



Out of time



Is our school system stuck in a bygone era?

Maura Sellars interviewed by Wade Zaglas

An education expert from the University of Newcastle contends that Australia's schooling system is largely stuck in the 19th century.

Dr Maura Sellars, a former teacher with a wealth of experience, told *Education Review* that "the whole purpose of education at present is economic, instead of multi-faceted like it has been in the past."

The academic has also noticed that in many schools the "structural organisation"

of classrooms at the moment emulates those in the 19th century, promoting a "transmission pedagogy" where the teacher stands at the front of the class and desks are neatly arranged. Teachers are expected to transmit information or knowledge to students, which the students are then expected to recall.

Sellars equates this type of learning with the bottom rung of Bloom's taxonomy of recalling and says it coincides with pushes for direct instruction or explicit teaching, as others have called it. Sellars also notes that the current school system uses the language of factories in the 19th century, with words like "benchmarking" and "outcomes" repeated daily.

She argues schooling has become part of a neo-liberal agenda where "economic rationalism has been applied to education". Although acknowledging their importance, she views the emphasis on numeracy and literacy in today's schools as not dissimilar to the narrow focus on reading, writing and arithmetic in the 19th century.

Consequently, Sellars believes many of today's students are missing out on a rich education and are not developing the metacognitive skills to become lifelong learners.

ER: Can you provide some examples of the Australian school system being stuck in the 19th century?

I think that any way you look, the systems that we have at the moment are reflecting very much what was happening in the 19th century, when mass schooling first became an option.

The whole purpose of education at present is economic instead of being multipurpose, as it has been in the past. We now find that all of our declarations of the educational goals for Australians – the Melbourne Declaration, the most recent Alice Springs Declaration – are all aimed at economic outcomes for education.

The other thing that really is striking is that you can walk into many classrooms today and see that the structural

organisations are not much different to those in the 19th century. The way that the desks are organised, perhaps the sort of desks, even if they're tables and chairs, and a lot of the reason for this is that the pedagogy hasn't changed.

There is currently a massive push for direct instruction, explicit teaching, whatever you'd like to call it, but what we have is transmission pedagogy where the teacher does all the work and all the thinking, and the students do the work of remembering and repeating and practising recitation.

The vocabulary that surrounds lots of documents and policies around Australia use the language of factories. They talk about benchmarking. They talk about outcomes. There's a one size fits all standard product that sees things ticked as appropriate and acceptable, or more or less discarded as unacceptable.

And the quality control that is applied in schools, of course, something like the NAPLAN assessment amongst others, are not appropriate for all students of the chronological age or in a certain class across a diverse country such as Australia represents.

Why do you think this kind of teaching model is still deeply ingrained in many or most of our Australian schools?

I don't know that it has been over the entire time since the end of the 19th century, but it certainly is now. And part of that is the neoliberal agenda that has infiltrated and impacted on all aspects of Australian society, most especially education. And, so, what we've got now is this economic rationalisation applied to education.

I often talk about the five C's of neoliberal foundational agenda that are used in schools. There's a high stress on competition, competitiveness, from the classroom, to the My School website, to all sorts of testing and assessments. There's also a great deal of conformity around preordained beliefs about what is considered to be knowledge. And, so, we get quite scripted documents in terms of what needs to be taught in all of the curriculum areas. And, of course, there is a huge push back now to conservatism.

So the teacher in the front of the class is the Western worldview of what it is to be an educated person in the content of these curriculum documents, and in policies about what needs to be taught.

We've got this excessive focus on literacy and numeracy alone. I would never say that these are not important; they are in fact critical for life anywhere, in any country, and provide the skills that students need to have and we need them to have as adults to operate in society. But to isolate them from other areas that enrich learning and to focus on those extensively really is a type of conformity that harks back to the 19th century, where children were simply reviewed and assessed on their aptitudes for reading, writing, and arithmetic.

We also work with conventions. We've got artificial structures in schools around chronological age. We're not taking any account of readiness, aptitude, diverse backgrounds, opportunities and experiences children have had in the past or are exposed to.

The last C is about commerce. All of this is aimed at producing workers for a workforce. And, so, we've come into this circle now where everything is measured on various tests. NAPLAN in Australia is one of the huge issues for me. And we have also had some academics who have recognised this neoliberal agenda and who are saying, 'the best way to get good results on tests is this explicit teaching'. And there's a model of schooling where it's, I do, you do, we do, but whether or not that's education and whether or not that education fits for the 21st century is another matter for discussion.

There seems to be a growing disconnect between the schooling our students are receiving and the types of knowledge and skills they'll need in the future. What will be the impacts of this in your view?

I think the impact will be multifaceted. I think if there's a disconnect at school amongst certain groups because they are diverse, the very narrow conformity to beliefs in the epistemology about what constitutes knowledge may not actually meet their learning needs and expectations.

Part of the problem will be that they're not developing the skills to become lifelong learners. They're not learning about themselves as learners, because so much is being fed to them by the teachers who do the work, do the thinking, and then the students have to remember. Which of course is the lowest form of thinking on a Bloom's taxonomy, and it is the least complex type of thinking.

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I think it will be very stressful for students, if it isn't now. I think we see that now looking at the impact of increased depression, teenage suicide perhaps, and we're looking at a great surge in students who get away from the real world and engage in web-based virtual realities.

Do you think prestigious schools tend to offer a more up to date school system?

I don't know that prestigious schools do offer a more up to date school system, but they have the resources, both monetary and human resources, to offer a richer type of curriculum. Most prestigious schools have very robust programs of creative and performing arts, and of sporting activities. And those schools don't just have education — they're selling status and culture.

When you look at the people who are making decisions for schooling across Australia, looking at the Prime Ministers perhaps, and other ministers in government, they actually attended a very small cluster of prestigious schools.

So, what is being offered in those very prestigious schools, at an enormous price usually, is the opportunity to maintain the class structure. It's an opportunity to belong to a network that has opportunities, whether or not you are the most academic student.

Those schools have the money for innovative programmes and the money to resource tuition at maybe an individual or a smaller percentage or a smaller ratio of students to teachers. I think that sets their sights differently to what is demanded in the public school system.

So, I don't think they do it better. I don't think they're necessarily more up to date. I'm sure you will find that there's lots of transmission going on in a lot of those classrooms in prestigious schools as well. But I do think that they have and can afford lots of richer educational experiences than are afforded in local public schools. ■