

Is the education system failing our children?

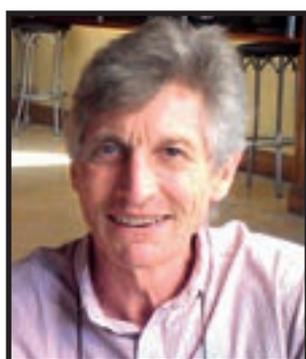


On 18 March, by invitation of Jonathon Anstock (Protecting Childhood), ECTA participated in a round table conversation to discuss age-appropriate pedagogies, early standardised testing, data collection and funding implications within Australian education. This was in response to the ABC TV Brisbane education special *The Learning Curve* (November 2016).

(Left to right) Jennifer Haynes, Principal, Brisbane Independent schools, Tom Hardy ex-President of Queensland Association of State School Principals, Dr Michael Nagel, Associate Professor in education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Allison Borland, ECTA SCC member and Amy Co, Founder of Protecting Childhood advocacy group.

The panel included Jennifer Haynes, Principal, Brisbane Independent schools, Tom Hardy ex-President of Queensland Association of State School Principals, Dr Michael Nagel, Associate Professor in Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Amy Cox, Founder of Protecting Childhood advocacy group and ECTA SCC member Allison Borland.

Here, the panel participants share their thoughts and messages with the early childhood sector.



Jonathan Anstock

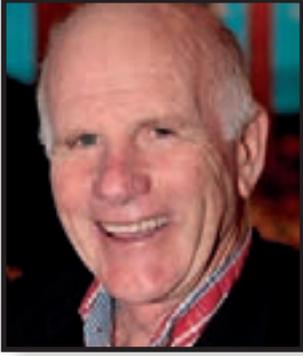
Jonathan Anstock

The education system is becoming sick and unhealthy because those politically driving the system are not educators. Education has become a political football, where the wrong drivers are being employed. It is a nonsense to follow failed education models and policies of England and the USA and ignore experienced teachers and school administrators, but we continue to do so. I've taught similarly in the Finland education system, and I know how things can be much better.

The great Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg has labelled these wrong/negative drivers the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). We have a lot to do to combat this pervading GERM to ensure that children have a happy healthy childhood.

I realised a deeper exploration of early childhood education (up to eight years of age) needed to be focused on. These are critical years where the love of learning needs to be fostered.

Sadly, GERM is invoking in many children a completely opposite response. The top-down pressure is pervading what used to be happy healthy learning environments. Children's happiness and health are under threat – as well as that of teachers, principals and parents. Experienced educational professionals, senior academics, therapists and parents are now labelling this 'sick schooling system' as tantamount to child abuse. It has to change.



Tom Hardy

Tom Hardy

No matter where you look, Australian education is in crisis! We seemed to be caught in an analysis paralysis where data reigns supreme. Like some voracious monster we must keep feeding it in the belief that this is how we improve things. After all this data gathering, ten years of testing and rigorous bureaucratic overlay, has learning improved? Has teaching improved? Are student results improving? Are we meeting the goals of the Adelaide Declaration? Ample evidence suggests we are not. The most recent Grattan Report *Engaging students* (February 2017) points to the fact that 40% of Australian students are disengaged in any given year. Mental health is a growing problem across all years of schooling and students as young as five or six are being suspended while teacher attrition rates are increasing. I contend that we have created this malaise through the corruption of early childhood learning. No longer are we guided by sound knowledge of child development theory nor does the explosion of research into brain development inform our practice. Surely the time has come for Australia to embrace drastic foundational change? Thirty years ago the Finns, through non-partisan, democratic and equitable strategies, created a system that is fair to all. Until we embark on a similar comprehensive reform, our children's learning is destined to be degraded by political expediency and the powerful influence of the formidable testing industry.



Jennifer Haynes

Jennifer Haynes

I am lucky to spend my days as a teacher and principal in a school that realises that development of the child is not a battle to form them to a pre-existing mold. The power of a school is to provide a journey of exploration through the world of ideas at the right time for that child so that passion for learning will emerge and take hold. This puts the child at the centre of the learning. To allow their singular uniqueness to shine through means aiming for personal excellence, not just benchmarks, and encourages courage and self-acceptance. This courage must come from the principal and teacher leaders to be clever in their programming and classroom design.

The Australian Curriculum is rich with opportunities for the Prep child to explore and grow at their own rate. As it spans seven years of formal primary schooling, there is space for big vision and deep learning when you work as a team to create it. This space is essential because Prep is when self-stories are formed and those stories need to be about being capable. All children have areas that take longer than others to develop and a quality education system leaves room for variation, because that is where creativity and brilliance grows.

The round table conversation,

*'Is the school system failing
our children?'*

has been released to view on YouTube (https://youtu.be/9_APpl3e1fw).



Michael Nagel

Dr Michael C Nagel

In 1837, Friedrich Froebel founded his own school and called it 'kindergarten', or the children's garden. Froebel described his educational philosophy as 'self-activity', which was premised on the notion that children were to be led by their own interests and be free to explore them. In this educational context, the teacher's role was to be a guide rather than lecturer or trainer, and today's notions of accountability and standards were justifiably unheard of. In the end, Froebel's most important gift to children was a philosophical position where the classroom was viewed as a lovely, thriving garden needing a teacher who took on the role of loving and supportive parent. In the fast-paced world of the 21st century, one can realistically wonder if some educational gardens can be more readily described as superhighways to socially demarcated destinations of success underpinned by a belief that the quicker a child's formal education takes place the better. Such a path appears to be complicit in the growing number of children dealing with anxiety and mental health issues due to a developmentally inappropriate curriculum. Indeed, there is a worrying trend within Australia whereby aspects of early childhood education are arguably developmentally unsound and potentially damaging to the emotional wellbeing of young children. I wonder if a decade from now we might look back and find that what happened to children in the name of 'education' did more harm than good.



Amy Cox

Amy Cox

Education is about holistic growth and development. By focusing on benchmarks and ranking too early, we are ignoring the importance of readiness and the broad range of 'normal'. We all develop at our own rate and each possess different strengths – we need to value that diversity more. The future of education needs to focus on creativity, collaboration and critical thinking, instead of trying to mould all children the same. Standardisation is outdated. We need to really discuss, as a nation, what we value about education. Why do we educate? For me, that is developing the skills and disposition to become life long, self-directed learners.



Allison Borland

Allison Borland

Play is still a very misrepresented word! What play means to a child, parent, teacher or administration is all different. Early childhood education should be focused on play-based learning for the early years. For this to happen there needs to be a dynamic shift in the way it is delivered. What is happening right now in educational services is putting teachers and children at burnout levels. For children this means that they are more prone to the pressure of failure whilst they try to complete the tasks set by the Education Department. For teachers it means they have lost what they are in the classroom to do and that is to support children in their learning. Teachers are spending more time on tracking data for their classroom students and at the same time trying to implement the top heavy content and the excessive amount that needs to be covered. What needs to be considered by education authorities is to allow teachers to teach by developing a curriculum and assessment that suits the children in their class. Early childhood should be focusing on age-appropriate essentials for this age to set children up for success.