

What's Happening In Education (Sept 2009)

I noticed that Australia has not done so well in an International report card in education. In the Education at a Glance report which compares education systems, funding and outcomes Australia offered almost 8000 hours of compulsory education for students between 7 and 14, but the percentage of time Australians formally spent on the core subjects was almost half that of their international counterparts. Essentially the article suggests that the more flexible curriculum in Australian education that allows schools to decide their own methods and length of time to teach compulsory content may be less effective than other education systems.

Julia Gillard (Deputy PM) (of course) blames the previous government for the lower standards.

“The OECD report shows that in the past we have invested too little in rewarding quality teaching, too little in the basics of literacy and numeracy, too little in higher education and far too little in early childhood education.”

Once again I climb on my soap box and give the commonsense view. The amount of time spent teaching basics is not what ensures success in learning the basics – there are so many other factors at play! One of these factors is the quality of the teaching that ensures that the basics are taught effectively. The education systems are slow to move and change and while many graduates come out of university with lots of facts and knowledge about the psychology, sociology, philosophy and statistics of education they have little training on “how” to engage today’s children and adolescents. I have spoken to secondary English teachers recently who did not know they would have students who cannot read in their high school classes – that is what happened to me 30 years ago!!!! We can only create quality teachers with excellent up-to-date teacher training.

Many modern teachers have also been seduced by the gadgets of the modern world – PC’s, laptops, interactive whiteboards, DVD’s, pod casts and goodness only knows what!! These all reduce human interaction and communication and in the early years this comes at a big price. The rote learning of basics like tables, grammar patterns and even collective nouns that were the norm was tossed out many years ago. Michael Merzenich in his fascinating work about brain plasticity also found the brain is organised topographically! In simple terms, that means that the brain forms maps . The order of these maps emerges because many of our everyday activities involve repeating sequences in a fixed order. We tend to pick up a cup in exactly the same way each time.....so the brain creates a unique map to lock that behaviour in. The maps can influence other skills that lie near by. Rote learning and memorising strengthens the auditory memory (hence thinking in language) and an attention to handwriting, probably helped strengthen motor capacities, thus not only helped handwriting but added speed and fluency to reading and speaking. I still have many collective nouns committed to my long term memory thanks to a primary teacher who challenged us to give him a collective noun whenever he had a class break!!! Did you know that a group of jelly fish is a smuck??? (p 42 The Brain that Changes Itself, By Norman Doidge) Doidge argues that the brain maps that are shaped by rote learning help brain function that gives us “fluency and a grace with symbols.” Interesting that handwriting is being dropped from some education systems – and

maybe decisions like this are also influencing those figures above. So some things that have had to be moved from our curriculum to allow the new gadgets to come in may have been more beneficial to learning than we realised. We used to fill gaps in class with simple games of noughts and crosses, hangman with guessing words, and doing puzzles. Not only were they fun they were really helpful for the brain to develop cognitive maps as well as learn social and emotional skills at the same time.

Indeed these experts think that every student would benefit from having brain based cognitive assessments so that any delays can be identified early, and with targeted help many students with delays could get the help they need sooner. The brain exercise programs are coming and I am very excited at this new development. So many children do not learn as our systems want, and often label themselves as dumb or stupid when they simply have a brain map weakness. One group I know struggle early on are boys. It is estimated that boys are about 3,500 words behind girls when they start school and they readiness is often behind girls. I get emails all the time from worried parents about boys struggling with learning to read at 6-7. If they feel pressured to perform, feel they are dumb, learn to dislike reading and their readiness switch comes on line, they can simply miss the opportunity to master reading. There needs to be a **gender sensitivity** around learning to read. I have worked with men who have serious self concept issues that go back to year 1 and delayed readiness.

The brain can only change with focussed attention and I am concerned that classrooms with too many bells and whistles may be too distracting for many students. Yes they will be entertained, but positive brain changes can only occur when there is **focussed attention** followed by a sense of reward or encouragement. Of course too much stress or tension will shut the brain down into survival mode – so safe calm environments are also crucial to supporting brain growth!

“Nothing speeds brain atrophy more than being immobilized in the same environment: the monotony undermines our dopamine and attentional systems crucial to maintaining brain plasticity.” Doidge, p 257

Classrooms need to have teachers who make learning interesting and interactive and interpersonal. Even though there are many masters who can teach how to teach exceptionally, it only seems to happen AFTER you have graduated from Uni not during.

My final points about what other factors that can influence how well our students learn on classrooms are the massive influence to TV and stressed fast paced living.

“About 20 years after the spread of TV teachers of young children began to notice that their students had become more restless and had increasing difficulty paying attention.” Doidge p 307

An expert on ADD Dr Edward Hallowell has linked the rise of ADD with the increase of the electronic media – TV and also the appearance of “computers in every classroom.” In my world nothing beats passionate teachers who can teach – without needing the bells and whistles of today. Many students are living in over-stimulated worlds and need things to take a quieter pace in our classrooms. I wonder how we

will create the writers and authors of tomorrow if they learn to write on a PC using spell check! Having a voice and being encouraged to express it takes the gradual development of human communication, story telling and a love of language from very early in life.

We all live at a faster pace and many children are hurried. Stressed family environments and tired children can make learning in today's classrooms more challenging. If we could improve the amount of sleep we all get, learning in classrooms would improve. If we also took more care to ensure children were eating high quality food with no additives, colourings and preservatives – students would learn everything better!

So maybe we need to consider that today's children are struggling with the effects of modern living rather than just not spending enough time in class on the basics when looking at the report on Education at a Glance. There could be many factors at play. Quality teaching that encourages building relationships BEFORE teaching, and a clear knowledge of what impacts learning and brain development and safe environments that are conducive to learning would definitely help our children learn not only the basics but also all the other "stuff" that you learn at school. (like collective nouns!!!!)

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