



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

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Summary

The history of the Victorian educational system provides a case study for this Australian review: decentralised policies between 1970 and 1990, with appropriate support for schools and teachers, improved learning, teaching and attainment. Different impacts flowed from the centralised policies from 1990 till now - with flat-lining and declines in student attainment. The current focus on a quantified, generalised evidence-base to drive improvement needs to be balanced with respect for individual teachers' autonomous decision-making and professionalism. When the profession is valued, teachers trust their experience and their art. They approach their work as a developing, ongoing iteration of theory and praxis. They must be free to develop their own evidence-base for their student cohorts (as against having to stick to priorities set by government accountability regimes). When teachers are listened to, responded to, and respected they will teach well. They will tune in to students as individuals and make curriculum worth learning in the living moment (it is unrealistic to focus on one's remote future employment or the good of the country). New, emerging actions include research into teaching and learning as a dialogic pair, student receptivity and appetite for learning, and the potency of dialogic imagination - its value for provoking learning as a living aspect of cognition that thrives in an open, living classroom discourse (see my recent doctoral research, Zibell 2017). Current scientific learning theory is congruent with use of dialogic imagination as a pedagogy.

Main submission

Below I summarise Victoria's educational policy history since 1970, a case study for the effects of Australian government policies from 1970 to 1990 in which power and control were de-centralised, coinciding with improved student attainment, versus centralising policies from 1990 to 2017 which coincided with flat-lining and/or decline. I address review goals, themes and questions.

The 'Karmel Report' (1973) was instigated due to "serious deficiencies in Australia's schools" (p. 139): a lack of resources, 'gross' inequality of opportunity for students, inadequate training of teachers and poor professional development. These circumstances have returned to Australian life.

The Karmel Report changed Australia's national policy picture: I summarise key points:

1. The review focused on improving equality of opportunity and prioritised a school climate in which "the cash return...and the access [education] give[s] to power" did not determine students' future: "education and people are valued...the influences of the market place do not dictate..." (p. 14).
2. Responsibility for education was devolved to "people involved in the actual task of schooling..."; it recommended "less... centralised control over the operation of schools" (p. 10) to leverage effective local decision-making.
3. Key 'values and perspectives' included prioritisation of public funding for public schools, encouragement of community and parental involvement and lifelong learning.
4. Schools' traditional functions were reinforced; special' purposes: to promote "confident, self-initiated learning... creative response[s]" and for individual children to "develop...[a]...sense of identity..." along with compassion for others, were proposed. The committee wanted Australian students to belong, and "to value other people as ends in themselves rather than [to] fulfil...one's own purposes..." All that is specifically human, the Report stated, "is an artefact of culture...[and]...has to be learned". Meanwhile, "No choice exists between education for enjoyment and education for learning" (p. 14).
5. In practical terms the review identified and funded 'disadvantaged schools' (mine was one); established community 'education centres' run by practising teachers (I used mine regularly); provided teacher 'in-service education' (I personally benefitted); and encouraged greater community involvement in schools (a key strategy I used).

Assessment was the teacher's responsibility, testing did not dominate school life. Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) tests for literacy and mathematics were set biannually. Principals gave teachers educative feedback, collegial teacher meetings encouraged ideas-sharing and mutual support. Annual school inspections occurred. Schools drew parents and community members into day-to-day running and celebrated student learning. In the words of the Karmel Report (1973) such, "Participation in...a caring community which sets out to build social relationships through its methods of teaching and learning can, by reducing the alienation of the individual, be a regenerating force in society," (p. 14). As PISA testing began in 2000, Australian student attainment was in the top ten across the globe.

During the early 1990s policy change was introduced. Political, market, bureaucratic and social control over schools increased; centralisation strengthened (Hattie, 1993). Education's significance for economic outcomes sparked the rationale. Centralisation coincided with the Program for International Student Assessment's (PISA) birth (Hanushek & Woessman, 2010). Governments sought greater control and a stronger say over schools.

In 1993 John Hattie predicted schools would become "more uniform, audited and accredited...[and] give primacy to centralised political control," (p. 3). Teachers, principals and universities would be ignored as a "greater interest in efficiency and productivity" developed - as against "quality teaching and learning." Students would be "treated as objects of economic value... [to] be enhanced via...testing ...and benchmarks." In consequence, he said, Australia could expect, "more narrowly skilled rather than critically reflective students and teachers..." There would be "no progress," Hattie added (p. 17/18). He called for redefinition of the 'plot for the future' and for teachers and principals to be included in policy discussions (p. 18).

The sequence of changes he predicted unfolded in Victoria in curriculum, assessment, registration and standards.

Impacts and consequences of reversal of policy dynamics from de-centralised to centralised.

- Economic language was in policy documents by mid-1990. 'Australia's economy needs an education revolution,' (Rudd & Smith, 2007) placed economics front and centre of Australian education, explicitly linking it to national and international economic purposes and ends. By 2009 economic language reached early childhood education policy.
- The potential profits of a testing culture translated to extraordinary growth of commercial educational opportunity generating economic supply chains.
- Political goals to mesh economics and education led to exorbitant monies spent on centralisation and teacher accountability.
- Little value for money ensued. Australian students' performance from 2000 to 2012 declined in reading from 4th to 17th; mathematics 5th to 19th; and science 7th to 16th (Thomson, De Bortoli & Buckley, 2013). Analysis from the United States already showed expenditure per student spent this way brought little improvement, (Hanushek, Rivkin & Jamison, 1992).
- Centralising policy may now be actively harming student attainment but negative impacts are ignored by governments. Increasingly Australian and international research evidence shows effects upon schools, teaching and the culture of learning (Mills & McGregor, 2016; Luke, 2010; Milburn, 2011; Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013; Hardy,

2013; Richardson, Karabenick & Watt, 2014; Mason & Matas, 2015; Terhart, 2011; Dinham, 2013; Hattie, 1993; Polesel, 2013; Lobascher, 2011).

Effective Teaching – the mixed messages

Effective teaching, (Hattie, 2012), fostered by mutual trust and co-operation, promotes a positive and dialogic approach, with peer collaboration and the welcoming of error as powerful opportunity for learning. Dialogic teaching and learning is underpinned by an open learning atmosphere (Bakhtin, 1981) centralisation closes it (monologic) by tying it to predetermined outcomes. Activator teachers are likely to be effective now despite centralisation. Thompson and Harbaugh's (2013, p. 301) research shows a climate of social and economic competitiveness between teachers and schools (e.g. via NAPLAN publication on 'MySchool') which increases teacher anxiety, arouses mutual distrust, saps positivity and erodes collegiality. Mason and Matas (2015) say the teaching profession is devalued due to heightened pressures on teachers to perform arising from standardised testing, intensification of teacher workloads and other demands. Milburn (2011) indicates significant teacher dissatisfaction and attrition applies to "between 25 and 40 per cent of teachers [who] leave the profession within five years..." Research evidence emerges of detrimental effects of centralised policies on teaching and learning culture, teacher morale and student anxiety to the point where conflict with the motivations and goals that draw people into teaching is surfacing and some policy enforcement comes at the expense of teachers' health and positive endeavour. Richardson, Karabenick and Watt, (2014) report mandated standardisation of students pressures teacher standardisation and is counterproductive since (their research shows) effective teachers show less standard - or routine - teaching behaviours.

Hardy (2013) says NAPLAN is insulated from criticism because it carries the express authority of the federal government; policy-makers are distanced from living classrooms - teachers cannot question the decisions. "High NAPLAN results" are now the "symbolic capital of most value" in education (p. 358) as reflected in contemporary news features and school billboards. Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) find NAPLAN influences teachers' inclination to "teach to the test, [they] spend less time on...curriculum areas...not assessed..." (p. 301); this is corroborated by Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer (2013). Barry McGaw (Chairman of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) says, 'there's no point in teaching to the test...the best preparation for the test is a good, rich curriculum...' (Abo, 2014), and Hattie, in 2011, affirmed the dialogic relationship of teacher and student to rich content is the heart of teachers' work. He also discussed fostering intrinsic motivation, engaging students in continuous improvement, inspiring team work, and ensuring teachers impact all students. He identified "failed levers" of educational improvement as reliance on test results, teacher appraisals to reward or punish,

over-reliance on digital resources, and fragmented strategies (p.23). The Karmel committee (1973) rejected centralisation as unproductive – and consciously devolved control to spark school accountability to community. Their policy innovations co-existed with a rise in Australia’s educational standards from ‘poor’ to global top ten in 2000. Coincidence?

Luke (2010) reviewed Australian school reform literature of research into enacted curriculum (what occurs in classrooms) to determine factors for improvement. He concluded dominant instructional patterns diminished Australian teaching and learning: “instruction...devoted to basic skills and basic curriculum content... students...completing worksheets, copying [from]...the board, answering questions at the end of chapters...activity-based ‘busy work’...” (p. 5). These minimise direct student-teacher engagement: the learning relationship is between student and object (worksheet, I-pad, text book). Thomson, Lingard and Wrigley (2012) call this a ‘curriculum of small measurable bites’ (p. 2); detrimental effects arise in their view because students fail to make comprehensive meaning. Luke (2010) views a teacher’s work as remaking the official syllabus “through the/lenses and practices of [their] substantive world, field and disciplinary knowledge” then bringing it “to life in classrooms in relation to teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and students’ cultural scripts and background schemata,” through their orchestrations, art and effort: “there is no direct ‘hypodermic’ effect between the official curriculum and the enacted curriculum,” (p. 1/2). Elsewhere (see my thesis, Zibell, 2016) I have set out reasons for teachers’ uptake of a curriculum of small bites when influenced by centralising policies.

Hardy (2015) states the relational dynamic between teachers, students, parents and the educational community – meant to be mutually supportive, as in the Karmel Report – is now “infused with [the] power relations of government policy,” (p.336). Australian students increasingly fail to listen, are noisier and more disruptive (Thomson, De Bortoli & Buckley, 2013); deterioration of positive teacher-student relations is noted in PISA (OECD, 2014). Lobascher (2011) affirms centralised testing has reduced student motivation and escalated behavioural management problems.

Impacts of education reform on pedagogy

When educational policy was de-centralised (Karmel, 1973) teachers exercised their art autonomously, understood their accountability to their communities and to government authorities. They developed their own living evidence-base to improve student outcomes. Now teachers are between a rock and a hard place: predominantly accountable to centralised authorities which challenge their autonomy but blamed by their communities if they fail to be autonomous. The combined political, societal, school and parental pressures inflicted on teachers and learners make education burdensome. Stewart (2016) says teachers are in a double bind: “relegated to acting...within traditional dialogue structures yet held responsible

for pervasive problems,” (p.146). As professionals they may resist, maintain pedagogy of choice, practice their art and continue to generate a rich culture of meaning-making from principles of effective teaching; alternatively they may ‘teach to the test’, become compliant with the need for short term results (particularly with disadvantaged students). After a decade-long era of ‘testing culture’, Polesel (2013) discusses how limited learning experiences have become - in particular those connecting students to the wider world. “The benefits of a broad curriculum that encourages creativity, problem-solving...provides for physical activity and engaged learning, are well established... [but] teachers will focus on the areas in which students will be tested...” (p. 643). Lobascher (2011) argues from extensive research that “high-stakes testing discourages teachers from being creative...instead encourages didactic teach-to-the-test approaches that reduce motivation” (p. 14).

Are government efforts to ‘fix’ Australian education changing teacher practice too effective?

Politicians will not want to relinquish control and will likely refuse to entertain that testing, enforcement and teacher accountability are counter-productive. But learning depends on openness of mind to the new: productive teaching atmospheres must first be open. Policy pressures are closing them as teachers focus on specific (monologic) outcomes. The culture of competitiveness and external punishments/rewards is thus in opposition to learning improvements and may be setting teachers up to attain mediocre results because it devalues actual moments of living learning in favour of ‘evidence’ of learning - attainment of an educational standard or supposed step toward remote future employment. Alarm bells should be ringing! Luke (2010) states, “The overall picture counters the Vygotskian axiom of teaching in advance of development, of stretching students’ knowledge... capacities and imagination beyond what they can readily do,” (p. 4). We need to open and free up our classrooms: support greater everyday happiness, dialogic exchange, imagination, and passion for educational work. Respect, trust and teacher professionalism are essential.

Solving the crisis

Thomson, Lingard and Wrigley (2012) call for ‘pedagogies of difference’ to revitalise and inspire a new approach: life-enhancing, rich teaching and learning, contextualised to living schools and their communities, unshackled from narrow economic purposes and a culture of testing. They advocate teaching and learning that enables broader societal and personal human purposes to be entwined into school life as well as strengthened face-to-face engagement and meaning-making. Language is important: Stewart (2010) says that when dry curriculum is brought to life language is dynamic: “Words come alive”, (p. 6). He asserts that “policymakers must be willing to engage in dialogue with teachers and researchers about what counts as teaching and learning...[for]... any hope of creating lasting reform,” (p. 16). Illeris

(2017) calls it a matter of global urgency that schooling has become ‘almost...a matter of industrial production [meanwhile] ...insight into how human learning and non-learning take place has been marginalised and biased’ (p. xiii).

Bakhtin (1981), the theorist behind dialogic learning, describes one-sidedness in schools of his context and time (1930s Russia). Monologic discourse was the norm, dialogic discourse which opened students up to learning was “backed...by no authority...frequently not even acknowledged by society...” He lamented it went unrecognised even though its interrelationship with authoritative, centralised discourses determined the development of students’ “individual ideological consciousness,” i.e. the capacity to think autonomously, (p. 342).

Bakhtin’s hope

Australia is inadvertently in this position right now: our diminished educational potentiality is strongly influenced by monologism. Bakhtin said schools did not have to be like this: “Both the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness [its open dialogic qualities] may be united...” (p. 342). He offers hope for a union of discourses in our classrooms by involving students in living, dialogic, teaching-learning events that are congruent with authoritative syllabus content.

New, emerging areas for action

We need research into teaching and learning as a dialogic partnership. And research into how to increase student receptivity and appetite for learning; not through teaching as entertainment, but out of deep understanding of imagination’s role in meaning-making. Dialogic imagination refers to imagination exchange between teacher and student that sparks learning. Teachers have always provoked their students’ imaginations for learning purposes - right back to ancient Rome. The practice is congruent with contemporary cognitive science regarding perception, cognition and learning.

My research into teaching with imagination as a pedagogic art (Zibell, 2016) investigated teachers’ meanings and understandings of imagination’s potency. I situated the research internationally and discussed several conceptualisations of imagination, then constructed a comprehensive theoretical framework that re-conceptualised Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic imagination and combined his philosophy of discourse with Paul Ricoeur’s (date) philosophy of imagination, and Jens Brockmeier’s (date) narrative imagination. I compared and contrasted teachers’ meanings and reported practice to the framework and found strong congruence. Contrary to existing stereotypes, imagination, as dialogic imagination, emerges as cognitive: it catalyses metaphoric meaning-making events. The teachers’ pedagogical choices demonstrate rational support for learning in an atmosphere of open living discourse that permits narrative imagination. Teaching and learning theory, in the

doldrums for two decades, is renewed with these exciting new ideas on the potency of dialogic imagination for student learning.

As explained above, Australian educational policy has increasingly leveraged a closed classroom discourse. Teachers and students comply with national testing regimes which demand monologic responses tied to finalised syllabus requirements. The experienced teachers in my research showed they could keep living discourse and imagination open and alive in spite of this, they thus demonstrate Bakhtin's hope (above). The Bakhtin/ Ricoeur/Brockmeier theoretical framework offers a rationale and clear criteria for teaching that supports dialogic imagination in living classrooms. It clarifies how teachers can use it to effectively provoke and catalyse learning events.

When the participants' understandings and professional art offered such a strong voice for imagination I wanted to contribute to this review. The research participants generated antidotes for depressing impacts of current policy regimes; their art brought positive side effects: enthusiasm for their work, student well-being and sense of belonging, improved classroom management and teacher-student relations.

A rapidly growing body of literature has emerged since the early 2000's about the concept of a 'dialogic pedagogy' (Alexander, 2015; Matusov, 2010; Stewart, 2010 and others). The potential contribution of a 'dialogic imagination' to that pedagogy builds great power for improved pedagogy. Stewart states "a growing body of research supports the notion that a dialogic pedagogy can be highly effective" (p. 15). Alexander (2015) says academically productive talk, "Provides tools for student engagement, learning and cognitive advancement of unique and undeniable power ... the resulting cognitive and communicative gains transfer [between] ...curriculum domain[s]... and offer larger benefits for social cohesion, cultural engagement and democratic vitality..." (p. 413)

Illeris (2017) recently articulated contemporary learning theory and summed up current knowledge about the science of learning. He asserts reason cannot "function independently of... emotions" (p. 13): reason, knowledge, feelings and emotions are inseparable. He explains scientific evidence for imagination's part in the learning process: each sense forms images which are deliberated upon in the executive brain along with re-activated information from long term memory, "a print of the event with... associated emotions and reactions" is fixed in long term memory to constitute an "impulse to...learning that can later be recalled and activated in connection with relevant new events or situations" (p. 14). This powerfully supports my thesis. Bakhtin, Ricoeur and Brockmeier's theory extends upon the science: they theorise the dialogic interaction between student and teacher and describe the cognition involved.

More than simple engagement – imagination engages students in learning: it offers a milieu to convey learning, a catalytic process by which to learn, and structures a narrative within which to manage learning environments.

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