

## When will we ever learn? Dr John Ewington

There are two parts to my response one rather pithy as I am fed up with all this followed by a more research-based response.

I was attending my orchids listening to talkback radio when I heard about the proposed Education Review. As the interview progressed, I found my pulse go up as my frustrations increased. I recall thinking, "We are not going to do it again are we?". I said to myself, "Not your problem I am retired. Repot the orchids and forget it". However, I decided that would be irresponsible, I should at least air my frustrations.

My Response:

So here we go again another review of Tasmanian Education. These reviews occur every few years and follow an all too familiar pattern. Statements of intent are prepared around some guiding questions. There may be a word here or there that is different in each review but that is all. (I look forward to reading how the wording is different from other reviews over the past 30 years. I have subsequently had a look, there is very little difference.)

The Minister of Education makes public announcements. *There will be an independent review, at arm's length for the government etc etc.* An external reviewer from somewhere turns up and further grandstanding take place through the media with talk back radio invites, news announcements and now social media posts. *We are going to get it right this time, this is going to be different from all other reviews we are going to announce the Holy Grail.* Glossy brochures etc are produced. The Minister and senior department officials make announcements the Holy Grail has been found. Monty Python really does come to mind.

While acknowledging the need for a concise statement of intent may be needed, I wonder how much it will change from Our Children: the Future, Secondary Education: The Future and the Essential Learning which were all replaced by the National Curriculum and so it goes on and on.

The Essential Learnings debacle is insightful to what happens in Tasmania. It followed a very predictable path. Workshops were held through the state inviting stakeholders to make submissions. Policy statements were written, the then Government supported the reform with motions in parliament. At one stage there was even a hint of bipartisan support. Implementation started and for a couple of years I thought maybe this reform will go against the research findings. International studies suggested this type of reform does not work. Sure enough, conservative forces, with the likes of Saul Eslake taking a leading role mounted a concerted campaign against the Essential Learnings and as the literature predicted that was the end of that.

I have listened to Eslake wax lyrical about Tasmanian Education on several occasions clearly demonstrating he is an expert in Economics with little idea about how schools and classrooms operate. I do however agree with some of the structural reforms he usually suggests like consolidating schools and reviewing the year 10 -11 transition. Several years back an attempt was made to close 30 small school which would have saved a lot of money. But as usually happens the election cycle took over and the government of the day lost its nerve.

About the only thing I have heard that makes any sense about this review is, new visions statements, policy documents etc make very little difference unless school leaders and teachers are intimately involved in implementation. All reforms end up at improving the quality of teaching. *(See my more formal response below.)*

So here are some questions I hope are addressed by the review.

Why are teachers, not just in Tasmania, leaving the profession and why are schools becoming harder and harder to staff? My background for this question I acknowledge is now just anecdotal and not systematic. But even in our city schools in more preferred areas staffing is difficult. Many teachers are teaching out of area. Mathematics and Science teachers are particularly hard to find. Even as far back as 2010 an emerging problem was predicted around 2017-18 given the then age profile of teachers. Further it was predicted staffing of rural and remote schools would become dire. A look at the number of people who apply for promoted positions gives further insights into the staffing problem. I look forward to reading how the review will address staffing.

I recall Professor Black mentioning this issue while being interviewed about the dire state of education in Tasmania. He rather condescendingly mentioned UTas was willing to help schools improve. Maybe he should start with the following questions over which he has direct control.

How does UTas ensure teachers are appropriately trained in the right areas in the first place? Why is there a shortage of appropriately trained teachers in specialist areas, STEM teachers in particular? What part will UTas play in addressing staffing issues? I look forward to how the review will address these questions with clearly funded implementation plans. Without it will be just hot air yet again.

The reviewers claim there is a district in South Australia with a similar demographic to Tasmania that has far better school results than Tasmania. Did the analysis go beyond a macro socio-economic review? I am always a little wary of these simplistic comparisons.

So, as you can see, I am left very uninspired by this review, it is following an all too familiar pattern. Maybe it is time for some radical change. What follows is only slightly tongue in cheek.

Tasmania should become a district of Victorian Education Department. This would do away with much of the duplication in Tasmania. Curriculum teams, policy writers, external reviewers, Ministers for Education could all be drastically reduced. Eslake is warning the state must drastically reduce spending so maybe we should do away with the State Government. Rather than expanding the number politicians and government bureaucracies maybe it's time to ask the question: Does an island with a population of just 500 000 people really need a state government at all. Imagine the money it would save. I suspect this comment is about as useful as this review so maybe I stick to what is grounded in research on school reform.

What follows is the summary from the following paper:

## **Reforming an education system : the Tasmanian experience / 2013**

I have not changed any words, so it is a little dated but my rather provocative comments above are grounded in the research alluded to below.

### **Summary: Leading change for student achievement**

There is no quick fix when you walk the road to improved student achievement. Change of this type and magnitude can be derailed by a multitude of factors even when the nature of change is well understood. Sometimes it is the political nature of educational reforms that interferes with effective implementation. Cranston and Kimber (2010) suggest that education policy might be unsuccessful because policy makers do not appreciate the time frame needed from the conceptualisation, design and implementation of a policy and changes in outcomes for students. They reference Hargreaves (1994) and Stokes (1997), in estimating the timeframe to be between three and five years. Regardless of the actual time frame, it is definitely not aligned to the political cycle and this can create challenges to planned reform when there is a change of government, or even minister, both at federal and state level. Keeping the focus on evidence-based reform such as the one currently being undertaken in Tasmania is critical to supporting lasting changes. A lack of alignment between educational reform and political process timeframes will probably remain a political reality however, so it is all the more important to focus resources that are available over longer periods of time on those things that make a difference. These are conceptualised in the Tasmanian context as improving teacher quality, especially through creating a feedback culture, and improving the quality of leadership.

Mulford (2006) provides a link between the conceptualisation of policy and its implementation in practice. He suggests three sequential and embedded elements in leading change for student achievement:

- the social community - how people are communicated with and treated. Success is more likely where people act rather than are always reacting, are empowered, involved in decision-making through a transparent, facilitative and supportive structure, and are trusted, respected, encouraged, and valued. It is a waste of time moving to the second element until this social community is well established.
- a professional community - involves using the social community to focus on shared norms and values, including valuing differences and diversity, a focus on implementation and continuous enhancement of quality learning for all students, de-privatisation of practice, collaboration, and critical reflective dialogue, especially that based on performance data.

- the presence of a capacity for change, learning and innovation, in other words, a professional learning community. (p.56)

It is worth noting that Mulford's comments lie strongly in the affective domain. Change strategies for improved student achievement are as much about how people are treated and valued as they are about getting a fit between policy and practice. The current reforms in Tasmania reflect this through:

- the public statement of the collaboratively developed Strategic Plan with its clear vision and underpinning values
- the provision of high-quality targeted professional learning designed to continually build staff capacity to deliver and support high quality teaching and learning
- the strategic use of feedback to inform future directions at all levels of the Department.

Well intentioned, and sometimes well structured, reform in Tasmania over the past decade has seen a lack of ability to stay the distance at a political and at a school level. Convincing teachers that improving teacher quality is not the next piece of jargon or the latest innovation to be passively resisted is not an easy thing. Improving teacher quality challenges values and attitudes and this makes implementation even more difficult, and we can expect a dip in both results and implementation effectiveness before we start to see lasting improvement.

Judging the success of reforms like these on the strength of high stakes test results in the short term, for example, will most probably result in another change of direction. Should this happen, it will be in the face of all we know about effective change and improved student achievement. Complex reforms are uncertain reforms because the solution is not known in advance and the pitfalls cannot always be anticipated. The trick is to develop a culture around the reforms acknowledging that there may well be an implementation dip that is considered to be a part of the process of change. Assessment data has reinforced our understanding that the gap between the best performing students and the worst performing students is wide, and it is reflective of the socio-educational and economic circumstances of students and families. The best quality teachers consistently in front of our students, and the best quality leaders leading our schools continues to be the greatest chance we have of addressing this problem. This will be achieved through focussing all available resources and support on improving the quality of teachers currently in our schools. Better leadership, high-quality professional learning and a feedback culture that has teacher collaboration and reflection at its centre offers the best chance of success. All of these are key aspects of the current reform process in Tasmania.

*The Government changed, high stakes testing appeared and that was the end of that. And so, it is all coming to pass yet again just as the literature predicts. **When will we ever learn!***

## Final Comment

I have calmed down a little as I get to end of my epistle and wish the reviewers well. Maybe I am just past it and should shut up. But maybe not. I will watch with interest as Tasmania's future depends on getting it right. Now I think this orchid needs a new pot it is a little root bound.

Kind Regards

John Ewington

PS This type of review is usually followed by a restructuring of the department. I wonder, surely not!