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Kim Napier interviews Ross Fox, the Director of Catholic Education in Canberra and Goulburn and Dr. Gerard Gaskin the Executive Director of Catholic Education Tasmania

Kim Napier: Is a teacher the ‘guide on the side’ or ‘the sage on the stage’? It has been a question at the heart of teaching pedagogy probably since the dawn of time. Is it the teacher’s job to guide a student toward unlocking their creative potential, or is the teacher an instructor, an authority, someone whose job it is to deliver knowledge. It is among the ideas being discussed at a teaching summit in Hobart called Teaching Matters, the Science of Learning National Summit, and I am joined by two conference delegates, Dr Gerard Gaskin, the Executive Director of Catholic Education in Tasmania and Ross Fox, the Director of Catholic Education in Canberra and Goulburn. Welcome to the program.

Ross Fox and Gerard Gaskin: Thank you.

Gerard Gaskin: Good afternoon.

Kim Napier: Good afternoon. Firstly, Ross if I can ask you, you are releasing some new research that looks at effective teaching approaches. What has been found?

Ross Fox: Well, what we have found is very clearly that telling the student what you want them to learn as a teacher is the most effective way to help them learn. And it’s not an either-or proposition. It is a both-and proposition. Once they have got the knowledge they can do great things with it so, if we have got the sage on the stage, to use your terms, they

can well be the guide by the side once they have been successful in helping students apply knowledge. So, it is really a commitment to follow what we know about how students learn, about how brains learn, so that we can use the million minutes that children are at compulsory schooling really well and that they can learn everything they need to, to have very successful lives beyond school.

Kim Napier: Gerard, what did you think of the findings?

Gerard Gaskin: Oh look, I think they are quite remarkable Kim. They force us to a seismic shift in the way in which we do education in Catholic Education in Tasmania and all credit to Ross because we saw it first in Canberra Goulburn. It's a great question whether we are the guide on the side or the sage on the stage, I think that the most important learning in the entire process is that the teacher is actually the lead learner in the process. That every student is looking to that teacher to provide the guidance, to moderate and plan learning activities that are going to be to the best advantage of the students. That is probably a bit unusual given some earlier ideas around education. Now the focus is back on the teacher as the person who has the knowledge and who has the understanding and is eager to share it with their students in very innovative and in very closely relational ways. We just believe that we are on to something really effective here.

Kim Napier: Gerard, sticking with you. Is it time to bring back some ideas that we thought were old fashioned or uncool when it comes to teaching?

Gerard Gaskin: Now that is tough Kim, because while many of the things we are doing go back as far as the Ancient Greeks, so talk about old fashioned thinking, who seem to have got a great deal of this right and have now been absolutely validated by the best of neuroscience. The old fashioned things that we thought about that were so important in education like being the person who really cared about their students and really wanted them to grow in their knowledge and having a knowledge rich curriculum that had definitive targets, had clear expectations, yes it was true of the Ancient Greeks, that it is absolutely true that the best of neuroscience is absolutely telling us that this is the most effective and efficient way in which we can learn.

Kim Napier: What about your thoughts Ross, on bringing back some ideas that were perhaps old fashioned and uncool?

Ross Fox: Well, two points to make is that I have been so impressed by teachers' eagerness to learn. To learn how they can lift their effectiveness. There is no teacher in a school who is not concerned about student learning and maximising it. And really, there is an international movement that recognises that too often teachers didn't know what they needed to know about how brains learn, about what the latest cognitive science says and really the classrooms I have seen where the most amazing practice is going on, where students are exposed to great teaching and experiencing great learning, there is nothing old fashioned about it. It is amazing and it is not going back, it is going forward with amazing exposure to vocabulary, to lots of concepts, to lots of knowledge, and the students are taking that and running away with it and thinking things that they couldn't think before. And so, it is drawing on thousands of years of knowledge and history, but it is applying it in classrooms

now in such a contemporary and exciting way where we are going to make a big difference across Tasmania, across Canberra Goulburn and hopefully across Australia.

Kim Napier: Ross, at its core, is this the idea that the teacher knows best, and the students are there to listen?

Ross Fox: Well, everyone, I think, has to be very modest about what they do and don't know. It is true though that teachers, in most classrooms, are the expert learner in the room, and we have to respect that and use that great asset of them being an expert learner to guide the learning of students who overwhelmingly in schools, in classrooms, are what's called a novice learner. I guess, we are very comfortable when it comes to elite sports. That we are very particular about how students should learn to play a game, or practice. And then they get better and better as a result of that. We are applying the same sort of principles in classrooms to say there is a very particular way, if you practice you will get better. Particularly when it comes to reading, when it comes to mathematics, when it comes to other subject areas in acquiring new knowledge.

Kim Napier: Yeah, I'm not sure on the practicing of mathematics. I could just never get it (laughing). I tried, I did, I really tried. Gerard, Noel Pearson is the founder of Good to Great Schools Australia in Cape York partnership and they will be there at this Summit. Is Aboriginal learning a key focus?

Gerard Gaskin: It has to be Kim. We have about 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in our school system and we have to prioritise their learning and their specific learning needs. But the beautiful thing about this project is that we don't necessarily have to segregate, we don't have to separate our students out according to their ethnic background or anything else. It is what is called a Tier One process of education. Effectively by upskilling our teachers and providing quality learning in ordinary classrooms we give every student the equal opportunity to grow and learn, whether they have a disability or not, all of those things can be taken into account, but the fundamental principle is everyone can learn and when we've got everyone learning together something special happens in those classrooms.

Kim Napier: Fabulous. Well, Dr Gerard Gaskin, Executive Director of Catholic Education in Tasmania, Ross Fox, the Director of Catholic Education in Canberra and Goulburn, you've got another day of the Summit. Are you excited for it?

Ross and Gerard: Very excited.

Kim Napier: (laughing) Both at the same time. Alright, I will let you go. I appreciate the conversation this afternoon.

Gerard Gaskin: Thanks very much Kim.

Kim Napier: Two of the conference delegates. Dr Gerard Gaskin and Ross Fox. They are in Hobart for the Catholic Education Tasmania, or Teaching Matters Science of Learning National Summit.