



Paul Brock looks at the past and to the future and provides a profound message for all public educators...

SHOW AN AFFIRMING FLAME: A MESSAGE TO THE PROFESSION

DR PAUL BROCK

“Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy.”

John Ralston Saul, “In defence of public education”, Speech to the Canadian Teachers' Federation Whitehorse, Yukon, July 13, 2001.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

G Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, New York, Collier Books, 1962

My longtime esteemed friend and colleague, Denis Fitzgerald, has invited me to write an article on the theme “A Message to the Profession”.

What follows is a fairly personal, eclectic collation of ideas / passions / pleas that I would include in any such message in my reflection over my past nearly five decades as a member of what the OECD has accurately described as the “knowing and caring” profession.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

If there is any one constantly recurring theme in those four decades, it is that we educators have so often been under attack by those who see us as perpetrators of inadequate or declining standards. Let me give one NSW example from the first decade of the last century.

“The wholesale substitution of ‘modern methods’ has been found to be unwise. The defects apparent in school children at the present day are summarised thus: a) The children are not thoroughly grounded in essentials; b) They are not accurate in their work. Business people in Sydney.... find these and similar defects in the children they are at present taking into their employment and they attribute them largely to the new methods of education.”

This is an extract from an editorial in *The Catholic Press*, a New South Wales publication, in 1909. ⁱ



Seventeen years ago I wrote a monograph on some of the myths of declining standards in literacy within an historical context, *Breaking some of the myths – again* (DET, Sydney, 1998). What follows is an extended quotation from that monograph – the substantial ‘message’ of which, I believe, retains its salience in 2015.

But it does not matter where you dip into the history of education, you will find thunderous roars of utter conviction that standards are ‘now’ palpably worse than they were a generation ago. The 1990s Jeremiahs hearken back to the 1950s. It is necessary, however, to apply an informed historical perspective to untrammelled cries of gloom and doom. For example, if you go back to the newspapers of the so-called ‘good old days’ of the 1950s you will find identical lamentations for contemporary disasters, and calls for a return to the presumed halcyon days of the 1930s.

So, let us go back nearly 50 years to those ‘good old days’ and listen to the comments of the Chief Examiner in English for the 1948 Leaving Certificate examination, Professor Waldock, thundering about the students sitting for the Leaving Certificate in 1946: “It is disappointing to find that students imagine they can pass a Leaving Certificate Examination without being able to write a sentence”ⁱⁱ

Reviewing what he had seen in the 1948 LC Examination he lamented:

Examiners again stress the weakness in spelling. Here are some of the words that seem to confound large numbers of students [nearly 80 words followed including those such as “tragic”, “practical”, “clever”, “hungry”, “persuade”, “believe”, “enemies” and “sensitive”]....It was felt too that errors in grammar and syntax are still too common. It seems that many pupils are conversant with the correct *theory* of good usage, but from lack of practice or attention continue to commit the old mistakes. ...The examiners...feel that candidates are still very weak in fundamentals - that far too many, for example, do not know what a noun is, let alone an abstract noun.ⁱⁱⁱ

Professor Waldock’s successor, Professor Alec Mitchell, declared in 1950 that he agreed with the withering criticisms made in the Norwood Report of 1941 on “the serious failure of the British secondary schools to produce literate students” and declared that, without a doubt, the same situation existed in NSW in 1950.^{iv}

Let us not forget that these Leaving Certificate students were the *creme de la creme*. In the 1940s and early 1950s, of every 100 students commencing 6th class only fewer than twenty or so completed their Leaving Certificate five years later. For example, of the 50,000 who enrolled in first year government high schools in 1948, only 16.1% survived to commence their LC year in 1952.^v The comparable figure today, of course, is around 70%.

Ah, but how the right wing media pontificators and so many talk-back radio disc jockeys love to hark back to the mythical ‘good old days’ when, they assume, everything was wonderful.



This process of lamentation for the present and exhortation for a return to some mythical halcyon past era can be traced continuously back into the 19th century and beyond. George Elliott, President of prestigious Harvard College, bitterly complained in 1871 that:

bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college.^{vi}

One of the many modern scholars who have discussed the ‘declining standards’ myth, the American Andrew Sledd, has observed that:

The discussion of this [declining standards myth] is not timely - it is timeless; for although *Newsweek* certified our crisis a mere decade ago ...no fewer than five consecutive generations have been condemned for writing worse than their predecessors. By now our students should hardly put processor to paper; it’s a wonder they can write at all.^{vii}

Another American historian of literacy practices, Harvey Daniels traces this pattern back as far as George Puttenham’s despair about the declining standards of literacy amongst the young of his day in 1586! Daniels sums up in this way:

To conclude: literacy has been declining since it was invented; one of the first ancient Sumerian tablets deciphered by modern scholars immortalised a teacher fretting over the recent drop in (standards of) students’ writing. It is Sledd’s cryptic conclusion that ‘there will always be a literacy crisis, if for no other reason than because the old never wholly like the young’.^{viii}

If I were revising this today, I would do some ‘tweaking’ to take account of the significant developments in the intervening seventeen years – especially recent years. However, to reiterate what I wrote prior to the commencement of the previous extended quotation, I believe it retains its fundamental salience in 2015. While there is a continuous need to ensure the quality of contemporary education, too often contemporary critics look back to the past through rose-tinted glasses, and at the present through black-tinted glasses.

When planning for the future we should retain what has been demonstrated to have been successful in the past and the present, and to transform or reject the rest! I believe that there should be at least four interdependent and interrelated basic principles that should underpin all quality policy developments in school education – now and into the future. They are: authentic research; genuine scholarship; acquired wisdom based on the collective expertise and experience of outstanding practitioners; and what is often called ‘nous’.

Authentic Research

There is considerable educational research that merely confirms what good teachers, principals, and educators in many contexts have known or suspected for quite a while. For example, the research that



has demonstrated that the quality of teaching is the most significant within-school factor in the quality of student learning; that within-school differences are often more significant than between-school differences; that the quality of leadership exercised within a school has a significant impact on the quality of learning and teaching in that school. And so on. These are really 'no brainers' these days.

When researchers seek to establish a compelling link between cause and effect in research, it is always necessary not to confuse causality with correlation.

When reading the outcomes of any particular piece of educational research, it is always necessary to stress the importance of **context** when assessing the value of that research. For example, one should generally respond cautiously to any black or white research pontifications about the significance of any one, isolated, factor within the rich and diverse landscape that constitutes teaching and learning.

We must always exercise our critical powers when reading research. The questions that always should arise include the following. Who undertook the research? What is their reputation? What was the purpose of this research? What was its context? What methodology was used? What were any underlying assumptions? Who funded the research? Who may have benefitted from it? What data was included? How is the research intended to be used? Was data excluded? And so on.

Genuine Scholarship

The second fundamental source is *genuine scholarship*, ie the ideas, speculation, imagination, creativity, innovation and so on, generated and articulated by thinkers who would not fit into the mould of evidence-based researchers. For example, my friend Professor Peter Freebody has named a number of towering figures who have made great impacts upon / contributions to education - but none of whom had ever undertaken what could be called an 'experiment'. Peter illustrated this point by reference to famous scholars and thinkers such as Jean Piaget, Shirley Brice-Heath, Benjamin Bloom, Ralph Tyler, John Dewey and Maria Montessori.

Acquired Wisdom

The third is the *wisdom* distilled from the reflection over their experience by excellent teachers, Principals, and other school leaders who may never have undertaken evidence-based research, who may never have published in the scholarship genre, but who are able to abundantly irrigate educational theory and practice because of their own reflected-over expertise and experience.

Nous

The fourth is practical, good old fashioned strategic *nous*, which might be described as that down to earth, insightful, flexible exercise of common sense, fully aware of the complexities of the relevant context.



I now turn to a number of other issues.

Beware the “institutionalizing of value”

Always push back against what the splendid sociologist Ivan Illich described as the “institutionalizing of value”. He illustrated what he meant by the term by referring to an historical situation in which a ‘pioneer’ would see the need for children to have schooling, but which was denied to them. He / she then built a school for these children. Then another school for other children lacking access to schooling. And so on. Over time “institutionalizing of value” would occur if the structures shifted from having a prime focus on the needs of the students towards a focus on the needs of the teachers; and then, as the organisation got larger, on the needs of larger organisations; even of governments. But our whole role as educators should be to focus on the learning needs, skills, talents, capacities, values, and so on of every student.

What is necessary is not always sufficient

Of course the skills of literacy and numeracy are absolutely basic goals of school education. But while absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient. Fulfilling only basic needs is rarely enough. Shakespeare’s magnificent play *King Lear* provides us with an insight into the insufficiency of addressing only needs. After haggling with his two evil daughters [Goneril and Regan] over how many retainers he really needs – involving a Dutch auction commencing at fifty, then twenty-five, then ten, then five and finally one – a distraught Lear cries out:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,
 Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s. Thou art a lady.
 If only to go warm were gorgeous,
 Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st,
 Which scarcely keeps thee warm
 (*King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 4)

Human life becomes cheapened when human aspiration and achievement do not exceed the basic animal needs. Education becomes cheapened if we stop at fulfilling only basic needs. We must seek to develop in our students not only skills, but also their knowledge, understanding, values, talents, creativity, imagination, and so on – all the richness articulated in our splendid national educational manifesto, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People*.

Practising what we preach

We public educators must practise what we preach. We have to live out our explicitly defined core values as public educators which, in NSW, are: integrity; excellence; respect; responsibility; cooperation; participation; care; fairness; democracy.



Above all, we have to be fair dinkum in striving to close the gaps between rhetoric and reality. For example there is an admirable aspirational goal to have an excellent teacher in every classroom in every public school. We know that in this case our deeds have not yet met our rhetorical aims.

How refreshing and correct, therefore, was NSW Minister for Education Adrian Piccoli's announcement on November 7, 2014 that, according to Alexandra Smith's article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* "for the first time, every public school teacher in NSW will have mandatory performance reviews in a push to lift teaching standards and ensure 'the very best teachers get better' while underperforming teachers are removed from classrooms."^{ix}

Alexandra Smith's article went on to say that, "In an unprecedented agreement between the state government and the NSW Teachers Federation, all teachers will have a performance and development plan and will need to do 100 hours of professional development every five years to retain their accreditation." Ms Smith's article continued, "A new approach for principals to deal with underperforming teachers will also be introduced, which will mean teachers who fail to perform in the classroom can be stood down in 10 weeks, about half the time it takes for a principal to tackle poor performance."^x

The crucial importance of the precise use of the English language

It is absolutely essential that educators be as precise as they can in the use of the English language, most especially – but not exclusively – in its written form, for communication with others.

In 1990, during my time as an advisor on the personal staff of the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, I drafted the Preface to the Hawke Government's *Australia's Language and Literacy Policy Green Paper – The Language of Australia: Discussion Paper on an Australian Literacy and Language Policy for the 1990s*. Dawkins agreed to affix his signature to the Preface I had written for him.

In the opening two sentences – which I consider to be among the best two sequential short sentences I have ever written – I attempted to articulate the power and significance of language in the following words, which I still hold to be true today.

It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experience, explore our customs, structure our community, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideals.

We aspire to an Australia in which its citizens will be literate and articulate, a nation of active, intelligent readers, writers, listeners and speakers. Such a nation will be well educated and clever, cultured and humane, and rich and purposeful, because of the knowledge, skills and values of its people.^{xi}

As educators and as educated citizens we have a responsibility to be lucid in the ways we express our thoughts, ideas and values. Sludgy, clichéd, jargonistic, careless, imprecise language is evidence of sludgy, clichéd, jargonistic, careless, imprecise thinking.



A number of miscellaneous issues

- Don't be beguiled by those who regularly use hindsight as a defence for misjudgement when the real failing has been their lack of foresight.
- Throughout my career I have found out if a theory does not work in practice, there is something wrong with the theory, or the way in which it has been put into practice, or both.
- Don't place work above your commitment to significant personal relationships / family.
- When providing advice to those who seek or need to hear it, always strive to ensure that, as far as possible, it is frank and fearless advice. Perhaps even more importantly, to ensure that those over whom you have some professional authority feel confident enough to provide you with frank and fearless advice.
- As one of my former Directors-General, Andrew Cappie-Wood, once pointed out to me, in large [and not so large] organisations, a major problem can be not so much that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, but that the left hand does not **want** the right hand to know what it is doing. An organisation as large as the NSW Teachers Federation, or the NSW Department of Education, would not be immune from this potential threat. On an even larger international canvas we have witnessed the sometimes catastrophic consequences of government intelligence agencies fervidly refusing to share their intelligence information with their so-called colleagues in other agencies.
- No matter what happens during your day at work, the sun will almost certainly go down on that day and, almost certainly, rise again on the next.

Is Education the answer?

Quite a few years ago the ABC TV news included what turned out to be a very short interview with an African lady in a war-torn, drought-ridden, poverty-stricken African country – holding her very young, ailing child in her arms. When asked what she needed, the woman replied – simply yet so complexly – “food and education”. With this aspiration for education as a fundamental driver for societal reform, I concluded my Keynote Address at the 2012 Annual Conference of the NSW Secondary Principals Council as follows.

In quite a few of my speeches in recent years I have pointed to education as perhaps the most powerful 21st century force to combat and eventually defeat the injustices, evils, poverty, hunger, abuse of women, triumphs of religious intolerance and bigotry, sexual slavery, wars and famines, and so on. However, today, looking at the relentless persistence of so much of these obscenities in the world, that optimism and hope is somewhat diminished.

But I am also reminded of that superb poem “1st September, 1939”, written by the great Anglo-American poet W H Auden, in which he expressed his profound fear, on the edge of despair, as he reflected on the almost certain consequence of Hitler's invasion of Poland on that day - the outbreak of what would become the Second World War. Yet in that very powerful and moving poem, he found something to cling to in his final stanza.



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Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages:
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame.

Colleagues and friends, I put it to you that although we educators cannot defeat the macro forces that inflict such misery on so many people on this planet, surely we can continue to be “ironic points of light” – “ironic” in the sense that we retain the capacity to critique “our world”. That we are “just” men and women who exchange our “messages” of human dignity, aspiration, hope, respect and all of those other values championed by public education. Who, “beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair”, nevertheless continue to show to our students, to one another, and – as educated citizens - to our local, national and international communities, “an affirming flame”, cherishing our belonging to the “knowing and caring” profession.

Putting it all in a nutshell

Having being diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease in 1996 and having been given three to five years to live, I feared that it was likely that I would not live long enough to see my daughters, Sophie and Amelia, complete their schooling.

In 2000 I was asked to give a Keynote Address on “Towards Conserving and Transforming the School Teaching Profession” at an international conference.

When I was preparing that talk I asked Sophie, who was not yet nine and in Grade 3 at Oakhill Drive Public School – along with our other daughter Amelia, who was then five and in Kindergarten – to write down her ideas on what makes a good teacher. So off she went to her computer, and this is what she wrote, aided in a few instances only by the use of the spell-checker. I was so impressed, that I asked her if I could use it in my Address. “OK Dad”, she said. This is what she wrote.

What Makes A Perfect Teacher

My name is Sophie Brock and I am nearly 9 years old. I think what makes a perfect teacher is when the teacher encourages the students to do their best and instead of treating each other like strangers make sure you get a chance to spend some time with each student. As a teacher you should know what you are doing all the time and be keen on what you teach, otherwise don't teach at all. My kindergarten teacher Jenny Tipping and my Year Two teacher Margot Hillhouse are at Narellan Vale Public School and they are fantastic teachers because they gave me challenging work and didn't give me the most boring work like some teachers, but I won't say who. The most important thing about being a teacher is that you try and help every single one of your students enjoy learning, reading, writing and joining in with activities. So, that is what I think makes a perfect teacher.



In 2004, four years after Sophie wrote this, I decided to set out my aspirational ‘instructions’ for the future teachers of our children at the end of the chapter on public education in my autobiography, *A Passion for Life* (ABC Books 2004) – most of which I typed with the one remaining finger that then still worked. Absolutely deliberately, Sophie and Amelia were both educated only in comprehensive, co-educational public schools.

This is what I wrote.

Therefore, not just as a professional educator, but as a Dad, I want all future teachers of my Sophie and Amelia to abide by three fundamental principles that I believe should underpin teaching and learning in every public school.

First, to nurture and challenge my daughters’ intellectual and imaginative capacities way out to horizons unsullied by self-fulfilling minimalist expectations.

Don’t patronise them with lowest common denominator blancmange masquerading as knowledge and learning; nor crush their love for learning through boring pedagogy. Don’t bludgeon them with mindless ‘busy work’ and limit the exploration of the world of evolving knowledge merely to the tyranny of repetitively churned-out recycled worksheets. Ensure that there is legitimate progression of learning from one day, week, month, term and year to the next.

Second, to care for Sophie and Amelia with humanity and sensitivity, as developing human beings worthy of being taught with genuine respect, enlightened discipline and imaginative flair.

And third, please strive to maximise their potential for later schooling, post-school education, training and employment, and for the quality of life itself so that they can contribute to and enjoy the fruits of living within an Australian society that is fair, just, tolerant, honourable, knowledgeable, prosperous and happy.

When all is said and done, surely this is what every parent and every student should be able to expect of school education: not only as delivered within every public school in NSW, but within every school not only in Australia but throughout the entire world.

(P Brock, *A Passion for Life*, ABC Books, 2004 pp. 250-251)

As I was ‘writing’ this, I realised that I was compressing into a few paragraphs all of the knowledge, understanding, values and skills, in effect my fundamental philosophy on school teaching and learning – that I had advocated and hoped I would continue to advocate – in so many pages and in so many speeches over so many years. But this time, I was articulating it in a so powerfully personalised context.

So, in view of the teaching expectations I had set down for the journey of our children, did NSW public education fulfil my hopes and directions I set down in my autobiography eleven years ago? Too right it did!!



Sophie and Amelia both attended Oak Hill Drive Public School and Cherrybrook Technology High School: Sophie commenced her schooling at Narellan Vale Public School when we lived at Narellan before moving to Castle Hill. They both achieved brilliant results in their HSC.

Sophie, now twenty-four, is in the third year of her PhD at the University of Sydney – after securing First Class Honours in her BA – and Amelia, now twenty, is in the third year of her undergraduate degree at the University of Sydney. With my wife Dr Jackie Manuel, being an Associate Professor in that University’s Faculty of Education and Social Work, and my being an Adjunct Professor in that Faculty – we are pretty much a University of Sydney family!

Both Sophie and Amelia achieved brilliant HSC results. Incidentally, as soon as we learned of Sophie’s results at the end of 2008, whom do you think I rang first to thank (after ringing our family)? It was her very first teacher – Mrs Jenny Tipping who had taught Sophie in Kindergarten in 1995 at Narellan Vale Public School so superbly. And who was still teaching Kindergarten at that very same school all those years later, when I rang her.

As I thanked her for giving Sophie such a wonderful schooling platform, she began to cry with gratitude. I got the feeling that primary school teachers, and especially Kindergarten School teachers, don’t often get such a phone call!

I believe that what I wrote in 2004 has as much validity today – eleven years later – in scoping the aspirations of parents and the achievements of our finest teachers. And I further hope – while acknowledging that there will be so many changes in what we call ‘schooling’ in the intervening years – that in eleven years time those aspirations will still have retained their fundamental salience.

Indeed, it is my fervent hope that public education – even though it may have heavily changed in its architectural forms, in its breadth and depth of content, and through imaginative, innovative and creative modes of teaching and learning – will continue to flourish well into the 21st century as well.

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ⁱ Cited by Dr Shirley Smith in “School and the Educated Parrot” which was subsequently cited by Margaret McDonnell in a Letter to the Editor in *The Australian*, 11 May, 1987, p.8.

ⁱⁱ Waldock, A.J, “Leaving Certificate Examination, Examiner’s Report, English - Pass Paper 1946”, *The Education Gazette*, 1st April, 1947, p. 129.

ⁱⁱⁱ Waldock, A.J, “Leaving Certificate Examination, Examiner’s Report, English - Pass Paper, 1948, unpaginated, Private Papers of D.B. Bowra stored in the library of the then Sydney Teachers’ College, later known as Sydney College of Advanced Education - Institute of Education, and now incorporated within the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.

^{iv} Board of Secondary School Studies, “Minutes of Meeting”, 28 June, 1951, p. 295.



- ^v Wyndham, Harold S., (Chairman), *Report of the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1957, p. 88.
- ^{vi} Cited in Daniels, H. Famous Last Words: *The American Language Crisis Reconsidered*, Southern Illinois UP Carbonale, 1983, p. 51.
- ^{vii} Sledd, A., “Essay Readin’ not Riotin’: The Politics of Literacy”, *College English*, 50, 5, 1988, p. 496.
- ^{viii} Sledd, A., “Essay Readin’ not Riotin’: The Politics of Literacy”, *College English*, 50, 5, 1988, p. 496.
- ^{ix} Alexandra Smith, “NSW public school teachers to undergo performance reviews”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November, 2014, p. 4
- ^x Alexandra Smith, “NSW public school teachers to undergo performance reviews”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November, 2014, p. 4
- ^{xi} Dawkins, J.S, *The language of Australia: Discussion Paper on an Australian Literacy and Language Policy for the 1990s*. Released by The Hon. John Dawkins Minister for Employment, Education and Training December 1990, p. ix