

Let's be clear about student-centred learning

Criticism of our schools is fine
but the purpose is sinister, says **Neil Hooley**

I can't remember a time when the attacks on public schools have been so persistent and so extreme. Hardly a day goes by without a new problem being raised and with fresh criticism of the performance of teachers and the achievements of students. Much of the source of this disquiet is not parents, but the Howard Government and its Federal Minister, Brendan Nelson.

Recently, Minister Nelson outdid himself when he was reported to have said that 'The prisons are filled with people who've gone through a generation of mollycoddling' (Sydney Morning Herald, 31/10). He also linked the apparent reluctance of schools to honestly present information to parents on the progress of children with the high illiteracy rates of prisoners. Such a view is as ridiculous as it is unbecoming of a Minister.

While it may be tempting to disregard such irrationality, it is important to analyse the underlying cause. What are the highly conservative sections of Australian society trying to achieve through such attacks? From my point of view, I suspect that the real target is the relationship with knowledge that public schools attempt to establish with their students.

Let's consider briefly a few of the issues that regularly make the headlines. Our old favourite 'standards' is always good for a comment, closely followed by the idea of 'learning outcomes' and how those outcomes are assessed. The level of literacy and numeracy in our schools is discussed at most bbqs. Over more recent times, Year 12 has been highlighted particularly in relation to English and Literature. It is clear that the nature of teaching and learning and of knowledge itself is under assault.

Australian teachers have never been enthusiastic about the traditional concept of 'standards' being imposed on their work. That is, slices of subject content decided outside the school and arranged in a hierarchy for teaching. Teachers are more concerned with involving students in cycles of learning that occur over time and build upon the student's interest. The essential difference here is that learning is seen to occur from within a school-based framework rather than be imposed externally.

The idea of 'standards' is often associated with a curriculum that is 'syllabus' driven, but this idea has not been prevalent in Victoria since the 1950s. Again, in an attempt to begin with the child's curiosity and development, the syllabus was progressively replaced with the notion of 'outcome,' what the child might learn, not what the teacher would teach. The Cain, Kennett and Bracks Governments have all supported a curriculum based on a framework and learning outcomes rather than a set syllabus.

There is a very conservative logic at work here. Once having decided on the knowledge and set the desired standards in fine detail, then the learning must be assessed to check

what has occurred. This is seen as a straight forward matter and as the answers are known they can be checked by testing and be graded accordingly. There is a series of major problems with this strategy however when many children do not learn in this way, the standard setting and testing is highly inaccurate and grading is very superficial. This view of knowledge seriously disadvantages a large proportion of children in our schools.

But what about literacy and numeracy under these conditions? This appears to be the major target of attack on students with outrageous and generally unsubstantiated claims being made. For example, 30 percent of Year 10 students are often abused as being illiterate, or worse 'functionally illiterate' in classrooms. Without a close definition of what these terms mean and without reference to the research, such claims are a disgrace.

Literacy in particular comes under constant criticism. The debate often centres on the difference between approaches to teaching that emphasise the grammar or code of the knowledge, or approaches that rely on a deep experience of the knowledge. One does not exclude the other of course. It is anticipated that a forthcoming review of literacy set up by Minister Nelson will encourage the former or 'phonics' approach over the latter or 'whole language' approach.

Within this highly charged context, it is significant that Year 12 has been dropped into the cauldron. The criticism is a little obscure without a detailed research base, but seems to rest on the idea that Year 12 at present is not consistent across Australia and that greater attention needs to be paid to international comparisons. A new Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) has been proposed, perhaps modelled on the International Baccalaureate, or at least, a common set of standards across states and territories.

English at Year 12 has been subject to particular comment, with criticism of the extent to which students become involved with traditional literature. This criticism has a postmodern origin where it is said that postmodern views in generally faculties of arts in universities, have impacted on the English curriculum in schools. The redefinition of texts in terms of video, music, text messaging, advertising and the like is taken as a move away from the values and guidance for living that classical literature is said to provide.

The instances noted above have a common theme, they are all to do with how schools introduce students to knowledge and how learning is pursued. It concerns the relationship with knowledge that certain groups of students are able to establish in comparison with the relationship to knowledge that other students from different social circumstances can manage. Some students have different forms of 'cultural capital' arising from their socio-economic backgrounds that make this relationship either stronger or weaker.

This 'cultural war' over knowledge is high stakes and is being fiercely contested. Australian teachers have worked valiantly for decades to enable their students from all backgrounds to access and participate with the valued knowledge of society. They have generally adopted more student-centred approaches involving inquiry-based learning and have built programs of study that integrate both internal and external interest. A reversion

to externally imposed knowledge with highly conservative teaching will tear this work asunder.

Student-centred learning that features inquiry and applied learning is the most appropriate avenue into the big ideas of humanity that the majority of people favour. It leads to deeper understanding and greater capacity to use knowledge than approaches that rely on conservative transmission and simplistic testing. It is the best way of connecting the significant practices of society with the generalised understandings that guide and frame our daily lives.

I construe that the machinations of some policy makers and commentators are designed to restrict profound learning to certain groups in our society. They are doing this cleverly, persistently, with legislative and media access. Therefore, the struggle of student-centred and inquiry learning with its policy-directed and rote learning opposite is at a dangerous tipping point. I have trust however that in thousands of classrooms across Australia our teachers in public schools are getting on with doing a great job for their students.

Neil Hooley is a lecturer in the School of Education, Victoria University.