Productivity Commission Draft Report

National Education Evidence Base

Submission by

Steiner Education Australia

7th October, 2016

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Submission to the Productivity Commission

Draft Report

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Education Evidence Base
Productivity Commission
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Background

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission Draft Report “National Education Evidence Base” as we believe the outcomes of this report will have significant impact on education policy and practice in the early childhood sector and in schools and therefore wish to make our views known.

SEA is the peak national body comprising 46 Member Schools and 11 Associate Members across Australia. We represent over 8,000 students and their families, in all States and Territories of Australia.

Steiner education is an internationally recognised educational movement and a member of the International Forum for Steiner/Waldorf Education. Steiner Education Australia is also affiliated with the European Council of Steiner/Waldorf Education, the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America and the Federation of Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools in New Zealand. There are over 1300 Steiner/Waldorf schools and 2000 Early Childhood centres worldwide.

Parents choose to enrol their children for the Steiner philosophy and pedagogical practice that differentiates our schools from other types of schooling and some of the suggestions in this report are concerning, as they may impact on pedagogical practice that we believe is not in each child’s best interests and healthy development.

In response to the Terms of Reference we offer the following comments:

> ***The information required to provide a comprehensive evidence base to inform policy development in early learning and school education now and in the future. This includes consideration of current data holdings at a national, state and sectoral level, their effectiveness in supporting educational outcomes, and the long term vision for such educational data holdings.***

The 'top down approach', which has been a feature of our national education system since the introduction of Basic Skill tests, then NAPLAN, and the introduction of MySchool has not had the desired effect of significantly increasing student performance on national and international tests. Education policy which is strongly focused on measurement, outputs and comparison of outcomes, largely ignores the human quality and range of issues which affect student well-being. Collection of national data to inform policy making and to have a cost-effective approach for government spending on education is of course necessary, but how this data is used can also have negative effects on programs, policies and practice at a school level.

National collection of data cannot take into account social issues, diversity and equity, as narrow standardised high stakes tests and performance benchmarking are not the measurement of what constitutes effective holistic education which teaches the whole human being. Silo-type assessment based national approaches such as NAPLAN and an increased focus on international standardised tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), high stakes international league tables and competitive country comparisons are driving global reform agendas.

The draft report's focus on driving student achievement through four interconnected processes – 'monitoring of performance, evaluation of what works best, dissemination of evidence and application of evidence by educators and policy makers', largely ignores the real impact of education on each individual learner, as it is output focused – that is monitoring of performance according to scores on national assessments.

Linda Darling Hammond in Lingard (2010, 144) highlights the importance of educational accountability combined with a rich and socially just schooling agenda. She gives some clear pointers for future reform that show national assessments and performance monitoring are inadequate and suggests the following:

Recognise the responsibilities of all actors, including governments, systems, schools, students,

communities and parents to learning outcomes;

- *Acknowledge the broad purposes of schooling;*
- *Reject the view that improved test results on NAPLAN are indicative of improved schooling or a more socially just school system;*
- *Reject the top-down, one-way gaze upon teachers as the sole source and solution to all schooling problems;*
- *Recognise the centrality of informed teacher judgment and quality of pedagogies to achieving better learning outcomes for all students; and*
- *Recognise the need to address poverty.*

What additional information could be considered and how it might add value to the existing evidence base. This may include data concerning non-cognitive skills, and information from other sectors, including but not be limited to: employment, health, social services, early childhood and higher education.

There has already been extensive research into how policy reform could be achieved. Firstly, the *"skills and characteristics required of successful learners, workers and citizens in the knowledge economy*" (Kalantzis 15, 2003) need to be defined as "*autonomous, self-directed, flexible, collaborative, of open sensibility, broadly knowledgeable, and able to work productively with linguistic and cultural diversity"*. Secondly, it would have to be acknowledged these are not capacities that can be assessed through standardised testing. Kalantzis (15, 2003) argues that a *"new basics … at the level of curriculum, with correlative assessment techniques such as analysis of portfolios, performance, projects and group work"* is required. Eisner (2004) supports the argument that important capacities such as "*curiosity, inventiveness, and insight"* are incapable of standardised measurement, yet should be held as being of utmost importance.

Any form of standardised assessment that narrows the curriculum and hinders the development of these essential human capacities, should be reviewed. A new style of assessment that covered these attributes would certainly support the objectives and goals of both the National Education Agreement and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008).

If all young Australians are to become *"successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens"* (MCEETYA, 2008, p.8), then policy makers could look to Lingard's (2010, 144) suggestion to *"attempt to develop rich and intelligent forms of educational accountability linked to a socially just schooling agenda".*

Whilst evidence-based decision making should drive education policy, neither the bottom up approach should be the driver of this, nor the top-down one size fits all approach. Education is complex, as it is driven by the human element; the student, the teacher, the family and the community, all which impact on a student and their ability to learn. Top down approaches do not take these crucial factors into account as only the parents know their child, only the classroom teacher can observe differences in learning styles, abilities, interests, student engagement and well-being, social issues and student diversity.

Brian Caldwell, Emeritus Professor, University of Melbourne and Deputy Chair ACARA, spoke at the ACEL conference 29 September 2016 and stated that teachers having the capacity to make decisions at the local level are likely to make a difference to student outcomes and that professional autonomy should be the 'lead driver' in efforts to link school autonomy to student achievement. Therefore teachers must have the autonomy to make informed discretionary judgements; the bottom up approach is of more significant value than any top down approach could ever measure, however the bottom up approach also has its limitations, which are explained in the final comments of this submission.

Professor Caldwell also gave a summary of the results from the recent Principal Survey on school autonomy and student learning in public schools. The survey highlighted the importance of adapting curriculum to meet local needs and children with special needs and identified the following as holding schools back from meeting the needs of learners:

- National curriculum
- National testing
- National targets to improvement
- Compliance requirements
- Demands on principal and teacher time

At the same ACEL conference, the Minister for Education, Hon Simon Birmingham told the 1200 educational leaders attending that he wanted to hear education leaders' feedback and engage fully, to really find out what can improve education. Hopefully this survey will highlight exactly how the top down approach simply is not working and that a real evidence base listens to those in the schools, working with the children, instead of researchers who may or may not have experience in the classroom or the ability to relate the evidence and data they collect to the all-important factor of child development and local needs.

The Minister also emphasized the importance of education to the country's productivity agenda, the economy, equity and stressed that Australia's international performance must be lifted. He wants to know what data is needed and how it should be used, as national policy

decisions will be made on the data collected. On one hand, to have policy decision made on robust data is good, as it prevents politicians without an education background or teaching experience to put their own 'personal' brand on the education agenda. But how the data is interpreted, by researchers who collect data, then make inferences at a one size fits all level is of great concern.

For example, at a recent ACECQA Forum in September 2016, the Productivity Commissioner spoke and also some young researchers. One of the researchers from the Australian Council for Educational Research gave a presentation about strengthening the early childhood sector's evidence base to make decisions and implement practices that improve outcomes and he presented evidence from data collected in early childhood settings.

The results from this evidence showed that some children come to early childhood settings, significantly disadvantaged in social and language skills and therefore the conclusion reached was that 'increased instructional support is required in the early childhood years'. However, this is alarming as great care needs to be taken as to how this data is interpreted at a research level, as it then becomes a factor to influence national policy disregarding the local level, and then becomes a one size fits all approach. There is often a great disconnect between evidence-based research, and developmental needs of children in the early childhood years. It is essential young children have a play based environment, largely free of 'instructional support' where they can learn through experience without too much teacher input. Early childhood is becoming more compromised with too much focus on developing intellectual concepts before crucial social emotional and physical skills are developed.

This approach in America has not worked as the following article suggests: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/the-new-preschool-is-crushing-kids/419139/

There seems to be a global trend towards increased early concept development in the early years, with the belief that this equates to better educational outcomes in high school years. What we observe in Steiner schools is that the more creative play and freedom to explore, be curious, engage in wonder and learning through experience in the younger years that children have, the greater engagement and better educational outcomes in the high school years and love for lifelong learning in graduates.

Using a plant analogy, just because you give quick grow fertiliser to a young plant and it grows fast, does not mean it will grow into a sturdy old tree, able to withstand the forces around them.

Existing or potential barriers to the sharing of education (and other relevant) data and how these can be overcome. Considerations should include, but not be limited to: privacy concerns, costs, technological capacity, sector-based sensitivities, national and jurisdictional data governance structures and workforce capability.

The draft report states that research shows there is only about 20% of variation in individual student outcomes between schools and that about 80% is actually student difference within a school. Therefore, it stands to reason that there should be more trust in school leaders and teachers to address these differences and to improve outcomes. The barriers to school leaders to be able to share good practice is often constricted by time and the heavy compliance burden they already face. Teachers and principals are leaving the profession because of this, so any further top down approach will only continue to drive educators into other professions and we will end up with the same situation that the US faces with many schools not having enough teachers for classes. They currently have a national teacher shortage of 60,000 and expect it to rise by 100,00 by 2018 according to US education policy expert Jane Evans. If Australia continues to follow similarities to the US with such a focus on measurement and data, then we also need to heed what comes next.

Factors that inhibit access to, and consistency of, education-relevant data to support analysis and evidence-based policy development. Considerations should include, but not be limited to: privacy concerns, legislative and technical frameworks, national and jurisdictional data governance structures, workforce research and analytical capabilities, stakeholder engagement, sector-based sensitivities and implementation timeframes.

Having more focus at the local level and supporting school leaders to work together and share best practice, would increase enthusiasm and engagement, collaborative practice and improve student learning. Therefore, local evidence based data shared locally could inform policy makers that engage with school leaders to truly hear what is happening in schools. Policy makers must take into account that education is a complex environment and national policy cannot be made by collecting student performance data on a national scale which then creates policy that is in alignment for *all* learners. Sharing of effective teaching programs and practice must take into account context, as what works in one school will not necessarily work in another school. Top down approaches cannot take into account context and complexity. A new way of looking to the future is required and this could be a new opportunity for real educational reform in Australia where we could lead the way instead of continuing following the US and the UK.

The costs and benefits of options for improvements to the national education evidence base including the administrative and financial impacts on schools and early childhood education and care providers of any suggested change in data collection practices. Consideration should include what opportunities exist to apply efficiencies to existing data collection.

One of the most significant costs to data collection is the negative impact this can have on students. Whilst the Melbourne Goals advocate for active and engaged learners, too much focus on assessment for data purposes, especially with more national assessments being proposed (such as Year 1 assessments) will put more pressure on teachers, students and families, resulting in disengaged students and teachers. However, this significant cost is not mentioned, only administrative and financial costs. It could be suggested that more data is required to measure the impact of measurement and data collection.

How Australian and overseas governments have approached the use of evidence and sharing data to improve outcomes (in education and non-education sectors) and the potential benefits and challenges of adopting these practices in the Australian education context.

Final comments and new thoughts

In response to the final terms of reference, if we are really serious at looking towards the future and improving student outcomes, then more of the same and more measurement and national data collection will not work.

Dr Jennifer Gidley, postformal psychologist, educator and futures researcher has written an excellent article 'Are Futures Organisations Ahead of their Times? A View of the World Futures Studies Federation in the 21st Century' where she gives an alternative to the top down and bottom up approach.

To really cope with the fast changing world we are experiencing today, Gidley (2013) says we need to have new thinking patterns and move away from both top down models and bottom up models. She describes top down models as hierarchical, managerial attempts to control, leading to lack of accountability, stifling of innovation and abuse of minorities.

Of the bottom up approach Gidley states that "There are also risks for organisations where there is too much collaboration and decentralised power and insufficient clarity of leadership. This can lead to inability to make decisions, lack of direction, procrastination, and in worst-case scenarios, a "coup de force" over what can become merely token leadership".

Instead she proposes a third model - that of an ***Interactive nested holarchy*** and the following is an extract from her research article:

> Although the first two organisational models [top down (Model 1) and bottom up Model 2) approaches] are now quite well documented, I propose that there is also a third model, which although somewhat dispersed and therefore harder to categorise, needs to be articulated. The emergent new, networked organisation that I am identifying here integrates healthy hierarchy with healthy collaboration. This third holarchical way of organising is optimised in groups that are already working towards developing collective individualism. In these organisations individuals are both empowered to take responsibility for particular tasks and in turn respect and reciprocally empower the leadership of those who carry the responsibility for steering/guiding/operating the organisation. Paradoxically, people operating from a Model 2 perspective can sometimes interpret the holarchical approach of Model 3 leaders as being hegemonic, because they see all leadership as hegemonic. This can lead to conflict and breakdown. Many transitional organisations swing between Model 1 and Model 2 operating style and process. Potential conflicts can reflect intra-organisational incompatibilities of style, for example between a Model 1 leadership and a Model 2 staff or membership. Such conflicts can often be unconscious to the various parties if the issue of organisational style and process has not been reflected upon within the organisation. Some ingredients for creating a healthy holarchy of collective individualism are: leaders who can take responsibility AND work collaboratively; a team of responsible ethical individuals who are willing to work autonomously AND who also respect healthy visionary leadership; and crucially, a group process whereby the operational process itself is meta-reflected upon.
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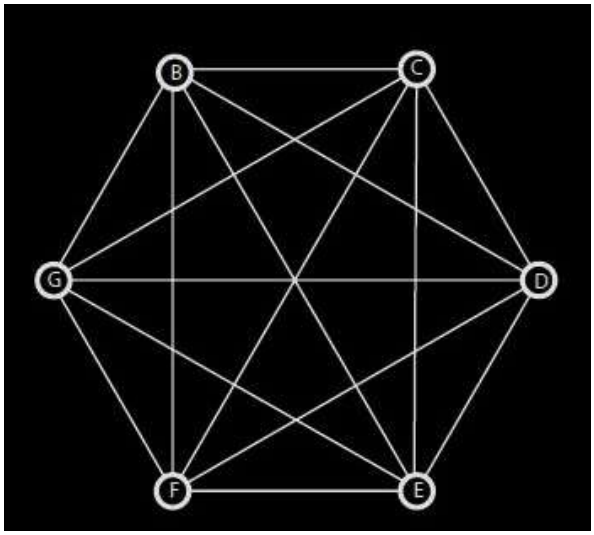
> From the perspective of group process theory the interactive, nested holarchical organisation would neither prioritise the *task-oriented* functions of a group (“are we getting the job done?”), nor the *maintenance* functions of the group (“how are the members of the group relating to each other?”). In contrast to both of the other organisational models, the holarchical model would integrate task orientation and group maintenance orientation.



Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report.

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