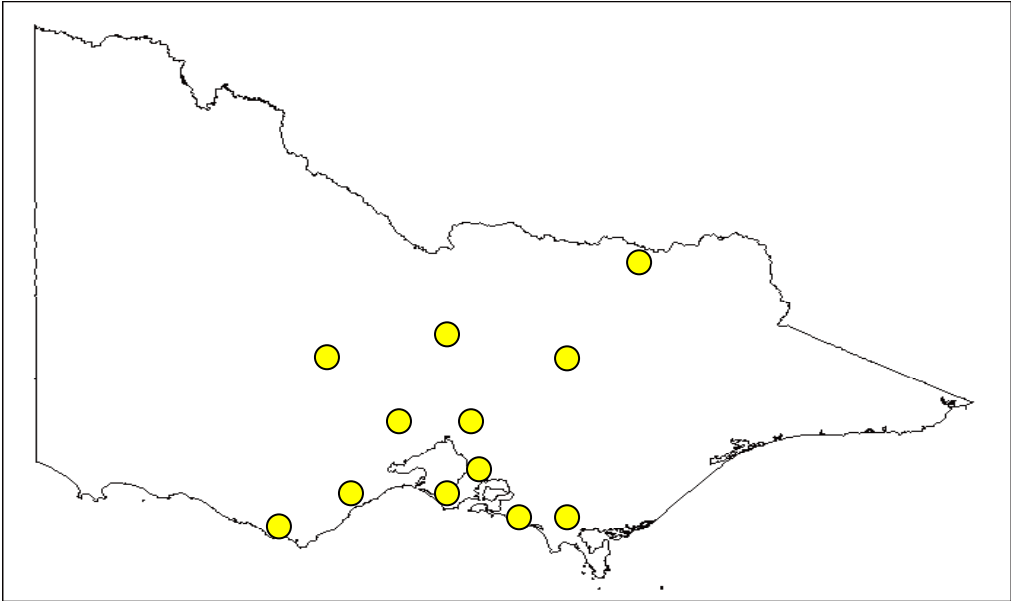


Figure 2: network distribution across Victoria

Networks allow teachers to share their practice and the challenges they face and to work together to identify their learning needs and source activities to support their practice. The networks are innovative in that they begin with teachers identifying their own professional needs and doing something pro-active and collectively to address those needs. They operate with a CRT who agrees to be the facilitator and the Institute supports the facilitator through a program of induction and mentoring. This involves meeting with more experienced facilitators, being provided with a manual of procedures to support the administration of the network and the direct support of the Institute through attendance at meetings and financial seeding to get the network operating effectively.

The Institute sees the networks as professional learning communities that will become self-sustaining. One of the biggest challenges for the networks is that facilitators soon develop confidence and a range of skills that are highly regarded by schools. Consequently, a number are offered more permanent work in schools. While this is a great outcome for those teachers, the Institute has quickly realised that succession planning for the network needs to be a key aspect of the induction process for facilitators, otherwise the network languishes when facilitators are no longer able to undertake this role.

School support for CRTs

Research into professional learning has shown that if new learning is not supported in the workplace then change in practice will not happen. CRTs need the opportunity to be part of the learning community of the schools they work in regularly. As Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins say, “Building small work groups that are connected to the larger school community but which remain responsible for one another, will increase the sense of belonging that reduces stress, isolation and feelings of alienation.” (Joyce et al., 1999)

One of the key findings of the *National Mapping of Teacher Professional Learning Project* commissioned by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is that “professional learning is grounded in local school communities” and the associated guidelines for quality professional learning in the future is that “Teachers should be encouraged to develop and/or extend professional learning networks with colleagues” (Doecke et al., 2008, xiv). The Institute has recognised this need and has put in place a school support program, which involves a seeding grant to schools. In 2008 more than 80 schools responded to an invitation from the Institute to provide professional development for CRTs. Although not all schools could be supported directly, the Institute was able to establish a relationship with a significant number of schools that were willing to develop and deliver activities and seminars specifically for CRTs. Just as important was the commitment from many schools to include CRTs in the professional development provided to their teachers. The Institute is able to identify teachers who are not connected to schools and who live in the local area of schools providing professional development for CRTs and can use this to generate a list of teachers to be invited to these sessions. Schools find this helpful where the CRT pool for the school is limited because potential CRTs are identified. Alternatively, it offers a professional development opportunity for teachers beyond those known to the school.

It is in their relationship with the CRT networks where schools really support the professional learning of CRTs who work in their schools. The Institute works to facilitate the establishment of relationships between schools, network facilitators and network members. The facilitators are introduced by the Institute to principals or teachers in leadership who are interested in hosting CRT sessions at their school. Table 4 is a visual representation of this relationship between schools, networks and the Institute.

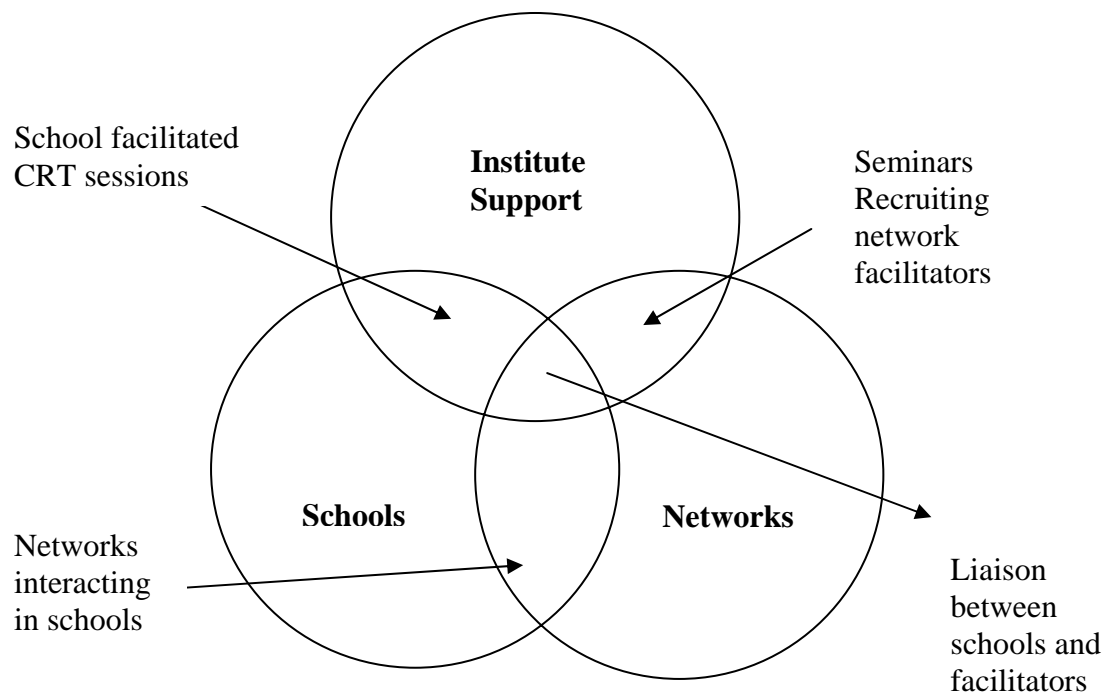


Table 4: Relationship between schools and CRTs & how the Institute can facilitate this

There can be little doubt that the idea of networks operating through local schools fosters a pro-active, professionally relevant and empowering learning community for CRTs. These members of the profession are included in the ongoing learning within the workplace and involved in change that occurs at system and school level. This inclusion goes a long way to building the morale of CRTs, giving them a feeling of belonging to the school, community and system. They have greater access to the most relevant, effective professional learning for themselves in their own particular situation and circumstances.

Conclusion

The Institute will continue to address the needs of CRTs and be involved in facilitating relationships between schools and teachers but recognises that this is not sustainable in the long term and partnerships are needed with others who interact with CRTs. This will ensure that support is across the board and not just the Institute's responsibility. The Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee in its *Inquiry into Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning* believes that 'as well as providing some professional learning for CRTs directly, 'the Institute may have an important role in encouraging schools and other organizations to help address CRTs professional learning needs.' The committee 'encourages schools and networks to make their professional learning programs available to CRTs in their region where appropriate, especially to any CRTs with whom they have an ongoing relationship.' The committee also recommends that the Victorian government consider ways in which it can support CRTs at a system level. The Performance and Development Culture process in government schools ensures that professional learning is effectively catered for and supported in Victorian schools. This needs to be broadened to include CRTs whenever possible. The work of the Institute in this area has raised awareness of the needs of CRTs and a positive development has come from the recommended inclusion of CRTs in the induction programs for teachers in DEECD schools.

As very little research has investigated this cohort of teachers it would be of value to conduct some quantitative and qualitative studies to investigate the nature of CRTs, including their age, work history, aspirations and perceptions of their role in the teaching profession. Although the Institute has been involved in research relating to the professional learning needs of CRTs and understands the diverse nature of this part of the workforce, a study would quantify and qualify what is known only from informal sources. This is particularly important as the workforce ages because it appears that many teachers do not simply retire but reinvent themselves as CRTs and short-term contract workers for a number of years. The Institute is also aware that many so-called retired teachers maintain their

registration because they like to retain evidence of their professional identity and ‘just in case’ they might be needed in a school or they decide to return to teaching. It’s only by understanding these teachers that the Institute can really address their professional needs.

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THE STANDARDS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Professional knowledge

1. Teachers know how students learn and how to teach them effectively.
2. Teachers know the content they teach.
3. Teachers know their students.

Professional practice

4. Teachers plan and assess for effective learning
5. Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments
6. Teachers use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning.

Professional engagement

7. Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice.
8. Teachers are active members of their profession.

Appendix 2

A successful network

An example of a successful pro-active network linked to schools in its area providing a professional learning community for CRTs is the network operating in Geelong in the south-western region of Victoria.

This network was set up in 2008 by the facilitator Tracey Vaught. Tracey understood the necessity to undertake 100 hours of PD over 5 years to fulfil the requirements for full registration and knew too well the barriers that were in her way as a teacher on family leave and a mother of two small children. She perceived that there would be many other teachers like her who, having the same need and the same barriers, may like to meet together regularly to do some professional learning close to their homes. She was pro-active in initiating the coming together of this group of teachers, which now has more than 100 members.

This network meets locally, twice a term for a couple of hours after school for professional learning. Sometimes they meet in the Barwon-South Western regional offices of the DEECD, which offers the room and coffee and tea free of charge to the teachers for the evening. Other times the group meets at a local school, which is a member of the school, support program, to access local information pertinent to that school and the needs of the members.

At their first meeting the teachers built relationships, agreed on procedures and identified the professional learning that they would find most valuable as a group. Tracey and staff from the Institute work together towards accessing effective professional learning for free or at a reasonable price to address the particular relevant needs of this cohort of teachers in this area. The group has participated in many sessions over the eighteen months ranging from Victorian Essential Learning Standards (Victorian curriculum), The e5 Instructional model, students with special needs, spelling programs to behaviour management strategies. All sessions are advertised on Pdi on the Institute's website and all attendees receive a certificate of participation for the session from Tracey for the verification of the PD for their renewal of registration. The atmosphere when you attend one of these network meetings is buzzing. The room is alive with conversation, professional dialogue, movement and a sense of the joy and fun of learning together in a supportive environment.

It began to emerge from these meetings that there was more going on than professional learning. An open forum of teachers was facilitated to gain understandings about these particular CRTs, their perceptions of their role in the system, their particular learning needs and their thoughts on belonging to a network. The forum was conducted at a network meeting with 50 teachers present.

The demographics of the group are that the majority are career CRTs (40%) and retired teachers working as CRTs (30%). The others are family leave teachers (12.5%) beginning graduate teachers (12.5%) and those returning to teaching from an absence of some other description. (5%)

Teachers who were present agreed that although their initial reasons for joining the network was to fulfil the PD requirements for renewal of full registration they were impressed by the supportive aspects of belonging to a network. These were:

- Collegiality – the support/encouragement from others
- Sense of belonging to a community – connected, new friendships
- Shared hopes and aspirations
- Sharing of experience, knowledge, skills, ideas, resources
- Sense of satisfaction about their professionalism
- Introduced to new initiatives, programs
- Information motivated re-directing of career path
- Developing confidence, leadership and organization skills
- Introspection - identifying personal skills, strengths
- PD is affordable and time- manageable
- Employment information – how to get work, who to approach

Participants reported:

“The CRT network was a find! If I hadn’t found this group I would be struggling to meet the requirements (of registration) as it is my experience that you are not really encouraged to attend school PD.”

“The network has been fabulous as I work in catholic schools but have very little access to their PDs as they are expensive and often involve ongoing work in the classroom that I do not participate in.”

“I feel fortunate to have come across the opportunity to be part of a this group. It has given me the hope that my teaching career can continue. I feel like I am still ‘in the loop’ when I attend these sessions.”

“I’m always on the look out to broaden my skills and knowledge base. The autism PD made me more prepared and more aware of what to do to make the day a positive experience. I have renewed enthusiasm to teach brought about by the establishment of our network in Geelong.”