



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

Submitter: Primary English Teaching Association Australia
Submitting as a: other (Teacher Professional Organisation (NFP))
State: NSW

Summary

The Primary English Teaching Association (PETAA) provides services to support teachers of English throughout Australia. With this national perspective in mind, PETAA endorses the content of the Australian Curriculum: English, with the Australian Curriculum General Capability: Literacy, as a baseline representation of the capabilities, skills and knowledge Australian students should learn in the primary school in the area of English language and literacy education. In combination, the three strands of the curriculum (Language, Literature, Literacy), the sub-strands and elaborations provide a well-organised overview of the content. Unfortunately, however, before teachers and schools have had an opportunity to implement the curriculum effectively, they have been distracted by a confused array of amendments, alternative documents (e.g. the NSW English syllabus), testing regimes and progression statements that do not align with the organization of the curriculum (e.g. NAPLAN). This has resulted in

- restricting students' opportunities to engage with curriculum content
- teachers and schools not being given the time they need to implement curriculum content, to monitor and evaluate the curriculum in a considered way before, for example, an orderly and systematic five-yearly review;
- increasing emphasis on standardised testing of basic skills reducing the time schools and teachers have to spend on the delivery of curriculum content, with the associated risk that the content covered by students becomes skewed towards a narrow set of constrained skills

Main submission

The focus of this submission from Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) is English literacy education in the primary schools.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?
What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

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What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

Literacy is a core skill for any educational success. Without core English literacies skills but also the knowledge and dispositions afforded by a rich and deep early literacy experiences for all young Australians, these young people will not be positioned to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives. This incorporates the skills required to compose and comprehend complex and at times, multimodal texts.

But further to this, students need understandings of the power associated with language use and how texts can form or change opinions. Further to this are understandings of how learners are judged on their literacy and oral language skills and that any educational system must make a strong engagement with ensuring Australian students are able to achieve within required standards and benchmarks. This, however, should never become the sole focus of schools and students because literacy is an enabling skill across the curriculum and requires a wide and broad understanding of the reading and writing process. Moreover, it is built on oral

language use and spoken interaction in preschool and early years classrooms and throughout the school years.

Language and literacy related capabilities, skills and knowledge that deserve increased attention in the Australian Curriculum include:

- using spoken language and playful uses of language in the development of literacy skills
- comprehending and composing complex, multimodal and digital texts, texts of increasing significance and power, in which distinctions between discrete language skills and between writer and reader are blurred
- understanding how language is used to shape opinion and to persuade in a variety of contexts
- understanding the specific literacy demands of each learning area, and ensuring that discipline-specific literacy knowledge and skill are taught explicitly from the early years, including the literacy demands of mathematics, science and the social sciences.
- recognising and valuing the cultural and linguistic capabilities, knowledge and skills of culturally and linguistically diverse students in Australian schools

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Quality education requires a complex view of assessment. Assessment that provides data for the: system; the school; the learner and the parents. Current assessment conversations in Education in Australia seem focussed on measurement. Any simple understanding of assessment in the educational context will deliver the message that measurement of production of achievement data reveals an important but 'tiny slice' of the rich data available. Educational excellence requires a correction to this direction and focus on measurement as this is leading systems, schools, school leaders and teachers into a pattern of quantifying children and 'normalising learner achievements' thus placing those of either end of the normal curve into a 'silent' place – thus making them invisible in the context of schooling.

We send a strong warning about continuing to head down this path - particularly in early reading and in NAPLAN literacy scores.

- Conflation of measurement and assessment is a danger.
- Good assessment is complex yet it can lead learning.
- A focus on what is Inside the Black Box (Black & Wiliam 1998) is a good place to start. How can assessment help us find the way a student can move from 'here' to 'there'?

- Using arbitrary assessment of student learning to pin point flaws in teaching or curriculum is morally wrong and counter-intuitive (e.g. Year 1 phonics screener).

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

There is no magic bullet, no one-size-fits-all set of actions that will improve practice and outcomes. Educators need principled methods for undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the learning needs of individual students and of particular student profiles in specific contexts. Educators can then draw on their repertoire of practices and strategies to design programs that address these needs. To support this approach, teachers need to be provided with systematic and sustained professional development, as well as with well-designed and targeted resources, they can draw on to plan customised programs differentiated to meet the diverse learning needs of their student cohort. Teachers should be provided with training and expertise, and then that training and expertise needs to be trusted and respected, and teachers given the space to make professional decisions based on their knowledge of the students, the teaching situation and the community context.

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?

School funding should be needs based and at the same time managed with a strong focus on individual support within a school based funding models. Further development of the work of schools as communities of learners should be followed - where resources and directions for development might be shared or deployed at system level which is locally focussed.

- Funding should continue to be needs based.
- It needs to support principals and identifying and providing high end professional learning for teachers in schools.
- Clusters of schools as “communities of learning” (Lave and Wenger 1999) need to be further explored.

What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions? What works best for whom and in what circumstances?

Too much weight, and funding, is often given to overseas initiatives, and where the evidence that these initiatives lift educational standards is not strong (as in the United Kingdom and the United States), rather than where the evidence for improved learning outcomes is much stronger (e.g. Singapore and Finland).

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?

Teachers are skilled professionals and across any school there is upwards 400-500 years of combined teaching experience. Within this experiential base we should be sitting back and allowing those who teach to lead the building of targets and standards, and once again within regional clusters of communities of learners in schools these pedagogical leaders should be given a little more voice in deciding what these benchmarks might be.

This is not to detract from standards, learning progressions nor NAPLAN testing systems - these things need to remain in place - but the constant 'hitching' of quality to a testing system (NAPLAN) which set out to be a simple snapshot of a learner's ability and which is becoming so high stakes in terms of school funding, teacher quality and even real estate value - is making schools much less educationally sound places than they could be. A rich and deep literacy curriculum is fundamental to achieving the Melbourne Declaration learning goals for all Australians, but this is being eroded with the shift in emphasis to the ability to recognize misspelled words in a sentence (NAPLAN) or nonsense words in an App (proposed Year 1 Phonics Screener). This shift detracts from the real and important purpose of schooling .

- High expectations of the professionalism and hard work of teachers needs to be continued and recognised.
- These high expectations are already in place through the Quality Teaching Framework and the AITSL Professional standards (and jurisdictional versions) which have excellent frameworks – but are still in their infancy.
- Teachers know their schools better than curriculum consultants and policy analysts located in a high rise buildings in a capital city.
- The experiences of groups of teachers in schools is more powerful than those of policy makers sitting outside the schools in offices preparing policy documents.
- Lengthy policy directions, curriculum directions and assessment frameworks (e.g. new national literacy progressions which sit outside teachers' experience) have a negative impact on teacher self-confidence and thus slow down the implementation of policy initiatives.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing? What are they and how could they be further developed?

There is a need to bolster the level of expertise not only of classroom teachers but of the systems themselves through reinstating a central core of educators (preferably doctoral level or undertaking doctoral studies) with expertise in their discipline area, in research methods, and the practical application of evidence derived from research, for example, in curriculum design, resource development and the design of professional learning for teachers. The job of this group of experts would be to undertake research and to contribute to policy and resource development, separate from bureaucratic requirements. In this way, those responsible for critical decision making in relation to curriculum, and the expertise required to do this work, are not distracted and over-burdened with the demands of the bureaucracy.

At the system and sector levels the design and delivery of professional learning for teachers needs to be aligned with principled research and professional development plans, in collaboration with teacher associations, and not devolved to individual schools with limited capacity to implement and evaluate professional learning in a systematic and sustained way.

Curriculum policy makers in Australia do not always demonstrate knowledge of and respect for the capability and depth for Australia's own internationally-recognised educational researchers. In the field of language and literacies education, Australian researchers and educators have built internationally-recognised expertise over decades, including in the fields of early language and literacy development, and in the language and literacy development of disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students. This expertise has contributed to the design of the Australian Curriculum: English, yet it often appears that policy makers do not recognise that expertise, and in fact appear to be undermining the curriculum by implementing constant unnecessary and confusing change. Educators at classroom, school and system levels need time (e.g. five to ten years) for consolidation in their teaching of current curriculum content, and a predictable, principled and systematic plan for curriculum review to which they can contribute.

In summary, teachers of English have:

- access to the innovative and powerfully framed Australian Curriculum: English, comprising three inter-related and mutually reinforcing content strands: Language, Literature and Literacy.
- a professionally recognised approach to developing and maintaining Teacher Quality (The Quality Teaching Framework);
- a national benchmarking process through NAPLAN in core areas of the curriculum; and,
- teacher professional standards which encompass quality in ITE and on-going career trajectories for the profession (AISTL standards)

Most of these initiatives are in their infancy (5 years at most) and require time for effects and improvements in quality to take place. We have the tools in place – and it now is incumbent on jurisdictions to let this configuration of elements fulfill their potential and the vision of the Melbourne Declaration.