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## MENTAL HEALTH, reporting and education futures



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Mental health, reporting and education futures



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# Mental health, reporting and the future of education

John Graham

The Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system has raised public concern about the adequacy and quality of existing mental health support and services. There is a strong sense that this is an area which for too long has been operating as the poor cousin in public health. It is seen as full of complexities, subject to misinformation and stigma, under-funded and without a political consensus about the way forward. Schools and early childhood settings are central to any considerations about what needs to be done to improve this situation because of the age of their students and because of their function as "caring for the whole student—mind, body and character—no matter how students arrive, and no matter what their learning conditions, their home conditions, or their health conditions"<sup>1</sup>

A major theme of this edition of *Professional Voice* is the mental health and wellbeing of students and their teachers. Three of the articles directly relate to this theme. The first of these from Vicki McKenzie outlines the growing concern about mental illness in Australia and its incidence in school age children and young people. She describes the central role schools play in identifying and supporting students with mental health problems and in referring them to mental health services outside of the school. Schools are also seen as "an ideal venue to nurture the skills for developing positive life skills and the capacity to be resilient in face of diversity".

Schools however, run into a series of problems when they try to address the mental health issues of their students. McKenzie points out that not all of the professionals teachers can refer students to are equally qualified. Some, such as psychologists, are required by law to be registered and are subject to professional standards, others are not. The numbers of psychologists in schools and in state public services are too few to meet demand with the result that schools have been increasingly referring students to private practitioners.

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**John Graham** is editor of *Professional Voice* and works as a research officer at the Australian Education Union (Vic). He has been a secondary teacher, worked on national and state-based education programs and in the policy division of the Victorian Education Department. He has carried out research in a wide range of areas related to education and training. He has had particular responsibility for the many issues impacting on teachers and teaching as a profession, teacher education, curriculum change, and the politics, organisation and funding of public education. He has written extensively in various publications about all of these matters.

The workload of psychologists actually working in schools is such that they are unable to spend enough time working on preventative programs because of the demand for direct assessment services. One way of meeting the demand for more in-school support is to fund scholarships to increase the number of psychologists specifically trained to work in the education sector.

John Graham's article complements that of Vicki McKenzie's. It outlines existing research on the impact of schooling on student mental health and wellbeing, particularly in relation to high stakes testing and examinations and describes the results of a survey of 3,000 teachers, principals and education support staff employed in Victoria's public schools. The survey results present a picture of high levels of observed characteristics related to student mental health concerns and a strong view that mental health issues are having a negative impact on student learning. The incidence and impact of mental health concerns was greater in survey schools in low SES communities and large regional centres. The survey also revealed unmet needs for school-based psychologists and a high level of dissatisfaction with access to external mental health services.

While Graham's article is about student mental health, the AEU survey also asked school staff about their own wellbeing and mental health. The staff results were in line with a number of other recent research studies which found that teaching can be a very stressful occupation which can contribute to significant mental health difficulties for teachers and principals. As one teacher said: *You can't teach wellbeing if you aren't feeling it yourself.* Paulina Billett, Rochelle Fogelgarn and Edgar Burns from La Trobe University reinforce this claim in their study of teachers being bullied by students and parents. They describe the difficult situation bullied teachers find themselves in when an unsympathetic school management questions their professionalism and implies that the teachers themselves were to blame and the solution was for them to improve their performance.

The La Trobe study found that the bullying of teachers is more common than previously realised, with teachers in the secondary sector more often bullied by students and those in the primary sector by parents. Female teachers aged 21-30 working in the secondary sector reported the highest level of bullying. The results of bullying included increased anxiety levels, an undermining of the sense of being an effective teacher and a general professional disempowerment. For many bullied teachers the impact on their mental health was severe. The authors report that a high proportion reported "suffering symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD, including panic attacks and uncontrollable shaking".

While student reports are one of the staples of schooling and of teacher work, they have not been a popular topic for education research. Hilary Hollingsworth and Jonathan Heard

are seeking to remedy this through their study of how student learning is communicated to parents. What they reveal is just how complex the process of communication is and how the 'legacy' semester report is now under pressure through new technology systems and a realisation that reporting performance is not the same as reporting progress. School Management Systems such as Compass are moving schools away from semester reporting to what is generally referred to as 'continuous reporting' – communicating with parents in regular instalments rather than twice a year. The authors however, point out that more timely reporting does not necessarily mean better communication of student progress.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of commentators on education who are always worth reading is their capacity to take on the prevailing wisdom and indicate that there is a better way forward. Alan Reid, Pasi Sahlberg and James Ladwig all fall into this category.

Alan Reid's article is about moving 'learning to learn' into the centre of the curriculum in an age of "significant disruption" where the capacity to learn and re-learn is becoming ever more important. He identifies the need for further development of the learning to learn concept and a change of name to 'meta-learning'. He opts for this name rather than 'metacognition' because "research demonstrate[s] that an understanding of the processes of learning involves a range of aspects such as the social, emotional, physical and sensory, which go beyond a focus on metacognition". He emphasises that meta-learning is not to be seen as something separate from the content of what is taught or how it is taught. Rather it is integral to both and involves students in deep reflection on their learning as they work with content knowledge.

James Ladwig contends that some time ago Australian education took a disastrous wrong turn by opting for standardisation at the expense of "the fundamental linchpin in quality schooling" – the professional judgement of teachers. The current system architecture is "standardised, stratified, countable" and may meet the needs of politicians but it has shown no evidence of improving student achievement. What it has done however, is to move the intellectual work of teachers into standardised categories defined by management, thereby deskilling them. The result of this is that "what were once widespread teacher capacities in local curriculum design and development had been forfeited to (extremely well-paid) bureaucrats". He sees the same processes in teacher education programs which "by and large no longer teach the history and practice of curriculum design, nor the philosophy and history of education". The way forward, according to Ladwig, is for the system to concentrate on finding answers to the key improvement question: 'how do we build systems that increase the likelihood that teachers will make intelligent and wise decisions in their work?'

This is the second time *Professional Voice* has interviewed the highly respected Finnish education expert Pasi Sahlberg. The first time was in 2014 on a visit to Melbourne, this time he is a resident in Australia and Deputy Director of the Gonski Institute at the University of NSW. His greater knowledge of the Australian education system has sharpened his insight into what and how we can improve what happens in our schools. He identifies three major ways in which Australian education can be improved. Firstly, the orientation of primary schools needs to be much less about the academic progress and performance of young children and much more about their happiness, wellbeing and making friends. Compared to other education jurisdictions he believes Australia is asking its children “to do too much too early”.

*One of the important things in the future will be to make sure every child learns at school how to live a healthy, meaningful and happy life, and how to take care of themselves and others. Academic knowledge and skills are important, but life skills - learning to self-control your own behaviours and understanding what is bad for you - will be the next big thing in the future.*

Secondly, the system needs to clearly demonstrate that it has confidence and trust in the professional judgement of teachers and reduce the role of NAPLAN to a sample-based system check only. The third area of improvement is making the education system more equitable. Presently Australia has one of the most segregated education systems in the world with “the biggest proportion of disadvantaged children going to disadvantaged schools compared to any other country [in the OECD]”. Australia will not substantially improve student learning outcomes, until it makes the system they learn in fairer for all.

## Notes

- 1 NEA, Education Support Professionals: Meeting the needs of the whole student [https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/150306-ESP\\_DIGIBOOK.pdf](https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/150306-ESP_DIGIBOOK.pdf)

# Mental health needs emerging in the school system

Vicki McKenzie

## Prevalence of mental health emerging in childhood

Mental illness and suicide risk are growing public health concerns in Australia – almost half of all Australians experience a mental illness in their lifetime (ABS 2018), and indigenous rates of psychological issues and suicide are nearly 3 times greater than the national average (ARACY, 2013). There have been substantial efforts to address this issue with numerous new initiatives and investments increasing resources directed to treatment agencies such as *Headspace*, *Beyond Blue* and others, but concerns remain about the rate of suicide and the frequency of mental health issues being presented in hospital emergency centres (APS White Paper, 2019). This sits in the context of increasing family breakdown, violence, mobility of families, lack of family support where it is most needed, vulnerabilities, reduced local social cohesion and in schools increased numbers of children in out of home care, and growing school absentee rates.

Concerns about young people are reflected in news headlines such as 'Mental health system fails children', *The Age* August 1, 2019 and 'The Age of Anxiety', *The Age*, August 11, 2019. Figures indicate that children and young people are impacted negatively by experiencing a mental health disorder. One in 5 adolescents experience depression by the age of 18 years, (WHO, 2019), 1 in 7 children aged 4-17 years are affected by mental health disorders, with anxiety disorders being the most prevalent, and major depressive disorders present in 1 in 20 adolescents from 12-17 years (Lawrence et al, 2015). Almost 10 per cent of children aged 6-7 are reported to show signs of social-emotional stress, and up to 1 in 5 young people live with a family where a parent has a mental illness, with consequent impact on their own

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**Vicki McKenzie** is Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne and is Coordinator of the Master of Educational Psychology, and Master of Educational Psychology/PhD programs. Dr McKenzie also has experience as the leader of a multi-disciplinary team of school support personnel working with schools on systemic intervention in the areas of student and community wellbeing. She has written on the resources, resilience and coping skills of disengaged students, and has presented at national and international conferences on building coping skills and resilience in young people. Training psychologists for professional practice in schools has been a central component of Dr McKenzie's professional career. She is currently Chair of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) College of Educational and Developmental Psychologists, and is a Fellow of the Society.

development (Mayberry, Reupert, Patrick & Goodyear, 2009; Goodsell, Lawrence, Ainley, Sawyer, Zubrik & Maratos, 2017). 50 per cent of lifelong mental health issues start before the age of 14 years (Sawyer, et al., 2010) so early intervention is crucial for ameliorating suffering and building strengths for future adult life.

Experiencing mental health problems can affect the development and adaptation of young people, as they are associated with lower educational achievement, poor school attendance and engagement (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick & McGorry, 2007; Lamb & Rice, 2008), and increased risk of suicide and suicidal behaviour. Childhood difficulties have been associated with increased risk of social exclusion and physical ill health and development of psychiatric disorders, depression, anxiety and substance use in adulthood (WHO, 2018, Lester, Waters & Cross, 2013). Children with mental health disorders, conduct disorder and ADHD have been found to have lower scores on national testing, miss more days at school and have lower scores on connectedness (APS Submission to the Productivity Commission, 2019). Learning and conduct issues also come with wellbeing risks, and can be associated with later mental health problems. Remote areas are underserved by health professionals, and families must travel significant distances to gain treatment (APS Submission to the Productivity Commission, 2019).

With new developmental and community demands, the school is often the first focus of interest when these issues arise. With the concerns about mental health presentations increasing, schools are seen as a major provider of mental health services and referral sources (Lawrence et al., 2015) and a target for Mental Health promotion (WHO, 2018). The school is considered an ideal venue to nurture the skills for developing positive life skills and the capacity to be resilient in face of diversity. The collaborative program developed in partnership with Beyond Blue and Early Childhood Australia titled *Be You* is a new program that has grown out of evidence based programs developed for schools to use to enhance coping skills and thereby reduce mental ill-health (Be You, 2019). The *Be You* program provides a range of resources for schools to build capacity in students that will contribute to prevention, early intervention and mental health promotion. Schools are encouraged to build positive support structures for students and school-community environments to nurture belonging, engagement, resilience and connectedness. *Be You* is one of many initiatives, and it is up to schools to select appropriate approaches to its student needs. There is an abundance of programs and on-line information to access, which can be confusing and overwhelming for schools hoping to do the best for their students. It is difficult to select and sustain these programs when there is no specific person to maintain the interest and ongoing support in the school. Experience in schools demonstrates that teachers are often keen to work on these programs but need advice and guidance in implementing them over time.

While building the strengths of the schools to support students, there remains a high need for close work between schools and appropriate clinicians: to interpret this material, help identify students in need of early intervention, and pick up the challenge of working with the complex day to day student presentations that arise.

### The service providers in schools

There are many professions contributing to the wellbeing of children in schools, and they may have different titles. For example, there may be Educational Psychologists, Clinical Psychologists, Counselling Psychologists or General Psychologists. There might also be School Counsellors (no registration needed), School Guidance workers (no registration needed), School teachers, School Principals, School Chaplains (code of practice but no registration needed), School Social Workers, Mental Health workers, and a range of others. Some of these professionals are required by law to be registered and are subject to professional standards, others are not.

Psychologist, counsellor, clinician, and practitioner: what importance rests on a professional title? In fact the title a service provider uses is extremely important. It is important to the practitioner so that they can clearly advise on the service they can provide. It is essential to the client that they can understand that the person treating them has expertise in the area of concern, and be reassured that expertise can be corroborated in professional documentation or professional registration. Understanding of the professional area of expertise is also key information needed by the person recommending consultation, whether it be a teacher or general practitioner, as their recommendation will hold weight. It is also necessary information for funding bodies, employers and other health professionals, as it allows clarity and verification as to what service is based on, what training has been undertaken, and what experience has been gained.

### Special role of teachers

Being with children and adolescents every day is a great training ground in how young people grow, change and cope. The teacher is a privileged person observing this development, and watching and working with young people as they work through their life stage tasks – learning, relating, problem solving, fitting in, setting goals are some of these. Teachers are encouraged to take note of this role in their work, being asked to build wellbeing and resilience while also succeeding in enabling their students to learn and achieve. As a potential referrer to services, teachers have been shown to be competent identifiers of children's difficulties, they are in an ideal situation to assist with early intervention, and evidence indicates that young people in difficulty are more likely to

approach someone they know and trust than search out professional help (Rickwood, Dean & Wilson, 2007). Teachers find that they need to be able to work with parents and families collaboratively, help young people deal with their reluctance to seek help, and modify their classroom practices to the diverse needs of their groups.

Whenever a new difficulty emerges, the community looks to the school to respond. The role of educational institutions has expanded from teaching essential academic skills to greater focus on overall development, and, in particular, fostering skills that will protect children when under pressure. Teachers are being trained in mental health first aid, and are to some extent expected to be able to identify students who need therapeutic services. At the same time they are expected to improve student performance on national assessments, keep up with demands of an expanding curriculum, and prepare students for tertiary education and future employment.

However, teachers are not trained clinicians and may be uncertain about which professionals have the training for working with the mental health needs of young people. How are teachers and school leadership to know who to engage to work with their students? A recent report by the Australian Psychological Society suggests that there is a highly variable skill base in the current mental health workforce in schools (2019). All young people need to be able to access high quality mental health support, and the school is the obvious accessible source of information as to who will provide this. Teachers need opportunities to fulfil their primary teaching role and not be expected to do work beyond their area of training. Schools need appropriately qualified personnel to assist them both in providing service or referring young people to the correct clinical service, and in working with the school to build capacity and connectedness in wellbeing and prevention programs.

There are presently no national standards for school support in Australia. The ratios of psychologists in schools to student numbers vary by State, and it is difficult to gain a clear picture of this. The APS reports that in a 2011 study there were 3,076 psychologists working in schools with a school population of 3,541,809, which indicates an estimated ratio of 1:1151. This is contrary to the APS recommended of 1:500, with a psychologist in each primary and secondary school (APS, Submission to the Productivity Commission, 2019).

An added complexity comes from the sharing of health and education responsibilities between state and federal governments, and balancing between the two levels of government can create inefficiencies and missing links in service (APS, White Paper, 2019). This is evident in schools referring students to private practitioners (funded through

Medicare) in place of using a school based service, and the shift of disability support to the Commonwealth NDIS system. The consequences are that fewer positions are offered in state public services, and numbers of psychologists in private practice have grown. This impacts school services, as in some cases well trained psychologists move to work privately, leaving school systems to employ those less experienced or qualified, thereby reducing services within the schools that work closely with teachers.

In a recent survey, Bell and McKenzie(2013) found that psychologists working in schools were keen to work with schools on preventative programs but the demand for direct assessment services left them little time to contribute systemic and prevention services. There were also inconsistent expectations of services expressed by psychologists, teachers and parents, highlighting how necessary it is to clarify the specific training and service offered by a health professional engaged by the school.

There are many excellent professionals involved with schools; however the clinical work with vulnerable young people and their families needs to be done with appropriately qualified professionals. Psychologists are required to be registered and update their work on a yearly basis with professional development and supervision. Their role in mental health is important and needs to be available in schools to support students and their teachers. Some registered psychologists are specifically trained to work in schools with young people, and with teachers.

## Changes

With a Royal Commission into Mental Health underway in Victoria, there are welcome changes being proposed and implemented. Some states have committed to a psychologist in each secondary school. It is becoming clear that the current mental health workforce is not adequate and highlights the need for more training places (APS media releases 9th May 2019, 21st June. [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)).

There are already psychologists employed in the public school system in Victoria, but they have been hindered by the demands created between numbers of referrals and available staff, and their work brief has evolved from direct work with schools to a consultancy model (DET). The introduction of a psychologist being based in all schools is a welcome one, but it is has not been established that the best model is to leave it to the schools to employ these practitioners, rather than employ more psychologists in the School Support Service teams that already work closely with schools.

## Where to from here?

The employment of registered psychologists in schools allows onsite support for school teachers and school programs. There are excellent programs looking at wellbeing and healthy relationships that can be utilised in collaborative work between teachers and psychologists. Use of appropriately qualified people and building constructive interventions are important steps to building a comprehensive program of intervention, early intervention and prevention in school settings. Noting that some psychologists are trained specifically to work in the education sector, an excellent channel for funding would be to support increased places in Universities in these Master courses and to provide training scholarships to encourage growth in the availability of educational psychologists. Professionals working with vulnerable children in schools can have significant impact on the individual and their future.

The important target is gaining the best service for the client – which is promoted when there is good understanding of the distinctive professional areas of knowledge and expertise that are available to support learners, teachers, parents, leadership teams and general wellbeing.

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# Student mental health and wellbeing in Victorian schools

John Graham

Schools have been identified as both a significant source of stress for many young people, often leading to symptoms such as depression and anxiety outside the normal range, and as an important site for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, including coping with stress.

*They are the central point of contact with both those who are currently experiencing mental health difficulties and those who may be vulnerable to such difficulties in the future and are often where symptoms of mental disorder are first identified.<sup>1</sup>*

The Black Dog Institute/Mission Australia 2012 – 16 surveys of young people aged 15-19 found that school or study problems ranked as the second most important issue of concern for those with a probable serious mental illness (behind coping with stress and ahead of depression). In 2016, 59.6 per cent of this group nominated school or study problems as something they were “very” or “extremely” concerned about. This was compared to 31.4 per cent of those who did not have a probable serious mental illness. The survey also found that young women (65.9%) had a greater prevalence of concern about school or study problems than young men (47.6%).<sup>2</sup>

In 2016, just under one in four young people aged 15-19 years of the 22,000 who responded to the Mission Australia Youth Survey met the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness. This represented a significant increase in the proportion of young people meeting this criteria over the five-year period 2012 (18.7%) to 2016 (22.8%).<sup>3</sup> In the most recent Mission Australia published survey (2018) of 15-19 year-olds, when asked to nominate the most

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important issue in Australia today, 43 per cent of the 28,000 respondents nominated mental health.<sup>4</sup> It was the most important issue for survey respondents in 2018 up from being the third most important issue (20.6%) in 2016.

While young people in the 15-19 age group have the highest likelihood of developing mental illness, and the proportion of those meeting the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness rising from 20.8 per cent among 15 year-olds to 27.4 per cent among 18/19 year-olds, it is now accepted that the underlying predispositions for mental disorders are shaped during childhood and that 50 per cent of mental health disorders begin before age 14 years and continue into early adulthood.<sup>5</sup> The federal government's 2015 study of the mental health of children and adolescents found that 6.9 per cent of children aged 4 – 11 had anxiety disorders.<sup>6</sup> It has also been found that some groups of children and young people are disproportionately affected by intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people, young people in out-of-home care, young people with a disability, and young people living in rural and remote areas.<sup>7</sup>

The level of concern about the rising incidence of mental health problems among secondary students was highlighted by the response of principals to an Age inquiry at the end of 2018. One principal told the reporter that at their school the number of students presenting with depression or anxiety rose from 285 in 2015 to 743 in 2017. The school also supported 298 students who were experiencing suicidal ideation or serious self-harm in 2017 compared to 47 in 2015.<sup>8</sup> Untreated mental health issues were related to poor attendance, disengagement, and poor relationships at school and home.

### High stakes testing and examinations

There are a number of specific school-based factors which have been linked to student mental health issues. Of particular concern is the stress created by high stakes testing and examinations. The impact of high stakes whole cohort testing (NAPLAN) in primary schools (Years 3 and 5) and lower secondary (Years 7 and 9) has negatively affected the wellbeing of many students. A teacher who completed the AEU mental health survey in June expressed a common concern among primary school teachers about the effect of the testing on young children:

*Students have asked me if NAPLAN will affect their high school applications and if it will affect their university applications. Many students lose sleep at night and I have had parents tell me that their children don't want to come to school during NAPLAN time. This is all during primary school years. News*

*outlets also directly cause students to worry as they watch the news reports about NAPLAN data.*

The Whitlam Institute/Melbourne University study of the impact of NAPLAN used a survey of 8,000 teachers across Australia to identify, among other things, the health and wellbeing issues for students involved in the testing. The study found that survey respondents stated that some of their students reported feeling stressed, a concern that they were too 'dumb', fear of parents' reaction to test scores, feeling sick before the test, freezing during the test, sleeplessness, and crying.<sup>9</sup> These findings are consistent with a range of other studies in Australia, the United States and the UK which link high stakes testing to concerns about student mental health and wellbeing.

The impact of the Year 12 examination system on student wellbeing and mental health has been an ongoing concern of teachers, parents and mental health professionals for a long time. This concern has been exacerbated more recently by evidence of increasing mental health issues in the senior school age group. One former Year 12 student indicated the pressure felt by vulnerable students faced with the high stakes exam environment: *I felt like I'd failed at life. I contemplated suicide after I left school and really the only thing that kept me here was understanding what that would do to my parents.*<sup>10</sup> Psychologists have pointed out the link between the timing of final exams and the age when teenagers are at their most vulnerable and often struggling with their mental health for the first time.

*"We know two very important things. One is that this age is the peak onset period for mood and anxiety disorders and we also have robust evidence that shows the prevalence of depression is increasing in younger people. We also know that if someone already has mental health issues that acute stress can precipitate even more serious mental illness or a deterioration in their mental health. So, it would be great to see a consideration of other methods of assessment that reduces a really acute period of stress around exam times."*

– Associate Professor Chris Davey from Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health<sup>11</sup>

67.8 per cent of respondents in the AEU mental health survey who were teaching VCE said that they had students with mental health issues in their classes and 85.2 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that mental health/wellbeing issues (identified in the survey) had negatively affected student learning at their school. One VCE teacher commented on the dilemma that they faced in 2018 which had implications for their own mental health as well as that of the students in the class.

*Last year, in one VCE class, I had 16 out of 20 kids on recognised mental health plans. It was overwhelming to deal with the volume of these students during a 'stressful' year. I nearly left teaching and for the first time in my career (28 years) was diagnosed with Anxiety. Teaching is such a different landscape and mental health issues are appearing in far greater numbers than ever before.*

## AEU Mental Health survey

The AEU Mental Health survey, carried out in June of this year, received 2,972 completed responses from teachers, principals and education support staff working in Victorian public schools. The survey asked respondents about their awareness of student mental health issues in their institution, the impact of mental health issues on student learning, the level and accessibility of support – initial teacher education, professional development, employment of support personnel and access to mental health services.

The survey results present a picture of high levels of observed characteristics related to student mental health concerns and a strong view that mental health issues are having a negative impact on student learning. Respondents were asked whether they had students with mental health issues *in the classes they were teaching*. The 'yes' response for each school sector was: 41.2 per cent primary schools, 65.6 per cent secondary schools, 49.6 per cent primary-secondary schools, 40.5 per cent specialist settings. A further question asked respondents to indicate whether a series of specific issues related to mental health had affected student wellbeing at their school (Table 1).

**Table 1: Percentage of school staff agreeing or strongly agreeing that the following issues had affected the wellbeing of students at their school**

Anxiety	95.7%
Challenging behaviours	92.7%
Family and/or parenting concerns	90.2%
Friendship and peer relationships	89.3%
Self-esteem	86.4%
Anger management	84.4%
Trauma	72.9%
Depression	71.4%
Bullying	67.6%
Child safety and protection	61.5%
Self-harm	51.7%
Drugs and alcohol	44.2%

There was a significant difference in most of these areas between low and high SES schools (see Table 2). For example, school staff at low SES schools were far more likely to report that student wellbeing at their school had been affected by child safety and protection, trauma, drugs and alcohol, anger management and self-harm

**Table 2: Percentage of school staff who report issues have affected student wellbeing by SES rating and location**

	Low SES	Average SES	High SES	Metro Melbourne	Large regional centres
Child safety/ protection	74.8	56.4	39.9	68.9	73.8
Trauma	85.4	68.0	53.3	68.9	86.6
Drugs and alcohol	57.0	36.7	27.7	39.3	58.2
Anger management	91.7	82.0	67.7	81.3	91.2
Self-harm	61.8	47.4	38.6	51.0	65.7

Another significant variation in the reported incidence of mental health issues between schools was their location (see Table 2). This applied particularly to differences between schools in large regional centres and schools in metropolitan Melbourne. School staff in large regional centres were more likely to report the incidence of each of the listed mental health issues than staff in metropolitan schools.

The high incidence of student mental health/wellbeing issues in schools reported by survey respondents is not only of major concern in its own right but also raises questions about how these issues are affecting student learning. The survey asked school staff to respond to the following statement: *Over the last year student well-being issues have negatively affected student learning at my school (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree)*. The percentage of survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement for each school category was very high - around or above 80%: All schools (80.1%), primary (78.6%), secondary (81.7%), primary-secondary (79.0%), specialist settings (81.5%). The impact on student learning of mental health issues differed according to the SES background of schools: low SES (85.2%), average SES (77.4%), high SES (73.7%).

## Access to Student Support Services

*Having managed students back into school after severe self-harm the mental health advice from the adolescent mental health institutions has been woeful.*  
(Metro secondary school)

The front-line support for students with mental health issues in all schools is the classroom teacher, both through their day-to-day interactions with students, and the relationships and trust they build up over time as part of their teaching role. The Mission Australia/Black Dog Institute analysis of the 2016 survey results of 15-19 year-olds with probable serious mental illness found that 30.2 per cent said they would go for help to a teacher and 30.5 percent to a school counsellor. In addition, 37.9 per cent of young people without a serious mental illness said that they would go to a teacher for help while 31.3 per cent would go to a school counsellor.

The AEU mental health survey asked teachers about the two areas where they may have received training and professional development for this role – initial teacher education and professional development. Only 7.2 per cent agreed that their initial teacher education had been useful in identifying and supporting students with mental health issues. Around half (49.7%) of all respondents said that their school supported their participation in professional learning activities linked to student mental health concerns.

The most common form of in-school specialist support for student wellbeing and mental health is Student Welfare Coordinators (SWC). 64.9 per cent of schools said that they had an SWC: 83.9 per cent of secondary schools and 48.3 per cent of primary schools. In addition, 41.5 per cent of respondents said that their school employed a qualified psychologist/counsellor. Melbourne metro schools were far more likely to employ a psychologist than regional or remote schools. When asked what additional resources are required to improve support for students with mental health concerns many survey respondents opted for the employment of a qualified psychologist at their school.

External mental health support services were seen as inadequate by most survey respondents.

*The support services provided by the department are poor - the staff members constantly change, don't know our school, and demonstrate little understanding of how schools actually operate and end up adding to our workload.* (Regional low SES secondary school)

The dissatisfaction with mental health services covered both the psychologists provided by the Department of Education and Training through its student support services and the external services such as Headspace and private psychological providers. Some respondents, particularly in rural areas, indicated that they virtually had no support, while others said that the waiting periods for support undermined their usefulness and left the school to their own devices to meet urgent student needs.

*The children I referred for MHP [Mental Health Practitioners] are waiting 6 months plus for an appointment with a psychologist or mental health professional outside school. MHP needs to work closely with schools and parents to support children. Schools are often the first to notice a change in the children but after initial referral there is no follow up to guide staff on the best way to support the child and their family. (Metro primary school)*

Principals and assistant principals are generally the key contact at the school for liaison with mental health services. Their perspective about the level of access to mental health services was significantly more negative than that of teachers. Only 20.8 per cent of principal class respondents stated that they had *timely access* to these services. Significant differences emerge when all staff responses to timely access are separated into school SES and location. Low SES schools which have the greatest need for these services exhibit the greatest level of dissatisfaction with access to them. Just 32.3 per cent of staff in low SES schools reported that they had timely access to mental health services compared to 46 per cent in high SES schools. Schools in regional cities and towns and remote areas had a significantly higher level of dissatisfaction with access to services than those in metropolitan Melbourne.

*Living in a small regional town our students don't have adequate access to mental health professionals or facilities. Wait times are extremely long for specialist services, and often an hour of travel time or more, each way, away from their home. (Regional low SES primary school)*

Student wellbeing is always a central consideration in the minds of teachers. It is integral to the teaching relationship. Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond made the link very clear: "We actually learn in a state of positive emotion much more effectively than we can learn in a state of negative emotion. That has huge implications for what we do in schools." However, the prevalence of young people and children in schools with mental and social health problems, who are often reluctant to seek help with those problems, means that schools need timely access to specialist resources to support students with additional needs. These resources should be in-school (Student Welfare Coordinators, psychologists

and qualified counsellors) and external (mental health services). The AEU mental health survey identified a major gap between the level of student needs and the resources schools have, and have access to, to meet those needs when they are required.

While this article is about student mental health, the AEU survey also asked school staff about their own wellbeing and mental health. The staff results were in line with a number of other recent research studies which found that teaching can be a very stressful occupation which can contribute to significant mental health difficulties for teachers. Ways of relieving teacher stress, often related to unsustainably high workloads, need to be clearly identified and acted upon in consultation with the AEU. *As one teacher said: You can't teach wellbeing if you aren't feeling it yourself.*

## Notes

1. Mission Australia/Black Dog Institute (2017), Youth mental health report: Youth survey 2012-16, p.29
2. Ibid pp16-17
3. Ibid p.5
4. Carlisle, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Hicking, V., Perrens, B., and Plummer, J. (2018). Youth Survey Report 2018. Mission Australia. p.30 <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/823-mission-australia-youth-survey-report-2018>
5. Department of Health and Human Services (2015), 10-year mental health plan technical paper, Victorian Government, pp1-2
6. David Lawrence, Sarah Johnson, Jennifer Hafekost, Katrina Boterhoven de Haan, Michael Sawyer, John Ainley and Stephen Zubrick (2015), The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents, Commonwealth of Australia, p.37
7. Ibid p.2
8. Henrietta Cook (2018), Labor plan for mental health in state schools, The Age, October 25, p.3
9. Nicky Duffer, John Polesel, Suzanne Rice (2012), The Impacts of High Stakes Testing on Schools, Students and their Families: An Educator's Perspective, Whitlam Institute
10. Tracy Bowden (2017), Year 12 exams – are they worth the stress? 7.30 ABC, 11 October
11. Rachel Wells (2019), Stressful VCE could be making depression, anxiety worse among kids: psychologist, The Age, May 7.

*The AEU has a comprehensive set of proposals to meet student (and staff) mental health needs identified in its school staff survey at <https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/submission-royal-commission-victoria%E2%80%99s-mental-health-system>.*

If you need further support with any of the issues raised in this article, a range of resources is available here: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/counselling-online-and-phone-support-for-mental-illness>

# Teacher bullying and harassment by students and parents in Australian schools

Paulina Billett, Rochelle Fogelgarn and Edgar Burns

Over the last few months, much media interest has arisen on the topic of teachers being bullied. This is surprising since many individuals have trouble believing that teachers can be bullied or harassed by students and their parents (Riley 2014; Woudstra, van Rensburg, Visser & Jordaan 2018), often seeing problematic behaviour as the consequence of a teacher's poor teaching ability.

The lack of credence placed in reports of parental and student bullying and harassment of teachers may be the result of the expected dynamics within a classroom context. In this setting, teachers are commonly understood to occupy a position of power over their students and are largely portrayed as the bullies rather than as victims, a situation which obfuscates the prevalence of teacher targeted bullying in the classroom. Parents are also seen as 'disempowered' within this dynamic, with bullying parents citing the need to push back when they believe teachers fail to perform their job adequately and/or protect their children from intimidating teachers.

Adding to this are reports from newspapers and the media which blame teachers for poor student performance and poor educational outcomes, and the messages promoted by film and television resulting in a range of misconceptions which negatively influence the public's perception of teaching professionals (Swetnam 1992). This includes perceptions such as 'anybody can teach' and that 'teaching is an easy life' with teachers supposedly arriving late, leaving early and having 12 weeks paid leave per year.

Unsurprisingly, teachers who report incidents of bullying or harassment by students or parents often find that their professionalism is questioned. For many teachers, the experience

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of teacher targeted bullying and harassment results in a challenge to their professional self-identity, particularly when their ability as a teacher is brought into question by parents and management (Fogelgarn, Burns & Billett, 2019). This often results in high levels of stress, lack of confidence in the classroom and loss of desire to continue in the teaching profession (see Billett, Fogelgarn and Burns, 2019).

### What is teacher bullying and harassment?

Reports of teacher bullying and harassment may elicit questions about over sensitivity on the part of teaching professionals and a political correctness gone too far, particularly when the reports are of single incidents. However, we would argue that teacher bullying and harassment constitutes a very specific set of actions, including the aim of gaining power over an individual and seeking to intimidate, belittle or insult. While these actions are usually verbal or physical in nature, we also acknowledge that more subtle forms of bullying or harassment can occur, such as constant disruptive behaviour in the classroom, or a parent bringing into question a teacher's professional judgement. While on the surface, these actions may appear harmless, for many teachers, they constitute a persistent erosion of their professional practice that often has marked negative effects (Garrett, 2014). Thus, we define teacher bullying and harassment as

*"a communication process that involves a real or perceived power imbalance where 'a teacher is repeatedly subjected, by one or more students [or their parents], to interaction that he or she perceives as insulting, upsetting or intimidating' (Kauppi and Pörhölä 2012, p. 1063). This may be verbal, nonverbal or physical in nature, it may be premeditated or opportunistic, be a single instance or recurring and of short or long duration."* (Billett, Fogelgarn and Burns 2019)

### Method

We used a mixed method methodology including a survey and one-on-one interviews to gather evidence of teachers' experiences of bullying and harassment by students and parents in Australian schools over a twelve-month period (2017-2018). Our project received approval from the researchers' institution Human Ethics Committee (research number HEC17-060). To recruit participants, three separate social media campaigns were run over a four-week period using one social media platform. An invitation to participate was also sent out by supporting organisations via their email newsletters.

We sought to answer the following questions

- Is there evidence of teachers experiencing student and parent enacted bullying and harassment in Australian schools?
- What type of bullying and harassment do teachers experience in their day-to-day classroom interactions?
- What effects, if any, is teacher targeted bullying and harassment having on teachers' sense of self efficacy and wellbeing?

The survey was open nationally to all teachers who either held current Australian teaching registration or had held registration within the last two years, aged between 21 and 70.

### What we found

The responses of 560 teachers were collected over the survey period. What was discovered is that teacher targeted bullying and harassment is a frequent occurrence with 80% of respondents having experienced some form of student or parent enacted teacher bullying and harassment (TTBH) over the last nine to 12-month period.

Teachers in the secondary sector suffered TTBH most often at the hands of students (78%), while those engaged in the primary sector were more likely to be victimised by parents (62%). TTBH was common among all respondents; with sector, age and gender somewhat influencing the likelihood of student and parental TTBH. For example, women were more likely than men to experience TTBH (82.7% and 72% respectively) as were those working in the secondary sector (67.6%) when compared to those engaged in primary teaching (60.9%). Teachers who worked in the secondary sector, aged 21-30 and female reported the highest incidence of TTBH of any cohort.

### The impact of TTBH

From the data gathered most instances of TTBH are experienced as part of a continuum of 'mostly separate and apparently 'harmless', experiences, which eventually wear down and erode teaching staff self-confidence and sense of professional efficacy' (Billett, Fogelgarn and Burns, 2019). TTBH by students and parents considerably reduced a teacher's enjoyment of their profession and many of those surveyed reported a desire to leave the profession or were actively seeking to leave the profession (83%). Worryingly, early and mid-

career teachers were more likely to express a desire to leave the profession (69% and 61.7%), potentially having a severe impact on the capacity of schools to fill future positions.

Teachers seem to experience the impact of parental and student TTBH differently. Student enacted TTBH impacted teachers at two different levels. At a personal level, student to teacher TTBH increased a teacher's levels of anxiety, particularly in terms of personal insecurities. For the most part, students exploited individual characteristics, such as dress sense, weight, gender and age. On the other hand, students also compromised a targeted teacher's sense of self efficacy by compromising the effective running of lessons. Maintaining conversations while teachers are explaining tasks to the class, not completing work when asked, walking out of classrooms and general misbehaviours resulted in teachers feeling exhausted and demoralized.

The primary effect of parental TTBH was experienced as an unwarranted challenge to a teacher's abilities and professionalism. Several teachers reported ongoing bullying and harassment by parents including intruding in classrooms during lessons, incessant phone calls, emails and even harassment outside of school hours – all of which contributed to high levels of stress. It was also suggested by a number of teachers that the high levels of advocacy adopted by parents eroded a teacher's ability to censure, and ultimately control, poor student behaviour. This was not only humiliating for most teachers, but also disempowering.

A complex issue faced by teachers was the lack of empathy encountered when sharing the problem of student and parental TTBH with others, particularly those not in the school sector. The prevailing common reaction was to minimise the problem or suggest that somehow the teacher was at fault due to professional neglect and poor classroom management. This was understandably distressing and created a barrier to the open discussion of student and parental TTBH.

Disturbingly, the experience of TTBH by students and parents resulted in severe impacts on teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Those who responded to our survey reported feeling highly stressed and overwhelmed and a high proportion reported 'suffering symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD, including panic attacks and uncontrollable shaking' (Billett, Fogelgarn and Burns 2019).

Sadly, many respondents reported needing psychological support to deal with cases of TTBH with some reporting having been bullied so badly that they required extended stress leave or chose to leave the profession. Taking sick leave, holiday leave or leave without pay was also a strategy which many teachers employed in order to avoid ongoing episodes of parent

and student TTBH. What is more, TTBH leeches into teachers' lives beyond school hours, with family members, particularly victims' children, also being victimised. Victimised teachers' personal relationships suffered significantly due to their declining mental health.

Adding to this already stressful situation, was the lack of response from management to teachers' reports of TTBH. Responses were often seen as tokenistic, with management frequently accused of allying themselves with students and parents rather than supporting the bullied teacher. For teachers, their inability to put a stop to bullying and harassing behaviour was disconcerting. This was particularly true of teachers who felt that management had 'sold them out' in a bid to appease angry parents. Victimised teachers felt that these individuals failed to understand why those who should be seeking to protect teachers in their employ would seek to question them or even do the opposite to what teachers believed was warranted. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming number of those who responded to our survey suggested that more support from management needed to be shown to teachers in managing even the most minor of TTBH cases.

Finally, for many, the lack of follow through or absence of repercussions for offenders was a source of disgruntlement. Many suggested that when action had been taken in censuring bullies, this was usually ineffective, particularly when bullies were students with an institutional right to step back into a classroom. Unsurprisingly, the suggestion of a code of conduct with clear guidelines and a zero-tolerance policy as well as measures to stop bullies from stepping back into classrooms was a common suggestion made by teachers to help them address student and parental TTBH.

## Conclusion

Understanding the impact and incidence of TTBH is still in its infancy, however our study supports the conclusion that teacher targeted bullying and harassment by students and parents in Australian schools is a problem. Initial findings suggest that there is a need for clearer guidelines as well as stronger measures to address TTBH in Australian schools. We also recommend that management and peak organisations show more meaningful support when teachers report even minor incidents of teacher targeted bullying and harassment.

Finally, we believe that to understand the full extent of this problem, further research needs to be undertaken and that this research should include cooperation at all levels including teachers, school management, teacher unions and Education Departments. This, we believe, will result in better understanding of TTBH as well as meaningful changes, which can help ensure a safe workplace for all our teachers.

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# Student reporting: Where to from here?

Hilary Hollingsworth and Jonathan Heard

## Introduction

Across Australia, as in many other locations, there is a long tradition of schools engaging in activities intended to communicate information about student learning each year. Given the tremendous investment of effort in these activities by teachers and principals, questions of great interest include: are these activities providing quality information about student learning, and are there alternative designs for these activities that might provide 'better' information about student learning?

Over the last three years, we have investigated these questions through the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) *Communicating Student Learning Progress* project (Hollingsworth, Heard & Weldon, in press). Our investigation has focused on the national research, policy and practice landscape related to how information about student learning is communicated, and in particular, what student reporting looks like.

This article presents some of the insights into student reporting revealed through our investigation. A brief summary of some of the prevailing issues related to student reporting is presented first to provide a context for current policies and practice. This is followed by a discussion of the growing use by schools of electronic systems and tools to communicate student learning, and the opportunities and possibilities that these systems offer for reporting.

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## Context

Students' school reports have long been the cornerstone of communication to parents: a much anticipated document that offers a final reckoning of a child's achievement each semester. However in Australia, the shift from syllabus- to outcomes- to standards-based curricula, as well as other educational trends over the years, have left their mark on student reporting, with the 'traditional' semester report frequently being a target of criticism, and its perceived inadequacies a topic of much debate.

Three issues related to student reporting practice that receive consistent airtime in this debate are: the language used in reports, the grading and ranking of students, and the timing of reporting.

Various approaches to describing student performance have been applied by schools and systems in student reports over the years. During the transition towards outcomes-based education in the 1990s for example, the objective, descriptive language of the curriculum increasingly came to replace the subjective and evaluative voice of the teacher, as assessment started to focus less on grading a student's performance on tasks and more on measuring their individual attainment of expected learning outcomes. National and state reviews from the mid-90s to the mid-2000s (Cuttance, Stokes, & Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Eltis & New South Wales Department of Training and Education Co-ordination, 1995; Reporting to Parents Taskforce & Tasmania Education Department, 2006) revealed that parents who were unfamiliar with and unaccustomed to this new style of reporting found it to be opaque and inaccessible. Such community perception prompted the federal government in 2004 to announce that education funding to states and territories would be tied to a requirement that schools write "plain language" reports at least twice yearly, and that a child's performance in her subjects must be graded using an A to E (or similar five-point) scale.

While few argued with the need to improve the language used in reports, the reintroduction of the A to E scale proved – and remains – a sticking point. Educators have questioned the impact on student motivation because of the potential for reports to define students by their performance on the A to E scale. There is also doubt cast on whether the A to E scale can be, and is, applied with any level of consistency. Recently, the inadequacy of A to E grades for the reporting of learning progress has been reflected in the Gonski 2.0 review, which recommends the introduction of new reporting arrangements which focus on both attainment *and* gain (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018).

Another concern with the tradition of semester reporting is that it does not provide timely-enough information to be useful. School reporting processes often require such extensive lead time for preparation and then finalisation of reports that by the time they are made available they lack currency. In our investigation, calls for greater flexibility in student reporting processes to increase the currency of information were made by students, parents and teachers.

These and other issues highlight the limitations of inherited models and legacy practices related to student reporting, and provoke the timely reimagining of the purpose and form of student reporting (for a more extensive review, see Hollingsworth et. al, in press). What follows is a discussion of the ways that some schools are utilising electronic systems to support, extend and reconceive their student reporting practices.

### The end of the semester report?

In the last 10 years, schools have increasingly adopted sophisticated electronic management systems with multi-user functionality, which, if thoughtfully managed, may help to address some of the limitations of traditional reporting. Various referred to as School Management Systems (SMS), Student or School Information Systems (SIS), Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), what unites these commercially available products is that they provide the capacity for schools to report on student learning, both to students and to parents. Many of these products allow schools to generate semester reports automatically, simply by collating and aggregating learning data and teacher feedback comments stored in a teacher's online 'mark book'.

According to interviews with several product providers, the vast majority of their client schools still produce semester reports, satisfying what many interpret as the mandated government requirement that all schools produce two summative written reports per year. However, all acknowledge that the semester report is quickly changing. In place of detailed comments and information about a student's performance, many schools are publishing more succinct, auto-generated academic transcripts, which are sometimes little more than graphs and grades.

James Leckie, co-founder and director of Schoolbox, observes that "there is certainly a trend towards schools removing the requirement for teachers to enter any additional information at the end of the semester". The primacy of the traditional semester report as the main vehicle for communicating to parents about their child's learning, seems to be "a paradigm that is

changing". So says Daniel Hill, director of sales at Edumate, who – from his dealings with client schools – suspects many would drop the practice of semester reporting entirely, were it not for the mandated requirements.

### Continuous reporting

The waning effort put into the production of semester reports in some schools is explained by an increasing preference for the new reporting functionality these electronic tools offer – continuous online reporting. Continuous reporting refers to the practice of reporting in regular instalments. Typically, at key moments throughout the semester, teachers provide updated assessment information to the system online, which is then made visible to students and parents.

The main benefit schools perceive in continuous reporting (sometimes referred to as progressive reporting) is the timely manner in which parents are informed of their child's achievement. It is often seen as 'too late' at the end of semester for a parent to be formally notified of how their child has been performing. In addition, the added capacity to upload annotated copies of the student's work, to include a copy of the assessment rubric, and to type limitless feedback comments to the student (visible also to parents), is seen as vastly more informative than the restrictive summary comments usually offered in a semester report.

Despite the potential for continuous reporting to be seen as burdensome for teachers, many schools are instead seeing it as a trade-off of teacher time, particularly in secondary settings. Assessing several tasks and providing feedback to students throughout the semester is already established practice in secondary schools. Travis Gandy, general manager of operations at Compass, suggests that one of the more popular aspects of continuous reporting for teachers is the lack of an "end of semester rush to get the reports out". If detailed feedback offered to the student mid-term can also, by a click of a button, be made visible to parents as well, then avoiding a re-hash of this feedback for the parents at the end of semester can be seen as a win-win.

### Progressive reporting versus reporting progress

Beyond the detail, frequency, and the timeliness of information that continuous online reporting allows, product providers go to significant lengths to add new reporting features and functions. In line with much of the academic research into high-impact teaching, these features enable such things as the creation of electronic rubrics, differentiated assessment

tasks, narrative teacher feedback, digital annotation of student work and student self-evaluation and reflection.

However, research suggesting that, in any given class, the most advanced learners can be as much as five or six years ahead of the least advanced learners, has put mounting pressure on schools to be able to assess – and communicate – not simply a child's performance against age-based curriculum standards, but the progress they make in their learning from the point at which they start. This was reflected in the recent Gonski 2.0 review, which includes the following recommendation: "Introduce new reporting arrangements with a focus on both learning attainment and learning gain, to provide meaningful information to students and their parents and carers about individual achievement and learning growth." (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.31).

Such a recommendation presents significant challenges for schools. In an ACER Research Conference paper (Hollingsworth & Heard, 2018), we identify two key findings from our early analysis of samples of student reports collected from schools and sectors around the country. One of these findings is that while schools often use the word 'progress' within reports, most of what they report tends to focus on performance or attainment rather than learning gain. As we outline in that paper, one possible explanation for this is that in some schools, a child's *performance* over time is considered synonymous with their *progress* over time. In the absence of assessment and reporting measures that can monitor and communicate a child's increasing proficiency within an area of learning, a sense of progress can only be (erroneously) inferred from whether a child's performance is improving, maintaining or declining. This is a concern both for perennially low-performing students who might still make significant learning progress each year, and for high-performing students who are not being extended.

Consultation with providers of LMS and SMS-like products would appear to support this view. Demand still exists for electronic reporting features such as grade point averages, student-to-cohort comparison charts, and 'learning alerts' that track the performance of students in their assessments longitudinally and notify teachers of any scores a student obtains that fall significantly outside their usual performance. It is conceivable that schools might use functions such as these to track or compare student performance, but construe them as indicating how a student is 'progressing'.

By implication, it may even be the case that by simply engaging in continuous – or progressive – instalments of reporting, schools misconceive this also as reporting 'progress'. While providers of continuous reporting technologies are seeking to find solutions that would

help schools to represent learning gain as well as performance in their reports, many schools are, according to Daniel Hill, "just at the beginning of that journey".

James Leckie agrees. While he has worked with client schools to assist them in using electronic rubrics for assessment that could theoretically measure – and track – progress, he notes that "it does rely on schools implementing standards-aligned rubrics" in the first place. Other providers, such as Sentral, enable schools to collate work sample portfolios for continuous assessment, which could theoretically be used to demonstrate gains in student learning and skill development over time. Both Sentral and Compass provide continuum tracker applications which, Travis Gandy at Compass explains, "allows schools to tick off particular [achievement standard] outcomes" over time. Gandy also points to Compass' data analytics tool which stores external standardised assessment data (such as NAPLAN, PAT and OnDemand testing), useful for making assessments of progress along a learning or curriculum continuum. However, Gandy notes: "We often find it under-utilised by our schools". Our own analysis of school reports in the *Communicating Student Learning Progress* project revealed only one school that reported standardised testing data to parents.

Nevertheless, the functionality that electronic systems and tools already offer provides some exciting opportunities that – if re-purposed – may lead schools towards improvements in reporting, along the lines of the recommendations made in the Gonski report. For example, the capacity for teachers to report in regular instalments in place of (or perhaps in addition to) semester reports, to collate digital samples of student work in electronic portfolios as evidence of growth over time, to digitally annotate this work to describe the features that show increased proficiency, to track these gains on a curriculum continuum or digital rubric that reflects a progression of learning within a subject, and to correlate such evidence against stored data obtained by external standardised testing, means that schools are already well-equipped with electronic tools to enable them to communicate learning progress, in the true sense of the growth in understanding, skills and knowledge a student makes over time, irrespective of their starting point.

What limits schools in this endeavour, therefore, is not the reporting technology, but the curriculum design, delivery, and assessment practices inherited from an industrial model of schooling, with its narrow focus on students' performance and achievement against year level expectations, rather than the gains that learners make over time. A broader focus, coupled with a reimagining of how existing technologies could be used, provides a clear first step towards the improvements in reporting that would enable us to better value and communicate the growth our students make.

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## Acknowledgement

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# Beyond silver bullets: towards a framework for meta-learning

Alan Reid

## 'Learning to learn' and the official curriculum

It has become a truism that in the 21st century the speed of change and of knowledge production means that people must become life-long learners. That is, the condition of life now and in the future means that people must have the capacity to learn, transfer knowledge to different contexts, relearn on the basis of new knowledge or experience and keep on learning. This has significant implications for the official curriculum and the work of schools. In particular, it means that attention must be paid to assisting students to understand **about** learning, as well as what is learned.

There has been an attempt to grapple with 'learning to learn' in the Australian Curriculum through the concept of metacognition as one component of the general capability: critical and creative thinking. The AC describes it in the following way:

*Students think about thinking (metacognition), reflect on actions and processes, and transfer knowledge into new contexts to create alternatives or open up possibilities. They apply knowledge gained in one context to clarify another. In developing and acting with critical and creative thinking, students:*

- *think about thinking (metacognition)*
- *reflect on processes*
- *transfer knowledge into new contexts. (ACARA, 2018).*

However, although this approach does some of the work needed, if an understanding of learning is as central to a knowledge society as is claimed, then in my view it must become a key curriculum component rather than just a small part of one of seven capabilities. If this is

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to happen, account should be taken of some of the most recent insights into cognition. For these reasons, I am suggesting that *learning to learn* be elevated to become one of the four central components of the official curriculum, and be named *meta-learning*.<sup>1</sup>

### What is meta-learning?

One of the earliest users of the term meta-learning was the Australian John Biggs, who described it as a state of being aware of, and taking control of, one's learning, including the learner's conceptions of learning, epistemological beliefs, and learning processes and skills (Biggs, 1985). According to Biggs, the meta-learner is able to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning approaches, and regulate them for the learning activity. Of course, Biggs was writing more than 30 years ago, so his interpretation of meta-learning did not take into account some of the developments in learning that have occurred over that time.

More recently, Charles Fadel and colleagues (2015) resurrected the concept of meta-learning, arguing that it should be one of the central pillars of a 21st-century curriculum. They proposed expanding 'metacognition' by adding the idea of 'growth mindset'—a concept developed by the psychologist Carol Dweck (2016) about the importance of beliefs about one's capacities to learn. However, this version of meta-learning omits a number of important elements of learning and needs further extension.

In the past few years, there have been some significant advances in such areas as cognitive psychology, with new insights into metacognition, cognitive neuroscience and research into the links between the functioning of the brain and learning, and the collapse of Freud's division of brain and mind. In addition, the role of emotions in learning, sensory learning, the relationship between learning and physical movement, epistemological beliefs and learning, interpersonal and intrapersonal learning and play-based learning are extending our understandings about learning. These and other areas of research demonstrate that an understanding of the processes of learning involves a range of aspects such as the social, emotional, physical and sensory, which go beyond a focus on metacognition.

### Towards a meta-learning framework for teacher and student use.

In my view, an important future project for education is to combine the insights from these various fields into a coherent meta-learning program/framework designed to help students to reflect on and understand processes of learning in particular contexts and for particular purposes, and to assist teachers with their planning. The aim would be to involve students in deep reflection on their learning as they work with disciplinary, interdisciplinary and

capability-based knowledges. That is, meta-learning cannot be introduced separately from the content of what is taught or how it is taught: it is integral to both.<sup>2</sup>

Given that researchers are just starting to scratch the surface of understandings about the brain, it would need to be a tentative and ongoing project. It would require collaboration between researchers who represent a number of the research fields that look at different aspects of learning, and educators with a knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum design. The developed program—which would focus on teaching students to understand, develop, monitor, regulate and evaluate approaches to learning—would span the year levels of schooling and connect to other key components of the curriculum such as disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings and the general capabilities, and be updated as new research comes in.

### What are the barriers to meta-learning?

A project to develop a meta-learning framework would have to surmount a number of barriers. The biggest of these is the predilection for education systems to grab the latest passing fad and promote it as a silver bullet. For example, springing from one or more of the learning research fields listed above are educational programs and approaches such as *mindfulness*, *growth mindset*, *brain-based learning* and *multiple intelligences*. Based on empirical research, each approach claims that it will boost learning and leave students with a lifelong capacity to learn new things in new contexts. Often the approaches are well packaged and marketed, and taken up with enthusiasm, if not zeal, by educators looking for ways to enhance student learning.

However, all is not as it seems. The speed with which these programs are adopted often leads to problems. Sometimes there is unease about the efficacy of the approaches themselves and the research upon which they are based; and sometimes the developers of the idea itself become concerned about the approach being oversimplified, or distorted beyond recognition. The well-known mindset theory can be used as an example.

Carol Dweck's mindset theory was developed from her research in cognitive psychology and, over the past twenty years, has become one of the most popular and well-known approaches in education (Dweck 2016). Based on the idea that intelligence is not fixed but can grow through effort and perseverance, Dweck's views have spread across the world through professional development programs, conferences and packaged resources. Many education systems have urged teachers to adopt growth-mindset approaches.

The problem is that the missionary zeal with which the idea has been embraced has masked some basic issues. A key concern is the questions being asked about the mindset research itself, with some researchers casting doubt about the methodology and the statistics that were used to produce the findings, and others claiming that the results have not been replicated in similar studies. Some researchers, like John Hattie, ask whether a growth mindset is needed for all tasks, or whether it might not be more desirable to have a fixed mindset in some circumstances (Hazell, 2017). A further concern is that the idea allows deep-seated structural factors such as poverty, socioeconomic status and ethnicity to be ignored simply by blaming students or teachers for not having growth mindsets. This academic debate will continue as the idea is tested for its rigour.

However, there is also a practical problem related to mindset theory in use, with claims that many teachers have oversimplified the idea. Carol Dweck herself is worried about this, saying that some teachers are adopting what she calls a 'false mindset':

*Often when we see kids who aren't learning well, we might feel frustrated or defensive, thinking it reflects on us as educators. It's often tempting to not feel it is our fault. So we might say the child has a fixed mindset, without understanding instead that, as educators, it is our responsibility to create a context in which a growth mindset can flourish.*

*... another misunderstanding [of growth mindset] that might apply to lower-achieving children is the oversimplification of growth mindset into just [being about] effort. Teachers were just praising effort that was not effective, saying "Wow, you tried really hard!" But students know that if they didn't make progress and you're praising them, it's a consolation prize. They also know you think they can't do any better. So this kind of growth-mindset idea was misappropriated to try to make kids feel good when they were not achieving. (Dweck, quoted in Gross-Loh, 2016).*

Indeed, Dweck is so concerned about what she sees as misuse of her work that she has republished her original book and included a new section on 'false mindset' (Dweck, 2016).

None of this is to denigrate the concept of mindset, or those who are using it. Similar stories could be told about educational programs based on mindfulness, or multiple intelligences, or the use of brain-based theory—each of which promises much but is also the subject of

considerable criticism. But it does provide a salutary lesson about education systems picking up the latest idea as a silver bullet, and running with it, rather than placing the idea within a broader theoretical framework, rigorously checking out the research and engaging teachers in ongoing professional development.

### Developing a meta-learning framework.

Assuming that there are lessons to be learned from the 'growth-mindset' experience, and if the idea of meta-learning has some merit, then there are some important tasks to be undertaken before it can be introduced. These include doing a synthesis of the latest research about meta-learning and turning this into a holistic framework spanning its various cognitive, emotional, physical, sensory and epistemological dimensions. Given the current stage of development, such work would need to be ongoing with the framework amended as knowledge expands.

One way to avoid the silver bullet syndrome that has plagued some of the earlier simplistic attempts to translate the results of brain research into pedagogical proposals would be to have educators working with researchers in other fields, and in other projects. An example of the latter is the Australian Brain Initiative, which includes an aim to 'harness the plasticity of the brain to improve teaching and learning outcomes', and to 'transform the way we teach and learn' (Australian Brain Alliance Steering Committee (ABASC), 2016). Clearly educators need to get in on the ground floor of such projects, not only to provide educational expertise to them, but also to add to the sum of professional knowledge about learning.

In this article I have argued that although the concept of 'learning to learn' has been used for many years now in education, we are still well short of there being widespread professional agreement about what such a concept means and how it can be developed. Given that we are now living through a time of significant disruption to every aspect of our lives as a result of the fourth industrial revolution, it has never been so important for people to have the capacity to learn and relearn in order to shape, as well as adjust to, these changes at different times, in different contexts, and for different purposes. This demands an understanding of learning itself, as well as content knowledge. Since formal education is the major avenue through which such capacities can be developed, there needs to be some agreed professional understandings about what is entailed in 'learning to learn', and how it can be nurtured in all students. The time has come to recognise the broader concept of meta-learning as a separate and key component of the official curriculum.

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## Notes

1. The term 'meta-learning' is now being used in the artificial intelligence field, with approaches being developed where machines rely less on a huge amounts of data, and more on the capacity to learn how to learn. Given the challenges of AI to what it means to be human, it is perhaps more urgent that humans develop the capacity!
2. I only make this obvious point because of the constant criticism by some that a focus on the general capabilities means neglecting the learning areas. Of course it doesn't. The general capabilities only make sense when they are developed consciously **through** the learning areas. Similarly, a focus on meta-learning can only occur during and after students' interactions with disciplinary and interdisciplinary work.

This article is a modified short extract from Alan Reid's new book – *Changing Australian Education: How policy is taking us backwards and what can be done about it* (Allen and Unwin). The book is available from October 1, 2019. It can be pre-ordered from Booktopia: [www.booktopia.com.au](http://www.booktopia.com.au); or from Kindle: [www.Amazon.com.au](http://www.Amazon.com.au)

# Put professional judgement of teachers first or we'll never get the systemic education improvements we all want

James Ladwig

I'd like to bring together three different lines of educational analysis to show how our contemporary discussions of policy are really not going to lead to any significant change or educationally defensible reforms. I realise that is a very big call, but I'm pretty confident in saying it, and I hope to show why.

Essentially, I think we really need to change the way educational reform debates are framed, because they are based on questions that will not lead us to the systemic improvement that I think most 'stake-holders' are really seeking. Before I launch into this discussion, though, I also need to point out that there are a host of related issues which really can't be sufficiently addressed here, and which I won't explain at all – but which I will name toward the end of this article.

## Consider three main points

1. There is growing recognition that a fundamental linchpin in quality schooling is always going to be our reliance on the professional judgement of teachers.
2. There is also growing recognition that our current system architecture works against that in several ways, and
3. this is the clincher, the systems that we have implemented are producing exactly that for which they were designed (where teacher professional judgement plays little or no part).

The practical conclusion of bringing these observations together is obvious to me. We are never going to get that "systemic improvement" that we all seem to think will be good for Australia, because we don't have the right system architecture to achieve it. I believe we need to start thinking more carefully and creatively about how our educational systems

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are designed. The hard part begins after sufficient numbers of stakeholders come to this realisation and want to shift the debates. We aren't there yet, so for now I just want to open up this line of thought.

The starting point won't be a surprise for followers of public educational policy pitches. On the one hand, anyone with Finlandia envy and followers of the recent statements from Pasi Sahlberg, now at UNSW's Gonski Institute, will know that much of the strength of the 'Finnish Education Mystery' (as it has been named by Hannu Simola) has been built on a strong commitment to the professional autonomy and expertise of Finnish teachers. This isn't simply accidental, but a consequence of a long understandable history<sup>1</sup> that included (but isn't only due to) careful and intelligent design by the Finnish Government.

On the other hand, here in Australia, Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, Nicole Mockler, and her colleagues have aptly shown that teachers are more than interested in using evidence-based approaches to help guide their local decisions<sup>2</sup>, but their judgements are not really being supported by evidence they see as relevant and useful. My own analysis<sup>3</sup> of this situation has led me to raise significant questions about the way in which technical issues of measurement and their statistical applications have been reduced to incorrect and really misleading uses, and the way in which the institutions which are supposed to promote teachers and teaching have reduced that exercise to classic institutional credentialism based on tick box exercises that really don't reflect that which it claims.

No matter how much politicians and other stakeholders might wish to create systems that guarantee this or that universal practice, student learning is always individual and in schools always dependent on whoever is guiding that learning (the same would apply to entirely automated systems, by the way). So the goal of designing systems based on the presumption that we can somehow specify practice to a point where there is no uncertainty in delivery, is folly. And yet these are precisely the sorts of education systems Australia has been building since at least the late 1980s.

In broad terms this corresponds to the significant changes in educational governance known as 'the *ministerialisation* of education' documented<sup>4</sup> by educational researchers Dr Janice Dudley and Professor Lesley Vidovich, long ago. It was in this time period where the penultimate attempt to nationalise curriculum developed, with the corresponding creation of national goals (the Hobart, Adelaide, Melbourne declarations), former civil servants were replaced by contracted 'Senior Executives' across federal and state bureaucracies, and teacher education was handed to the federally funded Universities alone (plus a range of massive shifts in TAFE). Since then it has been a long slow process of standardisation within

and across state systems, the formation of 'professional institutes', and the expansion of public funding to private schooling.

### The roll out of 'standardisation'

The case for why these systems inhibit or actively work against the exercise of teachers' professional judgement should be pretty obvious with the term 'standardisation'. These days, national curriculum is designed with the intent of making sure children of the military can move around the nation and 'get the same stuff', accountability is centrally developed and deployed via the least expensive forms, like NAPLAN (and an expanding host of supposedly valid measures), teaching has become regulated through standardising the people (at least on paper, via 'professional standards'), and securing employment and advancement has been directly tied to these mechanisms.

Even measurement instruments originally designed only for research, and later to help provide evidence for teachers' use, have become tick box instruments of surveillance. As a researcher I am not opposed to good measurement, and in fact I've created some of those being used in this larger schema, but how systems deploy them makes a huge difference.

From the reports of the implementation of NAPLAN it is very clear (as was predicted by then opponents) that many of these instruments have become much more high stakes than advocates predicted or intended (opponents were right about this one). Whether it be novice teachers beholden to developing paper work 'evidence' of standards for their job security through to executives whose jobs depend on meeting Key Performance Indicators (which are themselves abstracted from actual effect), we have developed systems of compliance within institutes in which real humans play roles that are pre-defined and largely circumscribed. And those who readily fit them without too much critique fill these roles.

After years of this, is it any wonder that teacher education programs by and large no longer teach the history and practice of curriculum design, nor the history and philosophy of education (which is now largely relegated to 'ethics' in service of codes of conduct) and what once were lively fields of educational psychology and sociology of education have become handmaidens to 'evidence-based' teaching techniques and bureaucratic definitions of 'equity'? In the University sector these 'foundational' disciplines literally do not belong in education anymore for research accountability purposes.

One bit of historical memory: in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this process of moving the intellectual ('mental') work of teachers into standardised categories defined by management

was shown to have a long-term effect known as 'de-skilling'. From our work in the New Basics Trial in Queensland (which was actually much more successful than most realise) it became very clear that what were once widespread teacher capacities in local curriculum design and development had been forfeited to (extremely well-paid) bureaucrats.

When I met the teachers who took part in the early 1990s National Schools Project (in 1993 and 1994), state differences were really obvious and relevant. When teachers were invited to restructure any aspect of their work to improve student learning, through an overt agreement between the unions and employers, teachers from states where there were strong traditions of local curriculum development and pedagogical reflection (most obviously Victoria and South Australia) were squarely focused on trying to find ways of providing rich educational experiences for their students (curriculum, and pedagogy were their mainstay). Teachers from the state that has provided the basic structure of our current systems (NSW) were largely concerned about timetables and budgets<sup>5</sup>. Of course this is a very big generalisation, but it is also obvious when you work with teachers in schools developing new curriculum projects.

What is the effect of all this? Precisely as intended, the systems are standardised, stratified, countable and a ready source of 'evidence' used to meet the needs of the politicians and 'independent' stakeholders, and advancing employees who probably actually believe in the reforms and initiatives they advocate. But let's be honest, these actors are not around after they have used the political capital gained from initiating their pet projects.

### Let's go further

There are hosts of other developments that buttress this larger system which need further analysis and elaboration than I can provide here. From the expansion of testing measures based on statistical assumptions few teachers and principals and fewer parents really know well (they are not taught them), to professional development schemes based on market determined popularity, to pre-packaged curriculum and apps literally sold as the next silver-bullet, to contemporary 'texts' of education carrying far more implications than the ones named by those selling them.

There are the huge range of ideas and presumptions that lie behind those sales pitches. Some teachers sometimes seek these out in the hope of finding new ideas and effective practices. Teachers' dispositions and capacities have not come from nowhere, they are the historical product of this system. But who is going to blame them (or the bureaucrats, for that matter) when they rightfully focus on making sure they have a job in that system so they can

support their own children and parents? Yes, we have systems we created. On the one hand, that's not encouraging. On the other hand, that does mean that we can re-create them into something quite different.

### Change the questions

One of the first steps that needs to be made in collectively trying to find new ways of constructing our school systems, is to change the questions we think we are answering. Instead of using the type of questions needed to drive research, e.g. anything of the form 'what works?', we need to start asking, 'how do we build systems that increase the likelihood that teachers will make intelligent and wise decisions in their work?'

Research and the categories of analysis CAN provide clear ideas about what has occurred in the past (with all the necessary qualifications about when, where, measured how) but those answers should never be the basis for systems to prescribe what teachers are supposed to do in any given individual event or context. For example, diagnostic testing can be incredibly useful for teachers, but it can't tell teachers what to do, with whom, when.

Do we have systems that support teachers in taking the next step in their decisions about which students need what support at what time, while knowing what those tests actually measure, with what margin of error, in what contexts for whom? The question for systems designs isn't what's 'best practice', it's what system increases the probability of teachers making wise and compassionate decisions for their students in their context at the appropriate time. That includes making judgements relative to what's happening in our nation, economy and in the larger global transformations.

Our systems, in the pursuit of minimising risk, are very good at proscribing what teachers shouldn't do; but, they are not designed to support teachers to wisely exercise the autonomy they need to do their jobs in a manner that demonstrates the true potential of our nation. We can see that potential in the all too rare events in which our students and teachers are given that sort of support – often on the backs of incredibly dedicated and professional teachers and school leaders. From local innovative uses of technology, to large scale performances in the arts, the potential of Australian educators isn't really hard to find. But we need new systems to support them in doing more of that type of work, with more students, more of the time.

So when it comes to advocating this or that system reform, please, change the focus. We don't need more 'best practice' policies from vested interests, to discipline our teachers, we need systems designed to promote true, authentic excellence in education.

## Notes

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# Pasi Sahlberg on more play, more equity and more trust in teacher judgement

Interview by Myke Bartlett

**MB** *Why did you want to leave one of the world's best education systems to come to Australia?*

**PS** It was many lucky things coming together at the same time. I'd been here many times before and I'd known Adrian Piccoli [Director of the Gonski Institute at the University of NSW] since he took up his office. I knew there was a need in Australia to work harder on equity, inclusion and fairness. I thought: 'Why not?'

**MB** *What are some of the main differences you've noticed between Australian schools and Finnish schools?*

**PS** I think the biggest difference with Australian primary schools is the workload. The school days are much longer, the backpacks are much heavier and the whole system is expecting more, not in terms of quality of work, but quantity of work. Kids are required to be engaged in school work much more here. The whole orientation is much more academic at this early age. In Finland we have much shorter school days and children have much more time to play. As a parent, I see many more parents here concerned about their kid's academic progress and performance. In the first grade, you hear them talking about NAPLAN, which I find strange. At home it's much more about happiness and wellbeing and making friends.

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The equally important and kind of painful thing for us has been the lack of universal early childhood education in the wealthiest country in the world. Australia has one of the smallest proportions of national wealth going to early childhood education in the OECD. I was expecting something similar to Finland, where we provide all children with universal high quality early childhood education and care. My wife and I found ourselves having the conversation when we came here — can we afford something that is clearly good for our children? It's \$160 a day here, which is a strange experience. I'm not a fan of making children start school early so their parents can save money.

**MB** *Most of society seemed to be behind the changes you made to Finnish schools. Is there a gulf behind what the current government thinks Australian schools should be like and what ordinary Australians think?*

**PS** When I look at Australia now as a resident, I think that fairly soon there will be a change when not only parents but everybody will realise that young children aren't doing well. Mental health and physical wellbeing are declining overall. If those things are not in good condition it doesn't matter how high your standards are or how well trained your teachers are. I think we'll see a shift in thinking, as soon as parents start to link the decline in wellbeing with what schools are not doing at present.

If you look at the statistics about children's health and wellbeing, it's a very sad list. Anybody who sees those things and takes them seriously, should say 'wait a minute, that's not the right way to go'. We should really reconsider early childhood education and the early years of primary, especially with regard to homework and how long the school days are and how much time the kids have to play and be active. My hope and expectation are the time will come when we realise if we want our children to learn better and be better prepared for the future we're asking them to do too much too early.

**MB** *Do you think the education system in Australia would be improved if, like Finland, we had a greater trust in teacher judgement and we did not have NAPLAN?*

**PS** I certainly think NAPLAN needs to be rethought or redesigned, although I'm probably not one of those who would say it has to go altogether. There has to be some kind of information for the system. But I was part of leading the Gonski Institute submission for the ongoing review into NAPLAN. In a country with an advanced and mature education system like Australia, we would be OK with a sample-based national assessment supported by school-based assessments. Other countries are doing that. The sample-based program would help us understand how our systems are doing in many areas, not just literacy and numeracy. Parents would be primarily informed by the assessments schools are doing. I think there's

a need in Australia to trust much more in a teacher's judgement. That trust is currently very weak, because most parents seem to think the best judgement of their child's learning comes from NAPLAN. Which is not the case.

We need to trust teachers more. And that means understanding what professionalism in a teacher's world really means. There are three critical elements that make teaching an autonomous, independent profession. One is planning, the decisions regarding the curriculum – what teachers teach and in what order. The other is pedagogy, the freedom to choose the best way to teach. The third is assessment, the progress of learning. Something like NAPLAN works against all three of these critical elements. It dumbs down the freedom and autonomy to decide on curriculum and choose the appropriate pedagogical approach and silences the teacher's voice on how their students are learning. Standardised testing works against a teacher's professional identity and ethos.

**MB** *Finland requires its teachers to have masters degrees. Is that level of qualification necessary for people to have more trust in teachers?*

**PS** It's a complicated question. What we've found in Finland is that if the level of entry to teaching isn't a masters degree, then there will be a lot of young people who will opt out, simply because they want to have a masters degree. There are those who would love to go into teaching, but they want a more advanced degree. A basic degree isn't that valuable anymore. The important thing is we make teaching more attractive to as many people as possible. Nobody should walk away from teaching because they want a higher degree.

The other thing is that it's important for a teacher's sense of identity. One nice part of the Finnish system is that when you're a primary school teacher with a masters degree in your pocket, you have the feeling that you are like a lawyer or doctor or anyone else holding the same type of degree. Most teachers don't need everything they'll learn in order to get a masters degree, but when we require a more rigorous degree, it will attract higher quality candidates to consider teaching. That's what we need.

All those countries that are now in the situation of redesigning teacher education think the best way forward is to make entry into the profession harder. Young people don't look for the easy way out, they look for things that very few people can do. They want to challenge themselves. The situation at present is that anybody can get into teaching. That would be lethal for the law or medical professions. If young people see that anyone can get in, it doesn't seem special. A more selective entry means that when you become a teacher, you have accomplished something, you have professional credentials early on.

Trust is a very important part of a culture. When you have a culture where teachers are trusted as professionals, this view spreads throughout the society, including children and young people. If that culture is not there, teachers are not trusted. If parents think anybody can teach and the teachers in a school are nothing special, the kids will learn that from them. Their behaviour will treat teachers in the same way.

**MB** *Should teacher salaries be increased to make teaching more attractive as a profession?*

**PS** I don't know about teacher salaries, but I'm really concerned about how public money is allocated throughout the system. In many places, when I look at the statistics around distribution of taxpayer money, non-government schools in Australia often get more than government schools. At the same time, public schools are taking care of 85 per cent of special needs and indigenous children who really require schools and classrooms with more funding.

If more funding towards salaries would help teachers stay in their jobs, I think that would be good because one of the really difficult and harmful aspects of the teaching profession here is that so many teachers leave after five to seven years. This leads to a situation where there are less and less experienced teachers in our schools. That's really harmful in any profession. But the more serious issue for me is what the first Gonski Institute report very nicely and accurately pointed out — that the money is not being spent in the right way. If education was a private company concerned about its investments, nobody would run it like education is being run.

It's going to be very difficult to move the needle towards more equitable education in Australia unless the funding somehow changes towards needs-based funding. I am a product of a system that has been funded on a needs basis. We have a lot of young people who would be completely lost or left behind if we'd had a similar way of funding schools to what is practised right now in Australia.

**MB** *Is there evidence that using funding to improve equity in an education system will improve overall student achievement?*

**PS** What the OECD is now saying is that when equity doesn't improve, improving the quality of learning outcomes becomes very difficult. That's why I say that, for Australia, investing heavily in improving equity probably will be the best way to improve the learning outcomes for everyone in the system and make the country better as an education nation.

Australia is presently one of the most segregated education systems in the world. The OECD is saying that Australia has the biggest proportion of disadvantaged children going to disadvantaged schools compared to any other country. Which really indicates that trying to improve the system as it is now with all these disparities will be very, very hard. The Gonski Institute understands that while we can't fix the system altogether, we can try to change the conversation and the quality of public debate to influence parents and taxpayers. Based on my eight months experience, I can tell you that most educators don't know about how the money is spent or what's happening in other countries. I think the Gonski Institute has a place here to promote a different kind of conversation and debate.

**MB** *How do you see students themselves taking part in the debate over the future of education?*

**PS** One side we haven't used much in this debate yet is young people. We've seen the difference young people have made in organising the climate change strikes. They're able to help their parents and adults change the way they think. Education will be the next big thing young people will take the lead on. If you put the facts on the table here in Australia to young people, they will understand why education isn't working for everybody. There would be a movement and activism where young people will say, 'this is not the world we want to have'. The Gonski Institute is trying to figure out how to engage young people more in this conversation and use them as an agent for change and help their parents and others to see that education now has a very different function to the one it had 50 years ago. It's about the future of young people, just like the climate.

**MB** *What do you think are the most important skills teachers pass on to students?*

**PS** One of the really important things that schools and students will have to do in the future is helping young people live happy and healthy lives. I'm really concerned about this decline in wellbeing, not only here in Australia, but everywhere. One good example of this is the challenge that smartphones and digital devices present. Schools might say, 'oh it's the parents who have to deal with that' and the parents might say 'the school should be dealing with it'.

One of the important things in the future will be to make sure every child learns at school how to live a healthy, meaningful and happy life, and how to take care of themselves and others. Academic knowledge and skills are important, but life skills - learning to self-control your own behaviours and understanding what is bad for you - will be the next big thing in the future. In America, they say this is the first generation where parents will bury their own children, because they're dying younger.

**MB** *How do we best assess those sort of skills (empathy, understanding, etc.)?*

**PS** The good news is they are already being measured in many places. Ontario in Canada is a good example. They're measuring and monitoring the health and wellbeing of their students. And there's talk of expanding the PISA instrument to take wellbeing into account. So it's already happening in the same way that 30 years ago we were talking about how to measure literacy and numeracy.

**MB** *If you had your way, what would the average Australian school look like by the end of your stay at the Gonski Institute?*

**PS** In five years from now, if I'm successful in what I want to do, there will be many more schools in Australia which allow their children to have more time to play, more time for themselves and who are less concerned about academic achievement. I hope there will be more communities where parents and others will realise that equity is the way forward. My dream is that Australia, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, will be offering a free, healthy, three course warm lunch every day to every child at 11.30 in the morning – not 1pm in the afternoon. Physical activity and healthy eating is key to a happier and more prosperous life.



# Mental health, reporting and education futures

Editorial: Mental health, reporting and education futures

John Graham

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Vicki McKenzie

Student mental health and wellbeing in Victorian schools

John Graham

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Australian schools

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Put professional judgement of teachers first or we'll never get the systemic  
education improvements we all want

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Pasi Sahlberg on more play, more equity and more trust in teacher judgement

Interview by Myke Bartlett