AEU SUBMISSION TO THE

SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Australian Education Union is an industrial and professional organisation representing approximately 170,000 members nationally in public schools, TAFEs and Early Childhood Centres.

1.2 In addressing this submission the AEU will first give an overarching statement concerning the content of the Inquiry. It will then primarily address Term of Reference 1, considering international and national evidence and the implications of this. Finally, it will briefly consider the other two terms of reference.

2 Overarching statement

The AEU believes that there is always good reason to examine current standards in schools and to seek ways to continuously identify potential improvements in areas where there are less than optimum outcomes. At the current time it is important that there be an open and wide debate on **the learning needs of students in the twenty-first century**.

Teaching is and always will be a highly complex activity. There is no clear method of guaranteeing success for all, and regrettably there have always been some students who have not achieved satisfactory outcomes. This is becoming increasingly unacceptable for both social and economic reasons and is a significant challenge to be taken up by our society.

However, it is important to get the context right and to objectively examine all of the evidence in order that one can move forward on the basis of knowledge and an understanding of what is really happening.

Unfortunately, this Inquiry takes place in a context which does not meet these conditions. The debate on standards in Australian schools has, over the last few years, become increasingly based on myths, misconceptions and deliberate deceit by those with particular and idiosyncratic views. They support these views with extremely selective use of the evidence. Certain parties in the debate have become adept at finding and exaggerating evidence which supports their pre-determined negative position whilst ignoring anything to the contrary. Consequently, the debate is increasingly dominated by those at the margins of general opinion and those with extreme negative views rather than an objective and broad based analysis likely to provide the basis for rational conclusions and sensible future policy development. There is an ongoing attempt by certain interests to manufacture the illusion of a crisis.

This has been seized on by, in particular, the Howard government, to divert attention from its inequitable and iniquitous funding policy and further its ambitions to create and control a national schooling system.

Regrettably, the sense of crisis has become so pervasive that the ALP now also feels it expedient to develop policy designed to deal with the "crisis".

It is time to stop and take an objective audit before proposing radical solutions to problems that do not exist or are poorly defined.

On the basis of all available national and international evidence academic standards in Australian schools compare favourably with other countries and with our own past. There is no general crisis in standards.

In asserting there is no general crisis the AEU is not suggesting that there is room for complacency and no need to consider how things might be made even better. We are not denying that there are areas in need of attention through research and/or policy change, or that more emphasis on further and ongoing teacher learning is not beneficial.

But we do assert that generic and ill-informed hysteria around "standards", the quality of teachers, or the quality of schools is totally unproductive. It pre- empts and smothers the objective analysis of strengths and weaknesses and of successes and failures which is an essential pre-requisite to worthwhile improvement. It focuses on scapegoats rather than clearly identifying the problems and finding solutions.

We are particularly concerned that the importance of quality teaching is being misinterpreted to suggest that teachers and schools are wholly responsible for any failure by students to achieve at the levels we would wish. Scapegoating teachers undermines morale, excludes the very experience, deep understanding and insight that in situ experience brings, and presumes the solution without considering the problems.

Most importantly the approach of generic denigration overlooks and ignores the need for concentration on specific problem areas which is the only productive approach.

The evidence, looked at rationally, overwhelming indicates that the major problem facing Australia is low achievement associated with students from low SES backgrounds, including, but not limited to, those from Indigenous backgrounds and those in rural and remote areas. This is a long standing problem, which occurs in a number of other countries as well. It requires determined intervention informed by objective analysis of the relevant research.

 It is well recognised that for those from such disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed requires more resources than for those from relatively advantaged backgrounds. Currently, the reverse is the case, with the most affluent schools catering to the students from the most affluent backgrounds, who are most likely to succeed.

The AEU trusts that this Inquiry will take an objective and holistic view of the situation and thus provide a basis from which the current successes of Australian schooling can be further enhanced.

There are considerable dangers in basing any future policy development on analyses motivated by personal prejudices and misinformation, and there is reason for concern that the current level of public and political debate around standards will lead to policy developments which are counter productive and not in Australia's long term interest. The evidence suggests that in order to develop students for the twenty-first century knowledge society, schools and teachers must be given high levels of trust and support and allowed the flexibility to innovate and tailor teaching to individual learning needs. The danger is that the current flawed debate will lead to counter productive over regulation and micro management of schools.

The AEU is, and always has been, committed to teaching and learning of the highest standard, and seeks to create a situation which facilitates its members achieving this. It is anxious to participate in any measures which offer a real opportunity to make Australian schools even better, and which focus on identified problem areas in ways likely to lead to improvement for the students involved.

A: Term of Reference 1

Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:

> a. *the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage; and*
> b. *the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community*

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3   Assessing Academic Standards

3.1   The way in which academic standards are determined needs careful consideration. The AEU has long been cautious about the use of basic skills tests and other standardised tests as a means of measuring the well being of Australian schools. The simplistic approach of subjecting students to exam-type situations to determine literacy and numeracy levels is not educationally or statistically valid.

3.2   It suits those who wish to denigrate teacher unions to portray this as trying to hide the facts, thereby ignoring the many legitimate concerns expressed not only by the AEU but a wide cross section of respected educational opinion. For instance, Avenell (2006, pp.34-35, 47) a Principal Education Officer with Brisbane Catholic Education made the following comments:

> Standardised tests cannot be trusted. Aside from not fulfilling their true purpose of adequately measuring the important things we really want to measure, they have become corrupted in

application and distorted in interpretation. Additionally, there is the critical issue of standardised testing programs corrupting and distorting the work of the people of the education system. We need to stop the statistical subjugation and regulation of our education system through the use of standardised testing before we lose sight of our true purpose – learning and teaching.

He goes on to cite considerable research which points to the potential undesirable effects of an over emphasis on standardised tests.

3.3   Assessment, reporting, teaching and learning are interrelated, and any changes to one have implications for the others. The best forms of assessment therefore rely on "demonstrated performance during real-life, real time activities, not those contrived as universal for all" (Avenell, 2006,p.35).

3.4   The desirable forms assessment should take are elaborated in the AEU Curriculum Policy (Appendix 1) section on Assessment and Reporting**:**

Assessment, reporting, teaching and learning are interrelated, and any changes to one have implications for the others.

The primary purposes of assessment, reporting, evaluation and accountability are to:

- support inclusive learning processes ;
- provide teachers, students and parents with information about the progress and achievements of students;
- form an integral component of the ongoing planning and modification of educational programs and practices and the targeting of specific resources.

Assessment should be authentic (closely linked to the purposes of the curriculum), and integrated with curriculum and classroom experiences.
Authentic assessment systems allow students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.

Assessment should be:

- for learning (diagnostic assessment);
- as learning (students learn to reflect on and evaluate their own work);
- of learning (summative assessment).

Assessment should be based on a range of assessment activities. These may include structured and impromptu observations some of which may be recorded and filed; formal and informal discussions/interviews; collections of students' work; use of extended projects, performances, and exhibitions; tests and practical exams,

The best forms of assessment rely on and value informed teacher judgement, as this ensures the integration of a range of factors including knowledge of the student and performance in a variety of forms of learning and assessment. This requires:

- ongoing development of the capacity of teachers to assess;
- moderation practices within and among schools to improve the ability of teachers to make judgements of student work;
- time for teachers during the school day to assess, evaluate, moderate and report on student learning;
- professional development programs on assessment;

It is important to ensure the confidence of the community in teacher judgment.

3.5   Much of what is important in schooling is not measured by standardised tests. One of the problems of standardised tests is that they focus attention on those areas of the curriculum that are tested, so that what is tested becomes what is viewed as important. Consequently, there is a tendency to expand the range of things tested in order that they be seen as important, whilst at the same time acknowledging that much of what is most valued is not susceptible to such testing. This distorts the curriculum.

3.6   The following have been identified as examples of some qualities exceedingly difficult to measure with standardized tests:
- Creativity
- Critical Thinking
- Resilience
- Resourcefulness
- Civic Mindedness
- Motivation
- Persistence
- Curiosity
- Question Asking
- Endurance
- Reliability
- Enthusiasm
- Courage
- Cowardice
- Spontaneity
- Self Awareness
- Self Discipline
- Empathy
- Sense of Beauty
- Sense of Wonder
- Sense of Humour
- Compassion
- Humility
- Arrogance

(Bracey, 2007)

3.7   A focus on standards tends to create a focus on standardised tests and this submission will consider the major international and national indicators. However, it does so in the context of the reservations expressed above and an understanding that there is more to schooling than the results from such tests.

3.8   Ironically, the AEU notes that where tests such as PISA have proceeded and shown generally favourable outcomes, the tests themselves have become the target for criticism.

3.8.1 It is also worth noting that Finland, which does so well in international comparisons, has no standardised tests prior to the end of school.

4   International Data on Standards

4.1   International data in context

4.1.1 When considering international data, there is a tendency to focus on the simplest presentation of results, in the form of an international league table. Where does Australia stand in relation to other countries?

4.1.2 In their book "National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling" Baker and LeTendre (2005) make a detailed study of the significance of findings in the TIMSS study (see below). Their observations are of significance to all international comparisons, and are worthy of consideration before drawing conclusions from such comparisons. In particular they note (pp.171-178):

- The difference between nations is considerably less than the difference between schools within a nation and the biggest differences are between student and student.
- There is no one factor that makes some countries perform higher than others. Much of the reason for this is that nations do not differ greatly from one another in the basics of the schooling process.

     None of the nations participating in TIMSS operates some radically different schooling process. Whatever educational innovation there is at the national level, it is carried out safely within the same basic operation of schooling found in other nations. This means that not only should one not expect to find a single master national factor; one should also realize that cross-national differences in achievement likely stem from moderate national influences on the distribution of achievement, not from some nationally unique and highly powerful determinant of individual achievement. (p.172)

- There are no large differences between teachers in different countries. Despite differing histories and cultures they come to think about their job in similar ways. "We are rapidly heading toward a worldwide faculty moving more or less in the same direction" (p.177).
- National performance is not affected by:
  o How centralized or decentralized the governance of schooling is   or
  o the use of national high-stakes tests.

- Focusing on the weakest students is important. Substantial inequality in the distribution of educational resources across schools can limit a nation's overall production of achievement.

4.1.3 Whilst there is a degree of inevitability in treating international comparisons like some international football league table, it is salutary to remember that the main rationale for running international comparisons is to learn what works and what can be improved. The exact position of any country is less important than the policy implications. The reasons for difference are complex and do not just mean that a country is "doing better or "doing worse". Whilst the most successful countries may offer policy lessons, it is also possible that differing circumstances, such as more homogenous cultures or differing parent attitudes contribute to their outcomes.

4.1.4 Within this context the submission will now consider some relevant international and national data.

4.2 **OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).**

4.2.1 The most widely cited and respected cross-national evidence on student performance is that produced by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The first PISA assessment was conducted in 2000. Its major focus was reading literacy. However, the PISA design is such that all assessments include elements of reading, science and mathematics, whilst focusing on one of these. The second assessment took place in 2003, focussing on Mathematics, and also including problem solving. The third took place in 2006, and results are currently awaited.

4.2.2 In the 2000 assessment, the Australian Report (Lokan, Greenwood, Cresswell, 2001) noted that "Australia's students acquitted themselves very well", and reported that:

- Only one country, Finland, performed significantly better than Australia in reading literacy;

- Only one country, Japan, performed significantly better than Australia in mathematical literacy;

- Only two countries, Korea and Japan, performed significantly better than Australia in scientific literacy;

- In reading literacy (the major focus of PISA 2000), Australia had one of the highest proportions of students of any country at the highest proficiency level (Level 5) and one of the lowest proportions of students at the lowest level (below Level 1);

- All Australian States and Territories performed at or above the OECD average;

- Australia's best students in each of the three domains achieved on a par with the best students in other high-achieving countries.

- In terms of the proficiency levels in reading 18 per cent of Australian students achieved the highest level (Level 5) compared to the OECD average of 10%, with Finland and New Zealand being the highest with 19 percent. Only 12 per cent of Australia's students did not reach at least level 2, compared with an OECD average of 18 per cent.

4.2.3 Australia's performance in 2003 was not significantly different from its high performance in 2000. The Australian Report (Thomson, Cresswell, De Bortoli, 2004) noted that:

- Australia's results were above the OECD average in each of mathematical, scientific and reading literacy, as well as in problem solving, and in each of the mathematical literacy subscales.
- Four countries outperformed Australia in mathematical literacy in PISA 2003 – Hong Kong-China, Finland, Korea and the Netherlands. In PISA 2000 only two countries performed better than Australia – Japan and Hong Kong-China, and Australia's results were statistically similar to those of Finland and Korea. Australia's results were statistically not different to those of Japan.
- As in PISA 2000, only one country achieved significantly better results than Australia in *reading literacy* – Finland.
- Three countries achieved better results than Australia in *scientific literacy* – Finland, Japan and Korea. In PISA 2000, only Korea and Japan outperformed Australia.
- Four countries performed significantly better than Australia in problem solving – Korea, Hong Kong-China, Finland and Japan.

4.2.4 Australia is also amongst a small group of countries where the difference in performance between immigrant, second generation and native born students is comparatively small (OECD, 2006).

4.2.5 It should be noted that PISA classifies Australia as a comparatively low spender compared to its achievement.

4.2.6 The importance of early childhood education is now widely recognised, including by all political parties. However, OECD data reveals that Australia is the lowest spending of 24 countries in the OECD in terms of early childhood education. Average country expenditure on education for 3-4 year olds is 0.5% of GDP, and Australia spends just 0.1%. Schools have to work hard to overcome this initial poor beginning, and a well funded early childhood program could do much to address early disadvantage and create greater equity.

4.2.7   The PISA results do considerably more than produce cross-national league tables. PISA has a strong policy orientation, with design and reporting methods determined by the need of governments to draw policy lessons. A productive approach to using the results must involve a considered look acknowledging both the areas of success and those areas in need of attention. A generic attack on standards fails to do this.

4.2.8   The most notable and worrying element of the Australian results was that in the 2000 results in relation to reading literacy Australia was found to have "high achievement, low equity". This presence of a "long tail" was caused by the comparatively wide spread of results across the achievement spectrum compared to several other countries with similar achievement levels.

4.2.9   Most importantly it should be noted that this low equity and long tail is closely associated with the socio-economic background (SES) of students. It was found:

- The relationship between socioeconomic background and achievement in reading is higher in Australia.
- Apart from gender in relation to reading literacy, the most important student background variable in relation to achievement in Australia was socioeconomic background, based on parents' occupations.
- Variance in achievement between schools in Australia is largely explained by differences in SES at both student and school levels.
- The social composition of a schools' student population was a stronger predictor of student performance than individual background.
- Schools that are better resourced and have a more positive disciplinary climate tended to have students from more advantaged social backgrounds.
- School related variables that were associated with student achievement were also dominated by SES.
- Many aspects of disadvantage tend to go together.
- The impact of educational experiences on student performance is probably greatest for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

4.2.10   It was concluded ((Lokan, Greenwood, Cresswell, 2001, p. xv) that "Australia still has a long way to go compared with some other countries in compensating for socioeconomic disadvantage" and in the International Report for 2003 (OECD, 2004, p.255) Australia was noted as one of the seven OECD countries where "policy makers need to address the fact that school resources appear to reinforce, rather than moderate, socio-economic differences".

4.2.11   Professor Barry McGaw, formerly Director of Education at the OECD and now at Melbourne University has given extensive presentations in Australia emphasising this key aspect of Australia's results. In particular, he has noted that PISA shows that excellence and equity in schools are not in conflict, but in fact mutually supportive. (See, for instance, McGaw 2005)

4.2.12   As with every other study that is made, the reports refer explicitly to the low

achievement of many Indigenous students.

4.2.13   It is clear that improving standards in Australian schools, as diagnosed through PISA, involves dealing with issues of inequity and having concern for the lower achievers and the connection between this and SES. As the Australian report noted:

> Several PISA results have policy implications. While the relationship between socioeconomic background and performance in *mathematical literacy* was less strong than for the OECD on average, there still exists a distinct advantage for those students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, no matter which way this is defined. While schools are not able to influence students' socioeconomic backgrounds, they are able to introduce policies that help to counteract the effects of disadvantage. Although many schools already do this there is work to be done because the differences observed are greater than would be considered desirable in relation to our national aspirations. (Thomson, Cresswell, De Bortoli, 2004, p.xv)

4.3   Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

4.3.1   Australian results in Mathematics are summarised as (Thomson and Fleming,2004a, p.iv):

- The Australian students acquitted themselves moderately well in mathematics with the performance of Australian students not statistically different to the international average at Year 4 and significantly higher than the international average at Year 8.
- At Year 4, Singapore and Hong Kong SAR outperformed all other countries while at Year 8 Singapore outperformed all other countries.
- There was no significant change in average scale score at either year level for Australia from TIMSS 1994/95 to 2002/03. However, a number of other countries show a significant improvement over the period, raising their position relative to that of Australia.
- Australia's average score at Year 4 in TIMSS 1994/95 was significantly higher than the international average, however in TIMSS 2002/03 there was no significant difference between the Australian and international average scores. At Year 8 Australia's average score was significantly higher than the international average in both TIMSS 1994/95 and TIMSS 2002/03.

4.3.2   Australian results in Science are summarised as (Sue Thomson and Nicole Fleming,2004b, p.iv):

- Australian students acquitted themselves well in science, with the performance of Australian students at both year levels significantly higher than the international average.
- The highest scoring countries at both year levels were Singapore and Chinese Taipei.
- There was no significant change in average scale score at Year 4 levels for Australia from TIMSS 1994/95 to 2002/03. However, a number of other

countries show a significant improvement over the period raising their position relative to that of Australia.

- The average score for Year 8 science significantly increased from TIMSS 1994/95 to 2002/03. The performance of some countries which were previously similar to Australia is significantly lower than Australia.

4.3.3 Whilst these results are less excellent than the PISA ones, they are very creditable and contain some which are excellent. The major concern is that the evidence suggests that, with the exception of Year 8 science where there has been considerable improvement, whilst Australia is maintaining its standards, other countries are now doing better than they were previously. This is clearly an area in need of detailed attention. A number of inquiries and initiatives by Australian governments are highlighting some of the problems in recruiting and retaining teachers in Mathematics and Science.

4.4 **The differences between Pisa and TIMSS**

4.4.1 These two major international tests do not measure the same aspects of learning, nor do they test students at the same age or in the same way. It is important to consider these differences. Ruzzi (2005, p. 2) summarises the differences as:

> The results of PISA 2000 and TIMMS 1995, 1999 and 2003 do differ. One reason is that the two studies differ in their approach and methodology. TIMMS assessment materials were constructed on the basis of an analysis of the intended curriculum in each participating country in order to cover the core curriculum common in the majority of countries. PISA assessment materials cover the range of skills and competencies that were considered to be crucial to an individual's capacity to fully participate in and contribute meaningfully to a successful modern society. Also, the age-based PISA targets populations of 15-year-olds. TIMMS targets grade-based populations (grades 3-4, 7-8 and the final year of secondary school for 1995, grade 8 in 1999 and grades 4 and 8 in 2003).

A more detailed explication can be found in Thomson (2005)

4.4.2 The most salient difference for the perspective of this Inquiry is that whereas TIMSS assesses the intended curriculum (without an analysis of the pertinence of that curriculum to the future needs of students), PISA assesses "the range of skills and competencies that were considered to be crucial to an individual's capacity to fully participate in and contribute meaningfully to a successful modern society." PISA also considers a broader spectrum of the curriculum.

4.4.3 Thus it can be seen that PISA more nearly equates to Term of Reference 1b of this Inquiry, and is a more relevant criterion where one is considering the extent to which students are being prepared to take their place in adult society.

4.4.4 Without trying to over simplify matters, it does appear that those who believe school is about equipping students for their future believe that PISA is the more valid assessment, whilst those who use the past and the old curriculum as their reference point prefer to refer to TIMSS.

4.4.5 This is exacerbated because the latter also generally wish to give the impression that standards have fallen and they are able to portray Australia's TIMSS results in a more negative way (notwithstanding that the results themselves are not generally negative).

5   National Data on Standards

5.1   National Benchmark Tests

5.1.1 Australia conducts testing in relation to Reading, Writing and Numeracy at years 3, 5 and 7 (and more recently 9). These tests began in 1999, though not all areas or all years were included initially. These are reported as an adjunct paper to the National Report on Schooling, and the latest, the report on the 2005 tests, includes data on the trends since the tests began (MCEETYA, 2007).

5.1.2 The AEU has always expressed reservations about these tests and this kind of testing for a number of reasons, none of which have to do with seeking to hide the truth. The tests seek to test the "minimum standards of performance below which students will have difficulty progressing satisfactorily at school" (p.2). The AEU is concerned that this focuses on minimum achievement in basic areas and can skew teaching to seeking improvement for students around the threshold benchmark, rather than all students across a broader curriculum. There is some evidence of a tendency in this direction in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States where "high stakes testing" has been introduced.

5.1.3 Nevertheless, these tests do now form part of the data that indicates standards are not falling.

5.1.4 The trends in most areas tested show considerable stability over the life of the tests, with generally over ninety per cent of students achieving the benchmark. There is no evidence of decline over this admittedly short period of time, and nothing to indicate these results show deterioration from times past. (See 5.2.3 below).

5.1.5 Of course, this also means that a proportion of students varying between 7% and 12 %, are not meeting these "minimum" standards, and there are those who will seek to use this as an indicator of a problem with standards.

5.1.6 Without in any way suggesting that the difficulties that these students are encountering should be ignored, it is important to note that this does not indicate that standards are falling or that standards are worse in Australia than elsewhere. It is symptomatic of the fact that achieving "minimum" standards for all has proved intractable over a long period of time and that this presents a real challenge which requires detailed and rational attention.

5.1.7 The results indicate that the major areas in need of attention are:

- The difference in results to do with location, with those in remote areas in particular showing considerably lower levels of reaching the benchmark;
- The difficulties of Indigenous students, who, as in other such tests, achieve considerably lower levels of achievement than other students.
- The growing gap as students progress through school. For instance, in 2005, the percentage of students not meeting the benchmarks in numeracy in Year 3 was 6%, however, by Year 5 this had increased to 9% and by Year 7, 18% of students were not meeting the benchmark.

5.1.8 This latter underlines the lesson from the PISA tests – that Australia is not dealing adequately with the issue of equity and of ensuring that resources are directed where they are most needed. In Australia we simply do not direct enough resources to those schools with a concentration of problems.

5.1.9 The growing gap should also bring into question the efficacy of the Federal Government's Reading Assistance Voucher programme. Against the advice of most involved directly in schools, this provides funding outside the school context specifically for those who did not reach the benchmark in initial testing. However, it is clear that a number of students who do initially reach benchmarks do not meet them later. It would be better to provide funding in a way that allowed schools the flexibility to spend it in the most effective way.

5.1.10 It also illustrates the complexity of under achievement. There is danger of seeing problems in terms of simple "catch up" programs. Students progress at different rates at different times, and learning is not a simple linear progression. There are some students who will always require extra support if they are to achieve, and others who need specific support at specific times. Schools and teachers must be provided with the funding and flexibility to ensure this is provided in the most effective way when it is needed.

5.2 The National English Literacy Survey

5.2.1 In 1996, the Federal government conducted a national survey of literacy, including skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing (Masters and Forster, 1997).

5.2.2 The survey was notable for its superior methodology, which included combining training the testers in complex measurement process, thus also being a form of professional development for the teachers, and the way the survey was produced and administered, which took account of the views, perspectives and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders.

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5.2.3 Dr. Geoff Masters co-author of the report noted in an article on the survey:

> In Australia, there is no evidence that levels of literacy achievement have declined significantly in the past two decades. The performances of students on basic literacy tests are similar today to performance levels 16 years ago. (Masters, 1996)

5.2.4 The results of the survey again pointed to the strong link between socio-economic background of students and achievement levels, and to the low achievement of Indigenous students in general.

5.2.5 This survey was also the genesis of the infamous myth that "thirty per cent of students are illiterate", which has become so much a part of the debate. Masters (p.3) explains how at the request of then Minister Kemp, a "pass score", reflecting expert opinion on an **acceptable** or **expected** score for the age was developed. He comments, "Importantly, students with scores below the pass score are not all "illiterate". Nevertheless, this figure has been cited, by Federal ministers, the media and others as the proof of 30% illiteracy without any attempt to accurately describe it.

5.3 **Other measures**

5.3.1 The past decades have also seen a considerable increase in the number of students participating in education for longer periods and at higher levels of education.

- Retention from year 7/8 to Year 12 has increased from around half in 1986 to more than three quarters now;
- The number of students participating in VET has increased from around 986 000 in 1991 to over 1.6 million in 2006;
- The number of higher education students has similarly increased from less than 400 000 in 1981 to over 860 000 in 2006.

5.3.2 Increased retention is itself an indicator of increasing standards of education as more and more students are being given the capacity to meet higher and higher levels of learning. The achievement of increased participation is made all the greater by the reality that the students who now participate in the higher levels would have previously been considered the ones with achievement levels below that required.

5.3.3 It must also be recognised that where selective processes operate, such as in entry to University, increased participation rates means more students miss out. This should not be portrayed as reflecting lower standards.

5.3.4 There are a number of areas in which those who work in schools would argue standards have clearly improved over past decades, but this is not easily substantiated. This includes:

- Student self-esteem and confidence;
- the capacity to make judgements;
- problem solving capacity;
- understanding of difference;
- developing broader horizons and expectations;
- learning to adapt to new technologies.

6 Nature of curriculum

6.1 Knowledge and the organisation of knowledge are always in a state of reconceptualisation, and curriculum development needs to reflect this. This means that curriculum needs to be continually evolving to meet new needs in a developing society.

6.2 Curriculum change produces criticism – at any given time there are those who argue the change is too fast or in the wrong direction, or too slow. Australian schools have been subjected to all extremes of this over a number of decades.

6.3 Criticism of "standards" is often really criticism of change. It is an inherent problem that most people believe that what they were taught and how they were taught it is what should be taught today. This arises from the fact that teachers need to inculcate a sense of value in the knowledge, skills and concepts they are teaching in order that they be learned. Change, therefore does not sit easily with many adults.

6.4 It is important to acknowledge the contested nature of the curriculum. Because of its extreme importance in shaping the future of individuals and society the content of the curriculum will always be a contested area.

6.5 For this reason, the processes for deciding curriculum change and development must involve teachers, be transparent, be protected from direct political intervention, include the broad community and seek to find consensus.

6.6 The Schools Council, which was abolished by the Howard government in 1996 and its predecessor the Schools Commission did much to help build common understanding amongst teachers and the broader community of the directions that needed to be taken.

6.7 The AEU is concerned that in the absence of such a body, much of the debate ignores the "popular centre" and respected opinion. It has moved to the extremes of opinion, is frequently based on the views of idiosyncratic individuals with a capacity to grab media attention, or individual anecdotal opinion and has become more negative, sensationalist and controversial and less likely to produce worthwhile change.

6.8 In the final chapter of its publication "Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century" (AEU, 2006) the AEU outlines the need to rebuild a common purpose in schooling. We also commend the document published by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) "A Guide to Productive National Curriculum Work For The Twenty-First Century" (ACSA, 2006). Both suggest productive processes to make genuine progress.

6.9 The AEU believes that is important that there be an open and wide debate on **the learning needs of students in the twenty-first century**. Without pre-empting such debate, there are some clear pointers as to the directions it must take.

6.10 Kalantzis and Cope, talking about learners in the knowledge economy describe the requisites of learning as follows:

> Excellent learners in the knowledge economy will be autonomous and self-directed – designers of their own learning experiences, in collaboration with others as well as by themselves. They will need to be flexible, possessing problem-solving skills, multiple strategies for tackling a task and flexible solutions-orientation to knowledge. Importantly, good learners will also be collaborative, recognising that knowledge is increasingly created collaboratively, whether in work teams, in scientific research laboratories or through community development. They will themselves be good teachers and communicators, and of open sensibility, able to work productively with linguistic and cultural diversity. Effective learners will be intelligent in more than one way – that is their intelligence may in turn be communicative, numerate, technical or process-oriented, or it may be emotional, analytical, creative or critical. Finally, good learners will be broadly knowledgeable, and in particular able to engage with the different interpretative frameworks and contexts of specific information. (2001 p. 38)

6.10.1 This requires a broad curriculum with multiple objectives, concerned not just with a few "basics", but with the development of interrelated skills, knowledge and concepts and the ability to apply them in real life situations.

6.10.2 This is not to argue that literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills and understandings are not foundational to participation in modern society and essential for life-long learning and that therefore every effort must be made to ensure that all students develop capabilities in these areas. This includes appropriate concentration on these areas at the relevant developmental stage, and access to additional resources and help for those who experience difficulty acquiring these skills. All teachers throughout schooling should accept responsibility for and receive appropriate pre-service education and professional development in incorporating the teaching of these skills.

6.10.3 However, it must be recognised that basic literacy and numeracy are not of themselves a sufficient education for anyone. All students, including those experiencing difficulty should have access to other forms of learning, including critical thinking and higher order skills, as well as an understanding of the major fields of human knowledge. Hargreaves (2003, pp.190-191) describes how in the UK a concentration on basic standards first is leading to schools and their teachers where the standards are easily met being perceived to have "earned autonomy" and therefore being less subject to standardisation. He describes how this is

creating a two level schooling system, with schools catering for lower achieving students being forced to concentrate narrowly on basic skills and standards, while schools catering for higher achieving students are free to deliver a much richer and broader education.

6.10.4   These are the challenges with which state and territory governments have been trying to grapple. It is not easy to make the necessary radical change to the new demands of a knowledge society but it is imperative that this happen in Australia, as it is happening elsewhere. Whilst constructive commentary and genuine evaluation are an important contribution to the process, creating an atmosphere which producess policy paralysis and recrimination rather than one of innovation is not.

6.10.5   Regrettably, the Federal Government and some commentators have chosen the latter course, and at a time when Australian schools need support and vision from the country's leaders, we are faced with reactionary "witch hunting". This is not the case in all countries, and it will be to Australia's disadvantage if it does not create an atmosphere more conducive to constructive change.

7   Role of teachers in curriculum

7.1   The curriculum is at the heart of what teachers do as a profession. It is therefore imperative that they be involved in all decisions related to its development and implementation.

7.2   Models which suggest that the teacher's role is to implement a curriculum which has been decided at some distance from its implementation create disconnections between elements that need to be integrated, and ignore the complex and inter-related judgements which lead to improved student learning.

7.3   The connection between student engagement and alienation and the content of the curriculum is particularly important, and standardised curriculum is likely to lead to further difficulty in engaging the very groups which have the low achievement standards which need to be addressed.

7.4   This is not to argue that teachers should decide the curriculum on an individual and potentially idiosyncratic basis, or to suggest that teachers collectively should decide the curriculum in isolation from the broader society and its demands. Rather it is to point out the complex nature of curriculum development and to assert the importance of teacher role in it.

7.5   The AEU Curriculum Policy states "Curriculum development, change and renewal processes should operate within a policy framework determined by each state and territory which allows schools and teachers to exercise their professional judgement and the flexibility to find the most appropriate solutions at the school, pre-school,

class and individual level" and stresses that "it is important that curriculum development take place … in a manner which allows a broad perspective on it, and within a set of explicit principles."

7.6   It is also important to acknowledge the role of the education unions as a means of ensuring appropriate teacher voice in the development of curriculum at state and territory and national levels. The vast majority of teachers are members of their union and believe it is the appropriate way for both their professional and industrial views to be represented. Although they also support an appropriate role for other professional associations where they posses specific expertise or interest, this is seen as additional rather than alternative to, the unions. Union representation is seen as ensuring a generic professional voice in a democratic way, and is a vital prerequisite to professional respect.

8   The Current "Crisis" in Standards

8.1   Given the performances in the international tests reported above and the many excellent features of Australian schools, it is a matter of considerable bewilderment to most of those involved in education as to how we have moved from celebrating these results to a situation where the major political parties and some of the national media act as though there is a crisis of standards. This alleged crisis is so general in nature that it lacks any reference to specific matters arising from PISA or other evidence.

8.2   Schools and teachers have been subjected to a campaign of negativity, in which:

- The worst possible interpretation is put on any evidence, and successes are largely ignored;
- Documentation is used selectively to back up pre-determined negative positions;
- Often, quotations from departmental documents are taken out of context;
- There is widespread use of anecdotal and individual comment, unsubstantiated by research;
- Research itself is commissioned to meet pre-determined outcomes;
- Anyone or organisation offering a counter view is vilified and targeted.

The purpose of this campaign appears to be more to establish the illusion of a crisis than to make any real improvements to schools.

8.3   The greatest responsibility for the poor standard of the debate must lie with the Federal Government. The Australian federal system places it in a position which is unusual in most countries – it has a Minister of Education but does not actually have any direct responsibility for the outcomes of schools. Whereas most governments would be held accountable for the problems they identify, the Federal

government is in the unique position of being able to play a "blame game" with the states and territories.

8.3.1 The AEU 2007 Federal conference condemned the Federal Government for:

- creating a debate based on scare tactics rather than rational debate;
- using tactics designed to intimidate and silence those who do not agree with them rather than welcoming a range of viewpoints and an intelligent debate;
- providing dubious research and interpretation of data and seeking and concentrating on negative aspects and results rather than an honest examination of improvements as well as areas in need of further consideration;
- basing the debate on false standards and the mythology of a past golden age, rather than a vision for the future;
- using the debate to seek to re-impose an outdated curriculum that will not serve students well in the future;
- seeking to enhance its political control of the curriculum at the expense of public confidence in schools
- consequently setting up an undesirable state versus federal dichotomy rather than working in partnership with the states and territories to the benefit of all Australian students.

8.3.2 It is notable that much of the information above which points to SES and disadvantage being of primary concern emerged at the very time the Federal government was implementing a highly controversial new funding mechanism for private schools which clearly directed more resources to the generally better off schools with the generally higher achieving students. The AEU is foremost in highlighting the flawed nature of this funding system.

8.3.3 The response of the Federal government to this criticism has been to mount a campaign around standards and the quality of teaching and the curriculum, as a means of diverting attention from the inequity of its funding mechanisms and attacking its critics.

8.3.4 The Federal Government has also used and fostered Kevin Donnelly, a former chief of staff with the Minister for Industrial Relations and a self styled expert with little or no credibility amongst the broad education community.

8.3.5 He has been encouraged to produce a number of books and numerous articles in the media, which is only too happy to give ready access to sensationalist and controversial views.

8.3.6 His "research" is also not respected. The paper he wrote on commission for the Federal Government "Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula" (Donnelly 2005) was widely criticised for the quality of the research. His more recent book (Donnelly, 2007) has received similar widespread criticism for its

lack of rigour and academic quality. (See, for instance McIntyre 2007). He tends to cite his own previous "research" to substantiate his latest accusations, and has failed to provide substantial evidence that can be tested and refereed.

8.3.7   He has also abused and misinterpreted the phrase "outcomes based education", expanding it to encompass anything vaguely progressive or that he does not like. That it is desirable to identify what students should learn as a result of the teaching they receive is of itself simple common sense, and has always been part of good teaching. All education is in essence about the outcomes, and there would be justifiable criticism of teachers if they were not concerned with outcomes! To imply that it necessarily means more than this or that it is incompatible with a range of other teaching strategies is misleading.

8.3.8   Whilst some would argue that he should at least receive credit for stimulating debate, the way in which he, supported by the Federal Government, seeks to vilify, denigrate and silence anyone who does not share his extreme and distorted views is not in the tradition of open academic debate and not in the interest of creating a healthier system.

8.3.9   The targets of this vitriol are not limited to teacher unions but range across many of the most respected bureaucrats and academics in the country. He effectively seeks to dismiss any authority, and previous learning and knowledge, in order to assert his own idiosyncratic views.

8.3.10   Without disputing Donnelley's right to hold and express his views in any way, the AEU is concerned that someone who is so poorly respected within the education community and has such a determinedly imbalanced view of Australian schools should exercise such influence on the government and the media. It is not helpful to have the debate lead by someone who so clearly has an entrenched negative view.

8.4   The way in which attempts to develop in students the skills necessary in an era of muliliteracies are caricatured as "teaching SMS instead of Shakespeare" is typical of the trivialisation of the debate around curriculum. The article by Bull and Anstey (2007) puts this in context. Such issues are at least worthy of intelligent discussion, rather than simplistic caricaturisation.

8.5   Another feature of the current debate is the way it erroneously portrays the extent of teacher union influence, the level of their support for the curriculum as it currently exists, and ascribes views to them that they do not necessarily endorse. The curriculum as it currently exists in states and territories is an amalgam of a range of processes and influences, most of which have not originated within the unions. Far from determining the current curriculum, the teacher unions have frequently taken issue with developments they consider undesirable. The union has sought to ensure the involvement of and represent informed professional opinion, (in line with 7 above) and has particularly struggled to ensure reasonable implementation

guidelines. However, to imply that the education unions determine the curriculum, as is frequently the case by the Federal Government and the media shows a complete lack of understanding of the issue.

8.5.1 The AEU Policy on Curriculum is attached at Appendix 1.

8.6 Teacher Quality

8.6.1 The AEU acknowledges the influence of its teachers on the outcomes for students and that therefore the quality of those in the profession is of vital national concern.

8.6.2 However, we caution against an exaggerated focus on the quality and performance of teachers. The quality of teachers and of teaching is but one factor, albeit one of the most important, influencing the quality of education for students. A singular focus on teacher quality ignores governments' responsibility for properly resourcing schools. Improved outcomes for students require attention to social, political and economic pressures on schools and communities.

8.6.3 This over concentration on teachers as the sole instrument of quality is creating a blinkered analysis of problems, blinding many to the detailed consideration of the evidence which is likely to lead to productive solutions.

8.6.4 It is also leading to generic and non-specific criticism of those who are most able to contribute to the solutions. It is leading to a situation in which teachers are seen as the problem, thus leaving them feeling harassed and undervalued. The recent talk around performance pay is an example of how the difficulties encountered by some students are seen to be due to a lack of effort on the part of teachers. With more incentive, it is argued, they will teach better and all students will succeed. Teachers' major motivation is a desire to help students learn, and they do everything they can to enable this to happen.

8.6.5 The danger of a flawed analysis which focuses on teacher blame is that it allows the real problems to be ignored and does not lead to researched and well founded improvements.

8.6.6 Many members of the public, business communities and even politicians tend to perceive learning as simple, mechanistic and linear. Term of Reference 1 appears to reflect such a view. Learning is complex, occurs differently for different people, and requires teachers to combine skills of discipline knowledge, pedagogy and child development tailored to the individual student to maximise their progress. If this is not clearly understood, it leads to "solutions" based on low teacher trust and high levels of centralised prescription when the evidence is that the countries most likely to succeed are those with high teacher trust and low centralised prescription. (Luke et al, 2007))

8.6.7 Simplistic associations of alleged "falling standards" and poor teacher quality also ignore changes that have taken place in the broader society and culture. The students that come to school today live in a very different world from that which adults inhabited when they were at school. Their experiences, their environment, their expectations and the expectations placed upon them have changed radically from the past. They are in many ways more sophisticated, but at the same time much of what happens in their lives outside school makes it that much more difficult for them to succeed.

8.6.8 The debate is also presented as a series of dichotomous extremes (such as phonics or whole language, spelling or creativity, and so on) which ignore the professionalism of teachers, who use a suite of strategies to vary and mix the approach as appropriate. Practice in schools does not reflect the extremes of the debate.

9 The "Crisis" in Perspective

9.1 The paper by Paul Brock, "Breaking some of the myths – again" (Brock, 1997, Appendix 3) gives an excellent outline of the way in which criticism of standards has been a feature of educational commentary since time immemorial.

9.2 There are a number of reasons why a perception of falling standards might be regarded as an almost natural phenomenon.

9.2.1 The difficulty that adults have in coming to terms with changes in learning needs has been referred to above;

9.2.2 There is, consequently, a tendency to always assess current perceived standards against those that applied in the past, so that even where curriculum has changed, the informal assessment of that curriculum is still that which applied in the past;

9.2.3 Many of those commenting on standards have a rosy and distorted view of past standards based on the peer group they were at school with or now work with, rather than an objective view of general standards at the time. Thus, for instance Minister Bishop laments (Bishop, 2006) " .. how is it that we have gone from mastering not only English but also Latin in year 12 to a situation where universities are having to teach remedial English…?" In reality, there is evidence that at the time she is speaking of there was no less dissatisfaction with the standards in either English or Latin!

9.2.4 Criticism based on comparisons with the past focuses on what is negative, not what is new or better.

9.2.5 As Brock points out, at any point of transition those in the receiving organisation or workplace tend to find fault with the organisation from which students come. There is always an expectation on the earlier organisation to meet the requirements of the

next. In practice, this is not as easy as it sounds, and receiving institutions must accept some responsibility for transition arrangements and ensuring new students are able to adapt to new expectations and methods.

9.3   It must also be recognised that expectations of students, and consequently schools, have risen quite dramatically in response to changes arising from the "knowledge society". Employers, in particular, are demanding more in terms of their expectations of new employees. For many years, society accepted that a proportion of students would leave school at fifteen, with minimal skills and capacities, and there was generally work for them. Indeed, one of the roles of schools was seen to be to sort students into categories based on ability. Teachers were often frustrated as they struggled to do whatever they could for students in a society that had very low expectations for some of them. That as a nation we have now come to much higher expectations for all students is a welcome change, totally supported by the AEU and teachers generally. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this has not necessarily happened in the past and it creates new challenges that require support, resourcing, research and understanding.

9.4   It is also not helpful that many of the negative critics of schools take their lead from political allies in the USA. The USA has different systems, different problems and indeed generally does considerably less well than Australia in international tests. It is not generally the best place from which to get one's intellectual stimulation in terms of schooling ideas, and Australia would do better to look to those countries which the evidence suggests may have some useful policy ideas from which we can learn.

10 Importance of Correctly Analysing the Situation

10.1 None of this, of course, is to argue that the quest to improve standards is not, and should not be, an ongoing challenge to all in schools. However, starting from the position that they have fallen and we need to return to some past golden age is an unproductive fallacy.

10.2 The AEU asserts that is not in the interests of Australia or its children to have such an unstructured and hysterical debate as is currently taking place. This is not to deny there are areas in need of consideration and ongoing improvement, but the nature of the debate that is occurring is out of proportion to the evidence, and more concerned with demonisation and victimisation of those involved in schools than with genuine improvement. It lacks any rigour, is driven by prejudice and misinformation and will never provide a basis from which Australian schools can move forward to provide even better education for students. Even if there are any elements of truth in what is being said, the method of presenting and dealing with it is totally unconstructive.

10.3 In interpreting any results, it is important to distinguish what is "normal" in the sense that it is common across similar tests both historically and geographically,

and what is unusual, or a comparatively unique result from a specific test. For instance there has always been a proportion of students who experience difficulty in learning situations, including literacy and numeracy. Similarly the widening achievement gap as students progress through school has been observed in many countries and at most times in history, and the comparatively low achievement of Indigenous students in Australia has actually improved from an even worse base.

10.4   This is not to argue that we should accept what is "normal", but that in seeking solutions we need a true analysis of the problem as a base from which to seek solutions.

10.5   The AEU therefore calls upon this Inquiry to urge all parties to take a responsible and constructive approach and to recommend mechanisms that bring the relevant parties into constructive dialogue rather than media sniping. The AEU hopes that its concerns that the intended timing of the report of this Inquiry, immediately before an election, is not an indication that it is going to be about political posturing and a continuation of the tactics to date.

11   Objective Analysis on Standards and Australia's Schools

11.1   Based on the above evidence and general observations of Australia's schools as reported by members of the AEU, it is clear that the basis from which Australia moves forward to improve standards in schools should be an understanding that current standards in Australian schooling compare very favourably with those in most other countries and historically.

11.2   There are a number of areas in need of attention which represent long standing problems and/or new expectations arising from the increasing demands of a knowledge society which should be addressed. Identifying these and researching and creating specific solutions will be more productive than simple, generic blaming of schools and teachers.

11.3   Foremost amongst these are issues arising from matters around SES, equity and disadvantage. The connection between SES and achievement in schools has been well documented throughout the world over a long period of time. This of itself makes it a leading issue in need of research and development. However, its importance in Australia is particularly acute as it is an area where Australia has been identified as having above average problems.

11.3.1   There is already a considerable body of work within Australia which can be drawn upon. Of particular significance is "Undemocratic Schooling" (Teese and Polesel, 2003), which presents a comprehensive picture of who succeeds and who fails at school, and of the connection between SES, social geography, attendance at public or private schools, and achievement.

11.3.2 Even more recently, "Dropping off the Edge" (Vinson, 2007) has provided strong evidence of "the particularly strong link between intergenerational poverty and low educational attainment" (Catholic Social Services, 2007). It also shows the interconnectedness of school and social factors as "some communities remain caught in a spiral of low school attainment, high unemployment, poor health, high imprisonment rates and child abuse" (Catholic Social Services, 2007).

11.3.3 Given this interconnectedness, it is clear that the solutions must be broader than simply scapegoating the very teachers who are trying hardest to deal with this problem. "Solutions" which focus on teacher blame will make the schools in these communities even harder to staff, as "success" in teaching becomes equated with teaching the least disadvantaged.

11.3.4 It is equally clear that disadvantage has a strong community aspect, and that it must be dealt with by supporting those schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students rather than it being seen as an individual problem.

11.3.5 The AEU applauds the objective expressed in the National Goals of Schooling that "Schooling should be socially just, so that students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of … differences arising from students' socio-economic background" (MCEETYA, 1999). However, the implications of this need much greater attention. Achieving such an objective has implications not just for individual schools, but for the Australian schooling system as a whole. Equitable outcomes will only be achieved by large scale distribution of resources in favour of those schools experiencing most disadvantage. As noted above, it was concluded within the PISA study (Lokan, Greenwood, Cresswell, 2001,p. xv) that "Australia still has a long way to go compared with some other countries in compensating for socioeconomic disadvantage" and in the International Report for 2003 (OECD, 2004, p.255) Australia was noted as one of the seven OECD countries where "policy makers need to address the fact that school resources appear to reinforce, rather than moderate, socio-economic differences".

11.3.6 A school funding system that allows the students most likely to succeed to attend the schools that are the best resourced cannot begin to address these issues of disadvantage and equity. Whilst school "need" continues to be defined in terms of the need of private schools to grow and enhance themselves, rather than the genuine needs of disadvantaged students, most of whom are attending public schools, the problem will persist.

11.3.7 The problem of SES is in large part a problem of needing more resourcing. Too often this suggestion is dismissed with clichés about not simply "throwing money at the problem". It is true that indiscriminate expenditure is unlikely to produce optimum results, but there are no viable solutions that do not involve increased expenditure.

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11.3.8   Adequate funding would provide resourcing for such early intervention strategies as:

- Extra support personnel to work with teachers;
- Increased provision of programs such as Reading Recovery;
- Special and long term programs of additional funding for those schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students given in a way that allows them the flexibility to direct them where they feel they will be most beneficial;
- Provision of additional professional personnel such as school counsellors, speech and hearing therapists, and behaviour teachers.

11.4   Study after study has highlighted the particular challenge of raising the achievement levels for Indigenous students. This is both part of the more general problems in regard to SES dealt with above, but clearly also has some particular issues. It is the case that this is well documented and generally accepted by all political parties and others involved in education. It is not a simple challenge, but some progress has been made and lessons learned. However, the AEU is concerned that recent changes to Indigenous funding are putting these gains at risk (Moyle, 2006).

11.5   Another specific aspect within the general SES problem relates to the comparatively lower achievement of students in rural and remote areas. Again, this requires specific research and solutions. One of the major difficulties is attracting and retaining the more experienced teachers in schools which are geographically isolated or undesirable. The AEU supports schemes which give teachers an incentive to take up and remain in positions in such schools, and believes that more could be done in this area.

11.6   The growing achievement gap as students progress through school identified at 5.1 above is properly a focus for attention. As noted, it is one of those problems that has been an ongoing feature of schooling for a considerable time. However, it is an unacceptable feature that must be addressed. This requires further research. The prevailing attitude that remedying the situation requires short term "catch up" funding undermines the chances of success. At both the individual and general level, there is a need to recognise that sustained and ongoing support is necessary.

11.6.1   Recognising the additional and new demands placed on teachers requires additional spending on professional learning.

The AEU Policy on Professional Growth is explained in Section 5 of the AEU Quality Teaching Policy (Appendix 2).

12 The Way Forward

12.1 This Inquiry could well place itself at the crossroads in terms of the direction of future reform and improvement in Australian schooling. In the face of a "crisis in standards" which has in large part been manufactured by those who wish to return schools to a bygone era, it is imperative that the Inquiry play a calming role designed to restore balance to a debate on the verge of hysteria. Public confidence in schooling is being undermined in a way which prejudices the very reforms necessary if Australia is to move confidently from a base which compares favourably internationally and historically towards the changes which are a necessary part of being in the knowledge society of the twenty-first century.

12.2 The danger of such an imbalanced view, based on a concept of "teacher failure" is that it will lead to over regulation and micro management of teaching.

12.3 In particular, it may inevitably lead to a form of standards based curriculum which seeks to micro-manage what takes place in classrooms. This will in fact have severe deleterious effects, reducing teacher creativity, spontaneity, professional self-worth, and student learning, and reducing cooperation between colleagues.

12.4 Hargreaves (2003 pp.90-93) gives an account of the frustration felt by teachers (in this case in New York) subject to "micro management of standards-based reform" (p. 90) and notes:

> … in teachers' eyes standards-based reform is preparing students neither for the knowledge economy nor for character and community beyond it. In general, teachers are being treated and developed not as highly skilled, high capacity knowledge workers, but as compliant and closely monitored producers of standardized performances. (p.92)

12.5 Hayes et al (2006, p.170), on the other hand, talk of the importance of integrating the three message systems of schools – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and (pp.184-194) the importance of creating "professional learning communities" which integrate these to maximise student learning.

12.6 The productive road to take will be based on models of development which exhibit:

- High teacher trust and respect;
- Low definition curriculum which, while specifying the basic outcomes of knowledge, skills and concepts required will leave teachers with the flexibility to adapt their teaching to suit the students they are teaching;
- Investment in resources, particularly directed at schools with concentrations of those students finding it hardest to achieve;
- Investment in teacher professional learning which enhances professional capacity and judgement and which assists in sharing professional knowledge and achievements;

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- Objective and pertinent research which resonates with teachers and helps them to overcome the problems they identify as limiting student achievement;
- Respect for the rights of all stakeholders and which create processes which build mutual understanding and consensus of objectives.
- Acknowledge the professional expertise of teachers and allow due weight to their views.
- Respect teacher unions as a legitimate and democratic way of representing the professional views of teachers.

B: Term of Reference 2

The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for the senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory.

13 Senior Secondary Schooling Certificate

13.1 The Inquiry will be aware of and have access to the report prepared for DEST by the Australian Council for Educational Research which has examined this question in some detail. The AEU does not dispute this work, nor have any additional information. However, a number of observations relating to the conclusions to be drawn from it are pertinent. The following is extracted from the AEU Response to the consultation which led to that report.

13.1.1 The AEU accepts that there may be some logic in evolving towards greater consistency and comparability of state and territory leaving certificates over time.

13.1.2 The AEU does not favour a single national curriculum which seeks uniformity at the expense of a diversity of approaches. However, the AEU would support a steady and considered evolution towards a national framework for more consistent senior secondary curricula and credentials provided it supports the higher quality, more democratic curricula and credentials existing or being developed in some states and territories.

13.1.3 One of the great strengths and values of Australian society has been its respect for diversity and its ability to build community on individual differences. We do not support a single education system which demands regimentation and conformity and is antithetic to that basic Australian value.

13.1.4 The AEU also believes that that the need for a national leaving certificate (ACE) is being greatly exaggerated. The current imperative towards national standardisation is largely a construct of the Federal Minister and Government and

their desire to centralise and control what is constitutionally the responsibility of the states and territories.

13.1.5 The current ENTER arrangements appear to satisfactorily meet the needs of Universities, and no real evidence has been produced to substantiate the need for greater uniformity in other areas.

13.1.6 Whilst minimising the disruption for students changing jurisdictions is a valid consideration, the reality is that short of massive uniformity both within and across systems, moving schools even within a single jurisdiction as the leaving certificate approaches is something which most parents and students will wisely want to avoid.

13.1.7 The current different leaving certificates in the states and territories reflect different philosophies which have evolved through different histories and approaches. Australian education as a whole has benefited from this diversity of approaches and the opportunity for states and territories to learn from each other whilst not being bound by uniformity.

13.1.8 Any pressure towards national conformity would create conflicts between the differences and require judgements about the most preferable which are unnecessary and undesirable. It would also stifle innovation. The consequences would be greater for schools and students in some jurisdictions than others, depending on the nature of the favoured option.

13.1.9 It is therefore of the utmost importance that "consistency" and "common content" be understood in terms of general concepts not specific content. The more specific the content the less room for movement schools have to make the learning experiences suit the students' context. In states where Year 12 assessment is external, the syllabuses are and need to be specific. It would be impossible, then, for states which have different assessment regimes to share syllabuses.

13.1.10 All states and territories have adopted or are adopting approaches to education which recognise the need to respect and respond to individual learning styles, needs, cultural and social contexts and treat students as far as possible as unique individuals. A reversal to a rigid national curriculum or syllabus would be extremely dysfunctional.

13.1.11 Another sudden change would create further heavy workloads and instability. Most state and territory systems have experienced considerable change in recent years and further major upheaval is highly undesirable.

13.1.12 The AEU would not support a lowest common denominator approach, and rejects approaches based on Standardised Achievement Tests (SAT). SAT tests have been shown to be culturally biased and to disadvantage students from lower SES backgrounds. They are open to abuse by being used for inappropriate

comparisons between schools, measuring the nature of student intake rather than the genuine work of the schools.

13.1.13   The AEU believes there is a need for widespread consultation before decisions are made and urges State and Territory Ministers to resist calls which seek to rush to greater uniformity, to consider all relevant issues, and to consult widely with the education community.

13.1.14   The AEU rejects any attempts to suggest in any way that the current differences are a sign of inadequate standards in any jurisdiction, or that consistency and comparability is a pre-condition for ensuring adequate standards.

13.2   The points made below in relation to making interstate comparisons are also pertinent here.

C: Term of Reference 3

How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

14   Making Interstate Comparisons

14.1   The presentation of tables which compare states and territories is very popular with the media and public. However, to provide useful information on which to base policy and reform they need careful and expert objective analysis which goes much deeper than a simple league table. Where this happens, it is generally not in the public domain, and regrettably much treatment is superficial and not particularly useful.

14.2   Generally, such comparisons tend to be superficial and appeal more to a sporting tradition than one of high academic standards.

14.3   Each state and territory has specific conditions, histories, philosophies and educational cultures. Most comparisons are at very basic levels, and do not reflect the complexities of these.

14.4   Some comparisons, such as those in PISA for example, report state and territory comparisons without allowing for the factors such as different SES compositions, even though they have identified such factors as important in regard to the national tests.

14.5   National comparisons such as the basic skills tests referred to above do attempt to take account of some factors by reporting disaggregated results. However, this is often inadequate without further analysis.

14.6 The following is an incomplete list of variables which can effect comparisons:

- Starting ages and length of time at a school – there is variation between states and territories in both the age at which students can and do start school and the length of time they spend at school;

- SES and SES density - states and territories vary considerably in the proportion of students in different SES groups, and in the degree of SES density in any particular area. The extent to which lower SES groups are consolidated in a particular area is known to compound the effect of low SES.

- Indigineity – Similarly, Indigineity varies considerably between states and territories.

- Geo-locations – given the fact that students in non-metropolitan, rural and especially remote areas currently tend to have lower achievement levels, the varying demographics associated with geo-locations in different states and territories can contribute considerably to differences.

- Objectives and priorities vary between states and territories and the degree to which these are compatible with what is being measured in tests therefore also varies.

14.7 Not withstanding all of the above, it is the case that the Northern Territory consistently demonstrates achievement levels well below those of other states and territories . Some of this is due to high levels of Indigineity and to its generally widely dispersed population with many small communities. However, that this has continued over many years and governments underlines a general failure to deal adequately with the problems we know are leading to low achievement levels. The Northern Territory school system has not been well served by either territory or federal governments. There are major problems of school availability which must be addressed as a starting point for dealing with the many other issues. Estimates suggest that as many as 5000 students, mostly Aboriginal, do not have ready access to schools. Some of the schools that do exist do not permit full participation through to the end of normal years of schooling.

14.8 The desire to compare results is not of itself an adequate reason for standardisation and regulation.

D: Conclusion

15 Concluding Statement

The AEU is, and always has been, committed to teaching and learning of the highest quality, and seeks to create a situation which facilitates its members achieving high levels of student achievement. It is anxious to participate in any measures based on rational and objective analysis of the evidence which offer a real opportunity to make Australian schools even better, and which focus on identified problem areas in ways likely to lead to improvement for the students involved.

Such measures will involve high regard for teachers and their professionalism, place high levels of trust in their professional judgement, and give teachers the capacity and support they need to maximise student learning and standards.

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AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION
Curriculum Policy

as adopted at the
2007 Annual Federal Conference

1   Introduction

1.1 Definition Of Curriculum

1.1.1   Broadly defined, curriculum is the totality of students' experiences within formal schooling. Curriculum describes the practices and operating ideas, both implicit and explicit, in the school. It encompasses the content, structure, assessment and reporting of the formal program of studies, co-curricular activities, and also the administrative procedures, personal relationships and teaching styles in the school.

1.1.2   Ultimately, curriculum is the outcome of the complex interaction between educational institutions and society. Schooling is one of the sources of personal and educational development, alongside the family and affinity groups, the local community, the mass media and work. Schooling's unique contribution lies in its formal program of studies, together with the experience of living and working within a broad and inclusive social environment.

2   Overarching principles

2.1 Social purposes of schooling

The role of schools is to develop students to be active citizens in a democratic global society with the capacity to participate in the development of society and discussions of ethics and values as well as to work in a globalised economy.

2.1.1   Schooling should assist in overcoming inequalities between social groups, seeking to produce equal and high educational outcomes for all social groups.

2.1.2   It should provide students with a basis for full participation in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the community.

2.1.3   It should develop in students a capacity for critical thought, informed opinion and the skills and knowledge to be socially responsible contributors to Australian society interested in the creation of a better global future.

2.1.4   In the national interest it should ensure there are highly educated and qualified people across all areas of the economy and society.

2.2 Development of the Individual

2.2.1   The curriculum should develop each and every student to his or her maximum potential. It should seek success not failure and have high expectations of every student.

2.2.2   It should be provided on a basis that is accessible and meets the needs and interests of all students.

2.2.3   It must be based on the concept of a common curriculum i.e. one which gives all students access throughout their schooling to all the major fields of human knowledge.

2.2.4   It should offer increasing choice with age in a way that opens up options and maintains a breadth of study rather than narrows opportunities (pathways) and options.

2.2.5   It should meet the cultural, social, civic and vocational needs of each student.

2.3 Equity and Access

2.3.1   Curriculum must be inclusive and be able to cater for all students in public education including:

- Students learning in isolated situations;

- students in low economic circumstances;

- Indigenous students;

- Students from language backgrounds other than English;

- Special needs students;

- Gifted and talented students;

- Both girls and boys;

- GLBTI.

2.3.2   Curriculum must be relevant to the needs of all students. It must be appropriate, motivational and able to engage students from all backgrounds.

2.3.3   This entails recognising that Australia is a multicultural society and that therefore students come to school with a variety of backgrounds, cultures, histories and values, all of which are equally valid.

2.3.4 Students should be encouraged to gain a rich understanding of both their own and other cultures through an inclusive curriculum.

2.3.5 Students should gain an understanding of the role that the construction of gender has played and continues to play in society.

2.3.6 A high quality curriculum must be accessible to all. To achieve this systems must ensure the availability of:

- quality teachers who have appropriate qualifications and skills to cater for students' needs;

- appropriate staffing levels and cooperative structures to offer all students a broad curriculum;

- professional development for teachers which is appropriate, relevant and of high quality, including time and support for the enactment of new curriculum;

- technology and technical support;

- resource allocation including necessary aides, course offerings, the ability to communicate with other agencies, human resource assistance etc.

2.4 The Contested Nature of the Curriculum

2.4.1 Because of its extreme importance in shaping the future of individuals and society the content of the curriculum will always be a contested area.

2.4.2 "Knowledge" is never absolute, is always open to interpretation, and is often constructed by groups in their own interest.

2.4.3 For this reason, it is important that curriculum development take place in an environment which acknowledges this, in a manner which allows a broad perspective on it, and within a set of explicit principles.

2.4.4 Because of its contested nature the teaching profession should play a key role in developing the curriculum.

2.5 Curriculum Development and Renewal

2.5.1 Curriculum should be subject to a process of ongoing reconceptualisation in terms of the future needs of students and the current social context.

2.5.2 Curriculum development, change and renewal processes should operate within a policy framework determined by each state and territory which allows schools and teachers to exercise their professional judgement and the flexibility to find the most appropriate solutions at the school, pre-school, class and individual level.

2.5.3 Any movement towards greater national consistency should involve collaboration between the states/territories and federal governments in consultation with the

teaching profession. This should not detract from the capacity for innovation in curriculum and assessment at the system and school levels nor lead to over standardisation.

2.5.4 Systems, in consultation with the profession, should develop curriculum frameworks in a way that enables teachers to adapt curriculum to local circumstances and assures age-appropriate material and activities which build on previous learning.

2.5.5 The curriculum should be based on a set of core principles and be responsive to the social context within which it is provided.

2.5.6 Change should be supported by research and theory which has been informed by the professional expertise of teachers. This can include research undertaken by teachers in schools.

2.5.7 Change should involve discussion, genuine consultation and collaboration with all educational stakeholders.

2.5.8 Change must be properly resourced and be introduced with timelines which take account of the realities of classroom implementation and the complexities of curriculum change, and should be properly evaluated.

2.5.9 Schools must be encouraged and enabled to innovate, experiment and research.

2.5.10 New curriculum must:

- be supported by high quality professional learning opportunities for teachers;

- be sustainable in terms of the workload of teachers and other education workers;

- be developed collaboratively by the profession and especially involve practising teachers with the appropriate expertise, with involvement by other stakeholders as appropriate.

2.5.11 Curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment and reporting are integrally linked and the development of new curriculum must ensure that these continue to complement each other.

3 The Formal Curriculum

3.1 Content of the Curriculum

3.1.1 Literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills and understandings are foundational to participation in modern society and essential for life-long learning. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure that all

students develop capabilities in these areas. This includes appropriate concentration on these areas at the relevant developmental stage, and access to additional resources and help for those who experience difficulty acquiring these skills. All teachers throughout schooling should accept responsibility for and receive appropriate pre-service education and professional development in incorporating the teaching of these skills.

3.1.2   At the same time, it should be recognised that basic literacy and numeracy are not of themselves a sufficient education for anyone. All students, including those experiencing difficulty should have access to other forms of learning, including critical thinking and higher order skills, as well as an understanding of the major fields of human knowledge.

3.1.3   All areas of the curriculum should be reflective of the fact that it is for Australian schools and students and should facilitate the development of an understanding of the cultures and traditions that make up the histories of Australia and the nature of Australian society.

3.1.4   The curriculum should acknowledge the special place of our Indigenous peoples in the history and culture of Australia through integration throughout the curriculum and through specific Indigenous studies.

3.1.5   Curriculum content also necessitates a broader understanding of other cultures and events, international relations and Australia's place and role on the world stage.

3.2 Reconceptualising the Curriculum

3.2.1   Knowledge and the organisation of knowledge are always in a state of reconceptualisation, and curriculum development needs to reflect this.

3.2.2   At the current time, there is a particular need to look at the curriculum needs of students in the twenty-first century who will be spending their lives in a world undergoing rapid and fundamental change. These circumstances require a curriculum which develops different skills and concepts of knowledge from those of the past.

3.2.3   There should be greater connection between different bodies of knowledge.

3.2.4   Whilst curriculum will remain underpinned by content, learning should be as much about skills and concepts as content. It should also be rigorous. Therefore the outcomes of curriculum processes should be about the capacities developed and an understanding of the skills specific to fields of knowledge as well as the knowledge gained, and the connections between these.

3.2.5   Nevertheless, there will remain a need for specialist knowledge within a context where specialist areas will relate to each other, contributing to an interrelated whole.

3.2.6   The senior curriculum should be relevant and accessible for all young people, in particular those who are not achieving optimal outcomes. The senior curriculum

should provide flexible pathways for all students and not curtail future options for them. Certification arrangements should facilitate not restrict access to TAFE, higher education, or employment for all students, with articulation and credit transfer arrangements made explicit so that students can be advised appropriately in terms of the pathways they have chosen.

Senior curriculum reform should maintain quality assurance and public confidence in senior schooling and in its certification.

3.2.7 **Civics, Citizenship and Values within a Social Justice Framework**

3.2.8 Public education should provide a strong values system based on:

- The pursuit of excellence;
- Principles of tolerance, fairness, egalitarianism and inclusiveness;
- Student leadership and participation;
- Preparing future citizens to make responsible decisions and participate in and contribute to local and global societies;
- Awareness of and respect for diversity;
- Awareness of human rights issues and legal processes.

3.2.9 Students' experience at school should engage them in and prepare them for participatory democracy.

3.2.10 Students need to develop a sound basis for making judgements about local, national, and international issues. This necessitates awareness of how decisions are made, a concern for others, knowledge of international circumstances and understanding of the importance of international organisations and the role they do and could play.

3.2.11 Students need to learn how to play their part in securing their own and others' futures. Implicit in this is an understanding of working conditions in a changing industrial climate.

3.2.12 Students should develop awareness of:

- industrial and human rights and how they vary from country to country;
- the history and role of trade unions and the politics of workplaces;
- the history and role of non government organisations and international organisations in improving human rights;
- the part that gender has played in the history of democratic development, and the role of women in citizenship, non government organisations and politics;
- basic economic literacy;

- the place of public and private interest in democracy, and the difference between them.

3.2.13 Particular emphasis in the school curriculum should be given to developing the skills and understanding to actively participate in public debate in such significant issues as:

- environmental sustainability;
- the implications of a diversity of lifestyles, values and beliefs;
- the distribution and control of wealth and resources;
- the development and application of technology;
- ethical and moral issues;
- questions of rights and discrimination;
- industrial legislation;
- access to information;
- equality before the law;
- global inequalities and issues of development and displaced people;
- the nature and role of the education system;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and the impact of non-indigenous cultures; and
- poverty and homelessness.

3.3 Environment Education

Environment education for sustainability should be studied by all students and should:

- be a core feature of the ethos of public education settings and evidenced throughout policy and practice;
- foster awareness and understanding of economic, social, political and ecological interdependence;
- provide every person with opportunities to acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills to protect and improve the environment;
- encourage responsible patterns of behaviour and attitude by individuals, groups and societies towards the environment.

4 Pedagogy

4.1 Schools need to ensure the development of modes of teaching and learning that foster understanding of meaningful content and encourage students' positive engagement with schooling.

4.2 All students need to be provided with intellectually challenging learning opportunities which provide opportunities for higher order thinking and critical analysis.

4.3 It is important that what goes on in classrooms is connected to the world beyond.

4.4 New knowledge should be built on students' existing knowledge. Connections between different bodies of knowledge should be made, rather than a curriculum with discrete compartments. Knowledge and skills should be developed in the context of real life issues and problems.

4.5 All students should be taught in an environment which is supportive, characterised by high expectations and in which they exercise agency and responsibility for their learning. Criteria for achievement should be explicit and all students provided with assistance to achieve.

4.6 Students should learn about and value a range of cultures, create positive human relationships, respect individuals, and help to create a sense of community. Working with and valuing difference is an important element in improving the academic and social outcomes of marginalised students at the same time as improving the social outcomes of all students and being important for society as a whole.

4.7 Pedagogical change is often an important means of achieving improved student outcomes.

4.8 Research into effective pedagogy should be undertaken by systems and incorporated into professional development.

5   Assessment and Reporting

Assessment, reporting, teaching and learning are interrelated, and any changes to one have implications for the others.

The primary purposes of assessment, reporting, evaluation and accountability are to:

- support inclusive learning processes ;
- provide teachers, students and parents with information about the progress and achievements of students;
- form an integral component of the ongoing planning and modification of educational programs and practices and the targeting of specific resources.

5.1.1   Assessment should be authentic (closely linked to the purposes of the curriculum), and integrated with curriculum and classroom experiences.
5.1.2   Authentic assessment systems allow students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.

Assessment should be:

- for learning (diagnostic assessment);

- as learning (students learn to reflect on and evaluate their own work);
- of learning (summative assessment).

5.1.3   Assessment should be based on a range of assessment activities. These may include structured and impromptu observations some of which may be recorded and filed; formal and informal discussions/interviews; collections of students' work; use of extended projects, performances, and exhibitions; tests and practical exams,

5.1.4   The best forms of assessment rely on and value informed teacher judgement, as this ensures the integration of a range of factors including knowledge of the student and performance in a variety of forms of learning and assessment. This requires:

- ongoing development of the capacity of teachers to assess;
- moderation practices within and among schools to improve the ability of teachers to make judgements of student work;
- time for teachers during the school day to assess, evaluate, moderate and report on student learning;
- professional development programs on assessment;

5.1.5   It is important to ensure the confidence of the community in teacher judgment.

5.2 Reporting

5.2.1   Reporting to parents and students should flow from the principles outlined in the section on Assessment above.

5.2.2   The aim of reporting is to communicate information about student learning. It should indicate achievements and areas in need of improvement, and suggest how this might be achieved. Standards referenced reporting is much more meaningful than comparison to the achievement of peers.

5.2.3   Decisions about the nature of reporting of student achievement should take account of the age and previous learning of the students.

5.2.4   Reporting of student strengths and weaknesses should avoid labelling, provide parents with clear and concise information that is easy to understand and create trust between students, parents and teachers.

5.2.5   Given the wide variation in rates of development amongst children in the early years, and significant differences in ages of children in the same class, comparison with other students is particularly inappropriate in the early years of schooling.

5.3 Evaluation and Accountability

5.3.1   Teachers welcome accountability used to build the capacity of education communities. Accountability needs to be based on valid processes, which are fair and equitable for all students, teachers and schools.

5.3.2   Standardised tests are a snapshot of limited learning at one point in time and are best used as a random sample over a large population to determine program effectiveness. Mass census testing is unnecessary, expensive and often counter productive in that it encourages poor teaching and learning situations.

5.3.3   Sample testing can provide the system-wide information required to support planning and resource allocation and enable governments and education systems to fulfil their responsibility to provide funding for programs in areas identified as in need .

5.3.4   There must be ongoing discussions with teachers, students, education unions and parent groups about any proposed collection and use of data from standardised testing programs. Information gathered on the achievements of individual students or schools should not be released to others outside the systems, and at no stage should there be public reporting comparing schools against schools.

5.3.5   All standardised testing should take place within strict data protocols for privacy and which ensure that "league tables" cannot be constructed. Ranking of schools is inappropriate, unfair to students and school communities and potentially destructive of the ethos of the public education system, particularly in areas of disadvantage.

5.3.6   Schools have a responsibility to report to their communities and this means developing reporting mechanisms in consultation with them.

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

Quality Teaching in Schools Policy

as adopted at the
2007 Annual Federal Conference

1   Quality teaching in context

1.1   Teaching is a complex professional activity which involves integrating a deep understanding of a knowledge base encompassing theoretical knowledge, pedagogy, subject discipline, child development and learning theory, in practical and unpredictable circumstances.

1.2   The quality of teachers and of teaching is but one factor, albeit one of the most important, influencing the quality of education for students. A singular focus on teacher quality ignores governments' responsibility for properly resourcing public education. Improved outcomes for students require attention to social, political and economic pressures on public education and communities.

1.3   Education is of enormous importance to society and its future at the global, national, community and personal level. Quality teaching contributes to the building of communities, particularly in rural and remote areas, and to the development of active democratic citizenship. Therefore the quality of teaching is of profound importance to society.

2   General principles

2.1   Responsibility for ensuring the quality of teaching rests with many groups within or associated with the profession.

2.1.1   Teachers themselves have an obligation, individually and collectively, to critically reflect on and inquire into their practice and its effectiveness and to continue their professional growth throughout their career. This is best facilitated by the development of a culture of inquiry in systems and in schools. Opportunities to develop the capabilities for inquiry and school based research must be provided.

2.1.2   Systems must support and nurture quality teaching through the provision of resources that are optimal for quality teaching to occur in areas such as:

- Time allocations

- Class sizes

- ICT

- Quality curriculum frameworks and support documents
- Professional learning/research opportunities
- Support staff
- Preparation time
- Materials
- Buildings and facilities
- Pay and conditions
- Research into factors which affect the quality of teaching.

2.1.3   Governments must provide adequate levels of funding and create a culture of informed and constructive decision making around education.

2.1.4   Good leadership in schools is critical for schools to be vibrant learning organisations in which teaching flourishes as a collegiate activity.

2.1.5   Teacher educators and universities need to be funded to ensure quality amongst new generations of teachers, to conduct research into learning and pedagogy and the contexts in which they occur, and to assist schools as learning organisations.

2.1.6   Teacher unions have a vital role in advocacy and support for optimal professional and industrial conditions, to achieve best professional practice for quality teaching and learning.

2.1.7   Teaching standards appropriate to various career stages can form a useful basis for the development of quality teaching provided they :

- Are developed by the teaching profession;
- Reflect the complex work that professionals undertake in educational settings;
- Are embedded in industrial or formal agreements between employers and teacher unions;
- Are used to guide professional learning and are not used punitively for performance management
- Are used voluntarily at the advanced level.

2.2   The profession has the right and responsibility to maintain and improve quality by:

- determining entry and continuing professional learning requirements;
- defining professional ethics;
- determining professional standards;
- being involved in educational decision making at all levels;
- engaging in practices that both attract new teachers and subsequently retain them;
- engaging in public debate on educational issues.

2.3   Teachers working in non-permanent modes of employment have the same rights and responsibilities and should have the same access to professional development as those in permanent employment. It is incumbent on systems to provide the resources and conditions necessary to ensure this.

2.4   Members of the profession must be university qualified through teacher education courses which develop deep knowledge and understanding of:

- Subject content

- Professional studies

- Professional experience in schools.

2.5   Schools and the system should operate on shared values and a common responsibility. For this to occur the system bureaucracy must be closely connected to the culture of public schools.

2.6   The location of decision making should relate to what is best for student learning across the system. Judgements about the location of decision making will be based on an approach that ensures appropriate systemic resources while allowing each school the flexibility necessary to cater for its unique student community.

2.7   Quality decision making involves the profession being included in educational decision making at all levels. Teachers have a responsibility to contribute to the development of the profession through active engagement in professional consultation and decision making at school and system levels, and through participation in the work of unions and professional associations.

2.8   Systems and the profession share a responsibility to be accountable to students, parents and society through a variety of mechanisms which provide valid and pertinent information. Simplistic models which suggest that the complex nature of education can be treated like a commodity, measured and ranked, are rejected.

2.9   Factors external to the education system such as social and economic conditions, family wealth, geographic isolation and access to social and health services affect the ability of schools and teachers to respond effectively to students' learning needs. Many of these factors are beyond the capacity of teachers and schools to address. Governments must examine and address the links between these factors and student achievement.

2.10   Quality teaching and quality career paths are interconnected and encompass:

- Recruitment

- Initial teacher education

- Induction

- Continuing professional learning

- Salary
- Conditions of work
- Promotion pathways
- Specialisation
- Research opportunities.

2.11 The quality of individual schools and the quality of all schools in the system are symbiotic. A balance must be sought between the desire of a particular school to recruit the staff most appropriate to its needs and the appropriate distribution of teachers throughout the system. Proper system wide processes should ensure that all schools have the teachers they need.

2.12 The teaching workforce should more accurately reflect the multicultural make up of Australia. Efforts to attract and retain teachers from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds must be recognised as a key quality issue and strategies to support teachers of all cultural backgrounds, including overseas-trained teachers, to teach in public schools.

2.13 Similarly, there is a clear need to recruit and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

3 Teacher Education

3.1 Relationship Between Education Faculties and Schools

3.1.1 The quality of teaching is greatly enhanced by the integration of theory and practice at all stages of a teacher's career and in all aspects of school operations.

3.1.2 Closer links between teacher education faculties and schools are already forming, and this trend should accelerate and become more formally recognised over coming years.

This should manifest itself in a number of ways, such as:

- ongoing relationships between faculties and individual schools;
- the interchange of personnel;
- a clearly defined and mutually supportive partnership between schools and teacher educators;
- joint approaches to solving challenges that schools identify as priorities, using the research expertise and knowledge of university personnel to work in partnership with teachers as school/classroom researchers or critical friends.

3.2 Pre-Service Teacher Education

3.2.1 The first step in ensuring quality teaching is to ensure that those recruited to teaching are of high academic standard and have an aptitude for teaching.

3.2.2   It is also desirable to actively recognise and credit the knowledge, capabilities and experience of prospective teachers who have been engaged in other professions, and to implement recognition of prior learning arrangements in ways that reinforce high standards for the teaching profession. Genuine recognition of prior learning is desirable; watering down of entry qualifications is not. Subject knowledge and experience cannot be substituted for pedagogical knowledge.

3.2.3   Over time, there has been a trend for the period of time spent in initial training to increase, and the demands of the learning society would seem to require that current course length be at least maintained.

3.2.4   Teacher education courses should ensure students develop a deep understanding of their discipline/s in order to convey the underlying principles when the content is changing. At the same time, increasing expectations of the skills and attributes to be developed by all students increases the need for professional studies in appropriate pedagogies.

3.2.5   Additionally, the need to develop practice alongside theory requires more contact amongst education faculties, student teachers and schools. Student teachers should be developing the skills they will need as teachers, including self-reflection, engagement in professional dialogue and using research as a guide. This should be achieved by a more direct involvement of teacher educators with what student teachers are learning in schools, and by greater use of practising teachers in university courses, through both short-term visits and longer exchanges, perhaps involving conjoint appointments and secondments.

3.2.6   As well as an understanding of the social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds of students and the impact of these on students' learning, initial teacher education must ensure teachers develop:

- a specific understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with special education needs, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students with challenging behaviours.

- a knowledge of strategies for addressing their needs.

4   New educators (Beginning teachers)

4.1   Completion of initial teacher education must be followed by a period of timely, accessible and effective induction in which the beginning teacher has the opportunity to integrate theory and practice. Provision for induction should include:

- reduced teaching load;

- time for new educators to prepare and to reflect on their practice;

- mentoring from designated teachers in the school who have received training in mentoring and are allocated time to carry it out;

- ongoing support from their university education faculty.

This will assist in developing the conditions through which new educators will develop the practice of action research, apply research to practice, and take part in professional dialogue about practice.

4.2   There should be a process of provisional registration leading to full registration of teachers at the end of a period of induction.

4.3   It is imperative that professional learning opportunities are offered in the early years of teaching to build on the teacher's pre-service learning. They must be resourced in such a way that they provide for professional support and growth so that teachers' early professional experience is positive, constructive and rewarding. Special provisions should be put in place for new teachers who begin their professional careers in a part-time, non-permanent capacity or in areas that are geographically and/or professionally isolated.

4.4   Professional learning opportunities to cater to the specific needs of new teachers who have been previously engaged in other professions, teachers who have had an extensive break from teaching, and teachers who were trained overseas should be provided.

5   Professional growth

5.1   Continuing professional learning is central to the practice of teaching and school leadership. The quality of professional learning will determine the quality of the ongoing development of teachers and must become a joint responsibility to which all parties devote greater effort and resources.

5.2   Professional learning can take many forms, including:
- formal courses of study at university;
- specifically designed short courses;
- whole school or department developmental activities;
- participation in professional activities and dialogue;
- professional representation on decision-making bodies;
- professional reading;
- observation of other teachers, work shadowing, mentoring, and professional exchange;
- industry experience;
- joint planning with colleagues;
- participation in research;
- mentoring colleagues.

5.3 Provision of professional learning opportunities is a right. School systems must provide a range of opportunities, ICT infrastructure and support at individual, school and system level so that each teacher or school leader can develop their own professional experiences to build system capacity regardless of geographic location.

5.4 Departmental needs for professional development relating to curricular up-dating or changed policy are important, but not sufficient to meet all the needs of a modern teacher workforce. Professional learning priorities should not be dominated by system priorities but should also meet the needs of individual teachers and schools. Teachers should have access to personal professional development and school-based in-service education as well as learning opportunities provided by state and national systems.

5.5 It is important that a substantial portion of professional learning relates to actual experience, stems from the teachers' perceived needs, encourages both self-reflection and an awareness of what others do and is sustained over time.

5.6 It is also important that there is an element of professional learning that is research based and that feeds into the professional knowledge pool.

5.7 The development of formal professional learning activities must be built on a substantial research base, involve the experience of practising teachers and school leaders, be of assured quality and be delivered with the minimum disruption to teachers' and school leaders' personal lives.

5.8 School systems should develop and maintain system capacity in teacher advisory support in all curriculum areas.

5.9 Faculties of education have a continuing role to play in supporting practice-based, research-informed professional development, which itself may also be a form of action research of use to others. This can involve individual teachers, a whole school, a year level, or a subject area.

5.10 Management and development of both schools and teachers must be clearly linked to processes and principles of school development and enhancement, supporting teacher and school leader development. It must not become an end in itself.

5.11 Professional learning linked to any requirement relating to continuation of teacher registration must take account of the full range of teacher learning activities, not add unduly to teacher workload, and places an obligation on systems to ensure the accessibility of relevant professional learning.

6   Leadership

The link between quality leadership and quality teaching is well established.

6.1   "Leadership" as a term should be understood as a function rather than a position. Whilst those in positions of formal authority in schools and systems should be expected to exhibit qualities of leadership, leadership may be evidenced in practice in many ways by many others – for example, through academic research or mentoring.

6.2   Leadership viewed in this way may encompass all teachers and the broader school and developing leadership capacity should be concerned with this full range.

6.3   This dispersed leadership can play an important role in leadership succession and ensuring more equitable distribution of promotion positions.

6.4   School leadership needs to be set in the context of highly developed systemic educational leadership. This will result in a system which throughout is working towards improved student learning and in which all accept responsibility commensurate with their position.

6.5   Education bureaucracies must be structured to provide support to schools and promote the vision and mission of the public schooling system.

6.6   System leaders are key members of the education community and as such must be appropriately qualified and experienced in educational roles. They must "own" the problems that occur and take responsibility for the ongoing development of all elements of the system, not merely play a managerial accountability function that sets targets and deals with the failure to meet them.

6.7   Schools and their leaders need to identify themselves as part of and be committed to a broader public enterprise. Public school leadership should be characterised by a willingness to share problems and solutions, learn from each other, and work together.

6.8   The AEU supports consideration of alternative formal leadership structures such as co-principalship and other forms of shared leadership.

6.8.1   The totality of those in formal leadership positions must increasingly reflect the cultural diversity of Australia in general.

Breaking some of the myths – again

Edited version of Opening Address: Refocus on Reading Conference,
University of Wollongong, July 18-19, 1997

Dr Paul Brock
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Recently some of you may have read the superb article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "The Great Escape", written by Deirdre Macken. One section deserves exact citation.

Australians are losing touch with reality. Traumatised by change, cynical of authority and pressurised by the pace of life, people are embracing myths and misconceptions: they increasingly rely on personal anecdote rather than on expert opinion to inform their view of the world and they are more likely to view statistics as an attempt to lobby rather than an indicator of reality.

This skewered (sic) view of the world is not just a curious aberration, one of the hiccups of society in transition. The flight from reality is gathering momentum. It is feeding on itself; myth, repeated enough, becomes part of the community's pool of knowledge; misconceptions, held with enough passion, set the agenda for society.

As the polls of perceptions divert further from the grounding of sense, logic, statistics, research, considered opinion, analysis and expertise, society is becoming more vulnerable to manipulation by political groups and vested interests.

More importantly, myth is receiving the imprimatur of authority as the most powerful institution – politics – is forced to respond to perceptions of reality rather than actual causes of concerns. The list of legislation crafted to quell misplaced fears grows annually. [1]

Ms Macken proceeded to provide a number of striking examples, such as the myth that most single-parent pensioners are teenage girls, whereas in fact only 2.9% of sole-parent pensioners in Australia are under 20 years of age.

Of course, some "myths" are valid and can be substantiated. One myth which Ms Macken showed to be true is that large numbers of extremely wealthy Australians don't pay their fair share of tax. Ms Macken cites an Australian Taxation Office survey of 100 of the *Business Review Weekly* magazine's Rich List which found that 80 of them had declared an income of less than $25,000, a fact which I, as an ordinary PAYE wage-earner, find to be utterly offensive.

Ms Macken's article makes no reference to false myths associated with literacy, but her observations are absolutely apposite to this continuously controversial area of policy, perception, and practice.

There was also the attack in the Sydney "contemporary" press on "modern methods" in to the teaching of reading and writing:

The wholesale substitution of "modern methods" has been found to be unwise. The defects apparent in school children at the present day are summarised thus: (a) the children are not thoroughly grounded in essentials; (b) they are not accurate in their work. Business people in Sydney… find these and similar defects in the children they are at present taking into their employment and they attribute them largely to the new methods of education. [2]

"As the polls of perceptions divert further from the grounding of sense, logic, statistics, research, considered opinion, analysis and expertise, society is becoming more vulnerable to manipulation by political groups and vested interests."

– Deirdre Macken

I must confess: I am misleading you. This contemporary criticism was made in an editorial in *The Catholic Press*, a New South Wales publication, in 1909.

This leads me into the first of the Literacy Myths I wish to explore.

Myth 1 - Things were always better in the "good old days"

The most constantly recurring issue in our field, maybe since early Greco-Roman history, has been the lament of the aged and the conservative about the "decline in literacy standards" in the young being perpetrated by dreadful, "soft, touchy, feely" contemporary teacher "revolutionaries" accused of lacking the intellectual rigour of their predecessors.

To say this is not to deny the absolute legitimacy, indeed the utter imperative, of the ever-recurring concerns throughout history for maintaining and increasing the literacy skills of young people within a world of ever rapidly changing and demanding contexts for textual, oral/aural, visual and what might broadly be called technological, literacies.

Our students need to be able to write grammatically, to spell correctly, to read fluently, flexibly and critically, as well as being able to use language imaginatively, creatively, critically and purposefully in a wide variety of contexts.

And one does not learn to read merely by osmosis. It demands the informed, skilled and explicit intervention of good teaching, whether this be undertaken by parents, school teachers, or others, such as volunteer aid workers in Africa, or those children in Nicaragua who taught their own illiterate parents how to read in Paulo Freire's famous literacy program.

But it does not matter where you dip into the history of education, you will find thunderous roars of utter conviction that standards are "now" palpably worse than they were a generation ago. The 1990s Jeremias hark

back to the 1950s. It is necessary, however, to apply an informed historical perspective to untrammelled cries of gloom and doom. For example, if you go back to the newspapers of the so-called "good old days" of the 1950s you will find identical lamentations for contemporary disasters, and calls for a return to the presumed halcyon days of the 1930s.

So, let us go back nearly 50 years to those "good old days" and listen to the comments of the Chief Examiner in English for the 1948 Leaving Certificate examination, Professor Waldock, thundering about the students sitting for the Leaving Certificate in 1946: "It is disappointing to find that students imagine they can pass a Leaving Certificate Examination without being able to write a sentence".[3]

Reviewing what he had seen in the 1948 LC Examination Waldock lamented:

> *Examiners again stress the weakness is spelling. Here are some of the words that seem to confound large numbers of students* (nearly 80 words followed including "tragic", practical", "clever", "hungry", "persuade", "believe", "enemies" and "sensitive")...*It was felt too that errors in grammar and syntax are still too common. It seems that many pupils are conversant with the correct theory of good usage, but from lack of practice or attention continue to commit the old mistakes. ...The examiners...feel that candidates are still very weak in fundamentals - that far too many, for example, do not know what a noun is, let alone an abstract noun.*[4]

Professor Waldock's successor, Professor Alec Mitchell, declared in 1951 that he agreed with the withering criticisms made in the Norwood Report of 1941 on "the serious failure of the British secondary schools to produce literate students" and declared that, without a doubt, the same situation existed in NSW in 1950.[5]

Let us not forget that these Leaving Certificate students were the *crème de la crème*. In the 1940s and early 1950s, of every 100 students commencing sixth class, fewer than 20 or so completed their Leaving Certificate five years later. For example, of the 50,000 who enrolled in first year government high schools in 1948, only 16.1% survived to commence their LC year in 1952.[6] The comparable figure today, of course, is around 70%, and almost certainly about to climb following the Commonwealth's latest edict on abolishing dole payments for 16 to 18 year olds.

Ah, but how knockers of modern teaching hark back to the mythical "good old days" when, they assume, everything was wonderful.

This process of lamentation for the present and exhortation for a return to some mythical halcyon past era can be traced continuously back into the 19th century and beyond. George Elliott, President of the prestigious Harvard College, lamented in 1871 that: "Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college."[7]

One of the many modern scholars who have drawn our attention to the "declining standards" myth, the American Andrew Sledd, has observed that:

> the discussion of this (declining standards myth) is not timely – it is timeless; for although Newsweek certified our crisis a mere decade ago… no fewer than five consecutive generations have been condemned for writing worse than their predecessors. By now our students should hardly put processor to paper; it's a wonder they can write at all.[8]

Another American historian of literacy practices, Harvey Daniels, traces this pattern back as far as George Puttenham's despair about the declining standards of literacy amongst the young of his day in 1586!

Daniels sums up in this way:

> To conclude: literacy has been declining since it was invented; one of the first ancient Sumerian tablets deciphered by modern scholars immortalised a teacher fretting over the recent drop in (standards of) students' writing. It is Sledd's cryptic conclusion that "there will always be a literacy crisis, if for no other reason than because the old never wholly like the young".[9]

I wish to discuss three big "literacy crises", each of which have enjoyed massive media coverage and assumptions of certitude – and each of which has turned out to be a furphy. Yet, in all three cases, any exposure of the myths was relatively ineffectual in weakening the power of the mythology of crisis or the skewing of public perceptions of reality.

(a) 1950/51

In a book published in 1996[10], I detailed the extraordinary chronicle of errors and false premises which led to the erroneous conclusions in the report on student performance in the 1951 English Leaving Certificate written by the Chief Examiner/Chairman of the English Syllabus Committee, Professor Mitchell, and presented to his colleagues on the Board of Secondary School Studies. Mitchell alleged that, compared with the 1950 candidacy and "pass mark", nearly 50% of all metropolitan candidates and about 25% of all non-metropolitan candidates should have failed English in 1951. He informed his Board colleagues that the required proportion given at least a "Pass" result had been achieved only by lowering the pass mark of 44% in 1950, to 40% in 1951.

In his report to his colleagues on the Board, Professor Mitchell was adamant about the disastrous situation facing everyone. There could be only two possible explanations for the 1951 literacy crisis, said Mitchell: "the performance of the candidates and the effectiveness of the teaching".[11]

All sorts of "reasons" for this apparently disastrous result were proffered by Mitchell and his colleagues on the Board of Secondary School Studies. They included assertions such as that country teachers were more dedicated than city teachers; that fewer students than ever had studied history (in fact, the very opposite was the case); that because of the introduction of what Mitchell referred to as the new "non-academic" schools for girls known as Home Science schools, a "weaker"[12] candidacy had joined the cohort in 1951 (in fact, the average mark in English of all students at these schools was higher than the State average). Similar claims were made about the products of Technical High Schools for boys.

R. G. (Phil) Price, who was Director of Secondary Education and was the lone member of the Board in any way to contest Mitchell's sweeping allegations, suggested that the city students were more susceptible than their country cousins to the distractions of the wireless, "with its ready choice of serials and hit parades to which the children become addicted at an early age".[13]

The errors or irrelevancies of all these assumptions and assertions were subsequently exposed by the research of the then relatively junior officer with the Department of Education, Dr (later, Sir) Harold Wyndham.

Using the new "SILIAC" computer (which filled a room at the University of Sydney), Wyndham undertook a comprehensive analysis of the marking records of the ten markers (6 of them were academics on Mitchell's staff at the University of Sydney) who had marked the 1951 Leaving Certificate English examination.

Wyndham found that once corrections were made for marker bias (which, in the case of two markers, was quite dramatic) not only was there no significant difference between the 1950 and the 1951 Leaving Certificate English results, there was also no significant difference between the metropolitan and non-metropolitan candidates in 1951. Wyndham's report was tabled at the Board's meeting in November, 1952.[14]

But this report was not presented to the Board until after the 1953 Syllabus had been completed and was never, at any stage, considered by the English Syllabus Committee. Nor did it ever enter the public domain.

What was to drive the English curriculum in NSW for the next decade was not Wyndham's exposé of the false interpretation of the 1951 exam results, therefore, but Mitchell's paper and the enthusiastic response to it by his colleagues on both the English Syllabus Committee and the Board of Secondary School Studies.

Because of the presumed "crisis" of 1951, the Board decided to add a second Leaving Certificate examination focussing specifically upon English usage, expression and comprehension and thereby redress the "'serious weakness in written expression' revealed in the Chief Examiner Reports in English and 'most subjects'"[15]. The Board also resolved to rewrite the 1944 English Syllabus. Both the additional examination and the new syllabus came into operation in 1953.

(b) 1992/3 - The Literacy Challenge

Let me jump ahead forty years. Emblazoned across Australia in late 1992 were headlines thundering outrage that one in four students entering high school from primary school was illiterate. Throughout that year, and into 1993 and beyond, this myth flourished and was rarely contested. The background to this furphy is as follows.

At the end of 1992, the Keating Labor Government tabled a report on literacy in schools entitled *The Literacy Challenge* produced by a House of Representatives committee chaired by Mary Crawford, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Employment, Education and Training. By and large its recommendations were sensible.

Later, we* on the Australian Language and Literacy Council, in association with the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), successfully urged the government to respond to *The Literacy Challenge* by establishing a National School English Literacy Survey (NSELS), which subsequently Prime Minister Keating established in *Working Nation*. It is fair to say that this survey was the most comprehensive and educationally credible national survey of literacy at Years 3 and 5 ever undertaken in Australia. I was a member of both the National Steering Committee and the Management Committee of the Survey from its inception until just after the Federal Election of 1996. The new Minister, Dr Kemp, removed all members other than State and Commonwealth Government officials, though after a strong campaign by both national unions of teachers he allowed the representatives of the Australian education Union (Sharan Burrow) and the Independent Education Union (Lynn Rolley) to remain on the steering committee.

We conducted the trial survey in 1995. The survey was conducted in 1996**. It is crucial that this thoroughly researched, effectively monitored project, which involved so many classroom teachers and their professional development, significantly influences the establishment of literacy benchmarks at Grades 3 and 5 by the Ministerial Council's (MCEETYA) national literacy and numeracy taskforce, whose preliminary drafting of such benchmarks has not had the degree of scope, funding, quality of research, professional development, and classroom trialling enjoyed by the NSELS.

It is possible, for example, that the NSELS research may demonstrate that the draft benchmarks established by the taskforce of the Council of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers have been set at inappropriate levels.

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*I was the Council's Special Adviser 1992-1996.

**Subsequent to the "Refocus on reading" conference Minister Kemp released the results of the NSELS along with an additional report he had commissioned from Australian Council Educational Research (ACER).

But none of the "good news" associated with *The Literacy Challenge* hit the press. The one sentence which was to generate the sensationalist headlines all around Australia in early 1993 was the unproved, blunt assertion that "ten to twenty percent of children are finishing primary school with literacy problems".[16]

Yet, the very next sentence in *The LIteracy Challenge* seems to contradict the confidence of its predecessor: "The actual numbers of children with such problems are not known".[17]

There is just no empirical evidence to prove that our primary schools in 1991 or 1992 were graduating such large numbers of sixth class students with serious literacy problems. What can be found is an implied assumption on page 2, paragraphs 1.6 and 1.7 of *The Literacy Challenge* that, because in its previous report on adult literacy the committee was presented with evidence that "between ten and twenty percent of the adult population is functionally illiterate", then it must therefore be true that "ten to twenty percent of children are finishing primary school with literacy problems".[18]

This was an unproved assertion based on a flawed extrapolation from the only comprehensive survey of adult literacy conducted in Australia, that of Rosie Wicker's, *No Single Measure* published in 1989.[19] Ms Wickert studiously avoided the term "functionally illiterate" to describe the proportion of her survey who manifested literacy difficulties. And, above all, she categorically did not make any assertions about the literacy standards of contemporary sixth class children.

The subjects in the Wickert survey, if they had been at school at all in Australia, would have been in sixth class in the years between about 1919 and 1979. In fact, her research showed clearly that there were two categories within her sample which consistently had literacy difficulties: those over 60 years of age (products of the so-called good old days) and those who had experienced fewer than six years of schooling. It was absence from, not attendance at, schooling which is the issue here.

There is just no empirical evidence to prove that our primary schools in 1991 or 1992 were graduating such large numbers of sixth class students with serious literacy problems.

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Teacher-bashing and the slamming those of us who try to introduce enlightened balance into the perennial and simplistic rantings of some of our media pontificators as they peddle their "we'll all be roon'd" mythologies, is an age-old sport.

Evidence that a new piece of politically correct cant had entered the lexicon of literacy mythology soon appeared when a major EPAC Report, *Education and Training in the 1990s* (Paper No.31) ratcheted up *The Literacy Challenge's* statement that "ten to twenty per cent of children are finishing primary schools with literacy problems" to its own hyperbole of "around 25 per cent of children beginning secondary schooling are not able to read and write properly"[20]!

The data which the authors of *The Literacy Challenge* ignored or overlooked in having arrived at their position about students entering secondary school was quite breathtaking. The Report admitted that the governments of Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory had not provided "any estimates of the number of children considered to be at risk": the same was true for Queensland[21]. Not a shred of evidence was presented from the ACT to support the Report's assertion. Only one of the eight States and Territories, South Australia , provided any evidence that could remotely substantiate the claim. The South Australian submission noted that its WRAP program "found that one in five Year 6 students across the school population was having difficulty with the demands of school reading and writing"[22]. But that is well short of asserting that one in four sixth class graduates could not read and write properly.

And the NSW data was fearfully distorted. The Report claimed that the NSW Basic Skills Test (BST)"showed that twenty per cent of children required 'some intervention'"[23]. But "some intervention" is light years away from the catastrophic situation claimed by *The Literacy Challenge* and EPA.

Later that year the then Director of Curriculum in the Department of School Education tore apart these furphies. Commenting on the 1993 BST for Year 6, which showed that fewer than 150 of the State's 58,000 sixth class students in government schools were found to be illiterate (Band 0), that more than 50% of all boys and girls had to be grouped in the two highest bands, and that students in Band 1 could not be classified as illiterate, the Director declared:

unsubstantiated reports had created the image that the nation's education system was in a woeful state. A Commonwealth parliamentary inquiry at the beginning of the year which revealed that 25% of young Australians were illiterate was shattered by these results[24].

The 1992 BST results had been very similar. They should have been known to the authors of *The Literacy Challenge*.

But the myth that one in four sixth class graduates cannot read or write persists, and its perpetrators love to propagate it with embellishments.

The media had great fun. For example, the *Brisbane Courier Mail* headline proclaimed, as fact, that "one in four are poor readers and writers"[25]. *The Hobart Mercury* went one better, asserting that "a House of Representatives committee… revealed up to 25 per cent of children were unable to read or write".[26]

Teacher-bashing and the slamming those of us who try to introduce enlightened balance into the perennial and simplistic rantings of some of our media pontificators as they peddle their "we'll all be roon'd" mythologies, is an age-old sport.

(c) The ACER-Kemp shock horror story of October, 1996

Now let us proceed to 1996, and go to the other side of Federal politics. From October of that year onwards the nation has been assailed by assertions that one in three of all Year 9 students (14 year olds) cannot read or write. Throughout that year, and often since, we have heard this assertion repeated as "gospel truth" by certain politicians, journalists, some talk-back radio jockeys, and in various current affairs programs. The day after the outraged Minister Kemp launched the story (five months before the ACER Report was published) the ABC's "AM" program's presenter prefaced Ross Solly's interview with the Minister on 22 October as follows:

A twenty year survey has revealed that about a third of fourteen year olds don't have basic skills. The Federal Schools Minister, David Kemp, says the figures show that education policy and practice over the past twenty years have failed and in some cases there's actually been a decline in standards .[27]

Dr David Kemp issued statements of outrage through media outlets all over the place that the ACER's survey had proved that one in three Year 9 Australian students were virtually illiterate and that it had shown a serious decline in standards since the equivalent 1975 survey.

Of course, the survey had shown nothing of the sort.

I and some of my academic colleagues, as well as two outstanding journalists Brian Toohey[28] in both the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Sun-Herald*, and Adele Horin[29] in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, have exposed this as yet another myth.

The comprehension "test" claimed to measure what the ACER defined as "mastery literacy" in students. Not "basic skills". Not "functional literacy". To be so classified, a student had to get 80% of the answers correct: nothing less. About one third of the students scored less than 80%.

All of these things were made perfectly clear in a two page "support" document produced at the time jointly by EPAD and ACER and distributed to people like myself, keen to look at the data upon which Dr Kemp's claims had been made, but who found out that the report itself had not even been written – and was not due to appear for approximately five months!

The tests do not measure "functional literacy", nor are they as wide ranging as assessments such as the current National English Literacy Survey, which assesses progress against curriculum profiles in the domains of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing.

In the context of literacy tests, "mastery" means the capacity of a student to correctly answer (sic) items used to measure performance on a set of specific items. …Following reviews of existing research on this question, the prescribed level for mastery was set at "correct answers to 80% of the population of all particular items associated with a task or objective". Thus in the 1995 test the 30% of students deemed not to have a mastery of literacy have failed to achieve an 80% correct mark on the literacy test.[30]

In a delightfully bizarre twist, Brian Toohey decided to ask Martin Flanagan, *The Age* journalist who was the very author of the comprehension passage used in the test, to take the test himself. And what did the author score? 60%! Well short of the 80%! There were two questions which asked students to state what the author meant. Flanagan got both of these "wrong": or rather, his obviously correct answers were deemed to be "incorrect" by the ACER markers! Flanagan, the author, wrote what the author meant, but the answers determined by the examiners were different. Whose "illiteracy" is on display here?

Anyhow, the text was heavily metaphorical and validly open to a variety of interpretations. As Toohey pointed out:

"What is being tested is not a basic ability to read. Students are expected to give unequivocal answers about the meaning of a piece of prose in which the writer deliberately avoids stating plainly what he means".[31]

In its report, which was not released publicly until about five months after Dr Kemp had launched the latest literacy furphy rocket into the Australian atmosphere, the ACER explicitly confirmed that its instrument was not one to assess "functional literacy" or "basic skills" at all.

Occasionally it's good to look at the fine detail. The published data on the 14 year olds, said by the Commonwealth Minister and the media purveyors of gloom and doom to show one-third of Australian 14 year olds to be lacking basic skills and to reveal a dramatic decline in standards since 1975, demonstrated but a 2% decline overall since 1975. Yet the data described in the media showed a rise of 2% for the NESB girls in this age group, but this same figure of 2% was described in the media as "no noticeable rise"![32] This is, of course, a patently ridiculous contradiction. *The Australian* wrote that "while the proportion of Year 9 girls who failed to attain basic literacy (sic) skills was 26 per cent in 1975 and 27 per cent in 1995, there was an alarming decline in boys' reading comprehension levels" .[33] A 4% difference was thus interpreted as "alarming"!

But all this playing with statistics further exposes a remarkable ignorance of quantitative research analysis. These tiny percentages fall well beneath the standard allowance for error in research analysis of this kind.

And as for screams of declining standards, even allowing for all the inconsistencies and contradictions already alluded to, there was virtually no difference at all between the performance of the 1975 and 1996 cohorts.

The most statistically honest thing to say about published comparisons between the 1975 and 1995 figures is that the performances of the two groups are not significantly different.

And what would such a "non-change" result mean? Statistics being statistics, they are actually capable of being used to argue the very opposite to the position taken by Dr Kemp. Associate Professor Brian Cambourne, for example, has claimed that:

> *rather than a decline in literacy standards the data strongly support a quite different interpretation, namely that given the incredible increase in the complexity of literacy demands over the last 20 years,*

> *given the increasing number of students (especially boys) who are staying on at school, …and given the increase in the multicultural mix of students whose first language is not English, our schools and teachers have held the literacy line.*[34]

But none of this prevents various talk-back disc-jockeys, or editorial writers, or teacher-bashers, from continuing to assert as "fact" the furphy that one in three of our Year 9 students cannot read or write.

Myth 2 - Literacy in a vacuum

There is a popular notion among some sections of the wider community that skills can be developed in a vacuum devoid of the richness of linguistic contexts defined by critical variables such as the pursuit of meaning, the shaping influences of purpose, and the subtle yet profound influences determined by diversity of audiences. Skills just cannot be developed effectively in a vacuum. We become literate through the exercise of literary practices, i.e. by reading texts, and through the informed practices of intervention as exercised by parents, guardians and teachers.

Purveyors of this myth seem also to assume that literacy development occurs in lock step, easily identified, hierarchical stages and that the various dimensions of literacy, which over-simplified can be described as:

- phonemic-phonetic syllable/sound/word recognition;

- the comprehension of meaning; and

- the informed response to, or critiquing of, the meaning enunciated in the utterance.

These can be stratified into discrete layers of ages or stages as performance indicators. These are the crucial and essential components, of course. It has been the particular strength of the Anglo-Australian tradition that we have always recognised the interrelationships between these three dimensions within and across the modes of reading and viewing, writing, listening and speaking.

This has not, however, been the tradition in the USA, where these organic relationships have too often been separated into discrete components. And while in recent years, in particular, we have heard the strident cries of protagonists within certain camps that "phonics", for example, is the only way to teach literacy, by and large the common sense of teachers has prevented the wholesale capture of pedagogy by any single camp.

Yet in recent months we have witnessed the orchestrated attack in California and Texas upon any approaches to the teaching of reading in kindergarten other than direct, systematic decontextualised phonics, as delivered through "basals" books. Textbooks have been banned which do not trumpet the phonics approach. I will quote from an e-mail I received recently from an Australian colleague in the United States.

> *Very carefully worded Legislative Bills have been devised and sneaked through State government sittings which legislate that all kindergarten children shall be taught to read through direct, systematic decontextualised, phonics. The only readers they will be allowed to read will be decodeable books (Dan tan fan the fan man) for the first 6 months of kindergarten. The teaching of the use of context clues is explicitly forbidden. In California a bill known as AB 1086 (Assembly Bill 1086) has just been passed on to the main Senate for approval. ..... PD by people like Connie Weaver, Ken Goodman, Frank Smith, Stephen Krashen, Leanna Trail, programs like ELIC, Reading Recovery, and books and/or PD programs offered by publishers like Rigby, The Wright Group, Heinemann, Shortland Press (Wendy Pye's company) have all been blacklisted.*

> *Many of our University colleagues over here are talking about a New McCarthy-ism.*[35]

Ironically, this represents a return to what Professor Alan Luke, in his doctoral thesis, demonstrated were the "bad old days" in North American education. In his highly detailed study of the 1946-1960 history of literacy education in North America in general, and British Columbia in particular, Luke describes the enormous emphasis placed on the phonics-based basal readers like the 'Dick and Jane' series and other methodologies dear to the hearts of Back to Basics advocates. He concludes that

> *in the era examined (1946-1960) the quality of literacy learning and of learned literacy was* constrained and delimited significantly *by official norms for the acquisition of literacy (emphasis mine).*[36]

As any teacher knows, the Californian decision to ban any approach other than phonics is nonsense. Of course teachers should be able to teach the phonemic-phonetic relationships. Of course teachers should be able to use whole language approaches to learning. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge of grammar and the multiple functions of language. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge about the psychology of the reading process. Of course teachers should be able to use their knowledge of literary and reader-response theory. Of course teachers should be able to draw upon their knowledge of a wide range of literary, factual, and media texts. But teachers will use these methodologies as appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their children and according to the contexts within which they are teaching.

Good literacy teachers go beyond the parameters of phonemic/phonetic decoding and accurate comprehension of texts. While these are necessary skills, they are not sufficient to describe the fully literate person.

Modern literacy curricula demand that students go further in order to be able, at a third level as it were, to respond critically, sensitively and with discrimination to what they read, hear and view: to be "critically literate". They need to be able to deconstruct texts: to be aware of the assumptions, purposes and presumed audiences of the writer, speaker, editor, producer, director and so on. Teachers are required to educate critical readers and writers, not to produce mere sponges whose literacy skills stop at the accurate assimilation and reproduction of text. This is even more crucially important in the era of interactive information technology and the Internet.

It is so necessary that students are armed with critical literacy; often they will be threatened by those who use language, not as a medium of searching for or communicating the truth, but as a weapon for obscuring, and even perverting, that search.

Myth 3 - Literacy acquisition commences in Kindergarten

There is the myth, that some education policy framers seem to hold, that language acquisition and its enhancement commence with Kindergarten, and that K-2 is the initial stage for early intervention, when all of us who are parents – and I am the father of two beautiful girls aged five and two – know that the prior-to-school experience is almost certainly the pivotal time for literacy. My five year old Sophie writes beautiful sentences, replete with meaning, more often than not accurately spelt (and she learns by having her spelling "guesses" corrected), but she is incapable of explaining the grammatical, syntactical, or philological theories which underpin her correct usage. She relies upon the grounding in and her mimicking of these literacy practices – and their correct formulation – which she has received in our home along with the richness of texts.

And we should not forget that human beings have been learning to read for thousands of years, well before the modern era, with its internecine warfare over competing ideologies, fads, and reputable pedagogies.

Shakespeare, after all, never enrolled in any courses in Process Writing, Systemic Linguistics, Semiotics, Phonemic-Phonetic Phonics, Whole Language, or Functional Grammar. But he, and those who transcribed and printed his folios and those who read them down through the ages, seem to have learned to read and write pretty effectively!

That is not to say that competing and complementary theories do not have their place in teacher education courses. They certainly do. After all, we have come a long way from the early 19th century, where in British schools liberal – or, rather, illiberal – thrashings with the cane were applied to "reluctant" readers and where, if this failed, the poor child was labelled "purblind" and therefore deemed to be incapable of learning to read. Humanity has a long history of washing its hands of responsibility by sticking a label upon a condition which it could not explain or sought to oversimplify: the great medieval Scholastic philosopher and theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, called this the myth of "Nominalism".

Myth 4 - Graduates: literate one year; illiterate the next

A particular literacy mythology has grown up around the break-points in the educational continuum. How often, for example, have the literate graduates of sixth class been condemned a few months later as "illiterates" by the Year 7 teacher; or the literate HSC graduates of Year 12 been condemned several months later as people "who can't read or write", by the academics teaching them in first year or by employers? And how often do we not hear the wails of complaints as the literate graduates of our universities hit the world of employment, to be condemned as lacking basic communication skills?

What perfidious alchemy blisters the no-man's-land between these staging points? Or, how much is it all to do with the initial difficulties experienced by the graduate of the previous stage as he or she attempts to come to grips with new forms of discourse peculiar to the new educational contexts?

And how much has it to do with low teacher expectations? Especially the hiatus between, say, the high expectations made of Mary, the primary school "graduate", by her 6th class teacher, and the low expectations of the Year 7 "baby" Mary exercised by her "new" secondary school teacher. Or you could substitute this with the equivalent hiatus between Grade 2 and Grade 3; between Year 10 and Year 11 (especially with regard to senior colleges); between the teachers of graduating HSC students and their university counterparts, as these mature young men and women become identified as naive, inexperienced, "freshers".

Now I am not denying that there can be problems. Nor that there are problems. But I believe that these criticisms often pay too little heed to the new linguistic contexts within which the educational graduate from the former "institution" is usually expected to operate immediately, and to the unfamiliarity of content with which the ex-student now has to deal. Transference of literacy skills from one set of contexts to another is not a simple process.

Australia's language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy noted:

> *Research in the United States indicates that people who perform literacy tasks adequately in a high school setting cannot necessarily perform literacy tasks of similar complexity in a workplace or community setting.*[37]

My friend and colleague, Professor Ian Pringle, who is Director of the Centre for Applied Language Studies at Carleton University, Canada, has demonstrated a similar hiatus between the allegations of unsatisfactory literacy attainment levelled at first year English literature students by university English lecturers, and the manifestly satisfactory levels of literacy displayed by the same students a year earlier in their final year secondary school English literature essays. He demonstrated that the students' writing deteriorated when suddenly hit with "new" writing tasks when they had no experience of what was acceptable or unacceptable in first

year English literature essays. Pringle recommended that the staff replace their lectures and tutorials in the first few weeks of the semester with practical writing workshops to enable the students to discover and practise the kinds of discourse demanded by the academic milieu of English literature. It worked, spectacularly. And the University saved itself the million dollars it had decided to waste on setting up "remedial" writing programs for these alleged illiterates!

Myth 5 - The either/or myth

Invariably associated with the "literacy crisis" syndrome are the cries of those who pursue their own exclusivist nostrums for literacy remediation and who fiercely oppose the claims of any other theoretical and pedagogical positions within language and literacy education. A British colleague of mine describes as "intellectual terrorists" those who fiercely adhere to their own narrow remedies and who refuse to consider the claims of other theoretical and pedagogical approaches, irrespective of the variegated nature of the learners and the diversity of learning contexts.

Education discourse in general, and literacy education discourse in particular, seems persistently soured by what the great philosopher Soren Kierekegaard called "the either/or heresy". So often we have witnessed the erection and dismantling of caricatures of points of view other than one's own, or particular ideological cultural or political empires being built by acolytes of fashionable gurus – often according to principles that would be anathema to the gurus.

Donald Graves, for example, in a seminal essay "The Enemy is Orthodoxy", has listed some of the more bizarre distortions of the writing theory and practices that he has heard proclaimed as being advocated by him.

1. Children ought to revise everything they compose.

2. Children should write only in personal narrative; imaginative writing ought to be discouraged.

Transference of literacy skills from one set of contexts to another is not a simple process.

If anything has been learned from the research on teaching literacy skills it should be that it would be arrogant to assume that all of the answers are known.

3. Children should have several conferences for each piece of writing.

4. Children should publish each piece of writing.

5. Children should make each piece of writing last four days.

6. Children should share each piece with the entire class.

7. Children should own their own writing and never be directed to do anything with their writing.

8. Children should choose all their topics.

9. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are unimportant.[38]

Graves rejects everyone of these statements.

Chesterton once remarked, melancholically, that Christianity could never be said to have failed because it could never be said to have been properly tried.

Similarly how many valuable insights into educational advancement have been repudiated and condemned not too many years later as having produced lower standards when in reality both the understanding and implementation of such insights have been honoured "more in the breach than the observance"?

Too frequently the acolytes of a theory or movement proclaim the teachings of their masters with a degree of certainty and a black-and-white exclusivity that sullies the more modest hesitancy and carefulness of their intellectual mentors or forbears

A submission from the Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Association to a House of Representatives Inquiry into literacy education during the early years of schooling, and cited in *The Literacy Challenge*, deserves to be "up in lights" on noticeboards in every school and, perhaps more importantly, in the office of every newspaper editor and the studios of all talk-back radio pontificators.

If anything has been learned from the research on teaching literacy skills it should be that it would be arrogant to assume that all of the answers are known. It would also be misguided to assume that evidence points to a single model of learning or teaching, or that one model will necessarily be appropriate to all developmental levels or for all children.[39]

We need to know and value the history of the teaching of literacy. This will not only help the profession to retain what is of value and let go what is not, but – perhaps even more importantly – will safeguard it against any later attempts to ignore or distort that history by any later whiz fad geniuses, gurus or whatever, who might seek to erect their "new" empires by demolishing their own straw-person versions of earlier edifices.

As teachers, policy advisers, academics, or whatever, we need to deal intelligently and constructively with diversity and not succumb to the "us versus them" bitterness of ideological bigotry. The field of literacy education has already been hurt by this kind of immaturity.

We need to resist, as far as possible, empire building and destructive infighting within and between opposing "camps". We need to identify and resist those false either/or dichotomies and ideological entrenchments often predicated upon straw-person arguments and sometimes even "the cult of personality". We should be on our critical guard to identify and contest theory that becomes dogma, critical enquiry which becomes worship, leaders who become gurus, bridges that become barricades, concepts that become articles of faith, followers who become acolytes, approaches which become religions, and dissent which becomes heresy, irrespective of the various intellectual or professional cultures from which they may come.

Whether we are teachers, researchers, policy makers, bureaucrats or a mixture of any of these, we must always be, to quote from W. H. Auden's fine poem September 1, 1939, "ironic points of light" idealists but armed with a healthy and informed scepticism of all preachers of orthodoxies.

What do we know about literacy?

Well, what can we say with confidence about the nature of language and literacy ?

It is well worth repeating, three decades later, those wise words of Michael Halliday that "what is common to every use of language is that it is meaningful, contextualised, and in the broadest sense 'social'"[40].

Building on the excellent foundations established in the *1971 Syllabus in English - Forms I–IV* (later renamed Years 7–10), in 1987, the members of the Years 7–10 English Syllabus Committee set down the following principles upon which the now current syllabus was based.

1. Growth in language is integral to the student's personal growth as a thinking, feeling person.

2. It is mainly through language that human beings explore their public and private worlds, organise their experience and form their values.

3. Language is best developed by having all students engage in an abundance of purposeful language activities that are appropriate to their needs, interests and capacities.

4. While students do learn in other ways, learning for the most part occurs as students use language: as they talk, listen, read, write and observe. Hence English is central to the achievement of the aims of the total curriculum.[41]

As part of the small team which wrote the 1990 Commonwealth Government's White Paper, *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* a colleague and I came up with the following "definition" which, I am delighted to say, has since been adopted in the DSE's recent excellent document, *Focus on Literacy*:

> *Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.*

Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual's lifetime[42].

Now let us come forward to 1998.

If you want a superb exposition of the richness and complexity yet, in another sense, common-sense simplicity of literacy education, you need go no further than the NSW Department of School Education's recently published official policy document, *Literacy 97 Strategy: Focus on Literacy*. It provides a splendid overview of literacy teaching and learning.

I. *Since 1991, the very nature of what constitutes literacy has been expanded by the emerging multimedia and information technologies, the appearance of the Internet and further developments in computing and word processing.*

II. *Literacy is learned in social contexts as people use literacy practices to interact with each other to achieve particular purposes. It occurs in a variety of situational contexts – in the home, in the community, at school, on the job, in recreational and other informal learning contexts. In the contemporary world, we employ literacy practices to argue, to explain, to debate, to demonstrate how something can be done, to provide information, to explore issues, to entertain, and to communicate creatively.*

III. *The literacy needs of individuals change throughout their lifetimes. As they move into different situations or specialised areas of learning and experience new technologies, they are continually required to adapt and extend their knowledge and literacy skills so that they can understand and use language appropriately.*

IV. *Practices of literacy evolve over time in accordance with changing demands made on individuals and changing expectations within the social and cultural context.*

Growth in language is integral to the student's personal growth as a thinking, feeling person.

V. *Good literacy teaching recognises the variety of ways in which literacy is relevant to the daily lives of students within diverse social and cultural contexts. Students must know what to do with text in particular contexts, both within and outside the classroom. To be literate in the contemporary world requires an understanding of, and the ability to apply, the wide range of written and spoken forms or types of text which are essential to effective communication.*

VI. *Development of literacy competence is necessary if an individual is to develop fully as a person, able to participate in the work force, to engage in the democratic process and contribute to society in an educated manner*[43].

Concluding reflections

The notion of informed, critical, eclecticism is central to my beliefs as a teacher, academic, and policy adviser. There is a wealth of splendid insights and scholarship to draw upon as a teacher/researcher/academic. While some are either/or mutually exclusive positions, many are not. We have so much to learn about reading from philology, psychology, literary theory, semantics, grammar – or rather grammars – phonics, whole language theory, systemic linguistics, reader-response theory, semiotics, history of pedagogical practices, and so on.

The splendid teacher draws upon these insights and applies relevant theory to relevant practice as she or he faces the daily task of identifying and responding to the needs, interests and capacities of each of her or his students. Good teachers have always been both idealistic and pragmatic.

1. A teacher of literacy needs to have a thorough grasp of the subject matter of the specific curriculum area or areas he or she is teaching that is well beyond the specific parameters within which he or she might be expected to work in the classroom.

2. Modern teachers of literacy must have a grounding in scholarly theories of reading, writing, communication and language use in general.

3. Teachers need to be able to draw upon a wide repertoire of strategies appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their students.

4. We educators must practise what we preach. All teachers need to be exemplary users of the language: to read widely and critically; to write with flair, imagination, accuracy, and lucidity; to speak with clarity, verve and wit; to listen with acumen, accuracy and sensibility. We need to be fine models for our students. One of my favourite maxims comes from Chaucer's description of the "poure persoun" the humble and dutiful country priest whom we meet in *Canterbury Tales*: "first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte". To teach effective literacy we must be "practitioners" of effective literacy.

5. Effective teachers of literacy have a commitment to sharing their enthusiasm and expertise with their students. They are able to lead their students well beyond those starting points of learning, i.e. students' needs and interests, way out towards those unmapped horizons limited only by students' capacities. They need to be able to inspire, drive, motivate and correct, and demand the highest standards of their students. We all know that teaching is an art and a science – and it's mostly hard, slogging, work. We teachers have also to be actors, head coaches, naggers, humdrummers, stirrers, listeners, susser-outers, intuiters, creators, pacifiers, and masters of repetition. Above all, we have to be people who keep hanging in there.

6. We must be eternally vigilant to ensure that our students are literate in the fullest sense of the word. There is no place for sloppiness or carelessness or ignorance or error within our teaching profession, especially in the field of literacy education. For a student to leave school illiterate is an indictment on our society.

To finish on a personal note. I am sure that when I accompany my daughter Amelia on her first day at Kindergarten at Narellan Vale Public School in the year 2001, I will be as confident about the quality of the literacy education that she will experience, as I was last Tuesday when Sophie returned there to commence her second term in Kindergarten. And irrespective of whether I am speaking as a teacher, or an academic, or a policy adviser, but above all as a parent, that makes me feel pretty happy about the future of literacy education in NSW.

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