Lessons in failure on education need to be learnt

PAUL KELLY

Burwood Girls High School students Khyati Walia, Khushi Shah and Hannah Tabikh with Education Minister Alan Tudge. Picture: Sam Ruttyn

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In the list of policy failures over the past 20 years, the fall in school education performance must rank at or near the top – yet the response has brought contradictory voices and a denial of political - responsibility to confront this disservice to young Australians and our economic future.

The inadequate level of school performance and Australia's steady decline both in absolute and relative terms has never hit the national political radar. It has never been presented as a national crisis. It is widely debated at state level – where responsibility lies for schools – yet there is no agreed, credible policy response being implemented as each state goes its own way with negligible results.

The issue is elemental. Schoolchildren have not been properly instructed in reading, maths, science and the humanities. This should be seen for the institutional failure that it represents. Yet this failure has only begun to enter the mainstream media debate.

Interviewed by Inquirer, I asked new federal Education Minister Alan Tudge whether he felt the Australian public was even aware of the extent of the crisis.

"Probably not – and when I point it out to people they are typically shocked, as they should be," Tudge said. "When I point this out in my speeches people are shocked to find we have declined in our school standards even against ourselves by about a year's worth of learning over two decades. That is, an average 15-year-old today is a year behind in their learning compared with an average 15-year-old in the year 2000."

How Australia compares

Programme for International Student Assessment

Reading literacy | Mathematical literacy | Scientific literacy

Reading literacy	2018 score	2003 score	2018 ranking	2003 ranking	Where they were in relation to Australia in 2003
China *	555	N/A	1st	N/A	Not included
Singapore	549	N/A	2nd	N/A	Not included
Macao	525	498	3rd	15th	Lower
Hong Kong	524	510	4thj	10th	Lower
Estonia	523	N/A	5th	N/A	Not included
Canada	520	528	6th=	3rd	Similar
Finland	520	543	6th=	1st	Higher
Ireland	518	515	7th	7th	Similar
South Korea	514	534	8th	2nd	Similar
Poland	512	497	10th	16th	Lower
Sweden	506	514	11th=	8th	Lower
New Zealand	506	522	11th=	6th	Similar
US	505	495	13th	18th	Lower
UK	504	N/A	14th=	N/A	Not included
Japan	504	498	14th=	14th	Lower
Australia	**503**	**525**	**16th**	**4th**	

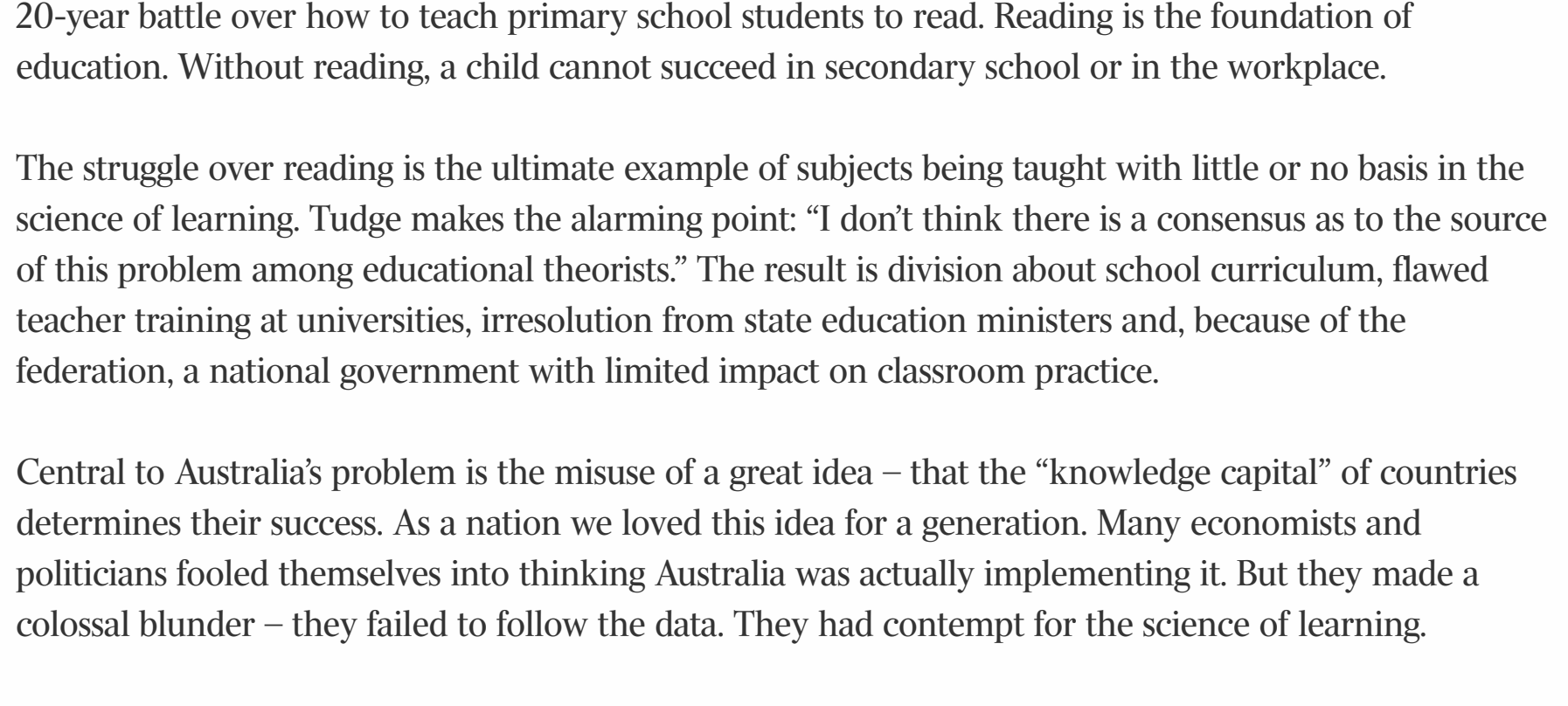
* Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang only
Source: PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's results

THE AUSTRALIAN

The public interest of students, parents, business and community is being sacrificed. Witness Australia's 20-year battle over how to teach primary school students to read. Reading is the foundation of education. Without reading, a child cannot succeed in secondary school or in the workplace.

The struggle over reading is the ultimate example of subjects being taught with little or no basis in the science of learning. Tudge makes the alarming point: "I don't think there is a consensus as to the source of this problem among educational theorists." The result is division about school curriculum, flawed teacher training at universities, irresolution from state education ministers and, because of the federation, a national government with limited impact on classroom practice.

Central to Australia's problem is the misuse of a great idea – that the "knowledge capital" of countries determines their success. As a nation we loved this idea for a generation. Many economists and politicians fooled themselves into thinking Australia was actually implementing it. But they made a colossal blunder – they failed to follow the data. They had contempt for the science of learning.



Jenny Donovan, director of the Australian Education Research Organisation – the body created by state and federal ministers to spearhead research – told Inquirer the evidence was convincing.

"We need to focus on practices that deliver the most effective learning outcomes," Donovan said. "We know what those practices are. The evidence is extremely robust, up there with the most evidence-based stuff there is. We know what works. We are talking here about explicit instruction, the teacher being responsible for the learning of students; teachers revisiting the content to ensure it is learnt and maintained. This approach is supported by cognitive science and our understanding of how the brain learns."

Yet this is not the approach followed in most Australian classrooms. "The problem is these practices are not necessarily well understood by teachers," Donovan said. "There are concerns teachers will be accused of lacking creativity in their approach. I believe these fears are misguided. We need to look into why teachers aren't picking up on the most effective practices.

"Indications from the assessments suggest that learning is not going well. We know from surveys of teachers where they are fairly frank that they don't know how to teach reading or writing."

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Tudge is unusual – a federal minister deeply versed in education before he entered politics. His mission is to return Australia by 2030 into the top group of education nations. He brands as "shameful" the story of the past 20 years. But he has no hope unless the states share this as a genuine commitment.

Tudge said: "Our standards have fallen significantly over the past 20 years despite the massive increase in school funding. A kid today has 60 per cent more resources allocated to them than they did 20 years ago. Funding for schools has increased by 38 per cent in real per capita terms over the past decade."

Incredibly, our performance has gone backwards. Politicians who talk passionately about equity have presided over classroom methods that have done more to damage disadvantaged students and handicap them for a lifetime than virtually any other public policy in this country. Yet there is no accountability.

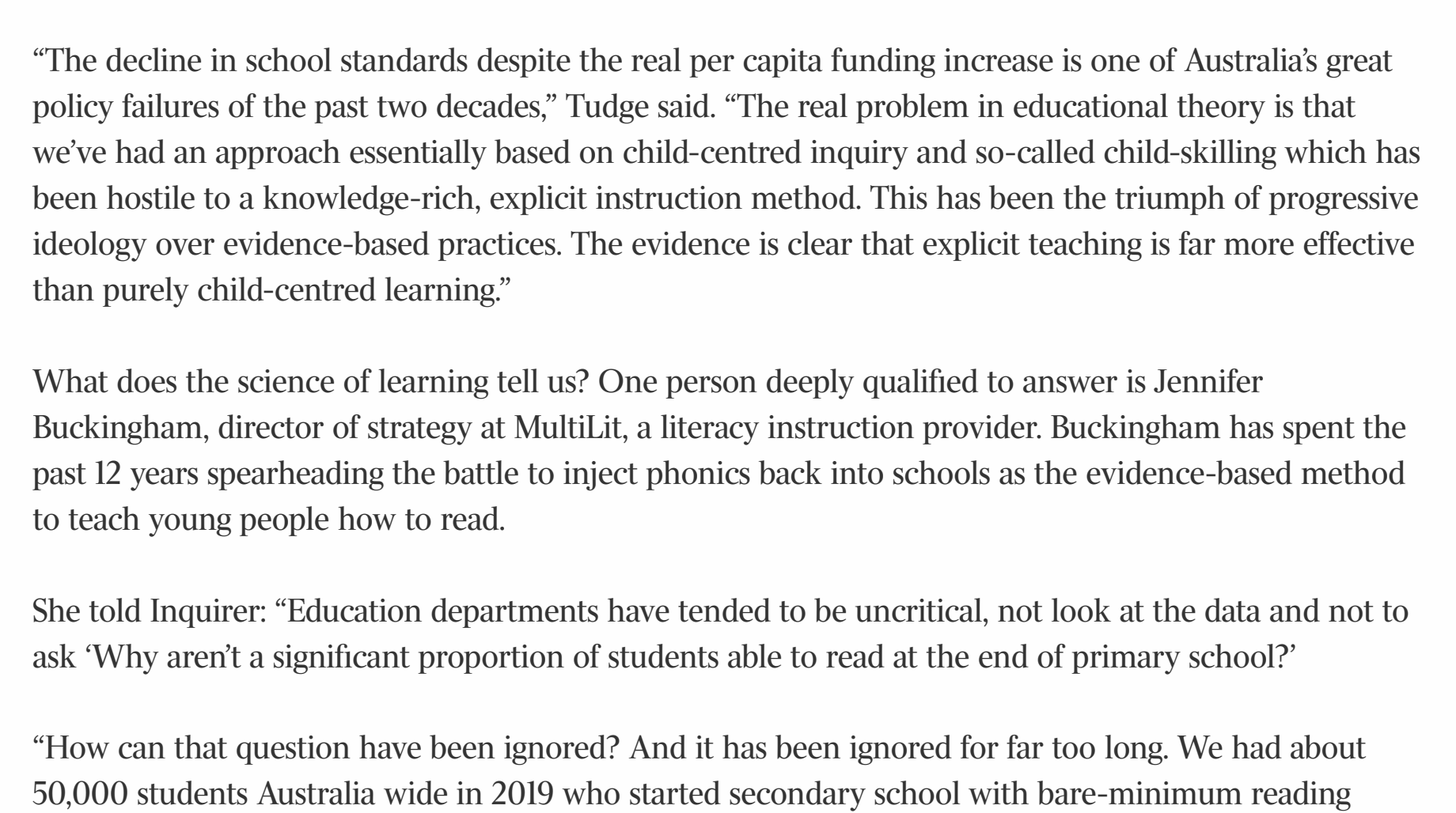
"The decline in school standards despite the real per capita funding increase is one of Australia's great policy failures of the past two decades," Tudge said. "The real problem in educational theory is that we've had an approach essentially based on child-centred inquiry and so-called child-skilling which has been hostile to a knowledge-rich, explicit instruction method. This has been the triumph of progressive ideology over evidence-based practices. The evidence is clear that explicit teaching is far more effective than purely child-centred learning."

What does the science of learning tell us? One person deeply qualified to answer is Jennifer Buckingham, director of strategy at MultiLit, a literacy instruction provider. Buckingham has spent the past 12 years spearheading the battle to inject phonics back into schools as the evidence-based method to teach young people how to read.

She told Inquirer: "Education departments have tended to be uncritical, not look at the data and not to ask 'Why aren't a significant proportion of students able to read at the end of primary school?'

"How can that question have been ignored? And it has been ignored for far too long. We had about 50,000 students Australia wide in 2019 who started secondary school with bare-minimum reading skills if at all, and that's being going on year after year.

"Seven years of full-time schooling should not result in a kid not being able to read. Reading underpins everything else. It is impossible to succeed in education if you struggle with reading. There is a responsibility here in terms of government departments and ministers around Australia who thought this was acceptable."



Dr Jenny Donovan with Stanmore Public School Year 1 students, Soraya, Phoenix and Darcy. Picture: John Feder

Creeping failure has been tolerated by education ministers. And this struggle is not limited to reading. The conflict over how to teach pervades all subjects and is now erupting in maths. The core problem seems almost unbelievable and will be denied – the politicians don't understand what has gone wrong, won't confront it, and won't even debate it.

Buckingham describes the philosophical conflict: "The reading debate is one part of the much larger debate about explicit teacher-directed instruction versus child-centred inquiry or discovery learning approaches.

"Explicit instruction implies you are teaching something concrete. You have defined what you want the child to know. Explicit instruction tends to go hand-in-hand with a content-driven curriculum. This is the link between pedagogy and curriculum.

"The other approach is a philosophy that we shouldn't be filling children up with facts, that they learn better discovering things for themselves and they will discover things more readily if they see them as relevant for their own lives. This is a romantic notion of education."

Asked if the phonics battle was won, Buckingham said: "Not entirely, yet." It depends on what state you live in. Incredibly, resistance remains strong in some states, with Catholic systems being the most backward. Buckingham said the alternative "whole language" movement "didn't make any sense" from the start.

Yet state education ministers are still not held to account. The stubbornness of the states in holding fast to their school education rights is legendary. So is their capacity to obscure the facts and, when pledged to reforms, lurch into timidity.

School education is a unique example of the public interest being sacrificed for the sectional interest. Is there any other area of economic or social policy where such decline would be tolerated? The normal Australian response to such underperformance is a major inquiry, media pressure, expert engagement and politicians driven to a new policy direction, sometimes bipartisan, sometimes contested.

But this hasn't happened with schools' decline. The normal democratic "fix-it" mechanism has broken down. No political leader has accepted responsibility or is held responsible.

Dr Jennifer Buckingham

Education analyst from the Centre for Independent Studies Glenn Fahey told Inquirer: "If we followed the science on education our student outcomes wouldn't be in free fall. The educational science is as settled as it can possibly be on this. The divide in the education community is between those who follow the educational science and those who embrace sociology instead. Politicians are rarely ambitious and genuinely curious about education."

The most recent 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment, done each three years, showed Australian decline in reading, maths and science compared with 15-year-old students around the globe. Australia performed significantly below 10 countries in reading, 23 in maths and 12 in science. Compared with the highest performer – a group of Chinese provinces – Australia was three and a half school years lower in maths, three years lower in science and one and a half years lower in reading.

Our own performance is regressing. The average Australian student is more than one full year behind 2003 levels in maths, one full year behind 2006 levels in science and a full year behind 2000 levels in reading. In reading, only 59 per cent of year 9 Australian students reached the "proficiency" standard. Australia's decline is across all bands – poor, middle and top students.

Donovan is optimistic Australia can raise its standards. But she understands the pull in the opposite direction. She said: "Teachers are attracted to the idea that if we let students find their own way then that learning will stick. But the data shows this isn't true. What is more likely to happen is that students will potentially have fun with terrific projects but it won't necessarily be the learning that sticks, it will be the fun.

"We need to be much clearer with teachers about what works. They can still bring their personalities and creativity to the table. They will be on board."

Chief executive of the NSW Education Standards Authority Paul Martin backed Tudge's goal. "I think it's feasible in a country that is as rich and first 'world' as Australia," Martin said. "But we need to co-ordinate action nationally. It needs to be built from the bottom up over a long period of time. From the earlier years of kindergarten, year one and two, it must be heavily predicated on literacy and numeracy."

A progress report comes from one system that has boldly embarked on this transition – the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra/Goulburn with 22,000 students across 56 schools under director Ross Fox. "When you lift the reading and vocabulary expectations, you find that students respond," Fox told Inquirer.

Templestowe Heights Primary School teacher Jeanette Breen with students (L-R) Quinlan Mance, Angus Stacker and Faith Polotoroff. The primary school is spearheading a project that is changing the way schools teach children valuable writing skills. Picture: Aaron Francis

"What transforms the lives of students are teachers who deliver a knowledge-rich curriculum to all students in the class. I am of the strong belief that knowledge is the key to creativity. In recent times, I've had conversations with our principals who have shared their own journey, telling me that part of their professional identity had been child-based inquiry learning. They related to me their own transformation and how they had come to realise that explicit, knowledge-rich teaching was essential for the development of young people."

Asked about the nationwide transition that Australia needed, Fox said: "It's monumental. What we are asking from teachers is incredibly challenging. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of teachers Australia-wide, and you are asking them to change. That's incredibly ambitious."

He warns of the traps: "It is so easy to focus on other things in education – its purpose, notions of inquiry, privileging the students – and there is a great temptation in education to indulge the needs of students at the cost of their learning. I know that's a provocative remark. The risk is putting notions of wellbeing ahead of student learning."

The Australian economy is being slugged with poor productivity feeding into reduced living standards growth. Education decline is pivotal to this story, a fact economists have been slow to confront. Yet a path-breaking document came this year in the NSW Productivity Commission White Paper that concluded "improving the quality of school teaching could be one of the biggest things NSW can do to improve its productivity."

It is an almost revolutionary statement. The commission, under the leadership of Peter Achterstraat, said government policy must now focus on "embedding best-practice teaching in every classroom".

Surely this means state treasurers asking education ministers to explain what will change in their classrooms.

Falling school standards must become a serious political issue. Educationalists, universities and state bureaucrats bear much of the blame. Yet this crisis suffers from the absence of a dramatic shock. Failure on border protection was apparent in boat arrivals; failure in energy policy was apparent in escalating prices; failure in aged care was obvious from appalling conditions in homes. But steady decline in schools has no such visibility.

Tudge holds universities accountable for much of the problem. "I believe that teacher educational faculties are largely responsible for the decline," he said "This goes back to the responsibility of universities in terms of the people they accept into teaching courses but, more importantly, how they are trained. There is too much dogma at the expense of established evidence-based practices."

As federal minister, Tudge must work where he has leverage. His critical initiative has been to set up an inquiry into teacher education, a chronic problem for 20 years. The failure of the universities to conduct evidence-based teacher education courses has been a material factor in the nation's school standards decline.

Three of the foundational sources on the superiority of teacher-based explicit instruction are US academic E.D. Hirsch Jr, author of Why Knowledge Matters, educational economist Professor Eric Hanushek from the Hoover Institution and co-author of The Knowledge Capital of Nations, and Professor John Sweller from the University of NSW, originator of cognitive load theory.

Interviewed by Inquirer, Sweller said there are two sorts of knowledge: young children "naturally" pick up their parents' language but there is no "natural" process to learn how to read and write. "That is knowledge we have to teach explicitly," Sweller said.

He said the key to thinking critically was to have "sufficient knowledge" in the first place. Teaching critical thinking strategies as opposed to core knowledge is "useless".

"This is one of the main reasons for the catastrophic fall in our rankings on international tests," Sweller said. "It has happened to every society that's decided inquiry learning is a terrific way of learning. The fall in our rankings correlates almost precisely with the introduction of inquiry learning. We've done an enormous amount of damage."

Sweller's research, which is recognised worldwide, as he admits, "is not so well known in Australia". Asked whether any education minister had ever spoken with him, Sweller said: "No."

Australia's generation-long furious debate about school funding consumed all the political energy. Nothing else was left.

"We now have one agreed universal funding system," Tudge said. "That means the funding wars are over. We can focus on what really matters – what occurs in the classroom and lifting our school standards."

This has been said before. Will this time be any different?

Paul Kelly is a director of the Australian educational charity Primary Focus.

PAUL KELLY, EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Paul Kelly is Editor-at-Large on The Australian. He was previously Editor-in-Chief of the paper and he writes on Australian politics, public policy and international affairs. Paul has covered Australian governm... Read more

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Jon 1 HOUR AGO

Life for teachers is easier if they let the students 'discover '. Actually imparting skills such as literacy and numeracy takes hard work . The biggest supporters of the sociological approach are the teachers unions.

In a related report it was claimed that 50% of adults in Tasmania are functionally illiterate. Not sure we can claim to be a first world nation any more.

Report Like 4 Reply

Leith 1 HOUR AGO

Excellent article! Thanks.

Report Like 3 Reply

Chris 1 HOUR AGO

Looking at the top student scores in the above chart I noticed that none of those countries have unemployment benefits....Especially for school leavers...So if you fail at school you either end up in the Army as a basic infantryman, working in a factory sweeping the floor or flipping burgers

Anyone ever though about giving our kids an incentive and taking the sugar off the table?

Report Like 2 Reply

Rod 1 HOUR AGO

And what exactly is wrong with starting one's working life as a 'basic infantryman' Chris? I did.

Report Like Reply

BruceM 1 HOUR AGO

If teachers were allowed to teach instead of having to follow the dictates of the teachers unions then standards would rise dramatically. The current vogue of convincing (brainwashing) children that the world will end in 12 years due to the manufacturing of steel and concrete (climate change = CO2) without teaching how steel and concrete are actually made is leaving our children ignorant. "Go Woke - Go Broke" needs to be restated to "Go Woke - Don't Learn".

Report Like 3 Reply

Dale 2 HOURS AGO *(Edited)*

The rot started with the move from Teachers Colleges to Universities.

Teachers Colleges focussed on an explicit teaching methodology (pedagogy).
Australian Universities focussed on whole child teaching, a methodology imported from the US. The US has been unwinding this methodology for a number of years.

Differences

1. **Teachers Colleges explicitly taught teachers** a range of class learning strategies and excelled in the teaching of 3 distinct groups of students within the same classroom:

- the group that was ahead of the curricula requirements
- the group that was meeting curricula requirements
- the group that was struggling to meet the curricula requirements

The group ahead of the curricula was explicitly taught the curricula and then stretched with their own self learning and peer mentoring to assist the other two groups (and teacher) as needed.

The group meeting the curricula was explicitly taught the curricula and then stretched them with their own self learning and some peer mentoring.

The group struggling to meet the curricula requirements was explicitly taught by the teacher and additionally by peer mentors and only when they mastered each part of the curricula they moved to stretched self learning.

2. **The mandatory content of the curricula was much more focused and smaller.**

For those who were struggling, the focus on the basics until they were meeting the curricula.

3. **Practicing teachers weren't allowed to teach if they could *not* meet or exceed the basics of the curricula.**

Most had already learnt to spell, write and were already mathematically competent and understood the priorities of basics first so they understood.

The principles of teaching have always been simple, it's the execution of those principles that has changed and why Australia is free falling down the global table at an alarming rate of knots.

Australia is free falling down the global table at an alarming rate of knots.

The knot (/nɒt/) is a unit of speed equal to one nautical mile per hour, exactly 1.852 km/h (approximately 1.151 mph or 0.514 m/s).

Report Like 1 Reply

Robert 2 HOURS AGO

It is a worry when the experts use the word " kid" in lieu of "child", or "young person". Also, it is a worry when the experts refer to " maths" when the subject is "mathematics".
I understand now why our education standards are dropping when experts and educational leaders resort to this language flippancy.

Report Like Reply

Ted 2 HOURS AGO

Standardisation of the curriculum has resulted in lower standards. When it's compulsory for all schools to follow the same playbook which is designed with a low bar for "disadvantaged kids", it locks in the mediocrity. Experimental teaching methods, the low bar in teacher training and the persistent mediocrity in state schools exacerbates the problem.

Report Like 1 Reply

Novocastrian 3 HOURS AGO

Paul Kelly is obsessed about Trump and seems really frightened of rights if peopke from the Right but has a different views on BLM and Extinction Rebellion and by other fanatical Left groups!
His analysis here is good but his judgement is frequently limited and frightening when making erroneous judgements on what most Australiansvthink !

Report Like Reply

Mac 4 HOURS AGO

Sweller is right.
Inquiry based learning is what you take out in life AFTER being taught.

If your own teachers are too lazy to teach you then good luck passing it down.

Report Like 7 Reply

Bryan 4 HOURS AGO

As a teacher of 43 years, it is obvious to many of the experienced teachers that there is one outstanding reason for these poor results. Teacher training. Comparing my experiences at a teachers' college before it became a uni, and with the other educational institutions I've been observing for decades, it comes back to that - teacher training. And one significant aspect of that teacher training. The key words are literally, 'teacher training' NOT university lectures and tutorials! Yes, academic knowledge in specific classroom subjects is absolutely necessary, but not at the expense of teacher training. Back then, our experience was many more weeks spent in the classroom observing the best teachers and then teaching ourselves with the class teacher carrying us along, until we could actually teach practically. We had some theoretical input but it was almost all practical. Our debrief afterwards on site and back at college, along with lecturers of the key classroom subjects teaching like classroom teachers, was also a massive benefit. We experienced a number of different schools over our three years, seemingly significantly more than uni's today. When I left college, I could teach and teach well. My colleagues from that training system are/were very good teachers. Being trained gained a far better result!!!
Bring back those teachers' colleges or at least their training methodologies. Bring back real teachers who love this vocation/career. Not those brilliant academic sorts who never will be able to teach, or those looking for anything to do and falling into teaching. Teacher training the teachers' college ways.

Report Like 16 Reply

Daniel 2 HOURS AGO *(Edited)*

This is because University Education courses also now lacks explicit knowledge based content. A case of the blind leading the blind.

Report Like 1 Reply

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