SECTION FIVE

CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS: THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE
What is the impact of teacher professional development on student learning outcomes? This is a critical question asked increasingly often by policy makers, school leadership teams, teacher professional associations, and many others with a stake in providing high quality teaching for all students.

Recent work in the Teaching and Learning Research Group at the Australian Council for Educational Research has explored this critical question in a number of evaluation studies of teacher professional development (Ingvarson et al., 2005).

There is a logic behind the question, captured very clearly by Supovitz:

*The implicit logic of focusing on professional development as a means for improving student achievement is that high quality professional development will produce superior teaching in classrooms, which will, in turn, translate into higher levels of student achievement.*

(Supovitz, 2001, p. 81)

This logic underpins many professional development programs, both large scale system initiatives, and ongoing school level programs.

The critical impact of teaching on student achievement is highlighted when we look at what research tells us about the major sources of variance in students’ achievement. Hattie, for example, reports that it is teachers who account for about 30% of the variance. “It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation” (Hattie, 2003, p. 2). This provides a powerful argument for focusing on ways of strengthening teachers’ expertise throughout their careers. The quality of teaching is intrinsically linked to teachers’ content knowledge, their knowledge of how students learn that content, and the effectiveness of classroom teaching practices.

However, despite the logical connection, there is agreement that:

*... despite the size of the body of literature, however, relatively little systematic research has been conducted on the effects of professional development on improvements in teaching or on student outcomes.*

(Garet et al., 2001, p. 917)

Not only has there been little systematic research, but direct evidence of a link between professional development and improved learning outcomes remains elusive:

*It has been relatively unusual for researchers to investigate the relationships between teachers’ and students’ learning, and when they did so it...*