ANZELA 2014 Conference Report

As a senior secondary science teacher and a law student, the ANZELA conference seemed like the perfect place to learn more about how what I am currently studying in law directly applies to my role as an educator. Through the generous support of the Teachers Registration Board, I was fortunate to attend the ANZELA Conference during the October school holidays. As an educator, most of my previous professional development has focussed on curriculum design. The ANZELA conference allowed me to gain a better understanding of the legal framework in which I operate every day. The conference theme of ‘Walking the Tight Rope’ provided many opportunities to explore the delicate balance of meeting legal obligations while still providing a high quality education to our students.

Through the workshops I gained an interesting perspective on the legal framework in which education operates within Australia and overseas. One workshop focussed on the role of school boards in New Zealand and how they were appointed, managed and held accountable. While the workshop focussed on the process adopted when things went wrong, it also highlighted just how effectively the vast majority of schools operated when given autonomy to make decisions about the strategic direction of the school and the curriculum.

Professor Rika Joubert’s workshop provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the South African educational context. Although a developing nation, South Africa seems further ahead than Australia in recognising the importance and the obligation to provide all students with an accessible education. South Africa places high value on a child’s right to an education in a language of the student’s choice; this right is protected by the highest court in the land – the Constitutional Court. I could see value in the way that issues of exclusion and racism are dealt with at the highest level in the legal system. However, Professor Joubert acknowledged that while these rights are protected by the judiciary, “South Africa still has a long way to go to address the legal and social challenges that prevent learners with different backgrounds, needs, abilities and preferences to achieve equal educational opportunities.”

Dr Mark McMillan gave an engaging and entertaining keynote address about the impact of human rights on indigenous students’ education. As I listened, I contrasted the South African context with the Australian context, where instruction is offered predominantly in English, with very little opportunity for indigenous students to access an education in their own language. This presentation highlighted the role of educators in overcoming disadvantage, and how teaching students about acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity is an important life skill that will serve all of our students well into the future.

While I enjoyed many of the workshops that I attended, the one that had the most significant impact on me was “Tips and Traps for Schools in Discharging their Duty of Care to Students on Excursion.” Although it focussed on the duties of a teacher in preparing, planning and undertaking an excursion, much of it could be applied to my duties in planning scientific experiments in school. 


laboratories. It also caused me to rethink the way some of my more local excursions are planned. I found it encouraging to note that in spite of some of the horrific outcomes of poorly planned excursions in other states, judges still found that there was ‘social utility’ in students participating in outdoor excursions and I will endeavour to keep these as an important part of my curriculum. This workshop also changed my perspective on how I view risk assessment procedures – rather than an administrative requirement that is externally imposed I now understand it is an important part of the planning process that when done well leads to more successful, rewarding experiences for students and staff and reduces some of the stress involved in undertaking excursions.

The ANZELA Conference has caused me to re-evaluate my teaching practice and consider deeply how I can better meet my obligations in a way that benefits students. The conference allowed me to broaden my knowledge of a range of social and legal issues in education as well as deepen my knowledge of certain duties and obligations I and my teaching colleagues have in our role as educators. What I have learnt has already had an immediate impact on my practice. I have already shared my knowledge of risk assessment with my collaborative teaching team and this has changed the way we implement some of our procedures around scientific practicals. It has also made us more aware of the importance of all staff receiving appropriate training to operate specialised equipment. I plan to share my knowledge with the whole staff in a professional development session early next year.

The conference organisers are to be commended for providing a great balance of interesting and engaging keynote speakers, relevant and insightful workshops where issues could be explored in greater depth and meaningful discussion and debate about the role of law in addressing and managing social and educational issues. The Teachers Registration Board is to be commended for making available this opportunity to attend such a high quality conference that has such direct relevance to the work of teachers, and would otherwise be well beyond the reach of most teachers to be able to attend. I would recommend this conference to other teachers and I hope that the Teachers Registration Board continues to make such opportunities available into the future.

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