



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

Submitter: Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) Sydney
Submitting as a: Principal
State: NSW

Summary

1. Value the understanding and application levels in Bloom's taxonomy
2. Value school tone
3. Value religious understandings of the human person and mind, and allow school diversity
4. Value the human conscience and student agency
5. Build trust
6. Value staff well-being
7. Spend the professional development budget carefully
8. Be skeptical about interest groups
9. Value principal autonomy under a Council set-up
10. Don't overvalue top-down control mechanisms

Main submission

I ask you to consider Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge in its traditional form. It is a triangle with knowledge as a base, then, from base to zenith, understanding, application, synthesis, analysis and evaluation. Stereotypes about past learning describe it as knowledge-centred. The thrust for the future is supposed to be in analysis and evaluation, or, as in some more recent versions of the taxonomy, in creativity.

We all praise the emphasis on creativity, evaluation and analysis, yet excellent schools will really value student understanding and application.

I would like to claim that PLC Sydney has some experience at achieving excellence. We are a comprehensive school which consistently performs in the top thirty-five schools in NSW. Some would claim that this is due to the school fees we charge, and this certainly does aid us to provide a broad and engaging range of programs.

I have also, in my career, run the Master of Arts in Education program at Lancaster University and have seen hundreds of schools. I have also taught in Zimbabwe and am part of an educational aid program in Tanzania.

I wish to explain the very real importance of developing student understanding and application, and of creating a positive school tone. These things can be delivered in any school and are critical to the creation of excellence.

The recent push to prioritise the peak of Bloom's taxonomy has a hidden danger. Interest groups in education specify the type of analysis that should be valued, the type of evaluation that is acceptable. We have seen this happen in the HSC English syllabus from 2000-2017. A post-structuralist approach has been favoured. The type of answer that now achieves high marks is one which sees language as closely connected to power. Thus, the 'better' answers will be those that deconstruct power. This leads to forced readings, poor quality writing and it makes education in English into a game that is played rather than a truth that is explored or a creativity that is valued. English studies could alternatively be understood as being about literature-appreciation or truth-finding or language analysis or author genius. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, yet the excellent curriculum will expose students to the FULL RANGE of views of English.

If we valued the 'Understanding' level of Bloom more, we would allow a broad range of approaches to a subject to be considered by students. We would expose them to 'surveys of knowledge' and to 'taxonomies of knowledge'. This will be opposed by some interest groups who want hegemony over the system, but it is critical to allowing excellence.

We take this approach at PLC Sydney and we reap the rewards.

Another aspect of this is that the human mind needs to be highly valued. There are numerous current ways of understanding human cognition which reduce the mind to being the equivalent of the brain. Neuroscience sounds impressive, but its claims are greater than its substance at present. Perhaps the best neuroscience I know is on dyslexia (Proust and the Squid) yet the author is full of caution regarding neuroscience's claims.

If we hold a high view of the human person and the human mind we will hold a high view of human conscience. This really aids excellence. Students need agency to do well. They need to be trustworthy. To be trustworthy, they need chances to prove themselves. They need to be trusted. As they feel trusted they start to love their school life and this motivates their learning deeply. This year our Year 11 and 12 students ran a full STEM Conference themselves. They did the lot. They are highly motivated and very committed.

To achieve this level of 'buy in' a school needs a strong understanding of what a human being is. We have a wonderful religious (Christian) position, that each person

is made in God's image. Each person's conscience is important and each person should act with integrity towards their conscience. This allows students to hold a variety of views, yet the school's understanding (on which theirs are built) is underpinned by a Christian framework. Even if they rebel, they have benefited from the model.

I recognise that different schools will hold different views of the human being. I appeal to you to allow religious positions to flourish. Each religious position of which I am aware will hold a view of the human mind that allows the conscience to exist. I worry about secular positions that ultimately equate humans to chance beings. It is reasonable that secular schools should also flourish, but what is their base understanding of the human mind? Does it lead to student nihilism? Marilynne Robinson's book *Absence of Mind* is a powerful commentary on this area.

Once a school is committed to developing understanding and to a high view of the human mind, it can really build student agency. Motivation matters. A distant dream of university education or a good job, or the Australian economy going well is not enough. Utilitarianism is a dreadful motivator of students. Utilitarianism is, in my view, a weak reason to operate schools. Kierkegaard said that life is understood backwards but lived forwards. Helping students with the next section of learning means engaging them fully in it. Excellence depends upon positive articulation of the good in the learning - both existentially and metaphysically. SMART goals are helpful, particularly towards the end of schooling, but the sense of being in a community, of belonging, of playing a part, of contributing to others, of finding out what's true - these motivate students.

Plus a good dose of fun. Schools must have light and shade.

And this leads to school tone. We have assemblies that are riotously funny and assemblies that are pin-drop quiet. And no one tells the students how to behave. Our students, on House Choir Night, will stand up - all 900 senior girls - and dance to the sounds of our jazz band, then sit down in silence without a teacher saying a word once the music stops. This student 'buy in' is really really possible, and it has many spin-offs for excellence. It makes students feel good about themselves and their school, it makes classrooms cooperative and learning a joy. It doesn't stop every squabble or fracture, but it builds a social capital that can help students work things out.

The external use of measurement should be kept to an absolute minimum. Excellence is not imposed from above by governments trying to gain political points. It is achieved by schools developing rich cultures based on the quality of the learning process. We should examine only to assist students to get to the next institution. We use NAPLAN data to help us diagnose student need, but we don't need it.

If students are to develop rich understanding they must read. And read and read and read. They must read and read and read. And so many government initiatives stifle their reading. They crowd the curriculum with other things.

As for governance arrangements, I can only say that the Presbyterian Church has excellent arrangements. They appoint a Council who oversee vision, mission, finances and strategic/master planning. They are very good at not dipping into management. As a type of CEO I have such wonderful freedom. It enables me to lead a very creative staff in bringing improvements to student education.

We work hard on staff culture. We have programs in staff well-being and a strong professional development budget. We are not afraid to go against the grain of current thinking in education. Education is tangled by interest groups that want to control how schools respond to issues ranging from human rights to how they teach science. Excellence will be achieved by a well paid, well organised and motivated teaching staff.

In regard to curriculum we desperately need education in Philosophy and Theology. We have our own program. It really sharpens student thinking. They are able to learn to avoid answering just how adults might want them to. This independence of thought is precious. We must avoid the claims of those representing Scientism that these areas are redundant.

We have a very strong program for students with disability and these students are integrated to our school. It comes from ensuring they have full access to all programs - gymnastics, swimming etc. as well as from a creative curriculum based on excellent social relations and positive interaction with the whole school.