

Lessons from COVID-19 for Australian Schools

Key Points for the Australian Primary Principals Association

-o0o-

Background

At its July and August 2021 meetings, the APPA National Advisory Council (NAC) discussed the continued impact of COVID-19 on school leaders, teachers and learners. Many of the issues identified were existing issues that pre-dated the pandemic but were highlighted by schools' experience of the pandemic.

In subsequent meetings, these issues were refined and coalesced into four main priority areas.

These are presented below.

One recurring theme in the NAC discussions was the intensification of the work of school leaders and teachers. This is a real concern for APPA members and needs to be strongly considered as part of the discussion of each of the four priority areas listed below.

Summary

The 2020/2021 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented and ongoing disruption to schools and learners and was a time of great challenge for our community at many levels. But with challenge comes the opportunity to refocus on areas needing attention.

This discussion paper focuses on changes which will provide opportunities to review and reimagine the future of education in this country. APPA is calling for the establishment of respectful, professional partnerships which enhance educational opportunities for children. Underpinning these partnerships, is an expectation that the professionalism and experience of school leaders be considered and respected as part of a new way of governments/jurisdictions developing educational policy.

1. The need for policy development input from schools

APPA calls on governments to establish a mechanism to work with schools and school jurisdictions in developing policy and assessing policy impacts.

Schools need input into decisions that impact them. While it is recognised that Governments set policy agendas, those policy agendas can and should be enriched by a school perspective. Working with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions, enhances policy outcomes. Working with schools to assess the practicality of policy propositions creates a mutually respectful partnership and an increased likelihood of policy implementation success.

Such an approach lessens the intensification of work demands on principals and school staff and allows for greater responsiveness in best meeting the needs of children.



2. Equality

COVID highlighted the effects of inequality on student education. APPA calls for:

- i. genuine needs-based, sector-blind resourcing. This is essential for school leaders to effectively differentiate support to ensure success for all. APPA acknowledges the commitment to equalised needs-based funding across all sectors in 2029.

A focus on equity leads to excellence and yet, while Australia is recognised as having an excellent education system, it is not excellent for everyone. Many international organisations, including UNICEF and the OECD, rate Australian education as unequal and highly segregated, leaving too many children behind (Sahlberg, 2022).

- ii. better service provision for families in need - for example, integration of government and NGO services within community service hubs. This provides for coherent service provision, tailored to the needs of families. Currently, service provision is siloed, duplicative or absent, and hard to access in a coherent form.

3. Accountability/Assessment

APPA calls for sample testing rather than high stakes, whole-cohort, national testing.

APPA argues the best way to enhance educational outcomes is to create conditions where students can flourish. Currently we have an epidemic of tension and anxiety amongst school children - exacerbated by a misguided emphasis on narrowly measured academic outcomes. Against initial expectations, research has found convincing domestic and international evidence that too strong a focus on externally determined and narrow academic learning outcomes is associated with deteriorating performance (Sahlberg, 2022) and increasing anxiousness. We want to create a space where children can be joyful learners - interested in exploring their own innate curiosity.

4. A Primary Curriculum

APPA calls for the development of a primary curriculum, a curriculum which reflects how children learn and which encourages responsiveness and adaptability for teachers in meeting needs.

A new story of primary curriculum is needed. One where joy of learning is celebrated and each learner's potential is unleashed. We call for a coherent curriculum which celebrates children and their curiosity, which encourages diversity and a diverse conception of skills and knowledge. A curriculum which addresses the 'basics' while recognising a narrow focus on measuring basics can result in poorer academic outcomes (Cárdenas et al, 2022).

Discussion

1. The need for policy development input from schools

APPA calls on governments to establish a mechanism to work with schools and school jurisdictions in developing policy and assessing policy impacts.

Schools need input into decisions that impact them. While it is recognised that Governments set policy agendas, those policy agendas can and should be enriched by a school perspective. Working with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions enhances policy outcomes.

Working with schools to assess the practicality of policy propositions creates a mutually respectful partnership and increased policy implementation success.

Policy as proposition

Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) described policy as an intelligent proposition. Not a fixed solution but a partnership, entered into by policy makers and schools. He felt we should be guided by research and expertise in the formulation of policy, but the policy should be propositional, to be tested in practice and modified based on the feedback of practitioners. Stenhouse argued we should expect a policy to be intelligent, but not necessarily 'correct'. To be a *proposition*, which is refined and improved, in partnership with schools.

Such a spirit of experimentation and action research is key to structural reform and a sign of Departments being willing to work in partnership with schools and in so doing, to release some of the controls imposed upon schools. Such an approach lessens the intensification of work demands on principals and school staff and allows for greater responsiveness in better meeting the needs of children.

Silos and intensification

The intensification of the work of principals and teachers has been highlighted during the pandemic as has the impracticality of a silos approach to the work of principals and teachers. In addition to managing all of the demands of the pandemic - community concerns, a shift to online teaching, support for teachers many of whom are managing their own children and families at home while teaching - principals have also been expected to meet the demands of assessment, school audits, external validation...

The intensification of the work-load for principals and teachers has been cruel – probably unintentionally so, but cruel nonetheless. And it highlights the need for a reformation in how policy development and enactment occur. Policy makers must consider any policy proposition from the perspective of schools – and that perspective is of the school as a whole, not the multiple competing demands of numerous silos.

When the bureaucracy is organised in silos, each of which transmits their edicts to schools without the crucial test of practicality, this adds to intensification of work for school practitioners. And too many edicts, from too many silos results in an intensification of the work of principals and teachers to the point of ridiculousness. Principals should not be put under the additional pressure of balancing the often contradictory and competing demands of the silos, to make them work in practice.

School practitioners need to become genuine partners in developing accountability requirements in partnership with the bureaucracy. And this requires a shift in how we think about the development of policy and how the bureaucracy is organised.

Such a shift moves school-based personnel to respected partners in the formulation and refinement of policy – a shift which is sorely needed.

2. Equality

COVID highlighted the effects of inequality on student education. APPA calls for:

- i. genuine needs-based, sector-blind resourcing. This is essential for school leaders to effectively differentiate support to ensure success for all. APPA acknowledges the commitment to equalised needs-based funding across all sectors in 2029.

-
- ii. Better service provision for families in need - for example, integration of government and NGO services within community service hubs. This provides for coherent service provision, tailored to the needs of families. Currently, service provision is siloed, duplicative or absent, and hard to access in a coherent form.

A focus on equity leads to excellence and yet, while Australia is recognised as having an excellent education system, it is not excellent for everyone. Many international organisations, including UNICEF and the OECD, rate Australian education as unequal and highly segregated, leaving too many children behind (Sahlberg, 2022).

COVID highlighted the effects of inequality on student education. A number of research reports confirmed that impoverished students disproportionately suffered the most in the shift to on-line learning. The PIVOT Report [Socioeconomic Disparities in Australian Schooling During COVID-19](#) stated the sudden forced shift to online learning “laid bare structural inequities in the educational system.”

In their research paper ([The 'new normal': the future of education after COVID-19](#)) into the impact of the pandemic on English schools, the *Institute for Public Policy Research* highlighted schools need to reach ‘beyond the classroom’ to narrow educational inequalities. The authors argued the pandemic is likely to have widened the attainment gap. Existing inequalities include disparities in parental support, the home environment, access to learning resources and exposure to vulnerabilities such as mental health problems (either children’s own or their families’), violence, neglect, abuse, bereavement and caring responsibilities. This demands that schools work with other public services to address the barriers to learning ‘beyond the classroom’ that children experience.

In their excellent white paper, *Reimagining Education in Queensland’s State Primary Schools*, the Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP) identified the widening digital divide as indicative of increasing inequity across many societal measures including economic, health, and educational outcomes. “Some of these are exacerbated by our political systems, the echo chambers created by social media, the increasingly uneven distribution of wealth and the consequences of colonial histories on First Nations peoples.” (QASSP, 2020 p.3).

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, charges educators with ‘supporting every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face’ (Council of Australian Governments Education, 2019. p.2). But such statements have been made by governments of all hues with regularity (see The Hobart Declaration, 1989; The Adelaide Declaration, 1999; The Melbourne Declaration, 2008). While it is accepted these declarations are sincere and well intentioned, they have traditionally been translated into an increased emphasis on measurement and control – with little or no improvement in educational performance over that time.

Addressing inequality is an issue that extends well beyond schools. Responses to disadvantage remain fragmented. There are arguably too many service providers, none of which seem to have the capacity to provide the level of service need by some children and their families. Fractionated, uncoordinated service provision does not meet the needs of families. Too many times, principals have presided over coordination meetings of service providers, all of whom can attend a meeting to talk about the needs, but none of whom seem able to respond to those needs!

APPA calls for:

- i. funding to facilitate an education of the highest quality for every student, in every locale and for funding to be targeted to those students who need it most.

In addition, APPA calls for:

- ii. a rethink of how support is provided to families in need and calls for consideration of family support hubs that serve to simplify and integrate supports for families in need.

3. Accountability/Assessment

APPA calls for:

- i. sample testing rather than high stakes, whole-cohort, national testing.

APPA argues the best way to enhance educational outcomes is to create conditions where students can flourish. Currently we have an epidemic of tension and anxiety amongst school children - exacerbated by a misguided emphasis on narrowly measured academic outcomes. Against initial expectations, research has found convincing domestic and international evidence that too strong a focus on externally determined and narrow academic learning outcomes is associated with deteriorating performance (Sahlberg, 2022) and increasing anxiousness. We want to create a space where children can be joyful learners - interested in exploring their own innate curiosity.

It is entirely appropriate that we have measures of our efficacy as an education system. Nobody wants to hide from this. We want data and we want data that leads to improvement. The problem with reductionist questions though, is that they can lead to reductionist answers. For example, the answer to literacy improvement is not always found in a literacy program. Instead, it may be found in programs which enhance the joy of learning, in guided play-based explorations and in collaborative participation (as opposed to isolated competition). If we want improved learning, we must create the conditions for it to occur and stop pushing it away.

We have an epidemic of tension and anxiety, a nerve-wracked generation. We have school and system pressure to perform on a narrowing set of indices. We focus on division, subjects, grades and priorities. We narrow the curriculum and wonder why we are having trouble getting students to participate. And in doing so, we fail to let children be children, to play, to work collaboratively, to be joyful. A narrow focus on measuring basics can result in poorer academic outcomes and students who self-report lower well-being perform worse academically (Cárdenas et al, 2022).

What are the questions we are seeking to address? Do we want measures that sort, classify and compare? This is certainly the emphasis of the Global Education Reform movement (GERM), with massive resourcing going to companies that produce tests and testing products. But is this what we want? When education is focussed on output and yield (through test results and league tables) and fails to focus on the conditions under which people learn, then we will continue to fail by the very measures we hope to improve.

The problem is that we get a narrowing of the curriculum and we devalue other elements of what it is to live a good life. We marginalise 'non-essential learnings' such as music, art, nutrition, health... When we promote a process of standardisation, we fail to celebrate that every child is different. And when our focus is on categorising people based on ability, we begin to categorise those with less ability, as having a disability.

In their white paper, QASSP writes "The evidence indicates that since the mid-1980s, developing educator capability through external accountability measures has not achieved the desired results (Hattie, 2015; Munby & Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The improvement measure (and driver) has generally been a standardised test. In Australia this is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

As in the United States, which has five decades of standardised data demonstrating little improvement (Hanushek, 2016), the gains in Australia have been less than encouraging (Thomson et al., 2018). Australia’s declining performance in PISA comparisons ... has also been interpreted as a concerning data set (Thomson et al., 2018).”

In recent years, NAPLAN has become increasingly high-stakes in response to accountability expectations. But it can be argued that accountability can be sensibly satisfied by sample-testing and that there are too many unintended consequences coming from an emphasis on all-in national testing programs. Some of these consequences are: ‘teaching to the test’ rather than focusing on learning; a narrowing of the curriculum; the lessening of joy; all with limited evidence that it results in better outcomes.

High disengagement is an indictment on the system and what it is designed to do. Disengagement should be seen as a system failure, not a failure of the child. We shouldn’t ask ‘what does this test result say about the child?’ Instead, we should ask, ‘what does this test says about our teaching and our approach to educating?’ And a testing emphasis linked to declining results and increased disengagement, needs to be questioned.

4. A Primary Curriculum

APPA calls for:

- i. the development of a primary curriculum, a curriculum which reflects how children learn and which encourages responsiveness and adaptability for teachers in meeting needs. We call for a coherent curriculum which celebrates children and their curiosity, which encourages diversity and a diverse conception of skills and knowledge. A curriculum which addresses the ‘basics’ while recognising a narrow focus on measuring basics can result in poorer academic outcomes (Cárdenas et al, 2022).

A new story of primary schooling is needed. One where joy of learning is celebrated and each learner’s potential is unleashed. Where is the primary curriculum based upon an understanding of how children learn? Where is the space for play, for wonder? Our current curriculum is dominated by a tertiary conception of faculties, pushed down into learning areas and translated as content to be mastered. There is a focus on division, grades, and subjects, but the world is based on collaboration and synergy.

Our school systems continue to place highest value on reading levels, test scores, school comparisons and accountability measures. But perhaps these are best attained through programs which encourage engagement, promote skilled teaching, acknowledge the individual child and each child’s learning readiness.

What should a primary curriculum look like if it is to reflect how children learn? Our current approach, based on tertiary conceptions of curriculum, forced back into the primary years is deeply flawed. High rates of disengagement and test results that are not that impressive, are symptoms of this malaise. We want good results. We want to see improved results. We question whether these are best attained through current policy settings.

We call for a rethink of the primary and early childhood curriculum. A curriculum which is coherent and makes sense to teachers and students. A concise curriculum which recognises and builds on the expertise of teachers.

-o0o-