Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Transforming Education Australasia (TEA) is an umbrella group whose purpose is to encourage conversations about ways of doing education in Australia. We embrace learner-centred, democratic, progressive, and alternative education throughout Australasia. Our group currently includes representatives of Montessori Australia (MA), Steiner Education Australia (SEA), Australasian Democratic Education Community (ADEC), Global Education Innovations (GEI), Home Education Australia, Future Schools, and others.

Transforming Education Australasia (TEA) wishes to respond to the terms of reference of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System with an understanding to both challenge and work with existing systems in order to drive improvements in learning and wellbeing for students and teachers. Key recommendations from TEA focus on:

1. The prioritising of relationships between all stakeholders and community to drive real improvements in learning and wellbeing through:
   - Multi-age classrooms, small class sizes and teacher-student ratios
   - Building culture and community (whole school approach, engaging parents, stakeholders and broader community)
   - Student agency and choice and listening to different voices in education
   - Recognition of context (Indigenous education, rural, remote, and regional, multicultural communities etc)

2. Building of a diverse evidence base with considered research and data within the alternative education space and alternative outcomes. We see value in:

   - Participation from and inclusion of young people's views including into processes of becoming researchers and active in their learning e.g. assessment.

   - A need for diverse approaches to "measurement" and discussion around the considered use of the evidence and data, particularly as linked to context - ITE and teacher professional learning, and time, to build teachers' capacity as active researchers.

1. **Driving real improvements in learning and wellbeing**

Currently, 84% of schools in Australia are smaller than 772 students. Half of all schools, 4804 schools are smaller than 316 students[1]. Opportunity exists here to maximise opportunities to build culture and community, to create connectedness and social wellbeing and the ability to work with others hold great benefits for student outcomes, cognitive, social and emotional.[2] Many TEA schools have multi-age classrooms in order to build on the peer learning opportunities. Others have teachers and classes who remain connected over 3 years to allow these relationships to form and deepen[3]. Montessori classrooms typically have a trained Assistant working alongside educators to support in the classroom.[4] This impact teacher-student ratios and may contribute to developing student outcomes.[5] Likewise, this has flow-on effects on teacher satisfaction and wellbeing.[6]

Time emerges as a persistent theme for teachers' effectiveness in building relationships. TEA supports actions which allow teachers greater time to build their capacity to observe and to meet collaboratively to support the whole child with a "deeply integrated approach" characterised by "connections with family and community contexts"[7]. Teachers, school leaders and fellow students are often those who recognise that students are struggling with mental health, but the concern is that most teachers are too stretched and often not equipped to take this on as part of their role. Support for students is unquestionable, and for schools to build effective relations with allied health professionals, potentially to create community hubs with services located on or near school sites and work together with the whole school community to create a work and learning place of safety with opportunities to build emotional health. Employment of more school-based psychologists, counsellors and wellbeing personnel who are trained in providing support would also assist. Time also needs to be allowed for teachers to develop positive supportive relationships with students and parents/caregivers and to have conversations around wellbeing in small group and individual settings. Recent work by the Smith Family (2022) reflects the strong academic as well as social and emotional outcomes from these quality relationships[8].

TEA also supports contextualised practice. Different approaches are required for different students and particularly for at-risk cohorts. Culturally diverse responses and practices are essential alongside an examination and change of the systemic and institutional racism that are

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[1] school-profile-2022.xlsx (live.com), *ACARA Data Access program*
[2] Darling-Hammond, L., Flooka, L., Cook-Harveya, C., Barronb, B., and Osher, D. (2019)
[3] Haralambous, B. and Dr Michael Carey, M. (2023)
[4] Montessori Educators | Montessori Australia
[5] Lillard, A. and Else-Quest, N. (2006)
[6] Lillard, A (2019)
[7] Darling-Hammond, L., Flooka, L., Cook-Harveya, C., Barronb, B., and Osher, D. (2019)
[8] The Smith Family Research report, *The Catch up Learning program* (2022)

barriers to young people in education by developing cultural curricula which involve families.[9] Support for and mentoring of young people entering and continuing with tertiary education is also required and happening at Newcastle University's Wollotuka Institute which offers "culturally tailored" support in transitioning high school students to university with retention rates for indigenous students at almost 80%.[10]

AITSL data shows that in 2021-2022, classroom teachers' likelihood of leaving the profession has increased, with workload and coping, and recognition and reward as the highest reasons.[11] [12] It is time to genuinely listen to teachers and to students as the welfare of both are closely entwined. Teachers need to have their professional capabilities respected, to have their profession respected and valued. The public perception of teaching as a respected profession needs to be improved with politicians spending equal time promoting education as being open and transparent about areas of need. Key suggestions include:

- Improved practical experience and internships for teachers in ITE which fairly remunerates.
- Genuine mentoring of graduate teachers.
- Reduce the administrative burden, to ease the load of bureaucratic paperwork and accountability processes and less classroom management concerns. Education policy in Australia has resulted in systems of compliance which seems to undervalue teachers' own professional teacher judgement in order to meet ever increasing requirements to meet performance indicators/evidence of standards to ensure job stability.
- Encourage and support highly effective teachers to remain in the classroom rather than continually being head-hunted to work 'higher up' in leadership or administrative roles. Value the status of classroom teacher rather than a concentration on career progression to move out of the classroom.
- Considered leadership which embraces reflective and collaborative practice rather than top down leadership would assist the wellbeing of teachers.
- Teachers who take on positions of responsibility require support without prohibitive extra administrative duties.
- Flexible working conditions such as part-time positions to enable work, life, family balances.
- Student perception of teacher effectiveness, including trust in their teachers to support their learning and positive relationships with teaching staff also needs to be fostered[13].

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[9] Yothu Yindi Foundation, Dhupuma Foundational Learning Program; Rioux, J (2019); Holmes, C. (2016), (2018)
[10] Boosting regional, poor and Indigenous university students goal of major higher education reforms - ABC News
[11] Australian Teacher Workforce Preliminary data (2021-2022)
[12] Teachers now: Why I left and where I've gone - EduResearch Matters (aare.edu.au)
[13] McKay and Macomber (2021)

2. Building the Evidence Base

TEA recognises the value of research and evidence to inform, affirm and review teaching and learning. We see the value for education to build a diverse evidence base with considered research and data within the alternative education space and alternative outcomes. We would call for a recalibration of the focus on the child and all aspects of their context (student, home, school, teacher) to develop a practice to move forward rather than classifying and compartmentalising at-risk cohorts in silos and compartments. Teachers as professionals offer students reasonable, scaffolded goals that promote success in learning, rather than a deficit model of interventions that increases feelings of incompetence. The goalposts need shifting so at-risk students feel successful and feel able to build on that success. This valuing of small data, as part of "the diversity and beauty that exists in every classroom – and the causation they reveal in the present"[14], is consistent with current teacher practice and teachers' preference for assessment as meaningful to student learning and useful to the school[15] . There are countless key moments of "small data" that give teachers a comprehensive picture of what students are achieving which can help develop more diverse and simpler approaches to measurement and accountability.

TEA offers the following as recommended strategies to help build the effective evidence base:

- ITE and teacher professional learning (and time) which builds teacher capacity to be active researchers. The inquiry cycle takes time and shows a valuing of research within the communities, specific to contexts and localities.
- The inclusion of students' views into the processes of becoming researchers and active in their learning. The area of assessment offers an opportunity to consider the imposition of where students should be, as opposed to helping students to ask where they could/would like to go.
- Look at new measures to capture student voice in these processes as the answers as to how to improve education lie within the students involved in schools, particularly for priority cohorts. There is a place for setting the targets, but schools should have autonomy to experiment with different pedagogical approaches to reach those targets such as experimenting with smaller class sizes, focused teaching interventions, and a culturally responsive curriculum.
- Simplify the goals and targets and communicate them directly to schools via several channels, including using state-based teacher registration bodies to communicate directly to teachers
- Additional data is required that specifically asks students to rate their wellbeing at school. School improvement surveys often include wellbeing questions, and most

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[14] Sahlberg, P. and Hasak, J. (2017)
[15] Mockler, N. and Stacey, M (2018)

schools undertake these annually with students as well as with parents and teachers. Some schools already have access to internal data on these processes but a consistent approach nationwide would enable comparison and conclusions to be drawn. We agree that there would be benefits in surveying students to help understand their perceptions of safety and belonging and value at school if this is done in authentic ways that includes all voices especially from those in priority cohorts. We do not think this should be linked to NAPLAN, to any external compliance but as part of internal processes and given its own place and status conducted in a student focused and caring way. Above all, students need to trust that their authentic views and opinions will not be used in negative reporting and problematising.

To enact effective change in the call for reform to address the many challenges facing the Australian educational landscape today, requires an approach that includes the voices of all stakeholders. TEA acknowledges that perfection and the complete resolution of issues is unlikely and unattainable, but we call for a need to do things differently. Connell writes that "There is formidable pressure here to standardize teaching practices, discourage the messiness of experimentation and local engagement, and re-shape teaching as a measurable technical performance rather than a complex human encounter".[16] It is, perhaps, time to acknowledge and celebrate the complexity of the encounter.

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[16] Connell, R. (2020)

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