

Can Australian education become self-transforming?

ACEL Conference September 2014 – Inaugural Patron’s Oration, **Prof John Hattie**, AITSL Board Chair, University of Melbourne



I presented the Patron’s Oration at a celebration by the Victorian branch of ACEL to honour the current Patron – my colleague and friend, Brian Caldwell. Brian’s recent book asks about developing the self-transforming school. The question I asked ACEL members is whether we can go one step beyond ‘the self-transforming school’ and upscale to consider the self-transforming nation.

Self-transforming schools have the capacity to make decisions that lead to success for all students in all settings. A self-transforming school calls the shots on how it will achieve transformation, seeks support from any source (including the ‘system’), and may network with any number of schools or other learning institutions without weakening its commitment to the values to which it aspires. Such schools can unleash greatness, can recruit, retain and reward the best education professionals, they focus on ‘student centred learning’, they knowledgeably implement a responsive and rich curriculum, and they use evidence to know about and plan for student learning. This can also be the case for

a self-transforming nation in its education endeavours.

My own work is very much based on this notion of using evidence to know the impact of educators and schools, which clearly is a major underpinning of the self-transforming school. My research is based on about 1200 meta-analyses, 60,000 studies, and 1/4 billion students. What surprised me the most is that almost everything works; virtually everything can enhance student achievement. The effects on the left hand side of the graph (in red; less than zero) relate to those influences which detract from achievement – and there are hardly any. About 95% + of influences on students enhance their learning. We need to stop asking “What works” and start asking “What works best” and certainly implement those factors that have at least greater than the average impact ($d = .40$). What caused me to spend 20 years writing *Visible Learning* was not so much the data, but devising the story that best explained the distinctions between the above and below average effects (Figure 1).

Many ‘effects’ below .4 are structural influences (new school

types, reducing class size, introducing more aides), and yet these influences tend to dominate the debates about education – I have termed these as part of the politics of distraction. It is not who the teachers or students are that matters; it is not what they necessarily do that counts; but it is very much how they think about their job. Impact is not about technology, finances, and structures of schools or classrooms. Instead, it is school leaders, teachers and students who enter learning situations and ask, “How would I know my impact?” who have the greatest impact. This is where transformation occurs (Figure 2).

What matters relates to the expertise of the teacher, of the school leaders, and the ways in which the system resources, esteems, and promotes the maximum impact of those in the school and system. This means it is critical for all in the school to work together to debate and decide what ‘impact’ means in this school – this highlights the critical role of school leaders in building the collective impact of the school. We cannot afford too many differentiated notions of what challenge, progress, and impact means – students are the common denominator. It is unhelpful when they experience difference in degrees of challenge or progress. It should not be that progress is a function of the fickleness of each teacher’s belief about what challenge and progress means (Figure 3).

Focusing on the right problems at a national level

A major message is that to become a self-transforming nation we need to focus on the right national questions. The current Federal Government gets the first answer right: ‘Students first.’ But what is the question? It is worth recalling that in many Western democracies, the focus on student outcomes is a recent phenomenon. In the UK, for example, it was in the late 1990s before a Minister claimed state responsibility for student outcomes; in the US it was Bush’s ‘No Child Left Behind’ that commenced the focus by the state on outcomes. There seems little doubt that the many policies that emanated from this focus have not been great successes. It is a good question, particularly in a federal system as in Australia, whether the (over-) focus on outcomes will lead to a self-transforming education system. We know that an outcomes focus has led to ‘narrow excellence’ of numeracy and literacy, and skewed parents to believe that

Focusing on the right problems at a national level

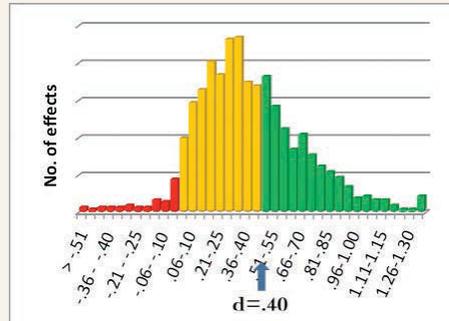


Figure 1

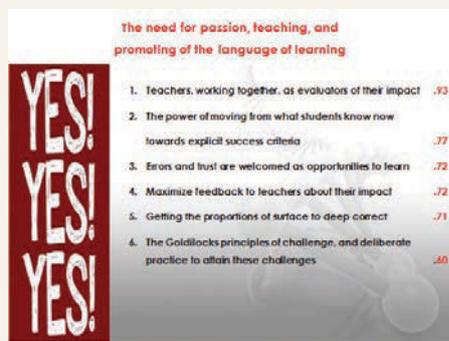


Figure 3



Figure 2



Graph 1

high achievement is the sine qua non of schools – when we have had many centuries of debates about children experiencing their childhood, having outcomes relating to love of learning, collaboration, and much more.

1 The current decline in narrow excellence

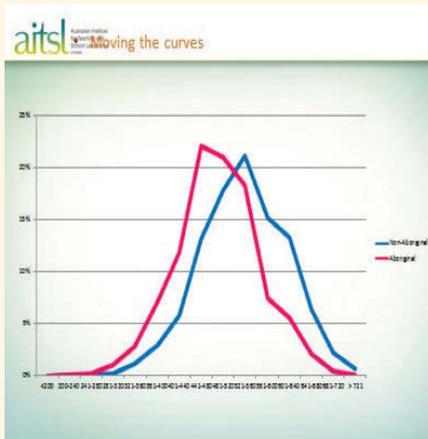
The Australian results in PISA have declined steadily over the past 12 years. It is often assumed that this stems from the outcomes for particular groups, such as low SES, Indigenous and overseas-born students, whereas the reality is quite different. Ainley (2013) has demonstrated that the greatest source of decline is among the top 40 per cent of our students – we have too many cruising schools and cruising students. We have too many parents and policy makers who believe that high achievement is the major outcome of schooling. The wrong answers to the wrong questions will mean Australia will never become a self-transforming nation – it is almost certain that over the next many decades there will always be

a normal curve underlying core cognitive subjects like Literacy and Numeracy, so there will always be ‘half below the average’ and this will misleadingly feed into the myth that it is those below the average that are the problem, and schools must do better with these students – the analyses shows we need also to do much better with those above the average (Graph 1).

2 Choose the right metaphors

We have had many years focused on ‘closing the gap’, concerns about the tail, and the poor outcomes achieved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Such metaphors have led to high levels of resources being poured into reducing the gap, fixing the tail, etc. Let us look, for example, at the distribution for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (based on NAPLAN reading). Where is the tail? Where is the gap? There is no tail, no gap; there are tails and gaps. Indeed we should be as concerned with those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (and there are many of them) who score above the average and demand that schools

What we can do



Graph 2

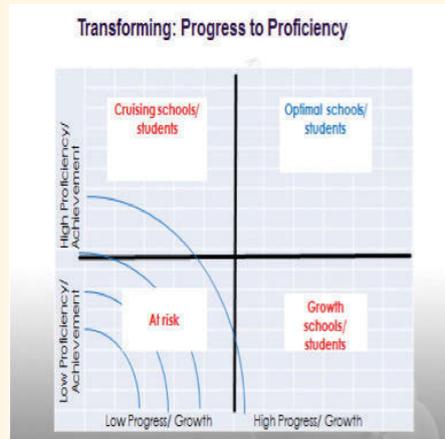


Figure 4

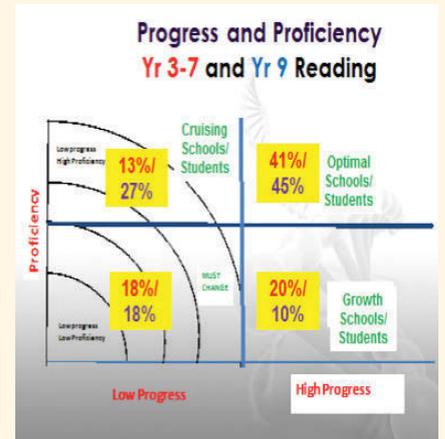


Figure 5

help these students realise and exceed what they are told is their potential. We should never use phrases such as ‘aboriginal underachievement’ as it falsely implies all these students are in the bottom half of the distribution. Noel Pearson, in his Walker Oration at this year’s ACEL Conference, outlined a way forward. When I heard of his work and his critics I asked to ‘see the evidence’. He provided the evidence, I reanalysed it and now I am a major supporter of his reforms as the effects are quite stunning – the students gain much more than a year’s progress from a year’s input, but (as Noel acknowledges) they need to gain even more to achieve at least to their potential.

3 Know thy Impact

The most important question is to ask about the nature of the impact we would like the nation’s schools to have. A robust discussion on impact is a key consideration in understanding the purpose of schools – and thus helps answer the question about what ‘Students first’ relates to.

Asking about ‘impact’ poses this question: what is impact, as well as what is the desired magnitude of impact, and what is the pervasiveness of that impact across our students, schools, and systems?

It is indeed a hot topic as to what ‘impact’ means. Surely it is not merely test scores or effect-sizes. The aims of most schools are to enhance achievement, learning, engagement and wellbeing – and these encompass many attributes and lead to many ‘impacts’. It is about experience for students *now* and preparing to enhance and enjoy more challenging experiences in the future. A critical function of the school leader in a school and for

the senior officials in a nation is to create a robust discussion about ‘impact’ and how would we know what and when impact occurred. Of course, that means having an excellent sense of the ‘here and now’ across the various impact dimensions, it means defining defensible targets, and then it means creating progress indicators of how efficiently and effectively movement occurs from here to there.

It would be folly to have a school system and not desire higher achievement – the issue, however, is that it is via growth that we gain higher achievement. We need to recast our narrative away from our obsession on achievement (NAPLAN reading, writing, and numeracy achievement scores and standards) to a narrative based on growth. If the narrative is too narrow around achievement then this speaks too much about the inputs into schools. (Schools who take in brighter students would be claimed to be effective even if they added no growth; and this favours schools in higher SES areas.) Of course, I want both high achievement and high growth – but it is via a narrative about growth and progress than we can attain high achievement. The mantra for a self-transforming nation is that every student should gain at least a year’s progress for a year’s input.

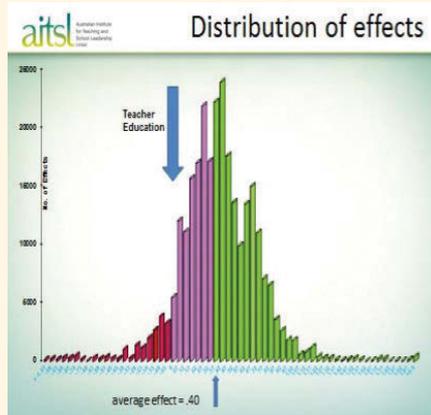
An example of how to conduct this discussion at a national level and avoid an over obsession with achievement is to contrast achievement with growth. Along the y-axis there is achievement (e.g., NAPLAN, school based assessments, VELS) and along the x-axis is growth (e.g., effect-size gains). The schools (students, systems) in the bottom left quadrant have low growth and low achievement and

they need to change. Indeed, perhaps they should not have ‘autonomy’ until they can demonstrate growth. In the bottom right hand quadrant are high growth and low achievement, in the top left are the cruising schools as they have already high achievers but add little value, and in the top right hand are high growth and high achievement schools (Figure 4).

Too many parents and schools see the top two cells as hallmarks of successful schools: I do not. I see the right two cells as successful schools – and this is quite a different narrative to our current debates in Australia.

For many, success is defined as schools in the top half of the graph; but for a transforming nation it is being in the right two quadrants that is important. Using NAPLAN scores, there are close to 30 per cent of Victorian high schools that are cruising (indeed Australia’s decline in PISA over the past 12 years is mainly a function of too many cruising schools and students; that is the decline in PISA is highest among the top 40 per cent of students), 20 per cent of primary schools are adding high progress, and close to one in five schools are in the ‘must change now’ quadrant. A self-transforming nation would focus on policies to move the cruising to optimal and different policies to move from growth to optimal; hence the typical one-size fits all policies are unlikely to succeed and indeed may cause damage. Knowing where one is located in terms of impact is critical to moving forward ... ‘know thy impact’ (Figure 5).

A critical message from this graph and the distribution of effect-sizes above is that there are approximately 60–70 per cent of schools and students that can be consid-



Graph 3

CAEP Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation	Impact on P-12 Student Learning and Development
1. The provider documents, using multiple measures, that program completers contribute to an expected level of student-learning growth .	Multiple measures shall include all available growth measures (including value-added measures, student-growth percentiles, and student learning and development objectives), other P-12 impact measures, & any other measures employed by the provider.
2. The provider demonstrates, through structured and validated observation instruments and student surveys, that completers effectively apply the professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions that the preparation experiences were designed to achieve.	
3. Satisfaction of employers	
4. Satisfaction of completers	

Table 1

aitsl	LEVELS OF ACCREDITATION DECISIONS
1. denial of accreditation	—for providers that fail below CAEP guidelines in two or more standards;
2. probationary accreditation	—awarded to providers that meet or surpass CAEP guidelines in four standards, but fall below in one of the standards;
3. full accreditation	—awarded to providers that meet CAEP guidelines for all five standards;
4. exemplary or “gold” accreditation	—awarded to a small number of providers that meet CAEP guidelines set for all five standards and surpass those guidelines for a combination of standards.

Table 2

ered ‘successful’ across Victoria, and this is the message that should be trumpeted in a self-transforming nation – we are working from a successful base, success is all around us, and the fundamental mission is making all schools like the many successful ones. There is no need to go to Finland or Shanghai to study success, it is here in Australia. If only we have the courage to dependably identify this success, esteem it, nourish it, and spread it. The enemies of a self-transformational nation are those who believe all teachers and schools are equal. Complacency, nostalgia, solving the wrong problem, creating crises to justify funding, claiming schools are the problems and inventing new types of schools, an over-focus on achievement, over learning and progress, and ignoring the amazing power and presence of teacher and school leader expertise that is already pervasive in our country are the enemy.

So what can we do?

We can do a lot – starting by ensuring we have the right narrative about schooling – one based on developing children to experience a worthwhile life while they are children, to know what we value and know how to know to equip students to live independently and participate in the life of their community and the world, to learn to ‘give back’, to develop respect for self and respect for others, and develop personal growth readiness to be employable and self-sustaining.

We can look to the enormous corpus of research which has shown that it is NOT the structure of schools (private or public, streaming, shape of classrooms, number of students, etc.) that makes the difference, but the presence of teacher and school leader expertise. Hence, a focus on promoting excellence in teaching and school

leadership for the benefit of all young Australians is primary – and indeed the purpose statement of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). AITSL defines and maintains national standards for teachers and principals; leads and influences improvement and innovation in teaching and school leadership; supports, recognises and extends high quality professional practice, and will have a key role in shaping and implementing the directions arising from the work of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group.

While AITSL has many high quality initiatives relating to the teacher and principal standards, and has achieved remarkable success in making these known and beginning to be used, I want to mention more about initial teacher education issues. I know not what the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group will say in their report, but I have conducted research in this area for some time, been Head of Departments including Teacher Education for about 14 years, and worked with the US based National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. When I ask about the overall effect of initial teacher education on student achievement it is very low ($d = .06$) and, as can be seen in the graph, well below average. More critically, despite enormous effort the key synthesisers of research can barely find 100 studies that have ever examined the impact of initial teacher education – it is a pretty bankrupt situation. This is NOT to say there is not excellence among providers – but you may never know from the research. What is self-evident though, is that high quality initial teacher education courses focus on the outcomes to be achieved by graduates, have strong assessment of these outcomes and make clear

links between theory and practice.

Here in Australia, at best the glass may be half full. From the AITSL 2013 Data Report and the TALIS international survey, we know there are 48 providers of initial teacher education across Australia offering over 400 programs. There are about 30,000 commencements into teacher education each year, and about half graduate. So we ‘exit’ half of them. About half of the graduating teachers claim their program was helpful or very helpful, about 30–40 per cent of principals claimed that these graduates were well or very well prepared. Australia is well below the world average in this percentage claiming preparedness. About 50 per cent are employed full time in schools within four months of graduation, and another 20 per cent in schools part time. The remaining 30 per cent have no position in schools.

All the programs these graduates undertake have been or are likely to be, accredited. It is fascinating to recall the various accreditation models that we have used over the decades. We started with the ‘horse and buggy’ model whereby new teachers were placed in experienced teacher classrooms and learned on the job. The ‘years and years’ model was introduced on the claim that at least a year, then two, then three, then four and more were needed. The ‘horses and courses’ dominate our current model, where the people teaching and the courses they offer are accredited – with no attention as to whether the teacher candidates actually learn. Hence, some systems have introduced models based on ‘graduating teacher standards.’ (Australia is in a strong position here as our own Australian Standards clearly articulate what is expected of graduates.) This can lead (as it has done in the US) to the ‘program impact standards’

which require teacher education institutions to provide evidence of the impact the teacher candidate has on the learning of school students. It is this latter model I would like to see introduced into Australia (and yes, I am biased as I was part of the NCATE team that developed this model some years back) (Table 1).

Under this model, there is no one set of evidence requested, but a negotiation across four major categories and the institution then must provide the impact evidence to attain accreditation. There are many sources of evidence, such as: licensing and other state accreditation requirements; hiring of completers in fields for which the candidate has been prepared; performance data on candidate development of 'high-leverage' instructional practices/strategies – from early field work to culminating experience – in diverse clinical settings; analysis of video recorded lessons with review and evaluation based on rubrics and disinterested raters; ability of candidates to design and use a variety of formative assessments with P-12 students; value added student growth measures; employer satisfaction survey; and candidate satisfaction survey.

In the CAEP model, there are four levels of accreditation, and what I like about these levels are that those classified 'excellent' can be used as beacons for all, and provide convincing evidence to the community that teacher education programs can indeed be exemplary (Table 2).

It is clear that we need an increased focus on impact across our education system and particularly in initial education. This means strengthening the process for accrediting initial teacher education programs and requiring education providers to show evidence of the impact of their programs. It also means recognising excellence where it exists and potentially differentiating between the quality of courses.

Other high impact initiatives in the initial teacher education space that AITSL continues to explore focus on: entry assessment; improved induction; the development of a broader and deeper pool of publically available data and research on initial teacher education potentially involving tracking students and establishing a world class research program; the benefits of a common approach to assessment; and the development of an electronic 'passport' tool for professional experience placements to enable information sharing

Conclusions

The challenge I offer is to ask whether Australian education can become self-transforming. This can occur if we are wise about the purposes and outcomes of schooling for all, about a shared meaning of success and progress, if we become more successful at scaling up significant, systematic and sustained change, and if everyone (or at least a critical mass) shares and celebrates the enormous success that is all around us. A self-transforming Australian education system would invite all to become more like the successful teachers, schools, and teacher education programs that already exist across our nation. It very much comes back to the narrative we conduct across the nation about success and I invite ACEL and AITSL to create the narrative of the self-transforming nation. We need a focus on successfully implementing major policies, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and for Principals and ensuring that they lead to high impact, we need networks of schools working to learn from each other, and we need a focus on transformation based on this impact. To paraphrase Brian Caldwell, such a nation of schools can unleash greatness, can recruit, retain and reward the best education professionals, can focus on 'student first learning', can implement a responsive and rich curriculum, and can use evidence to know about and plan for student learning. There is a bright future for a self-transforming education nation.

About the author

Prof John Hattie is Director of the Melbourne Educational Research Institute at the University of Melbourne and has been recently appointed as Chair of AITSL. His areas of interest are measurement models and their applications to educational problems, and models of teaching and learning. He was chief moderator of the NZ Performance Based Research Fund, immediate Past-President of the International Test Commission, Associate Editor of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, and the *American Educational Research Journal*, and is a part-time cricket coach and umpire. He has published and presented over 550 papers, and supervised 180 thesis students.



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