

Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

Introduction

An Independent Review of Education in Tasmania is welcome and necessary, and I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to it. The objectives of this Review as outlined in the Terms of Reference are laudable and it is to be hoped that the eventual recommendations do not shy away from difficult decisions that take an objective view of the current deficits and strengths in the Tasmanian school system. As should all schools and systems, this Review must firmly maintain improved outcomes for the young people of Tasmania as its exclusive focus.

By way of background, I commenced my career as a teacher in 1982, having completed a four-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) at the then Tasmanian College of Advanced Education. I taught in the Tasmanian state education system for five years, took a period of Parental Leave, then returned to teach in the independent sector at the then fledgling Launceston Preparatory School, a small non-denominational independent primary school catering now for 150 students in Early Learning to Grade 6. From June 1993 to December 2023, I was a teacher and Co-Principal at this school. I continue to work there as a teacher of English and Philosophy. Over that period, I have maintained a cross-sectoral network and links to the University of Tasmania Faculty of Education, including supervision of students on Professional Experience placements.

This submission predominantly addresses Themes 2 and 4 of the Review's Terms of Reference:

- strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education, and
- support for our teaching workforce.

Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education

My experience as both a learner and an educator in this state enables me to take a long and broad view of education and it is somewhat disconcerting to observe that, despite various attempts at reform (of curriculum, mainly), the same essential view of schooling as a linear, one-size fits all system continues to dominate.

One of the many things I have relished about my current workplace is that it genuinely has the child at the centre of its decision-making. While economic bottom lines, various levels of accountability, and teacher welfare are all vital, "Is it in the best interests of our students?" is the question that underpins decision-making. I respectfully encourage the Tasmanian public education system to do the same. Through this lens, we can genuinely examine and evaluate issues such as the make-up of grades (peer or vertical groupings, for example), optimum class sizes, timetables, subject structures, and curriculum priorities, rather than assuming that schooling has to follow the same substantive patterns as it always has.

This is not to suggest that all things traditional are, by definition, outmoded; indeed, when the interests of young people are consistently used as the filter for decisions, innovation can sit comfortably with tradition.

One of the fixed views that needs to be amended is the one that deems Year 6 to be the endpoint of explicit literacy instruction. This is founded on an (erroneous) assumption that all students will have acquired by the age of twelve all the literacy skills they require to take on the challenges of the secondary curriculum and life beyond the walls of the classroom. There is any amount of anecdotal and quantitative evidence to the contrary. We live in a literacy-based world and those who do not have a broad vocabulary, the skills to decode written text and make meaning from it are disenfranchised. Our education system needs to make the time and effort to continue teaching literacy skills throughout schooling, regardless of students' age.

This begs the question of how best to teach literacy skills, a question that has been at the centre of much debate throughout my teaching career. As fads have come and go, students in our schools have paid the price and the low levels of literacy among the Tasmanian population are well documented. We are now in a phase where teachers in Tasmania will be required to teach at least one hour of structured literacy each day from 2025. It is an indictment on our education system that it has taken a mandate to bring this focus on structured literacy into effect.

It will be vital that teachers in this state have the skills and knowledge to implement best practice in teaching literacy and that this is consistent across all classrooms. Currently, teachers exit UTas Education courses ill-equipped to face this challenge, a topic upon which I will comment further later in this paper. It is pleasing to see increasing awareness of the Science of Reading which should be used to inform best practice in classrooms, although there is already a danger that the Science of Reading is misunderstood to be a program of instruction rather than a body of evidence to inform practice. Similarly, structured literacy runs the risk of being interpreted purely as systematic instruction in phonics. This is only one element of literacy and we need to give equal attention to phonemic awareness, the building of vocabulary, the ability to read fluently and make meaning from text.

Along with strong literacy skills, our young people need now more than ever to be good critical thinkers. With the rise of social media as a form of communication and decline of ethics in journalism, young people must become their own gate-keepers of information. This is a skill that needs to be learned; therefore, our schools need to be places that foster critical thinking and our teachers must adopt methods that teach it.

Over the course of my teaching career, there has been a significant increase in (and awareness of) the number of students with learning difficulties, behavioural and self-regulation challenges. Others have written more learnedly about why these issues are on the rise; it is the concern of this Review as to their management and support in the education system.

As well as teachers needing the skills to provide for students with diverse needs, teacher assistants are invaluable in this arena and I strongly encourage consideration be given to how we can increase this component of the education workforce and equip them with the skills and knowledge to support students in their care. Credibility needs to be given to their work so that we look upon teacher assistants as skilled and necessary professionals rather than lackeys. Their role in the preparation of materials to support teachers is useful but their role in managing challenging students is vital. A prime source of this workforce is the Faculty of Education. Some teachers-in-training already work as TAs while undertaking their studies at university, which often makes them better teachers. This trend, which currently occurs incidentally, could be pursued as a deliberate plan to reinforce and increase the number of TAs available to support students in the classroom.

There is a strong correlation between student success and the value families place upon learning. I stress here the difference between parental involvement in learning and parental engagement in learning. The former requires parents and family members to attend school-based activities; the latter refers to the interest shown in learning at home, at school and within the community. Given the diversity of family make-up and the cost-of-living pressures that see all parents working, parental involvement in learning is logistically difficult. Parental engagement, however, is more influential on students' success and concerns the commitment of attitude rather than time.

Helping families to appreciate the value of education and take an interest in their children's learning needs to be one of the tools that schools and systems use to support students. This is a very broad challenge and one where there is already considerable work being done. I recognise here the work of Libraries Tasmania in developing early literacy programs, presenting inviting opportunities for a wide demographic, and supporting the literacy of prison inmates and their families. Given that Libraries Tasmania sits within the same department as Education, there is a lot of expertise that could be shared. Schools can be intimidating places for people for whom schooling was not happy or successful; there is much work to be done in this arena to foster parental engagement in education and, in turn, the success of students.

Support for our teaching workforce

Supporting teachers in Tasmania begins with how they are selected for admission into the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. A student's Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) has customarily been the predominant factor in determining admission into university courses. However, whilst we want "the brightest and best" to become teachers, there are aspects of teaching that differentiate it from other professions for which ATARs might legitimately be used as the sole determinant for acceptance into a university course. Teaching is also a craft; as such, it requires an aptitude. This quality is not assessed well by the UTas Faculty of Education.

Although it is pleasing to see the recent implementation of a Schools Recommendation Program where applications take into account recommendations by a student's school teachers, I submit that there are opportunities for a more rigorous and appropriate process for assessing applications into the Faculty of Education. In places like Singapore and Shanghai, candidates for teacher training are assessed by experienced educators (not university staff) for appropriate personal attributes, including their passion for teaching, before being accepted into teacher-training programs. A similar process is something I would strongly encourage to be implemented in Tasmania.

The evolution of teacher education courses in this state has been a contentious one with outcomes that are, in my view, not particularly successful. As stated above, teaching is a craft as well as a profession and therefore requires considerable on-the-job training as well as academic learning in order to hone one's skills. Yet what we have seen from UTas over the past few decades is a progressive decline in the amount of experiential learning as part of the course requirements. I understand that it is a logistically difficult exercise to find placements for all Faculty of Education students; however, being difficult is insufficient cause for reducing this component of a teacher's training.

Rather than just trying to squeeze a larger component of practical learning into the current Bachelor of Education program, I would like to see our state university implementing a more holistic review of their course. Perhaps a practice module that gives a high number of credits could be adopted, where students complete practice sessions in the university setting alongside a traineeship-style component in schools that are properly prepared for such responsibility. With a view to comments made above about the need for qualified teacher assistants, perhaps such employment could be considered as an induction into teaching and be given credit accordingly.

At the moment, the Bachelor of Education at the University of Tasmania adopts a concurrent model where students study units in pedagogy alongside units in all eight key learning areas. In theory, this seems like a logical plan for study. However, in practice, we have hundreds of beginning teachers exiting the university feeling hopelessly underprepared for what they have to do in the classroom. They have a cursory knowledge and understanding of everything but a deep understanding of little. Along with the effect of underprepared teachers upon the students they teach, this can cause teachers to leave the profession early in their careers – something no Australian state can afford to happen.

In places like Finland, Education students initially specialise in a chosen field (across a range of arts and sciences) which they then go on to teach. This is in the primary sector as well as the secondary school arena. It would be worth exploring such a system in Tasmania, which would have flow on effects for the way curricula are delivered in the classroom. In the light of my previous comments about the need for teachers who have a deep understanding of literacy and its pedagogy, specialisation at university level could provide for the literacy experts we need in our classrooms.

Once teachers are in the classroom, there are several things the Review could consider to support them:

- With respect to comments made previously about learning the craft of teaching, beginning teachers would benefit from being paired with mentors within their schools. These mentors would not necessarily have to be teaching the same grade or subject level. Their role could be to observe teaching and provide feedback, have their own lessons observed as models of good practice, be safe sounding boards for problems and ideas.
- In many schools, collaborative planning is used to support teachers. Although it can be a useful tool, one of the common problems that arises from this situation is that the loudest voice dictates the path for all. Collaborative planning needs to be a tool rather than a program.
- Professional learning should be tailored to the individual teacher as well as supporting school-wide development. This should involve experts visiting individual classrooms as well as teachers attending external and online training sessions. Planning Professional Learning in consultation with individual teachers gives authenticity to the process rather than being just one more thing that teachers have to make time for.
- No doubt there will be a lot of commentary provided to the Review about the administrative workload that is required of teachers. The reality is that a certain amount of administration is essential to the nature of the profession – planning, assessment, reporting, etc. However, school leaders need to ensure that the administrative tasks they require of their teaching staff is transparently related to the best interests of the students in their care. Tasks like annotating work samples that parents never look at or understand, data entries into learning management systems for the sake of the software and appearances are those which tire teachers unnecessarily and make them resent the time spent on them instead of being able to devote themselves to work that benefits their students.
- Finally, a word about the wellbeing of teachers. This not just about treats and morning teas. This is about genuine support for and understanding of teachers' welfare, both individually and collectively. It is supported by authentic interest from school leaders and good communication.

In reviewing education in Tasmania, Ms Vicki Baylis has a very broad range of issues to consider and a challenge to synthesise what will no doubt be a wide range of views on the problems we face. In this submission, I have highlighted what I believe should be the main areas for reform to support learners within the classroom and the teachers who are at the frontline of that work. This paper also attempts to foreshadow some potential solutions that will require a broad range of input, including from the University of Tasmania, our primary teacher-training institution. I wish the Review well in its endeavours and look forward to reading the recommendations and seeing improved outcomes for the young people of this state.

Leonie McNair (October 2024)