

SUBMISSION TO TASMANIAN LITERACY ADVISORY PANEL
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25th March, 2022

From: Michael Middleton

This submission focusses on primary and secondary school education and the role schools and teachers play in the development of literacy in Tasmania. The submission makes five recommendations.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Establish A Tasmanian Institute for Schools

Recommendation 2: Guarantee Individual Teacher Time for planning

Recommendation 3: Encourage Uncluttering of the Curriculum

Recommendation 4: Encourage Breaking lock-step age-grading to improve literacy

Recommendation 5: Check for Inequity across schools

Accompanying this emailed submission are two documents:

- 1. A short curriculum vitae**
- 2. An Information Flyer for a book I have just written.**
For the Love of Teaching: A Plea for Trust and Engagement
(The book elaborates much of what is in the submission)

INTRODUCTION

This submission avoids focussing narrowly on the teaching and learning of literacy. Rather, it focusses on the changes in teaching that have occurred in our schools over the past decade and the effect these changes have had on teacher morale and student learning generally, including literacy learning. Only when teachers feel relaxed, creative and happy in their work will learning outcomes improve, including those in literacy.

Any narrowly focussed attempt to find and implement a ‘best way’ of teaching literacy by targeted in-service training should be avoided at all costs. It would almost certainly be counter-productive by adding to the top-down pressure that has been eroding teacher morale and student learning for the past decade. We need instead to look at teachers’ work generally. The Gonski 2 Report¹ and the recent NSW curriculum review by Geoff Masters² criticise the way teachers now find themselves under top-down pressure resulting in conflicting accountability demands. As the reports indicate, teachers believe they are being told what to teach, when to teach it and how to teach it, independently of their professional skill and judgement about the unique needs, interests and readiness of their own students. This top-down pressure was not the intention of ACARA’s leaders when the Australian curriculum was developed.

Their hope was that the Australian Curriculum *could be used flexibly by schools to develop programs that met the needs of their particular students. It was also hoped that schools would implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that valued teachers’ professional knowledge, reflected local contexts and took into account the backgrounds of individual families and communities.* (paraphrased from ACARA’s Introduction – Implementing the Australian Curriculum).

In general, this responsiveness has not happened, partly because the syllabus writers were keen to include as much as reasonable of their own discipline in their detailed, year-based subject syllabuses. Alternatives to a year based-curriculum were not considered. To add to the problem, schools and teachers have been hesitant to modify the year-based curriculum, believing the content is mandatory. The result, as the NSW Curriculum Review stated, has been a ‘cluttered curriculum’.

As far back as 1995, research by the Coalition of Essential Schools in the USA found that *the more crowded a curriculum becomes, the more superficial and shallow is the learning, with disastrous effects on the learners, particularly for those most at risk.*³

In Tasmanian primary schools, a teacher with 25 students in her or his class theoretically has to keep track of progress in eight learning areas for each individual. This means two hundred separate pieces of data she has to record and use in her planning and teaching. Of course, this does not happen. She has to prioritise. Consequently, the ‘coverage’ in some subjects becomes token only. Nevertheless, teachers feel the pressure. So often, across Australia, I have heard teachers express similar views to this Queensland teacher.

“If I teach what they’re telling me to teach, my kids aren’t going to engage.”

And as one Tasmanian primary school teacher told me...

“I don’t have time to fart. There’s no way I have time to prepare quality lessons the way I used to. I pay to subscribe to Teach-starter or Twinkle so that my lessons just roll off the net.

I flick pass them to the kids. Our collaborative meetings are not about planning. They're about ensuring accountability. It sucks."

I looked at the recruitment and retention of teachers. As news.com reported on January 10th, 2019,

Former educators have spoken about the "miserable" conditions driving an estimated 40 per cent of graduates to quit within the first five years of entering the workforce."

The abandoning of our profession is not limited to beginning teachers. Veterans are pulling the plug too. The news release quoted one such ex-teacher who described her experience.

"I went from being able to spend most of my time dedicated to my students, planning great lessons and putting my energy into my classroom, to being taken over by meetings, paperwork and checking boxes for the sake of it."

On 2nd March, 2022, Seven News reported that 10,000 teachers in NSW resigned during 2001.

The crisis is made worse by the rapid decline in young people aspiring to be teachers. By 2018, there were ominous signs. On April 16th 2018, the ABC's "The Conversation" reported a number of troubling trends. The percentage of graduating students making teaching their first preference on entering university courses was dropping rapidly. For example, the University of Queensland saw a 44 per cent drop compared with the previous year. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre had noted a forty per cent drop in 2017 compared with 2016. The Australian Catholic University reported a twenty per cent drop for its campuses in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

These declines are clearly not related to the salaries of teachers. There was no sudden change in the trajectory of salaries. The decline results from a changed perception of teaching in Australia, both within the profession and without. By 2017, school leavers had experienced five or six years of their own schooling under the new, centralised regime. Their view of teaching was tainted accordingly.

As Merryn McKinnon wrote in the Conversation Jan 11th, 2016

"We want to create a nation of critical thinking, creative, flexible and innovative people who understand the importance of collaboration. Yet teachers are not supported to be truly innovative and the system is far from flexible, creating barriers to desired practice and frustration. Failing to recognise this will ensure we continue to lose the teachers we need most."

It is my belief that literacy learning will only improve when teachers and schools are able to customise their programs to meet the unique needs of individual students within local communities. Accordingly, I make five recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Establish A Tasmanian Institute for Schools

There needs to be a situation where Tasmanian schools and teachers are able to explore potential initiatives without the perceived risk of ‘overstepping’ boundaries. They need to be professionally supported and secure in their creative, even risk-taking, endeavours. Gonski 2 recommended a national institute to monitor school based initiatives as a way of encouraging bottom-up reform. This has not happened because there is no coherent infrastructure across school systems and across the different political orientations of each state. However, the Tasmanian government is in a perfect position to introduce a Tasmanian Institute that would not only monitor initiatives, but also stimulate and support them. This would create a networking across schools so that they could share promising and effective practices in any aspect of their work, including literacy development.

The Institute could comprise three standing committees, one each in the North-west, the North and the south. Each committee would be made up of school-based practitioners in State education, Catholic education and Independent schools as well as representation from Teacher Education faculties, Teacher Unions, and parent organisations, about twelve people in all. The government could appoint a chairperson for each committee and provide secretarial assistance where needed.

The committees would meet about monthly to:

- receive reports from individual schools (school clusters, regions, parishes) about initiatives already being undertaken, reported initially by the relevant committee member. (In time, people managing particular initiatives could be invited to the meetings to describe their project, answer questions, and clarify any needed support).
- communicate the initiatives to the other state committees so that a database can be established and an online ‘newsletter’ created to share the successes and shortcomings of initiatives.
- provide (by brainstorming, research and networking) an open-ended range of initiatives that schools or school clusters or regions or parishes might take or are already taking.
- where appropriate, liaise with appropriate curriculum authorities to make sure that the initiatives are understood and supported (or modified if necessary).
- **liaise with the relevant systems (State, Catholic or Independent) so that initiatives are appropriately supported in terms of resourcing, the appointment of new staff and public communication. This should not involve significantly greater costs. The special support should be qualitative rather than quantitative.**

The annual cost of such an Institute would be modest. The meetings could take place on rotation in schools or university faculties. There would be some secretarial and printing costs.

Recommendation 2 Guarantee Individual Teacher Time for planning

Teachers need personal time for planning, alone or with chosen colleagues. This time needs to be guaranteed, unsupervised and untrammelled. Particularly in Tasmania and particularly in primary schools, senior members of staff have typically used some of this limited and valuable time for meetings or seminars, seeing it as a legitimate way of exercising ‘leadership’ and utilising their non-teaching role.

As one Tasmanian primary teacher explained to me, *“If teachers are left to their own devices, they will naturally support each other and collaborate informally. As soon as they are forced to collaborate, under supervision, they no longer have ownership, control and investment in the process.”*

We need to trust the professionalism of teachers. Given time and opportunity, teachers will research literacy learning and decide on the approach that best suits them and their students.

Recommendation 3. Encourage Uncluttering of the curriculum

To see uncluttering merely as reducing subject content ignores other vital issues that have emerged since the Australian Curriculum was introduced. Ironically, increasing the curriculum content resulted in more time and effort needed to demonstrate adherence to it. Increased ‘paperwork’, ‘tick the box’ assessment and time spent in meetings erodes real teaching time. Teachers therefore have had to teach more content with less time available. *“There is so much assessment and paperwork, I don’t have time to prepare lessons anymore.”* (secondary humanities teacher in Queensland).

‘Uncluttering’ means creating more time to teach, as well as less content to teach.

If top-down mass delivery is the problem, top down uncluttering is hardly likely to be the answer. Teachers and schools know best how to ‘unclutter’ their curriculum.

Uncluttering involves pruning content. It also involves making links so that the learning is deep. The potential to unclutter is very much a local issue. Schools with teachers strong in, say, science and history, might choose to swap classes each semester and just focus on their particular area for that semester. Other schools might be in a position to focus on particular key learning areas every second year of students’ programs. Others might delay the introduction of formal science lessons until the third or fourth year of schooling. Others might move to a stage-based continuous classroom structure as described in the next recommendation. Yet others might use an ‘essential learnings’ approach.

There is a danger that, in uncluttering the curriculum, the elements considered dispensable will be the creative subjects that are sometimes seen to be less important than the basics of literacy and numeracy. This is clearly not the intention of those who wrote Gonski 2 and the NSW Reviews, titled respectively “Creative, Connected and Engaged Learners” and “Nurturing Wonder and Passion”.

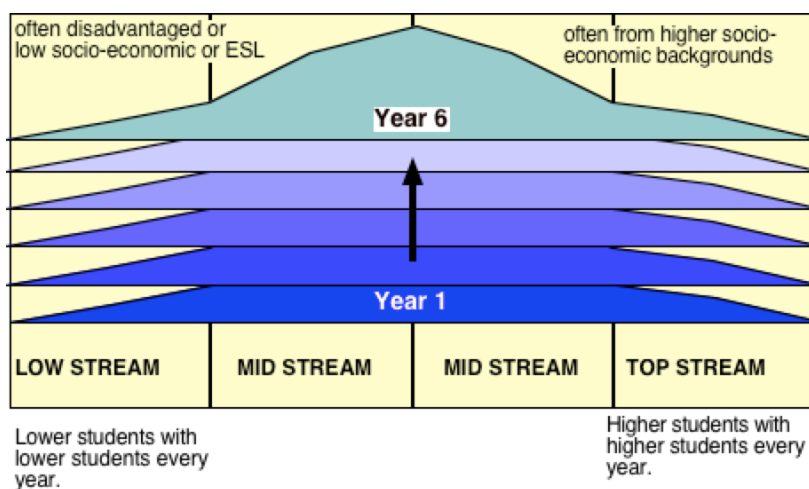
Most kids are creative, connected and engaged before they go to school. Child care centres are characterised by toddlers going every which way physically, socially and mentally. The task of the primary and secondary schools is to provide them with the tools to pursue their engagements, not to disengage them and try to redirect their interests into a mainstream commonality.

Recommendation 4. Encourage Breaking the lock-step to improve literacy learning

There may be schools which would like to explore the possibilities of a more continuous learning pattern for literacy and numeracy, within the auspices of a Tasmanian Institute.

Teachers in Tasmanian primary schools typically have heterogeneous classes where the reading ages among students can vary by six years or more. This is a difficult challenge. With the best will in the world, under pressure, teachers are often forced to focus on the middle range of literacy development where most of their students sit. This risks disengagement from advanced students as well as from those who are struggling. Behavioural issues can result.

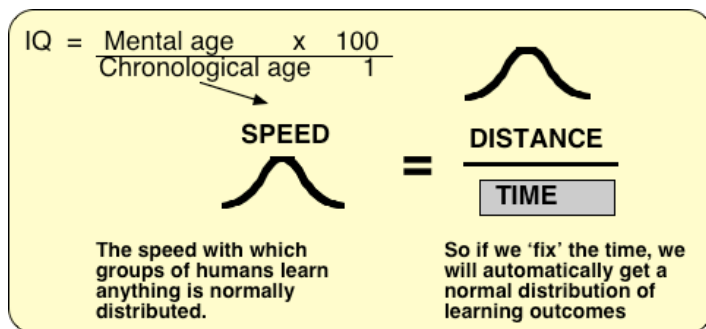
For ease and effectiveness of pedagogy, it would be much better to have more homogeneous classes. Under a lock-step pattern, this involves ‘streaming’, a pattern long frowned upon not least because of its socio-economic implications.



However, streaming is a function of year grouping. There are alternative ways of grouping students that avoid streaming yet provide relatively homogeneous groups. This can only occur if we change from a lock-step, year-based pattern. It is worth reviewing the origins of age-based schooling and analysing whether this remains the only way, or even the most appropriate way of organising schooling.

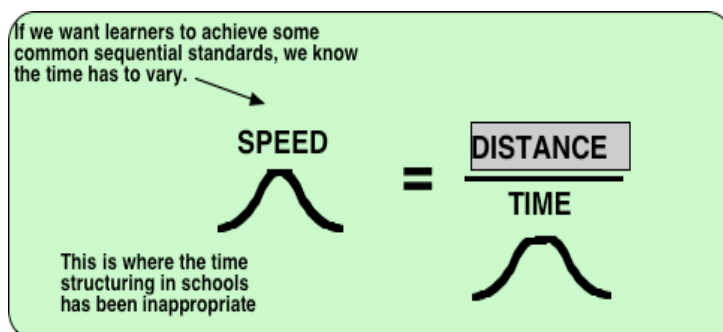
When compulsory education was introduced in the Australian states, it was convenient legislatively to identify a starting age and a finishing age. The calendar year was an obvious means of grouping students and progressing them through the school years.

The year-based schooling pattern was not challenged early on because it was appropriate for an overtly meritocratic system where students were ‘graded’ into courses that determined their adult roles. The 1950s tri-partite system in Tasmania (High schools, Technical schools and secondary-modern schools) exemplified this meritocratic pattern. Comprehensive schools typically followed suit by having students choose courses appropriate to their ‘ability’ or aspiration. Grading students in this way required that all students had equal opportunities. Otherwise, the comparisons were unfair. This meant that the inputs, including time available for lessons, needed to be common. I have found the following diagram useful in sharing this logic with colleagues and parents.



The logic worked well in a world where there was a shortage of labour and most jobs were 'unskilled'. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the nature of work changed dramatically. Developing technologies greatly reduced the need for full-time unskilled work. Unemployment became an issue. These trends were well described by Barry Jones in his 1982 book *Sleepers Wake: Technology and the Future of Work*⁴. The old meritocratic logic gradually became obsolete. Outcomes based education (OBE) became vogue in some states. The Australian states variously responded by replacing norm referenced assessment with 'criterion based' assessment, goal-based assessment, essential learnings and the like. However, the basic lock-step logic controlling the grouping structures of schooling did not change in parallel.

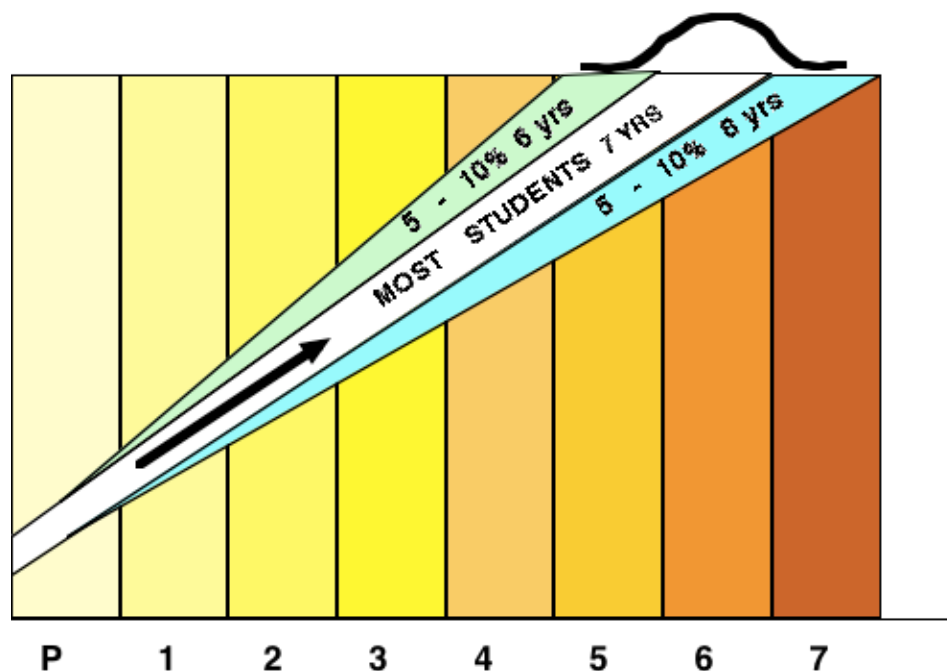
If we believe there are some learnings that all students will need if they are to participate in a modern society, we need to change the logic. (We wouldn't dare give all learner drivers fifteen hours of driver education and then send them out onto the road with licenses labelled a,b,c,d or e.) With a license, we define the outcome and let the time vary.



Educators have been caught in two conflicting worlds. They still have a meritocratic year-based structure but they try to accommodate the pedagogy and assessment by using descriptors such as a,b,c,d,e or 1 – 10 to indicate students' achievements **against their year level**. We might try to pretend otherwise, but we are still using a form of 'norm-referenced' assessment (the norm usually being what the 'normal' kid achieves at that year level).

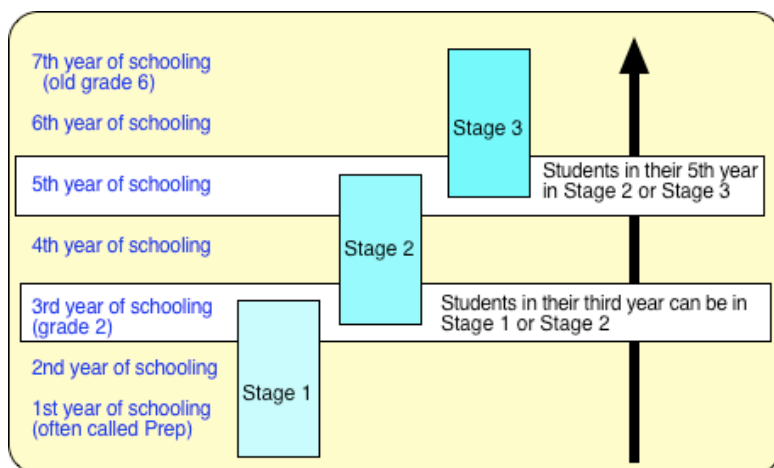
Prior to the National Curriculum and its strictly year-based framework, there were many schools in Australia that were already challenging the year based curriculum. In secondary education, the NSW McGowan Report (1981)⁵ and the West Australian Beazley Report (1984)⁷ both recommended vertical curriculum arrangements for secondary schools. Indeed, there was a national conference in 1984 of about fifty schools from all mainland states that had adopted this alternative approach. The Australian curriculum clearly made these kinds of arrangements much more difficult, if not impossible.

Acknowledging that students learn at different rates, Gonski 2 and the NSW Review were against fixed common time blocks for student learning. But if all students have seven years of primary schooling, that is a major 'block'. It is obvious that, on graduation, there will be a normal distribution of the levels of achievement reached as a result of their seven years. This will not be disastrous for many students in the middle range. However, a minority, particularly those who were among the oldest on entry, may not need the full seven years and could well graduate after six years. (They might be only a month younger than some of the students graduating in the same year). Others, particularly those who were youngest on entry, or were from disadvantaged backgrounds, might benefit from an extra year. (They might be only a month older than fellow students graduating in the same year). In typical classrooms, these exceptions involve no more than about twenty per cent of students. Yet they demand a much greater percentage of time and effort for teachers attempting true differentiation. The time pressure on teachers can easily preclude the real attention these students need.



The potential for continuity by breaking the time straitjacket is obvious in a small, one-teacher primary school. Imagine a school of 21 students, 2, 3 or 4 in each age group. The teacher will almost certainly teach according to the students' learning needs rather than their ages. Most students will complete their primary schooling in seven years. However, a few might need eight years and some might complete their schooling in six years. If this seems radical, bear in mind that a student taking eight years may be just a week older on graduation than another taking seven years. A graduating student taking six years might be only a week younger than one taking seven years.

During the 1980s and 1990s, prior to the Australian Curriculum, there were many larger primary schools in Queensland and New South Wales that did not have a year-based limitation. These schools included Catholic schools like St Thomas' in Mareeba, and St Thomas More's in Toowoomba, Government schools like Walkerston Primary School near Mackay, Avoca Primary School in Gladstone and Merimbula State School in NSW as well as Lutheran schools like Bethany in Ipswich and Grace in Redcliffe. These schools had classes patterned in a way that facilitated true continuous learning. They divided the curriculum, and the groupings, into three **overlapping** 'stages'.



This pattern meant that students could spend either two or three years in each stage. Most students followed a pattern like one of the following, completing the journey in seven years. $3 + 2 + 2$ or $2 + 3 + 2$ or $2 + 2 + 3$. For many students, it did not matter which of these three patterns applied. This provided the schools with a high degree of flexibility in their grouping, taking into account gender balance, friendship patterns and the like, as well as the learning needs of individuals. A minority followed a $2 + 2 + 2$ pattern, or a $3 + 3 + 2$ pattern, depending on need.

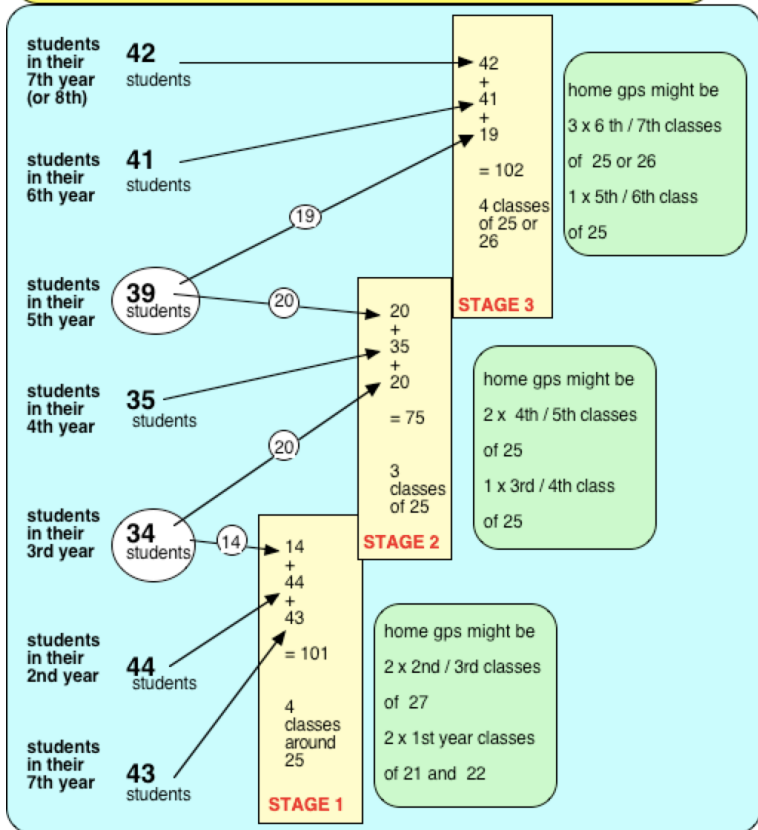
The pattern these schools used provided individual students with the time they needed to progress successfully through primary school. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds could spend three years in stage 1 while some of their peers spent only two. This did not mean they were permanently behind because they would likely spend just two years in each of stages 2 and 3. Indeed, many parents expressed a preference for three years in stage 1. Even if some students needed eight years, there was nothing to lose. The resourcing of disadvantage has always been seen as more money. More TIME is what many need. The cost of the extra time is balanced by the savings among students who need only six years.

A bonus for administrators and teachers is that the pattern creates the opportunity to control, even equalise, class sizes across the school and to have much more homogeneous literacy groups without the disadvantages of 'streaming'.

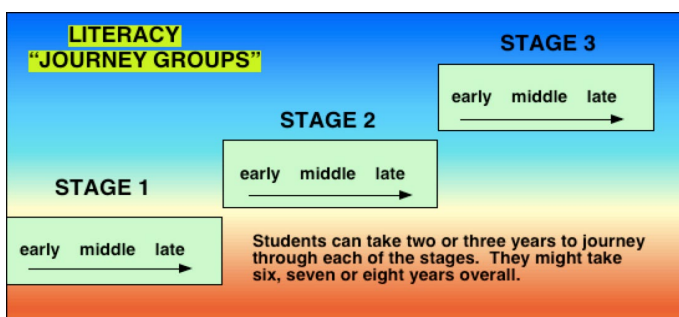
Such a pattern is quite simple to achieve, once understood – certainly simpler than the complex year-by-year pattern of composites many schools have dealt with. The following explanation may well be easier for a lay person to understand than a teacher or principal or educational administrator who has been conditioned into a year-based thinking mode.

The total enrolment of the school is divided by the number of classes desired. This indicates class size that can apply throughout the school if desired. Then we start with the students in their first primary school year and work our way up. The numbers will always provide potential for the overlap required. The pattern is repeated each calendar year. Let's consider a school with 278 students and eleven available teachers/rooms. ($278 \div 11 = 25$ or 26 as a nominal class size)

**278 students
11 classes** **CREATING AN OVERLAPPING
STAGE_BASED PATTERN**



The schools typically organised a literacy block and a numeracy block each day. Students were grouped into ‘journey groups’ within each stage. The groups were arranged so that students could take the time they needed to progress through ‘early’, ‘middle’ and ‘late’ steps in each stage. Individual students progressed through these groups taking two or three years in each stage. Normally, the groupings remained spatially within the rooms used by home classes in the ‘stage’. There was not a wholesale movement across the school (as sometimes happens in secondary schools).



Effectively, this provides a continuum of achievement levels. Students can be assessed against these levels and gain a clear picture of their ‘journey’. Students are comfortable with levels of achievement. They commonly use this concept in the games they play on-line.

Schools used a two-year cycle right across the stages in subjects like science, the social sciences and the arts. This meant that there was continuity of learning in these areas no matter what the pattern of progress was for individual students.

Recommendation 5. Check for Inequity across schools

Literacy measures show a strong correlation with socio-economic status. The variation in achievement levels happens between schools as well as within schools. Within state government systems, I believe there is an unrecognised systemic bias favouring schools in middle class areas. I will use a passage from my book to explain my reasoning. I believe it is likely true in Tasmania. ... there is... a dysfunctional aspect of school financing that creates regional inequality. This involves the inequity brought about because of the staffing formulae commonly used in Australian government school systems. Because some schools are less desirable than others, they are often staffed by teachers who are mainly in their early years of teaching. The staffing formula used determines the number of teachers appointed to a school rather than the salary costs available to the school.

For example, Elizabeth West was a 'disadvantaged school' when I moved there in 1984. From memory, it received \$32,000 a year in extra funding from the Disadvantaged Schools Program as a result. However, because of the patterns of teacher employment, I estimated at the time that a school in a highly sought after area in Adelaide with a similar enrolment to Elizabeth West would have about \$200,000 more spent on it per year in teacher salaries.

The situation still exists. I have used 2020 South Australian salary scales in this example. Consider two schools, each with 600 students, and each with 25 teachers in non-promotion positions. School A is in a desirable area where most teachers are in their 6th, 7th or 8th year of teaching (average salary \$93,500). School B is in an area less attractive for teachers and consequently most are in their 2nd, 3rd or 4th year of teaching (average salary \$78,700).

School A's salary bill = 25 x \$93,500 = \$2,337,500.

School B's salary bill = 25 x \$78,700 = \$1,967,500

The difference between these two totals is

$$\$2,337,500 - \$1,967,500 = \$370,000$$

This is enough to employ four or five extra teachers.

In terms of expenditure per student, disadvantaged schools are subsidising advantaged schools!

There are two possible initiatives that could improve the situation. The first is to create incentives encouraging teachers to work in these less advantaged or remote schools. Another approach would be to test the above hypothesis by calculating the salary dollars per student across a region with a wide range of socio-economic and remote schools. If the inequity is found to be real, the next step would be to explore alternative staffing patterns based on the real expenditure rather than on the number of teachers. In this way, schools that attract mainly less experienced teachers would be able to employ more of them. These schools could then have more support teachers and/or smaller classes. Application of this alternative approach would need to be monitored over several years, taking into account student learning outcomes, rates of sick leave, rates of resignation and the like. The initiative might have an impact, not just on student achievement in less desirable schools, but also on the overall patterns of teacher retention and recruitment.

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Curriculum Vitae

Michael Middleton B.Sc, Dip.Ed., M.Ed.

Growing up in Tasmania, Michael Middleton worked briefly as a geophysicist in the Savage River area of the Tarkine wilderness in western Tasmania, before entering the teaching profession. During his early years of classroom teaching, he planned and presented many Science for Schools programs for ABCTV. In 1967, he was Tasmania's representative on the Australian Science Education Project, the first Commonwealth Government curriculum initiative. And in 1971, he won a year-long Tasmanian Government travelling scholarship to study schooling in the UK.

When the Whitlam Government made Innovations Grants available to teachers during the mid-1970s, Mike initiated the Tagari Project, a four year 'non-school' secondary journey for 52 Tasmanian students. During this time, he was invited to take part in a number of Commonwealth Programs including the Schools Commission's School and Community Project and the National Core Curriculum Project.

In the mid 1980s, Mike worked as a high school principal in South Australia and led a 'Project of National Significance' that linked secondary schools from all Australian states that were experimenting with vertical timetabling. He then took on a lecturing role in teacher education at Griffith University in Brisbane where he also chaired the Queensland Government's Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum (MCCC). In 1990, he was invited onto the board of the Australian Children's Television Foundation as it launched its Lift Off Series.

During the last twenty-five years of a long career, Mike worked as a consultant, by school or system invitation in over four hundred primary and secondary schools in all Australian states as well as in Hong Kong and New Zealand. He now lives in beautiful Tasmania, enjoying water sports and interactions with his grandchildren including occasional home-schooling.

Mike has written widely including:

Middleton, M. (1982) *Marking Time: Alternatives in Australian Schooling*, Sydney: Methuen.

Middleton et al, (1986), *Making the Future: The Role of Secondary Education in Australia*, Canberra: Commonwealth Schools Commission.

Middleton, M. and Hill, J. (1998) *Changing Schools*, Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow.

Middleton, M. (2000) *Lutheran Schools at Millennium's Turn: A Snapshot*, Adelaide: Lutheran Ed. Aust.

Middleton, M. (2007) *Timetabling and Other Practical Ideas*, Queensland Studies Association, May.

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Middleton, M. (2022) *For the Love of Teaching: A Plea for Trust and Engagement*, Montmorency: Busybird.

For the Love of Teaching

A plea for trust and engagement

by Mike Middleton

Mike Middleton's sixty year educational career in Australia and overseas includes teaching from primary to postgraduate levels, through school and state-based curriculum planning to policy making at the national level. By school or system invitation, Mike has worked as a consultant in over four hundred Australian schools.

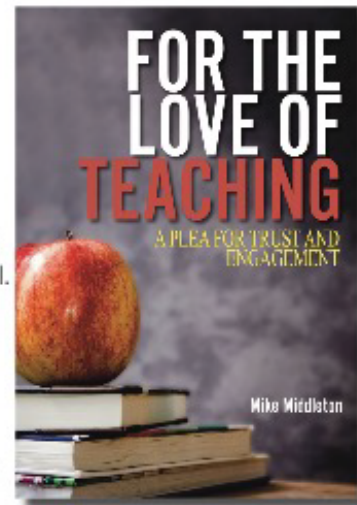
He is passionate about teaching and its place in a healthy society. He believes that the Covid interruption provides a much-needed opportunity for policy makers, and school communities to rethink teachers' work, restoring it to a valued and central place in society.

Since he began his career, Mike has seen teaching change from a role that was exciting, creative, and attractive to one where universities struggle to attract young people into the profession and where education systems struggle to retain teachers, even part-time.

For the Love of Teaching follows Mike's career as he strived to maintain the integrity of his beliefs about teaching in the face of social and political circumstances that were transforming it from a high status and culturally embedded profession, to one that threatened to make teachers no more than educational functionaries. Combatting an agenda that shaped young people into economic units 'in the national interest' rather than participants in vibrant and culturally rich Australian communities was a constant challenge.

This is a celebration of teaching as it can be, and in all-too-rare cases, still is. In parallel, is a critique of the political and administrative changes that have, over several decades, shifted from support for teacher professionalism and autonomy to making teachers accountable for the delivery of a uniform and 'teacher-proof' curriculum to all Australian communities and students independent of their background and circumstances.

Mike offers ways that teaching might be revitalized to free up the immense potential of the teaching profession and improve the learning experiences and outcomes for the nation's young people.



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