



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

Submitter: Mr Darcy Moore
Submitting as a: Parent/carer/guardian, teacher, principal
State: NSW

Summary

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like? One of the themes listed - defining and measuring success in education - is particularly pertinent when considered in relation to the terms of reference. If the goal is to “improve student outcomes and Australia's national performance, as measured by national and international assessments of student achievement” it will be very difficult to also “improve the preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education”. This sums up the paradox, or bind, Australian parents, educators and more importantly students find themselves experiencing in the Australian education system. The limited and limiting nature of standardised testing and other narrow notions of success is a major issue in developing a contemporary education system that prepares students for their future.

There are significant barriers to implementing improvements when the legislation that governs what schools can do is so restrictive, inimicable and antithetical to innovation and progress. For example, legislated, mandatory grading of students from A-E in NSW does not reflect research nor does the continuation of heritage systems, like pen and paper exams, which certainly no longer reflect what students need to improve their preparedness for the future.

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

1. Focus on funding equitably in an effort to genuinely realise the goals of the Melbourne Declaration (2008)
2. Fund Public Education to make it attractive to all Australians and strengthen this fundamental organ of democratic, civil society
3. Fund quality research into what should replace paper exams ie. digital portfolios from K-12 to measure student competencies

4. Cease competition between schools and the public reporting, via the MySchool website, of NAPLAN data which was never designed for this purpose
5. Decrease managerialism in education

Main submission

“What did you have to sacrifice about my child’s education to raise those scores?” Alfie Kohn

Students should have the knowledge, skills and opportunity to lead happy, healthy and productive lives as citizens in a sophisticated, technology-rich, globally-connected and democratic society. The measurement of this ‘educational success’ should not pervert the ideals of education so clearly enunciated in the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008). Unfortunately, it is clear that current policies do not “provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location.”

Educational success cannot be measured in isolation from the civil society that our institutions serve. Since late last century, outcomes-based models of education implemented in Australia have not led to improved educational or societal outcomes for young people who increasingly are not able to access full-time jobs, home-ownership or the free education enjoyed by the current prime minister as a young person. The funding policies that have been embedded since 1996 resulted in a shift from ‘public to private’ that has led to our diverse multicultural society being segregated along ethnic, religious and socio-economic lines. This has been well documented by Dr Christine Ho, Chris Bonnor, Trevor Cobbold and Dr Marion Maddox (see bibliography). There is much evidence that our focus has moved away from funding an egalitarian system, where educational opportunity is evenly distributed, to one where privilege is enshrined.

Research by the Lowy Institute has consistently revealed that younger Australians have lost faith in democracy. Education has been commodified and this is a great danger to our democratic institutions. In the scramble to enshrine market-based reform, some of the most basic functions of schooling - to provide hope, equity and opportunity in a democratic state - are being neglected. Citizens may be consumers but not all aspects of life should be left to the market. Education should not be a commodity in a properly functioning democratic state; it is a right. Younger Australians are just reflecting lived experience that Australian democracy is becoming less democratic as the influence of the market and those who control it becomes more omnipresent in the educational sphere too. There is no longer ‘a fair

go' for every kid, in every postcode. There never was but government policy is exacerbating the divide.

Australian students have not been well-served over the last two decades by the political, bureaucratic and administrative processes that have delivered funding arrangements and new syllabuses but little effective change nor equity and opportunity for our young people. André Spicer, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Cass Business School, City University London and Mats Alvesson, Professor of Business Administration at Lund University accurately describe the managerialism established for little educational improvement:

“Our thesis in this book is that many organisations are caught in the stupidity paradox: they employ smart people who end up doing stupid things. This can produce good results in the short term, but can pave the way to disaster in the longer term.”

“Less time and resources are allocated to teaching and learning than to image-polishing exercises as schools become machines for persuading others that children are getting a good education, rather than institutions for educating children. Instead of focusing on the actual work process, educators spend most of their time on ceremonial activities. They develop plans, set up meetings, write reports, develop policy statements, prepare presentations and all the other things a ‘proper’ school is supposed to do. The years roll by without any logical reconsideration of how all this actually helps educate children or improve the society it serves.”

“There are many whose sole job it is to create plans, rules and procedures, and even more who spend their working life ensuring that these are followed. Other employees find that ever-larger chunks of their days are taken up with following rules and procedures.”

Crass, authoritarian and market-based managerialism has taken root and the “McDonaldisation” of school is almost complete as this unhealthy paradigm results in conformist, non-creative thinking by politicians and bureaucrats who parrot the importance of data-driven decisions without actually making them.

The whole concept of (inappropriate) measurement is deeply problematic in the educational institutions that serve civil society and the individual. Anyone interested in the future, or recent past, for Australian educational reform should be acquainted with Campbell’s Law:

“The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” Donald T. Campbell

The misuse of NAPLAN data and the establishment of league tables in newspapers as a result of the MySchool website further segregates Australians and encourages a

misplaced competition. The international evidence collected via PISA has similar challenges as a reliable measure of anything. Even the most cursory acquaintance with the politics of Australian education reveals crass, simplistic pronouncements by politicians and then the whole cycle starts again:

“The 2016 results show reading scores have increased by 0.4 per cent since 2013, writing scores have declined by 0.2 per cent and numeracy scores have risen by 1.26 per cent. Over the same time period, federal school funding has increased by 23.7 per cent.” Federal Minister for Education, 2016

“...the Premier’s Priority is to increase the proportion of NSW students in the top two NAPLAN bands for reading and numeracy by 8% by 2019.” Bump It Up Strategy – Fact Sheet

This obsession with measurement not so subtly reinforces some questionable, deep metaphors about the nature of knowledge, teaching, and learning. Essentially this kind of measurement reinforces the belief that knowledge is some kind of “stuff” that exists independently of the human mind and like all physical “stuff” it has mass which can be measured, broken down and reassembled and moved from place to place. This then makes teaching a delivery system for transferring this “stuff” from one source (a teacher) to another source (an empty space called a learner’s mind). Learning thus becomes the acquisition of this “stuff”.

The measurement systems teachers are increasingly coerced to follow are underpinned by dubious research and a range of ethical issues. Since the original publication of John Hattie’s book, *Visible Learning*, there have been questions raised about the statistical methodology underpinning his research and representation of ‘what works best for learning’. By 2014, the year Professor Hattie became the Chair of AITSL, it was clear, even to tertiary statistics students, that serious mathematical errors had been made. There continues to be a steady flow of journal articles contesting Hattie’s ideas. By 2017, concerns about flawed use of statistics and how the politics of education works in Australia sees many practitioners not really needing to read a journal article to know all about “the cult of Hattie” in our schools.

Hattie continues to rank the “195 Influences And Effect Sizes Related To Student Achievement” without acknowledging the concerns raised by statisticians. Reading the latest paper which derides the methodology makes one ask the question, what has become of critical thinking in Australian education circles? As Pierre-Jérôme Bergeron points out:

“Unfortunately, in reading *Visible Learning* and subsequent work by Hattie and his team, anybody who is knowledgeable in statistical analysis is quickly disillusioned. Why? Because data cannot be collected in any which way nor analysed or

interpreted in any which way either. Yet, this summarises the New Zealander's actual methodology. To believe Hattie is to have a blind spot in one's critical thinking when assessing scientific rigour. To promote his work is to unfortunately fall into the promotion of pseudoscience. Finally, to persist in defending Hattie after becoming aware of the serious critique of his methodology constitutes wilful blindness."

This is particularly disturbing when flawed statistical analysis is resulting in advice that there's little or no impact with reducing class-sizes or democratic pedagogies such as:

- giving students control over their learning
- problem-based learning
- inquiry-based teaching

Context is everything. That includes the context, thoroughly discussed by Dr Scott Eacott, that has led to Australian schools looking for scientific, evidence-based solutions to the apparent educational challenges highlight by PISA and NAPLAN. Dylan William, since at least 2009, has questioned the use of meta-analysis in education. It seems pretty obvious that Hattie's number-crunching has appealed to politicians and administrators looking to solve what often feels like a manufactured series of education crises. It is worth quoting the conclusions from a 2009 paper (by Snook, Clark, O'Neill and Openshaw):

- (i) Despite his own frequent warnings, politicians may use his work to justify policies which he does not endorse and his research does not sanction;
- (ii) Teachers and teacher educators might try to use the findings in a simplistic way and not, as Hattie wants, as a source for "hypotheses for intelligent problem solving";
- (iii) The quantitative research on 'school effects' might be presented in isolation from their historical, cultural and social contexts, and their interaction with home and community backgrounds; and
- (iv) In concentrating on measurable school effects there may be insufficient discussion about the aims of education and the purposes of schooling without which the studies have little point.

The reality is that all this research analyses what we have had in the past which is not necessarily what we need in the future.

The decades of designing managerial documents / syllabuses if not already resulting in genuine reform or improved educational outcomes for students is certainly not what we need for the future. Students need genuinely personalised learning and far more opportunity to choose their own learning paths. This faux reform over the last two decades is revealed to be 'wearing no clothes' when we look at the continued

importance of the Higher School Certificate examinations in NSW 'celebrating' their fiftieth anniversary as I type.

One of the major barriers to creating a world class, innovative education system for 5-18-year-olds is the persistence of heritage systems, like pen and paper exams, that effectively prevent genuine educational reform/progress. It is evidence of limited policy-making nous that the state is compelling students to "regurgitate on paper fast" - as one student expressed it - in order for them to complete their schooling and have a single-number ATAR decide their tertiary fate (which deregulation of the university system has corrupted anyway). Our society does not need citizens who can memorise and write fast but this is where they end-up, in the same summer halls that some of their great-grandparents sat completing the HSC all those years ago.

As part of the Education for a Changing World Project, the NSW Department of Education commissioned essays from distinguished Australian and international authors to stimulate debate and discussion about Artificial Intelligence (AI), education and 21st century skill needs. The common threads gleaned from these "occasional papers" suggest:

1. Traditional skills (updated for contemporary times) are essential for maintaining civil society. Citizens must be critically multi-literate with a strong sense of context and history. Enlightenment values are essential.
2. Creativity, imagination, emotional intelligence, collaboration and communication skills will assume an importance not traditionally emphasised in edu-systems for three reasons: 1) to maintain employability; 2) to provide a citizenry with skills to shape the future; 3) to help with increased leisure-time (the 'fruits of civilisation'?).
3. The cognitive power needed for an individual to fully participate in society will require a quality education previously reserved for a small elite. Technological knowledge is essential but must be complemented by strong ethical decision-making abilities in a time of rapid social change and civic need.
4. The purpose of education should be focused on creating a fair and just society.

After reading these perceptive papers one cannot escape the thought that most of the changes mooted have been essential for some time now and are not really made any more urgent by the coming (already here) AI or digital revolutions. They have been urgent for at least two decades and generally similar papers could have been written about the time we were connected to the World Wide Web in schools. It should be noted that at this time we commenced implementing standardised testing and wrote managerial, outcomes-based syllabi rather than focusing on the genuine

re-structuring of our schools where children, as Sir Ken Robinson says, are batch-processed by age.

We have been shuffling digital paper, sorting out the lettering on the electronic filing cabinets and spending an inordinate amount of money getting ready for 1990 for some time now. As Yuval Noah Harari eloquently puts it, “the governmental tortoise cannot keep up with the technological hare”. It is also worth quoting Harari on school systems:

“After both factories and government ministries became accustomed to thinking in the language of numbers, schools followed suit. They started to gauge the worth of each student according to his or her average mark, whereas the worth of each teacher and principal was judged according to the school’s overall average. Once bureaucrats adopted this yardstick, reality was transformed. Originally, schools were supposed to focus on enlightening and educating students, and marks were merely a means of measuring success. But naturally enough schools soon began focusing on achieving high marks. As every child, teacher and inspector knows, the skills required to get high marks in an exam are not the same as a true understanding of literature, biology or mathematics. Every child, teacher and inspector also knows that when forced to choose between the two, most schools will go for the marks.”

There needs to be a sea-change in the way schools are funded based on need and the principles espoused in both the Melbourne Declaration and the original Gonski reports. Crass measurement, in and of schools, needs to end. Students must have an opportunity to personalise their learning, with the assistance of teachers and technology. They need to learn about our media-saturated world and be critically literate enough to understand and navigate it successfully. Students should have opportunities to learn about and analyse their own personal data and to have a say in how a democratic state uses that data. The wellbeing of each student and the community they live must take precedence over huge expenditure on managerial systems that do not result in anything other than a digital paper chase that keeps everyone busy. The time has come to focus on learning, not obsessively funding measuring that learning, and testing kids for dubious purposes.

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