

Preface

The committee's intention in this inquiry has been to consider the issues arising in the current debate on how to achieve the best education for students progressing through twelve years of school. Every committee inquiry is a 'learning experience' for the senators who take part. In this case the learning has resulted in a broad consensus that a more rigorous approach to teacher training and to curriculum design, is required to improve educational achievement levels across the country.

To deal with curriculum first, it is the committee's view that it should embody two elements. First, it should reflect the accumulation of knowledge, wisdom and skills, and pass these on. Second, it should try to ensure that this knowledge, wisdom and skill is relevant to the work and life challenges to be faced by those whose experience of the world will be different in unforeseen ways. Relevance here may be determined by foreseeable vocational need and technological change, and by the unchanging nature of human needs and the human condition. The learning which allows teachers to survive is not 'relevant' to students. 'The 'relevant' curriculum is that which is directed at the need for a broadening and deepening learning experience and for acquiring new knowledge and new skills. There is much stimulating discussion in academic circles, currently, about the radical possibilities for schooling as the 21st century progresses. The committee applauds this, but fears the possibility of curriculum fads and fashions to which school systems and university education faculties are frequently prone.

The committee has also reviewed the extent of curriculum change over the past 15 years, noting aspects which have proved to be unfortunate, and which are currently being put right. However, the committee also notes that there is much to be done, particularly in developing standardised assessment methods which would ensure comparability of standards across the country.

Convincing evidence presented to the committee has stressed the centrality of good teaching as the factor which has most bearing on educational quality. Good teachers are the key to good performance. Good schools are those which are made up of good teachers. The committee has found that at a time of growing consensus on curriculum improvements, the threat to improved standards may result from the insufficient numbers of more able recruits to the teaching profession, and the failure of employing authorities to place a sufficiently high priority on measures which maintain the professional and intellectual vigour of teachers. This is particularly so in the case of teachers who have been at the chalkface for many years and whose sense of vocation is under strain.

It appears that in some respects the training offered to teachers does not match the needs of schools for more rigorous and challenging teaching. While this may in part be attributed to declining entry standards to teaching, the committee notes that there is some dissatisfaction with the ability of many new teachers to cope with the challenges of teaching. A great deal of emphasis has been placed recently on improving the

experience of practise teaching, including its duration, vis-à-vis the time spent on more theoretical aspects of training. This committee has other concerns. It believes that many new teachers have insufficient grounding in the actual subject content they are teaching. That is, they do not know enough history, have limited appreciation of literature through not reading enough of it, and are ignorant of, and frightened of, mathematics and science. This has a direct effect on the quality of educational outcomes because it can impede student intellectual growth.

Schools are our most public institutions. They are the most vulnerable to criticism and are often perceived as failing in their mission. The committee agrees that much of this criticism is unfair, and based on misperceptions. It takes little account of the need for schools and teachers to accommodate and deal with students whose social conditioning, often in dysfunctional families, thwarts their willingness to learn and weakens their ambitions.

But often the criticism is not unfair. Schools and systems need to acknowledge that such criticism often result from informed observation of poor performance or neglect of students' learning difficulties. The growth of skills and abilities may be stymied as much by the absence of challenge as by class disruption or slow progress of some students in a class. The failure to organise a school so as to maximise learning opportunities for all students partly explains the existence of the long tail of underachievement which characterises the relative performance of Australian schools, compared to those in Canada, in the various international comparative surveys.

The committee acknowledges the clear evidence that schools, in most cases, achieve very well. It accepts the judgement that teachers are as dedicated and professional as could be found in any advanced OECD country. Yet the task of schooling is relentless. There can be no room for complacency, and the best teachers are always striving to do better. To improve the quality of school education will mean raising the level of achievement across all schools.

The committee's terms of reference for this inquiry were broad, and so they provided space in which the committee was able to respond to what the submissions and witnesses identified as being important. While the committee has noted that media commentary and public controversy have centred on curriculum issues recently, it emerged that the issue of teaching quality came to be seen as being equally significant. For this reason the committee has paid particular attention to teaching methods, training, and matters relating to the profession. It has covered curriculum issues in some but not all subjects. Science and languages have not been dealt with in the detail of mathematics and the teaching of literacy. These have been given most emphasis because that is where some of the quality and underachievement issues were identified in submissions.

This has been a most interesting and rewarding inquiry for members of this committee. The committee thanks the 76 organisations and individuals who made submissions to this inquiry, and those who appeared before the committee at its public hearings. The committee commends the quality of evidence given, and the reasoned

points of view presented from many standpoints: academics, school systems, principals' associations, professional associations and individuals with particular interests to share with the committee.

The committee commends this report to the Senate.

Senator Judith Troeth
Chairman

