



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Professor Robyn Ewing
Submitting as a: Academic person or institution
State: NSW

Summary

Learning structures, pedagogies, curriculum and school organisations will need to evolve be re-imagined to make schools fit for the 21st Century. A creative approach to planning, teaching, learning and assessment is critical because it connects with students' social and emotional wellbeing, increases levels of attention, retention and enjoyment in the act of learning and facilitates deeper learning and understanding. Capabilities such as curiosity, creativity and expertise with new forms of media and communication will be essential for employment in the jobs of the future. Instead of working in isolation and ignorance, policymakers and bureaucrats should work collegially with educators to explore how the country's social and economic resources can serve all of Australia's children. Equality of service and resourcing based on the educational needs of each student (Gonski, 2011) rather than equality of opportunity is envisioned The kind of engagement with ideas and processes inherent in all Arts disciplines (including dance, drama, literature, media arts, music and visual arts) prepares children to observe their environment carefully, make sound decisions and engage in both abstract and concrete thinking, playing to the imagination in ways that are often lost in more traditional academic practices. Arts processes can and should provide a way of reshaping how learning is conceived and organised in schools and other educational contexts. The Arts can also act as a catalyst for personal and social transformation in schools and the community more generally. Quality arts experiences within the mandated school curriculum are especially important for those learners who are more vulnerable.

Main submission

In Australia educators, policymakers and bureaucrats talk constantly about the need to foster the development of flexible, creative and imaginative learners (for example, The Melbourne Declaration, 2009). Australia's 2020 Summit Towards a Creative Australia stream acknowledged that the arts are central to creativity. As this stream's co-chair, Cate Blanchett reminded everyone: 'What is education if it doesn't

teach our children to think creatively and innovatively?’ (April 12, The Sydney Morning Herald, 2008). Our curricula must ‘cultivate the capacity for perception, critique and creation’ (Connell, 2009, p.10).

Alongside strong content knowledge the National Education Association’s (2013) distilled a range of skills into four key capabilities, the ‘Four C’s’ or communication; collaboration, critical thinking and creativity). Communication must include multiple literacies including a new focus on media participation and screen literacy. Creative indicators include imagination, resilience, persistence, discipline and curiosity (Lucas, Claxton & Spencer, 2013). We argue these are essential 21st century capabilities and core skills that are needed to thrive in the dynamic ever-changing global community. Jefferson and Anderson (2017) also nominate the ability to reflect critically as a key capability in developing self-awareness. Students also need to foster their empathy and compassion. They must develop the courage to take risks in exploring new ideas. Future employment will favour those who have strong interpersonal skills, higher order thinking capabilities together with creative digital design skills (NESTA, 2017).

The co-directors of the web portal, Imagination: Creating the Future of Education and Work, Rita King and Joshua Fout, claim that we are currently living in the ‘Imagination Age. Given the failure of many of our economies and traditional ways of thinking, they suggest it is imperative that we all find time to imagine, and then create, new global ways of looking at the world. We must ensure that children and young people are always allowed time and space for imaginative play opportunities.

- How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Quality and educational success should be measured through a range of authentic assessment and evaluation strategies that examine what students have been taught, achieved and CAN do rather than what they don’t know. Too much emphasis is frequently placed on high stakes multiple choice tests that can only assess relatively minor aspects of students’ understandings and knowledge. While we continue to privilege just one kind of testing regime in literacy and numeracy we give these tests undue weight – more weight than is attributed to students’ end of school achievements. In addition, teachers feel pressured to teach to such tests and students are then left with a reductive and narrow competitive academic curriculum.

Assessment for learning should be an integral part of curriculum and pedagogy planning and implementation. Students’ achievements and capabilities should be celebrated and used as a starting point for their next learning tasks. Assessment criteria must be explicit and processes to ensure students’ understanding of their meaning should be central to teaching and learning. Criteria must not be biased in relation to gender, ethnicity, socio economic status or cultural capital. Risk taking and failure are embedded in supportive learning contexts because they can foster persistence, discipline and resilience

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

- How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?

It has now been clearly established that the kind of engagement with ideas and processes inherent in all Arts disciplines (including dance, drama, literature, media arts, music and visual arts) prepares children to observe their environment carefully, make sound decisions and engage in both abstract and concrete thinking, playing to the imagination in ways that are often lost in more traditional academic practices (McKechnie, 1996). Arts processes can and should provide a way of reshaping how learning is conceived and organised in schools and other educational contexts. The Arts can also act as a catalyst for personal and social transformation in schools and the community more generally. Reflective thinking embedded in arts processes enables inner and social conversations (Catterall, 2009) referred to as ‘substantive communication’ in quality teaching and learning frameworks (e.g. NSWDET, 2003). Quality arts experiences within the mandated school curriculum are especially important for those learners who are more vulnerable. Ensuring that the arts experiences are at the centre of the curriculum can:

- facilitate students’ active involvement in learning, help them make links with their own knowledge and experiences
- enable a range of possible meanings to be explored and represented
- challenge stereotypical assumptions and perspectives
- encourage creativity, flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity
- provide opportunities for students to reflect and dialogue collaboratively
- encourage risk-taking and trying again when something is unsuccessful – understand that getting things wrong is part of effective learning
- apply understanding to their own personal context or other contexts
- provide a wide range of learning experiences that can challenge and accommodate all learners and their range of abilities.

(Ewing, 2010)

Many successful quality arts programs have been established in schools and the broader community by arts organizations and by philanthropic groups (Ewing, 2010).

Yet such initiatives should also be the responsibility of government through both educational and broader social policy and action.

- What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions?

Achieving the demonstrated educational and social benefits of Arts in Australian education will require a change in thinking by policy makers to ensure that cultivating imagination and creativity become priorities rather than 'add-ons'. If quality arts education and pedagogy are to become core curriculum components in schools, there are workforce, funding and resource implications which will need close attention. Learning in, through and about the Arts must become a priority for both pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional learning for in-service teachers. Rich professional learning for teachers needs to be contextualised to meet their needs.

- What works best for whom and in what circumstances?

We spend too long looking for the single recipe that will work best for everyone – there is no magic formula. As educators we need to choose the most appropriate pedagogical strategies to implement depending on the individual child/student/young person.

For example, if we truly care about all Australian children becoming literate we must stop perpetuating a narrow debate about what literacy is and we must stop using outdated misunderstandings and definitions. There is no single recipe for literacy learning. To propose that a synthetic phonics approach is the only way of teaching phonics and that all children must be subjected to a phonics test/check at 6 years old trivialises the complexity of the literacy learning process. It also disadvantages our most vulnerable children and leads to their disengagement from the literacy learning process. Teachers need to have a deep understanding of a repertoire of strategies and approaches carefully chosen to suit the intellectual needs of individual children to ensure all children learn to read for meaning and enjoy their learning.

- What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

The involvement of qualified educators with relevant and recent experience in early childhood centres, schools and universities in policymaking in education. Frequent opportunities should be provided to enable sharing of relevant research and practice and ongoing professional dialogue. Such involvement and sharing should be at the centre of all educational policy and action.

- How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

The strategies outlined in the above response are relevant here. In addition, strategies that allow time and adequate resourcing for genuine reform to be embedded and appropriately evaluated. Ensure there is ongoing professional learning for teachers and that they have agency in their accreditation process.

- Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

It is imperative to acknowledge the ever-increasing research that points to the importance of imaginative and creative approaches to learning. Australia has drawn on outdated models of curriculum and assessment for too long. A creative pedagogy which connects with both emotional and feeling brain functions is more likely to increase levels of attention, retention and enjoyment in the act of learning and facilitate deeper learning and understanding. There is thus an urgent need to reconceptualise what the curriculum should look like through incorporating creative, integrated approaches to pedagogy.

The development of cross curricula skills need to be emphasised, along with multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary curriculum integration, time for collaborative thinking, meaningful discussion to encourage the negotiation of meanings and critical reflection (Gibson & Ewing, 2011)

- What are they and how could they be further developed?

A review of international research (Ewing, 2010) commissioned by the Australian Council for Educational Research strongly recommended that quality arts processes and experiences were embedded in all academic disciplines and fields as a way of cultivating creativity and imagination across the curriculum. While each Arts discipline provides intrinsic benefits for the individual, a succession of research reports over more than a decade underline that those students who engage in quality arts processes and experiences are more highly motivated in all their subjects and consequently achieve better academically, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom and have more positive self concepts than those students who are deprived of arts experiences (e.g. Martin, Anderson, Gibson, Sudmalis, 2013; Catterall, 2009; Gadsden, 2008; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999).

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

- It seems totally incongruent then, that, at the same time as the big picture learning outcomes above are advocated through important statements about our vision for young people government policy is placing an increasing emphasis on expensive, narrow and restrictive national testing regimes that cannot measure creativity, imagination or flexible problem solving. High stakes standardised tests can only focus on shallow and superficial thinking and an emphasis on drill and practice to prepare for such tests. They ignore the research that demonstrates that a one-size fits all test actually disadvantages those at risk through poverty. Since moving to NAPLAN Australia's ranking on international benchmarks has fallen and in addition our most able students have plateaued. In addition both teachers and students report increased anxiety and it is well established high anxiety can affect outcomes.
- In a number of publications Professor Tony Vinson (e.g. 2006, 2009, 2016) has convincingly drawn out the relationship between inadequate education and a life of disadvantage, ill-health and poverty. He has warned us time and again about the huge human cost of inadequate investment in education describing the provision of quality pedagogy in early childhood education as a moral imperative:

'What an improvement it would be – morally, economically – to do something serious about challenging the inter-generational transmission of poverty and limited education that continue to help shape the destinies of significant numbers of our children' (Vinson, 2006, p.13).

¥ There is an ongoing culture of blame through constant discussion of the inadequacies of teachers and teacher education, often specifically focussed on the teaching of literacy and numeracy. There is little recognition of the sophisticated knowledge, decision-making skills and expertise that teachers possess and inadequate support for the increasing number of students diagnosed with special needs. Research into teacher thinking suggests that teachers make more decisions in a day's work than in any other profession. Young teachers continue to exit the profession in the first three to five years (eg, Buchanon, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson and Burke, 2013; Fantilli and McDougall, 2009; Ewing and Manual, 2005).

- an outdated, fragmented, conservative competitive academic curriculum that caters for a narrow range of learners.

¥ Literacy achievement is measured superficially through high stakes multiple choice testing. Prescriptive recipes are repeatedly held up as the way forward to ensure success for all students. Many teachers feel obliged to use these outdated strategies and to 'teach to the test' and use valuable learning time to prepare students for national tests particularly in schools in lower socioeconomic areas rather than meet

the individual needs of their students often against their better judgement and long experience.

- If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

The de-politicisation of education.

Social policy strategies and action to reduce poverty in Australian society.

We must stop implying that teachers and schools are the greatest determining force in solving society's social and economic problems. The reality is that poverty and social inequality shape childhood development and heavily impact on learning.

Australia should learn lessons from other nations' errors. The final report of the Cambridge Primary Review (2009) in the UK led by Robin Alexander, for example, delivered the findings of a six year long, independent review of the current condition and future of primary curriculum in England. Although the review reports the widespread acceptance of the need for a national curriculum and significant gains in science, citizenship as well as the way values and children's personal development are handled, the inquiry found that two decades of a standards agenda with national testing had compromised primary children's right to a balanced approach to learning. Such a focus has meant that memorisation and simple factual recall has been privileged over deep learning and understanding. Learning in the arts and the humanities had been restricted and consequently devalued as had 'those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem solving and the extended exploration of ideas.' As a result students' creativity was at risk. This report confirms the findings of an earlier study undertaken by Ken Robinson for the Blair government (1999). At that time Robinson emphasised that creativity and the Arts are of equal importance to the sciences and suggested that fostering creativity through the Arts would enable students to interpret and appreciate the real meaning of being literate and numerate in the twenty first century.

More recently in the UK the requirement to teach all children decoding using synthetic phonics has not resulted in improvements in children's reading (Clark, 2017). Rather it has improved phonics for a short time. There has been no evidence that it improves comprehension or the understanding of meaning(s). Yet Australia is now poised to follow suit. It seems that we do not learn lessons from overseas research but rather replicate the errors.

Despite the unequivocal evidence pointing to the educational and wider social benefits of the Arts, to date equitable provision and resourcing of the Arts and monitoring teaching quality in arts education has received insufficient attention in Australia.

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