



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

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Summary

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Consider these recent vignettes about education in Australia:

- NAPLAN test results show a marked decline in students' writing ability from Year 3 to Years 7 and 9.
- Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham decides to introduce a Year 1 phonics test for all Australian students even though a recent study of a similar test in the UK (where it has been administered for years) has shown that this test is no more effective in identifying children with literacy problems than class room teachers. (See <https://theconversation.com/new-phonics-test-will-do-nothing-to-improve-australian-childrens-literacy-83045>)
- Australian students of all ability levels do comparatively poorly on the Pisa Science test which, despite its name, is in fact a reading comprehension test. The list could go on and on. They are all symptoms of an education system that has lost its way. Of politicians and bureaucrats addicted to the 'quick fix', the knee-jerk' reaction; the politically expedient.

In this submission I argue for:

- The much more professional and rigorous training of teachers
- A re-structuring of the curriculum in Years 1-9 to produce greater integration of subjects and to prevent overloading through 'bolt-ons'.
- Greater, not less, autonomy for schools in terms of the writing of school programs and the development of appropriate assessment instruments
- An assessment regime that not only evaluates student performance but also guides the writing of unit plans and provides transparency in how assessments are made

- The teaching of high-level subject-specific literacy across the curriculum
- A revamp of the current conventional staffing model to put much greater emphasis on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment rather than on management.

Main submission

1. New Basics.

I recommend strongly that the panel should look closely at a program of curriculum structure and delivery developed by educational academics in Queensland in the 1990s called New Basics. This program takes a trans-disciplinary approach to curriculum in Years 1-9 and is organised in three three-year blocks. The program comprises three sub-programs: Productive Pedagogies; Literate Futures; and Rich Tasks. New Basics is based on earlier work undertaken at the University of Wisconsin by Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage under the banner of authentic learning and authentic assessment.

(See <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr93/vol50/num07/Five-Standards-of-Authentic-Instruction.aspx> for more information.)

The adoption of New Basics would involve a significant re-structuring of how schools operate. Teachers, too, would be challenged by the demands of Productive Pedagogies in how they teach. The Literate Futures component of New Basics would also challenge Primary teachers who are currently required to take a narrow phonics approach to literacy. (Of course, there is no approach to literacy across the curriculum at all in Australian high schools.)

2. ROSBA.

The ROSBA system in Queensland has been one of the most important innovations in education ever undertaken in Australia. It is probably the only approach to student assessment which has treated teachers as professionals, capable of developing school-based study programs and appropriate assessment instruments in all subjects.

The ROSBA system was compromised right from the start by the requirement that it should serve not only the legitimate demands of school assessment but also act at Year 12 as a university entrance exam via the Queensland Core Skills Test. ROSBA has also been undermined in more recent times by reduced funding from the Queensland government.

Now the Queensland government has decided to add an external assessment component at Year 12 level in line with other states. This external test will inevitably

influence teaching and learning in schools, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum and to a further de-skilling of teachers.

I would argue that all other states should be following Queensland into a ROSBA-like system that values teachers' professional skills and knowledge rather than the reverse.

3. Criterion-referenced assessment.

Rightly or wrongly assessment drives teaching and learning. Therefore, the design of assessment instruments is crucial. At the moment in Australia the external examination remains the preferred form of assessment, especially at the senior level although, of course, at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 NAPLAN tests are a form of defacto external test. Unfortunately, external exams reinforce teaching methods that emphasise rote learning, memorisation, de-contextualisation of content and so on. I argue instead for 'authentic task-specific criterion-referenced assessment'. 'Authentic' (see New Basics above) and 'task-specific' mean assessment based on real tasks designed for real-world audiences to achieve authentic purposes. 'Criterion-referenced' means that the criteria to be met in each task and the standards of performance achieved must be made explicit by the teacher. This form of assessment can be used for formative, diagnostic and summative purposes and can also be used as a very useful pedagogic tool both during the teaching of a unit of work and later as a way for students to critique their own work through the feedback provided by the teacher. (See <http://www.innovativeconservatoire.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Sadler-%E2%80%93-Opening-up-feedback-Teaching-learners-to-see-%E2%80%93-Publication-2013.pdf>).

Criterion-referenced assessment also contributes to the professional growth of teachers by requiring them to think very carefully about the nature of the assessment tasks they set. Recently there has been a regression to earlier low reliability forms of assessment such as use of percentages, 'marks out of ten', impression marking and so on. These approaches simply reduce the credibility of assessment regimes in the minds of students and parents and are of no use as a teaching tool.

Criterion-referenced assessment is just one of a number of ideas developed in a suite of documents written by Professor Royce Sadler of the Queensland University of Technology (See https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/publications/research_qbssss_rosba_11.pdf) for the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies in the 1990s. Needless to say this approach was resisted by Mathematics and Science teachers who persisted in using recall of knowledge exam-based assessment approaches.

4. Literacy as a social practice.

Literacy as a concept in the context of Australian education is simply not understood. It is usually treated as 'a thing' (spelling, punctuation, 'grammar' rules' and so on) or as a skill to be developed through phonics drills, 'reading clubs' and the like. In fact, literacy is a social practice which changes from context to context. The explicit teaching of subject-specific literacy should lie at the heart of all subjects across the curriculum. Instead, content area teachers persist in putting responsibility for literacy teaching on English teachers with predictable results. (I should point out that I regard English as a content area, too.) Many students simply cannot handle the language demands of, say, the STEM subjects and consequently drop out. The irony is that there are some wonderful literacy programs available to teachers if they were encouraged, and trained, to use them. I have in mind David Rose's Reading to Learn program and Bill Green's Literacy in 3D model. However, putting language learning at the heart of teaching in the content areas would require a complete change of the mind-set of teachers in those subjects. At the moment, for example, most teachers of Mathematics work in only one of Green's three dimensions, the Operational, which essentially means Drill and Skill. Little wonder most students get out of Mathematics as soon as possible. Science teachers, too, treat their subjects as bodies of knowledge rather than as discourses into which students are to be inducted. As professor of education, physicist and science philosopher Jay Lemke has said: "Learning science means learning to talk science... Talking science means observing, describing, comparing, classifying, analysing, discussing, hypothesizing, theorizing, questioning, challenging, arguing, designing experiments, following procedures, judging, evaluating, deciding, concluding, generalizing, reporting ... in and through the language of science" (P 1.) However, this is not the current approach to teaching Science in Australian schools.

(Jay Lemke. Talking Science: Language, Learning, and Values. Ablex Publishing, 1990.)

Unless literacy education is completely re-conceptualised we can expect continuing poor results not only on so-called literacy tests but on, say, Pisa Science tests.

5. A new model of school leadership.

Politicians who talk about school autonomy and handing over responsibility for school education to Principals simply want to deflect criticism from themselves onto others. In the current model of school leadership principals are usually ambitious teachers who have sought to climb a rather truncated career ladder. Once they reach senior administrative positions inside a school they essentially become managers of school business rather than educational leaders.

I propose a new model of school leadership:

- The administrative functions of a school should be carried out by a business manager responsible for all aspects of the day to day running of the school.

- The most senior position in the school should be that of Dean of Studies responsible for the overall implementation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the school. The person who occupied this position in a school would have high-level post-graduate qualifications in education and would be authorised to promote best practice across all subject areas in the school.
- These two positions would obviously be supported by deputies of appropriate qualifications and by a group of well qualified heads of departments.