Labor commits to Gonski
But will Malcolm Turnbull?
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After becoming prime minister last year, Malcolm Turnbull told the ABC he had no plans to change the government policies that forced this downgrade.

The “savage attack” on the ABC and SBS “should be called for what it is: censorship”, says AEU deputy federal president Maurie Mulheron. “The cuts are not the end-game.”

The funding slash aims to silence journalists who offer an independent critique of policy. Meanwhile the weakening of the public broadcasters will help give commercial media a competitive advantage in a volatile media market, says Mulheron, who’s also president of the AEU NSW Teachers Federation.

Mulheron sees a parallel with the federal government’s attack on public education.

“Behind the refusal to fund Gonski, the cuts to TAFE and the deregulation of higher education are vested interests which denigrate the work of teachers, attempt to reframe the curriculum to reflect a conservative world-view and which seek to marginalise public education,” he says.

The weakening of public broadcasting and public education threatens Australia’s cultural and intellectual capacity. “It is nothing short of an attack on the democratic foundations of this nation,” says Mulheron.

“Teachers rely on the ABC and SBS not only for quality educational resources, but as standard bearers for objective media in the classroom,” he says.

Mulheron’s sentiments are shared by Walkley-award winning journalist, Quentin Dempster, who says the ABC and SBS face grave danger without a strong political support base.

Speaking to the Ryde-Macquarie Teachers Association late last year, Dempster called for “people power”. He urged teachers to join Friends of the ABC and Save Our SBS to save quality journalism and program making from the “forces out to undermine and destroy it.”

Children in care are less likely to achieve nationally agreed literacy and numeracy standards, according to an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report.

The report, Educational outcomes for children in care, explored the academic performance of more than 3,500 children in care (aged between seven and 17) from six states and territories.

The proportion of such children who achieved the national minimum standards was lower among older children. When compared with all children in Australia, children in care were 13 to 39 percentage points lower on literacy and numeracy measures, a gap which increased from 13–20 percentage points for Year 3 students to 24–39 percentage points for Year 9 students.

The institute’s Justine Boland says it’s important to note that the academic achievement of children in care is likely to be affected by complex personal histories and multiple forms of disadvantage, including poverty, maltreatment, family dysfunction and instability in care and schooling.
Australia’s declining maths and science results have been “virtually ignored” by the federal government, despite a supposed focus on innovation, says education researcher Trevor Cobbold from campaign group Save Our Schools.

It’s “somewhat bewildering” that prime minister Turnbull’s recent innovation statement failed to seriously support school education, he says. “At present, 18 per cent of Australian students do not achieve basic skill levels. Bringing all students up to this level would require an average increase of only nine points on the OECD’s PISA tests for mathematics and science,” says Cobbold.

The statement acknowledges that ensuring students have the skills to equip them for the workforce of the 21st century is critical to Australia’s economic and social well-being. But it proposes spending a miserly extra $100 million on school education over five years from 2016 to 2017, comprising $48 million on prizes and competitions in science and mathematics and $51 million on digital literacy programs, says Cobbold.

“The planned increase is farcical. It amounts to only $20 million a year or $54 per student a year. It represents only one per cent of the increase in Gonski funding planned by the Gillard/Rudd governments over the three years from 2016-17 to 2018-19. It will do little to reverse Australia’s declining maths and science results,” he says.

Cobbold says a wealth of research in Australia and from overseas proves the link between student performance and a nation’s economy. The latest study, released late last year by the US National Bureau of Economic Research, estimated that long-run economic growth could increase by 0.24 per cent per year if student achievement were improved even slightly. Improving the average results of US students to the level achieved in Finland would improve long-term economic growth by 0.62 per cent a year.

The bureau concludes that there is a significant economic incentive for change. “Improved schools lead naturally to higher skilled workforce, and the impact of skills of the workforce is clear and strong.”
Vale Dr Margaret Williams-Weir

Dr Margaret Williams-Weir, who died on October 1, aged 75, was a trailblazer whose contributions to Australia merit wide recognition and celebration.

A Malera/Bandjalang woman from northern New South Wales, Margaret Williams-Weir (aka Margo Weir) defied the odds to achieve a remarkable number of firsts in her 75 years.

In 1956, before Indigenous people were granted civil rights, she was one of the first two Aboriginal students in the country to matriculate. She then became the first Indigenous person to enrol at and graduate from university, initially with a diploma in physical education from the University of Melbourne.

She went on to attain a bachelor of education and a research master’s (with honours), and a PhD from the University of New England, which she completed when she was 61.

Williams-Weir, who was also a gifted sportswoman, felt a great sense of duty to succeed. From her earliest days at university she was conscious of the pressure to prove herself and set a good example.

“I knew I was opening a door for others and had to finish,” she said, “because if I failed, white people would say they gave a black person an opportunity but what’s the point?”

Her contributions to the development of Indigenous education are legendary, as a teacher and researcher, and as a consultant to the government on significant projects including reviews of national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and a longitudinal study of Indigenous children.

Williams-Weir again made history in 1983, as the first Indigenous person to be employed by a national union, when she became the Aboriginal education coordinator of the Australian Teachers’ Federation (which later became the AEU). During her three years with the ATF, she had a significant impact on the way teachers perceived Aboriginal education issues, says Robert Bluer, who was ATF general secretary at the time.

In the navy

Williams-Weir was no stranger to the classroom, teaching primary, secondary and post-secondary students in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada.

In Canada, where she met the man who would become her husband, she also served three years as a commissioned officer in the Royal Canadian Navy.

Professor Glynn Davis, vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne, remembers talking with Williams-Weir at that time and thinking it “odd to hear her describe living at Anchorage and looking over the Bering Strait” while discussing Indigenous education.

But Indigenous education was her passion, and her inspiration will live on in Indigenous students and communities throughout Australia.

“The struggle for justice for Australia’s Indigenous people will continue, and the building blocks erected by Margo Weir will provide its foundation,” says Bluer.

Williams-Weir passed away two weeks after the University of Melbourne awarded the first vice-chancellor’s fellowship named in her honour (with Noel Pearson being the inaugural recipient). Speaking at the launch, her niece, Melissa Williams, said her aunt’s life was testament to the elimination of what had once been an exclusion zone for Indigenous Australians.

“Aunty would be so proud. She accepts that this is a credit, not just to herself, but to the broader communities she has moved through and that helped make her the person she is.”
That "something big" is Gonski funding, which is already getting results at schools in Australia. This is why Labor’s commitment to funding the full six years of Gonski funding is such a breakthrough. It will put the pressure on Malcolm Turnbull to match that commitment and turn schools funding into the bi-partisan issue it should be.

I had the privilege last year of travelling Australia and seeing first-hand how schools and educators are using additional Gonski resources to shape students’ futures and make a difference to their lives.

The enthusiasm from educators who are benefiting from Gonski funding was incredible. Schools can finally offer students the literacy programs they need, the speech pathology or extra STEM activities, and professional development to give teachers new skills.

It made me even more determined that that we win our campaign for all schools in every state and territory to get the full six years of Gonski resources they need.

In 2016, more schools and students will benefit than ever before as Gonski funding will be delivered directly to schools in New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and, for the first time, Victoria.

Future funding uncertain
That’s why we need Malcolm Turnbull to match Labor’s plan to invest an extra $4.5 billion in schools by funding Gonski in 2018 and 2019 and ensure schools have certainty about their future funding.

There is no need to renegotiate schools funding after 2017 – as Mr Turnbull is saying he wants to do – the six year Gonski agreements have already been signed, we just need governments to implement them.

After all, education minister Simon Birmingham has agreed that schools receiving Gonski funding are doing “fantastic things” with their extra resources. So why not build on that success?

Disabilities funding promise broken
The Turnbull Government has already broken its promise to extend Gonski funding to all students with disabilities in 2016.

This funding was a key recommendation of the Gonski Review and a Coalition election promise in 2013. This broken promise is a shameful betrayal of the hopes of students, their parents and their teachers.

Educators have always known that there are many students whose disabilities or learning difficulties mean they need extra funded support in the classroom, and that many aren’t getting it.

The federal government pledged it would use the comprehensive Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Disability (NCCD) to extend Gonski funding to cover all students with disability who needed funded support at school from 2016.

The data collection process has been completed but the federal government still cannot say when or how the extra funding will be delivered.

To add insult to injury, the final data from the NCCD found that more than half of students who need funded support for disability are not getting it. This is a huge pressure on teachers, schools and students.

This year will be crunch time in the battle for Gonski. It’s a federal election year and our Gonski campaign is gathering momentum.

Investing in our schools and students will have huge benefits in the long term and should have bi-partisan support.

The evidence shows Gonski is working, we just need the federal government to understand this and fund it in full.

Correna Haythorpe
AEU FEDERAL PRESIDENT

Its a federal election year and our Gonski campaign is gathering momentum.

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Labor’s pledge to implement the full six years of the Gonski agreements if elected and give all schools the resources they need for their students is a game-changer, which would give schools certainty about funding.
The pressure is now on Malcolm Turnbull to match Labor’s commitment and deliver the full Gonski funding our schools need. If he does not the future of Gonski funding will become a key issue at this year’s federal election.

We know Gonski is working in the states where it has been delivered. Ask principals what Gonski means to them and chances are you’ll hear the words “flexibility”, “proven results” and “finally being given the responsibility to spend extra funding” where they know it’s needed.

Many have already done just that, and have big plans for the future, but they’ve been left in limbo by the Turnbull Government’s refusal to commit to the final two years of Gonski funding.

Those who were buoyed by Turnbull’s hints last year that he might give Gonski a lifeline were left disappointed over the festive season when education minister Simon Birmingham confirmed the federal government had no plans to deliver the last two years of Gonski funding.

It’s a bizarre stance from a government spruiking the need for an agile and innovative nation, and an education minister who’s admitted schools are already doing “fantastic things” with extra funding.

It left the door wide open for opposition leader Bill Shorten to declare – on the first day of school for 2016 – that a Labor government would reverse the Coalition cuts and fund the full six years of the original agreement.

Shorten called the policy “the largest boost to school funding in two generations”, effectively pumping an extra $4.5 billion into schools in 2018 and 2019. The total package is expected to cost $37.3 billion over the decade.

AEU president Correna Haythorpe says Labor’s investment will ensure all schools have the resources they need to give their students a quality education. “If Malcolm Turnbull is serious about innovation, he will support this in full.”

Education is too important to be a political issue. We need Malcolm Turnbull to back the full Gonski, not just stick to Tony Abbott’s policy of ending needs-based funding after 2017 and cutting real funding to schools.

What’s at stake?
Needs-based schools funding has overwhelming support from business, education, welfare and community groups. As Haythorpe points out, its only opponents are the federal government, and state leaders in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, where schools have suffered a double-whammy: no Gonski funding along with deep cuts to existing education budgets.

For schools that have received Gonski funding, the evidence is clear. It works.

At Caboolture East State School north of Brisbane, Gonski funding started with rebranding. The school’s motto was always ‘Strive together and excel’ but the mantra: ‘no matter my journey, my pathway to success starts here’ has been added.
Gonski funding gives Katoomba High School the flexibility and freedom to tailor extra programs that increase engagement with students and the local community.

Set in the lush surrounds of the Blue Mountains National Park in New South Wales, Katoomba High School serves a diverse community. Its 660-strong student body is a mix of low-SES and middle-class families, and 10 per cent of students are Aboriginal. All have different learning needs.

When principal Jenny Boyall arrived at the school three years ago, she set two priorities: enhancing student engagement and creating a sense of belonging. “Kids can’t learn if they’re not engaged and part of the place. We talk about Katoomba High as being part of a community,” she says.

The $120,000 in extra Gonski funding the school received for 2015 enabled Boyall to look at how the curriculum could engage every type of student. The result is a host of new programs that she says have seen the school “become a place that’s not just about the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom”.

Inside out

One of the school’s most ambitious initiatives is Birriban Land Care, a bush regeneration project that’s transformed a two hectare space among the native eucalypts into a living classroom.

Birriban is the Gundungurra word for Emu, and Gonski funding allowed Boyall to employ a full-time Aboriginal education officer, Gary Rule, to run the program. What started as an alternative to sport, and a way to connect Aboriginal students to their culture and heritage, has become a dynamic learning that is being used across the curriculum to teach art, science, English, geography and maths.

“It’s opening up teachers’ world views,” says Boyall. “They’re seeing how they can use it for teaching and learning. Having Gary here has given them permission to feel comfortable moving into Aboriginal culture.”

Rule, along with another member of staff, also runs a motorcycle repair club for boys who were becoming disengaged at school. Boyall likens it to a young men’s shed and says in its first year eight boys took part, three are now in work and five are doing their HSC.

“One Aboriginal student connected with the program before he started here, working with Gary and the older boys. Now, instead of feeling anxious about the transition to high school he’s become engaged with the school and his culture,” says Boyall.

Extra support

Gonski funding is assisting Boyall in other important ways, such as employing additional staff, who provide extra support with literacy and numeracy, and a full-time teacher who runs a Learning Hub for children with emotional and behavioural needs.

“When students get the extra support they need they feel more comfortable at school and stay connected to their learning,” says Boyall.

Students entering Year 12 can also access the HSC tutoring program, which assigns them a one-on-one mentor to keep them on track emotionally, assist with specific lessons and advocate on their behalf.

In a nutshell, Gonski funding has given Boyall greater flexibility and creativity to invest in the school according to the needs of her students.

“It has increased engagement, improved academic results and enhanced a sense of belonging and connectedness for students and the community. “It’s funding we urgently need to continue into the years ahead because we’ve only just begun, and investment in our young people is worth fighting for,” says Boyall.

Jenny Boyall
Katoomba High School
That’s the essence of everything we do,” says principal Julieanne Wilson. “No matter what journey these children have travelled, this is where their pathway to success begins, and continues on.”

Being in one of three states that didn’t sign the original agreement, the school has only had Gonski funding for three years. It has received $305,000 in 2014, $296,000 in 2015 and $406,000 for 2016.

The money has been very welcome. In the past six years the school’s population almost doubled, from 420 to 686 students. Of those, 105 have a verified disability. A further 117 attend the school’s Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP).

The ECDP complex caters for students with a disability from birth through to pre-prep, and it can be utilised by children from neighbouring areas. Wilson says its success has seen parents fighting to get their children enrolled. “They tell us they’re trying to find a house in our catchment area!”

We work together: the kids, the staff and the parents are a team. That’s the key to our success.

Tempering disadvantage

Caboolture East has a high percentage of students with disabilities (SWD). It ranges from 13 to 16 per cent, compared with 5 per cent at most other schools. Most of the children in the SEP have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Others have intellectual disabilities, and hearing and vision impairment.

Wilson says “there’s still a huge cohort awaiting verification” [See page 13: Disability funding] To further complicate matters, the school’s transient population is high. Last year it was 43 per cent.

And many come from disadvantaged homes. While Wilson can’t change the unpredictability of her student body, funding has allowed more investment in professional development for teachers, to build their capability and capacity to understand those dynamics. “If children bring trauma to school, it impedes their learning,” she explains.

Wilson uses parallel and co-teaching to optimise special ed teachers so they
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Correna Haythorpe
AEU Federal president

Disability funding:
More broken promises

The 2016 school year began on a bad note: the Turnbull Government revealed it would not support additional funding for students with disability.

Denying this key component of the Gonski Reforms, and bi-partisan policy at the 2013 federal election, means no extra money to support around 250,000 students.

Results from the 2015 Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability found that 12.5 per cent of students need "supplementary, substantial or extensive support", compared with 5.3 per cent of students currently getting funded support.

The AEU’s State of Our Schools survey in the same year revealed 79 per cent of principals don’t have enough funding for their students with disability. Even more had to shift funds from other areas of their budgets to manage those needs.

AEU Federal president Correna Haythorpe says, “Despite five years of data and repeated promises by the Federal Government that extra funding would go to schools from 2016, we’re no closer to getting the extra resources that schools desperately need.”

“This is another broken promise by the federal government, and a failure by state governments to hold them accountable,” says Haythorpe.

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The Northern Territory’s education funding strategy is a heavy hit for already severely disadvantaged students at remote schools.

Feeling the heat

With schools around Australia devastated at news that the federal government is breaking its promise to fund the final two years of the Gonski reforms, schools in the Northern Territory are facing a double whammy.

The federal government handed an extra $272.5 million to the NT to spend on government schools for 2014 to 2017, despite its refusal to sign on to the Gonski agreement. But it appears that the government has not only pocketed the windfall, it’s reduced the amount it spends on schools from its own budget.

An AEU analysis of the NT budget shows that, in the last three financial years, funds to government schools have fallen by $28 million — almost $1,000 less per student each year. But the extra federal funds can’t be found in the budget papers.

The NT government has admitted that some of the federal funding has been used to build two new schools rather than its intended use: new programs in schools.

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“...that communities place on bilingual education and jeopardise access to education for many children, says Haythorpe.

Meanwhile, in the lead-up to the NT election this year, the government is thought to have softened its stand on a proposal to withdraw secondary schooling from some remote schools, forcing students to board in one of six major urban areas. Those who chose not to leave their communities were to be offered a basic numeracy and literacy program beyond Year 7.

But AEU NT president Jarvis Ryan points out that successful secondary programs in remote communities are getting results. Last year saw the NT’s largest number of Year 12 Indigenous graduates. At 187, it was an eight per cent increase on the previous year. A total of 27 were from remote areas, says Ryan.

Funding excuse

NT chief minister Adam Giles refused to sign up to Gonski, using the excuse that it would mean diverting money from schools in Darwin and Palmerston to remote schools.

“That claim wasn’t true,” says Ryan. “Their funding would have increased by three per cent a year until 2017.”

Importantly, remote NT schools would have been massive beneficiaries under Gonski, with most receiving funding increases of more than 50 per cent.

“Giles likes to use the slogan ‘Developing the North’ but how can you have that strategy if you aren’t investing in your own people and making sure kids receive the best education,” says Ryan. ●
They are eager, energetic, buzzing with new ideas and keen to make their mark in the classroom. They are also overworked, stressed, worried about their jobs and wondering what happened to the idea of work-life balance.

Across Australia, from outback primaries to inner-city secondaries, thousands of newly qualified teachers are taking charge of their own classrooms for the first time.

Chances are they have been hired on a fixed-term contract as short as six weeks. The lucky ones will know they have their classes for a year. The really lucky ones will have found a permanent position but they’ll be in the minority. Many will be looking for casual shifts and asking what happened to the teacher shortage they’d heard so much about.

Other graduate teachers have returned to work for a second or third year, and they may not be at the same school. They may even be on their third, fourth or fifth school. Some will have already left the profession, frustrated by the lack of job security and/or the workload.

Those who have stayed would have not only been looking forward to seeing their students, but also further developing their own skills.

And, whatever issues all these teachers have, they’ll be turning to their union for support - from finding and applying for jobs, to building their skills, understanding their entitlements, and campaigning for reforms that meet their needs and those of their students.

Support for new educators has been a big growth area in AEU activities in recent years. Most states and territories have a graduate specialist to help them become active, campaigning members in the knowledge that they are the future of our union, and our schools.

AEU new-educator networks have flourished with the spread of social media, connecting members and sparking conversations about everything from finding the best lesson plans to trying to secure the final two years of Gonski funding.

Last November in Hobart, at the annual federal New Educators Conference, the verdict was that our profession is in good hands.

**Cuts uncertainty**

The first problem graduates always face is finding a job. AEU branches across Australia say job security is a big issue, stemming from the uncapped supply of new teachers and a low entry bar to courses. This is often exacerbated by state and territory government cuts.

The start of the school year is a unique experience for every new graduate teacher, but the need to find support and build confidence is common to all.

**BRIEFLY**

Oversupply and budget cuts make job security elusive for new educators.

Access to mentors and time release varies greatly across Australia.

The AEU helps plug the gap in support and professional development for new teachers.

New teacher Aiko Wendfeldt is able to work closely with her new-educator AEU officer in the ACT on developing new professional skills.
An AEU survey of Victorian graduate teachers found that 65 per cent were on fixed-term contracts, with job insecurity a key reason why only half saw themselves teaching for more than 10 years. Victorian president Meredith Peace blamed chronic underfunding that left principals unable to make long-term staffing decisions.

“Secure employment means financial security, which is a key way to keep our newest teachers in the profession. School communities expect and deserve a stable workforce,” says Peace.

When you’re a student, you see teachers only inside the classroom; when you become a teacher you discover there’s this whole other work that you’ve got to do...

I have a really good mentor as well. I know in some other schools people have said they only see their mentor once a month but I see her every single day. We talk about workload and because she teaches my subject we share a lot of content — we collaborate a lot. That has really reduced my workload.

Under our agreement, new educators get day release — I’ve used that to observe lessons at a college in our cluster which many of our graduates go on to. That was really good: knowing where to pitch the content and how hard to push students.

There are two other new educators in our school. We have one less teaching hour per week, which we use to talk about issues we’re facing.

Aiko Wendfeldt
Japanese language teacher, Campbell High School, ACT

MY PARENTS ARE both teachers and my dad is an American teaching in Japan, so I always had a vision of going somewhere else as a teacher. I chose Australia.

When you’re a student, you see teachers only inside the classroom; when you become a teacher you discover there’s this whole other work that you’ve got to do. That’s quite challenging, but I really enjoy the teaching.

Our school has a new-educator AEU officer and she’s been wonderful. Our sub-branch president has been quite vocal in saying these are things you should be doing and if you’re asked to doing something else you need to say something.

Aiko recommends:

- Ask questions
- Find a mentor
- Share issues.
For new teachers like Aiko Wendfeldt, developing professional skills such as dealing with challenging behaviour and time management is vital – and these are areas where mentors and supportive unions can make all the difference.

In South Australia, an education department restructure is sending former teachers back to the classroom, squeezing out graduates. “After taking a four-year course, people are finding it hard to get a single day of work,” says new-educator focus organiser Sam Lisle-Menzel.

The Northern Territory has a hiring freeze, and in Western Australia more than half the state’s schools are now ‘independent public schools’ that can circumvent the requirement to hire from the graduate appointment pool, despite encouragement from the government to do so.

In Tasmania, the education department cut 266 teaching positions last year and offered voluntary redundancy to experienced teachers. The resulting chaos found principals desperately looking for teachers at the start of the school year, but unable to offer more than six-week contracts.

Job insecurity can mean more than just making job applications at a busy time of year. In WA it can mean packing up your entire home and family to move hundreds – or even thousands – of kilometres.

Mardi McNamara is an early childhood teacher who spent her first three years in Derby with the Kimberley School of the Air. “Your housing is provided in the country, but if you lose your job, you lose your house,” she says.

“The first year, I didn’t know where I was going to be the following year. I didn’t find out I could stay until the third-last day of term. Obviously that was quite stressful. It’s a lot of work for someone to move their life.”

Tom recommends:
- External coaching
- Prioritising tasks
- Joining the AEU

I DID MY school work experience with an accountancy firm and absolutely hated it – it was so boring. My mum said she thought I’d be a good teacher. So I sort of fell into it.

Now, after teaching for two years, there are some nights where you’re absolutely exhausted and think about certain things but overall it’s been a great experience.

Getting my first contract was very stressful. There can be 100 applicants for one job, so even to get an interview is quite an achievement. But it’s also very exciting – you’ve finished your degree and want to go out and change the world.

What’s been most satisfying has been seeing the growth in my professional knowledge. I’ve done a lot of work with an external literacy coach and that’s really built on the things I learned at uni. Our school has a number of children with special needs and I’ve really enjoyed working with them. It makes you really consider what you are doing and how you do it.

Sometimes you have a really hard day where things just don’t go the way you want them to go and other days you can have a fantastic ‘light bulb moment’ when you work out the right strategy to use.

Time management is the biggest challenge. You want to do everything perfectly. It’s a matter of needing to prioritise. The most important tool a class has is its teacher and, if that person is really down and cranky, that’s no good for anybody.

I joined the AEU as a student. Knowing your rights is really important – what’s acceptable and what’s too far. Under our agreement I’ve just been given an ongoing position. After two years on contract you can be rolled into a permanent position if there is one, without having to reapply. It’s fantastic to have that security. The agreement has worked for me.”

…I’ve done a lot of work with an external literacy coach and that’s really built on the things I learned at uni.
I have a really good mentor...I see her every single day. We talk about workload and because she teaches my subject we share a lot of content - we collaborate a lot.

Aiko Wendfeldt
Campbell High School, ACT

Support issues
Short-term employment can also mean missing out on crucial support. In New South Wales, only teachers in their first permanent position get a reduced teaching load, usually intended to help newbies receive mentoring and get to grips with lesson planning and report writing.

Physical education teacher Cameron Reynolds spent his first two years teaching maths at Wollongong’s Woonona High School. His school was supportive but his teaching load was full.

‘An extra two hours a week would have helped me massively with time management,’ he says. ‘You can have someone who’s been on contracts for six or seven years, and when they finally get a permanent position they get those two hours when they no longer need it.’

In Tasmania, only employment for a term or longer attracts support. New-educator organiser Adam Clifford says the rash of six-week contracts at the start of the year meant many new teachers didn’t get time release; they weren’t assigned mentors, and they weren’t given department laptops or email addresses until their contracts were renewed in term two. ‘You don’t feel you’re part of the staff,’ he says.

That said, some see serial contracts as a rite of passage with benefits. Deana Cuconits has spent four years on a succession of contracts at Parafield Gardens R-7 School in Adelaide’s disadvantaged northern suburbs. The first was for four weeks, teaching Year 6.
I’m a former journalist and I’ve worked in places with large Indigenous populations. It was that interest in Indigenous issues and finding solutions through education that spurred my career change.

When qualified at the end of 2014, I put expressions of interest in to Queensland, the NT and WA to work in a remote school. I’d never been to Tennant Creek but I’ve lived in similar communities. I didn’t experience the culture shock that other teachers do. It’s a great community.

My qualified teaching area is English but I’ve been teaching literacy, numeracy, a South Australian subject called personal learning plan, and science, in Years 7 to 11.

We don’t get the formal time release and mentoring that you do in other states. I’m fortunate to have more experienced colleagues who aren’t formal mentors but have been willing to show me support and assistance — and emotional support when I’ve needed that.

We have a really active AEU sub-branch here and that’s been another network of support. I’ve appreciated my colleagues’ advice on workplace conditions.

At times I found the workload a struggle. And we probably don’t have the professional development opportunities that we would in an urban area. But I honestly think the department does its best to get people out to us.

I’ve sought my own PD in financial literacy. ASIC’s MoneySmart was helpful — I did that over the phone. That’s been my main message to my students in numeracy: they need an understanding of the financial literacy issues that affect Indigenous people and be aware of the people who try to take advantage of them.

I’m excited to start another year of growth with my students. It’s a cliché but they make every day worthwhile.”
It’s very important to find a balance...I’ve joined a local theatre group to get me out of the house and have some fun. I’d encourage any new teacher to find a hobby to keep them motivated when school gets them down.

Cally Grogan
Cohuna Secondary College, Victoria

Her second was for six weeks with Year 7, and her third was a baptism of fire: taking a Year 3-7 special needs class of 12 for two terms, "I was petrified," she admits.

But, looking back, she says it strengthened her as an educator. "It gave me the opportunity to make a decision about where my heart is in terms of where I want to teach. I’ve met a lot of different people and learned different things, and now I know that the middle years is where I really love teaching."

Cuconits had a supportive school, something that new educators say makes all the difference in those intense first years.

However, AEU Victoria’s survey of new educators found only 57 per cent were sure they received their agreed five per cent cut in workload. A quarter didn’t have a mentor, and, of those who did, half didn’t have the time to meet properly.

Typical survey responses included: “I can’t remember having a weekend without planning or marking”; and “I’ve often felt out of my depth”. A quarter of new teachers were required to teach outside their area of specialisation.

Cally Grogan, an art teacher at Cohuna Secondary College in country Victoria, says teaching isn’t like any job she’s done before.

“I worked selling insurance in a call centre and it’s a job you leave at work. You leave the difficult customers behind, have a drink and chill out,” she says. “With teaching, I often find I take home a lot of worries, whether it’s a student not handing work in on time or a student who’s failing a VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] unit.

“It’s very important to find a balance and not let work overtake everything... I’ve joined a local theatre group to get me out of the house and have some fun. I’d encourage any new teacher to find a hobby to keep them motivated when school gets them down.”

Learning curve
Support varies across the nation. Until recently, Queensland graduates had no entitlement to mentoring or a reduced teaching load. The state government has now agreed to both, which the union will seek to embed in its next EBA.

By contrast, the Australian Capital Territory’s new teachers get 15 days’ release over three years – on top of a cut in teaching load – to access professional development and tackle report writing or other priorities. Importantly, these can be carried over if the new educator doesn’t take them in the first year.

“It has helped keep new educators in the profession,” says ACT organiser Jacqui Agius.

Each school sub-branch has an AEU member who ensures graduates know their entitlements.

But even with such entitlements, the learning curve is steep. Take behaviour management. “You’ve done your degree, but to go in front of the class and deal with everyday behavioural issues can cause quite a bit of stress,” says Agius. “[New teachers] feel like they should be able to do this stuff.”

In the NT, Kimberley Walker is only six years out of university but mentors new teachers at Rosebery Primary School in Palmerston.

“New teachers know what they’re getting themselves into,” she says. “When they’re on their final placement they see how busy teachers are. But it’s still a bit of a shock and it can take a couple of years to find the perfect work-life balance.

“It’s important to have someone they know they can trust to bounce ideas off and clarify things, to help them realise what their strengths are; to help break problems down into manageable steps and work out what they need to concentrate on first. Sometimes new teachers just need to be reassured that they don’t have to be doing everything right away.”

Even with a strong agreement in force, accessing support can be difficult, especially for teachers in deep country.

“In some remote or community schools, your beginning teachers are actually your entire staff,” says Queensland Teachers’ Union deputy secretary Kate Ruttiman. “You won’t have a lot of people who have been there over the past five years. So access to mentoring, professional development and understanding of the complex settings are all difficult.”

The tyranny of distance can make it hard even to attend PD in larger centres because schools can’t get cover. SSTUWA organiser Natalie Grant says: “With some of our more remote schools you have to fly out of the NT and then take a different form of transport to the school. It can be hard just getting regular supplies such as groceries.

“Often it’s a wonderful experience for new educators, but it does need to be supported in a special way.”
If we put all our energy into developing their union involvement and don’t support them in their first passion... that’s no good for the profession ...

Adam Surmacz  
AEU graduates organiser

Building capacity
The AEU is well placed to step into the breach. Like many branches, Victoria’s new-educator provision covers everything from application writing workshops and evenings that bring together final-year students and principals, to after-school ‘PD in the Pub’ sessions on behaviour management and other vital skills.

In supporting new teachers, the union is building the capacity of its future leadership, says graduates organiser Adam Surmacz.

“We know that good reps in schools are usually good teachers. You have to be respected as an educator first,” he says. “If we put all our energy into developing their union involvement and don’t support them in their first passion – teaching – and they leave the profession because they’re not supported, that’s no good for the profession, no good for them and no good for the AEU.”

If those who travelled to the New Educators Conference in Hobart are typical, it’s an approach that is paying dividends. While admitting the job has its challenges, none of the new teachers who spoke to Australian Educator has any regrets.

Mardi McNamara has this advice to those embarking on their career: “It’s okay to get stressed out. You’ll feel like you’re falling behind, there’s so much to do, but everything that should get done will get done. Breathe and you’ll get through it.

“You are the professional. You went to university to do this and you are passionate about your career. You will get it done and you’ll do it brilliantly.”

Nic Barnard is a freelance writer.

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Children with speech disorders face multiple disadvantages, but ensuring early intervention is a costly challenge for schools.

**BRIEFLY**

- An estimated nine per cent of children have speech disorders.
- Early screening is important to identify those needing specialised help.
- Funding specialised help stretches many schools' resources.

but most don’t receive the specialist support services they need and don’t qualify for disability funding under stringent rules.

As a result, many schools are diverting precious funds to hire speech pathologists to help their students. The need is more acute in some schools than others.

At Richardson Primary School, in the ACT, more than half of the students have oral language concerns such as major speech development delays, says principal Jason Borton. The school found out how significant the issue was when it engaged the government organisation Therapy ACT to conduct screening in early 2014.

However, accessing Therapy ACT’s support services was often difficult for low-income families.

“To put a family on a bus and pay to go there is too much of a barrier for them. It just didn’t happen,” says Borton.

Instead, Therapy ACT ran a Therapies Assistance Program at the school for two years.

“All we needed was parental permission and the school could be the base for screening, assessment and intervention,” he says.

Speech therapists worked one-on-one in small groups and with students. Importantly for the
sustainability of the work, teachers and teachers’ assistants were also trained to boost their ability to help students with speech issues.

The improvement in many of the students’ oral language skills has flowed on to writing and reading. “It has tended to turn the kids’ confidence around too,” says Borton.

One boy who started the program when he was in Year 2 had oral language skills about two years behind what was considered developmentally appropriate. “We’d struggled to get the family to access any sort of support due to the barriers of transport and finance,” says Borton.

After two years on the program, including some one-on-one assistance and the benefit of his teacher’s additional skills, the boy was recently master of ceremonies at a school assembly.

**Early intervention**

Without early intervention, speech difficulties can have a big impact on a child because they affect other areas of development. Learning difficulties can include reading out loud, building vocabulary, decoding text and a lack of confidence in contributing to class discussions and working in groups with other children. They can also lead to behavioural issues.

But early intervention comes at a cost, and as Borton points out, the changeover to the National Disability Insurance Scheme means schools can now access support services only via private providers.

“From the occupational therapy perspective, we’ve been able to work with the University of Canberra and its undergraduate program, but access to speech therapy isn’t the same,” says Borton. “They are working with me on finding some providers that may be able to do something ongoing, but the cost will be prohibitive – and that’s the issue. “We can continue to do the work we’ve been doing [through classroom teachers], but more targeted intervention is going to be a challenge.”

Even when more funds are available, deciding how best to allocate resources can involve a steep learning curve.

When Thomas Acres Primary School, in Sydney’s south-west, gained from a change in the funding allocation model two years ago, it used some of the resources to tackle speech difficulties.

“The nature of our enrolments had says principal Greg Cartwright. “We
had children coming in at kindergarten level who were identified as having articulation problems. When we dug deeper, we found it wasn’t just articulation. They had language processing issues.”

Community health services in the area were already swamped, says Cartwright. “It got to the stage where if you didn’t access speech services through community health by the first term in kindergarten, you weren’t eligible to access them at all.”

The school initially used its new resources to employ a speech pathologist one day a week to do screening. “Then we got her to target K1, 2 and 3, but it was far too much. It was a scarce resource spread too thinly.”

A review at the end of the first year led to a decision to focus on kindergarten and have a follow-up program in year one. “We realised that we needed to increase the amount of speech pathology time we had and to have daily intervention occurring.”

The school now has two speech pathologists and a school learning support officer (SLSO) to work in its four kindergarten classes 9am-1pm five days a week.

Parent role
Children in the Macarthur area, where Thomas Acres Primary School is located, often don’t have a very strong “parent advocate” at home, so the school’s SLSOs take on the parent role in doing speech homework with the children, says Dayna Soden, who, with Jennifer Pickford, runs SpeechWise, a speech pathology service that works with public schools in the area. For example, the SLSO plays a five-minute matching game where ‘s’ plus a vowel sound are repeated.

Some children have receptive language difficulties that affect their ability to follow auditory instructions....this can have flow on effects.
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They have trouble participating in class because they aren’t actually following what is going on.

“Also, our teachers have a greater understanding and awareness of the impact an effective speech program can have on a child.”

Teachers are usually the first to notice when a child is having difficulty, says Pickford, so it’s important that they are familiar with age-based scales of development and articulation. She suggests Cochlear Australia’s integrated Scales of Development for gauging whether there is a need for speech therapy. In the absence of a full language assessment by a speech pathologist, school counsellors can provide access to the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals screening tool.

Borton stresses the importance of early screening and says there are some very user-friendly oral language tools that can indicate which students require individualised, targeted support and those who could benefit from more universal approaches.

Dayna Soden, SpeechWise

developing and maintaining relationships with their peers. They tend to fall behind and aren’t following what the other kids are talking about. They are also quite slow to develop vocab and grammatical concepts.”

To help such children, the SLSOs work with small groups – to teach them a concept such as ‘above and below’, for example.

At Thomas Acres the speech pathologists also attend weekly learning support team meetings along with the school counsellor, classroom teachers and the school’s occupational therapist.

The school has been tracking the impact of its initiatives using the NSW Department of Education’s Early Action for Success program. “We map the progress every five weeks,” says Cartwright, “and we’ve seen a really significant improvement in the numbers of children exiting kindergarten operating at cluster 3 and 4, and in some respects higher than that.

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Pronounced improvement

Early intervention is helping the 40 per cent of prep students at Queensland’s Minimbah State School who need support with oral language and speech intervention.

The school, at Caboolture, near Brisbane, has been using Gonski funding to test the hearing, speech and vision of every child from prep to Year 3. Speech therapists work two days a week, or as needed, and teachers are given additional aide time.

Many of the children have a hearing problem, often due to blocked ears, which is easily remedied.

Principal Sean Bennett says this is vital. “If they’re not attended to early, they can miss out on a lot of oral language,” he says.

The speech therapists develop strategies for teachers and support staff, and use a range of tools. Some are deceptively simple. For example, a modified piece of PVC tubing. The children speak into one end and can hear what they are saying through the other. Or they speak in front of a mirror and watch their mouth and lips as they form different sounds.

Having hearing, speech and vision rolled into one program contributed to Minimbah achieving reading results last year that were the best since Bennett came to the school four years ago.

Christine Log is a freelance writer.

Minimbah State School in Queensland has worked hard on hearing, vision and speech therapy, which is paying dividends in vastly improved reading results.

If they’re not attended to early, they can miss out on a lot of language.

(Left) Sean Bennett, Minimbah State School
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A teachers’ union project in a few villages in India, showing the link between HIV/AIDS awareness and school attendance, has established a model that can be used on a much larger scale.

Changing lives door-to-door

In 2014–15, under a project targeting the impact of HIV/AIDS on school attendance in 20 villages in India, 368 children commenced the education they had been missing out on or returned to school after dropping out.

In India, with a population approaching 1.3 billion, that’s a very small statistic. But it’s also a measure of success of no small significance. “It’s a remarkable outcome,” says Ajit Singh, director of professional development at the All India Primary Teachers’ Federation (AIPTF). “It’s a feat in the sense that what state governments haven’t achieved with their huge amount of human and material resources, state teachers’ union affiliates have been able to achieve with very limited resources and time.

“But for this project, these children might have remained illiterate throughout their lives. Many would have become victims of child labour due to the poverty of their parents.”

The AIPTF designed and ran the EFAIDS (Education For All/AIDS) project in collaboration with Education International and the AEU. The AEU also helped fund it.

The multipronged project, involving home visits and HIV/AIDS awareness programs and street rallies, was focused on 10 villages in the states of Odisha and Tamil Nadu.

It had three objectives:
• To increase the number of children completing basic education.
• To prevent HIV infection through education. This includes overcoming resistance in the community to addressing AIDS/HIV; empowering teachers to educate in different ways, depending on the ages of the children; and making the teachers themselves aware of the need to ensure their protection against infection.
• To challenge and prevent discrimination against girls. “Whatever the issue is in India, you find that girls are doubly hit, and that’s certainly true around issues involving HIV,” says Susan Hopgood, Education International’s president and the AEU’s federal secretary.

While the project’s success at individual village level is an achievement in itself, its greater value lies in producing an audit sample that indicates the extent of the problem while setting an example for governments and other agencies to follow in trying to solve it.

“The important thing is that we show government departments that we can have success on a small scale and they should pick it up on a larger scale. We want state governments to continue the work,” says Hopgood.

The AIPTF, Education International and the AEU are launching similar projects this year in Uttarakhand and West Bengal – both states have very high student dropout rates.

Antidote to poverty

The recently completed project impressed on parents, communities and other stakeholders that an elementary education is essential to earning a reasonable livelihood and is the antidote to poverty. It was also stressed that child labour perpetuates rather than mitigates poverty.

AIPTF secretary general Kamala Kanta Tripathy led the project in Odisha, working hard to convince...
WORLD VIEW

Global action

But for this project, these children might have remained illiterate throughout their lives. Many would have become victims of child labour...

Ajit Singh,
All India Primary Teachers' Federation

projects in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Odisha have helped to get children back into school and raised awareness and understanding about HIV/AIDS.

But for this project, these children might have remained illiterate throughout their lives. Many would have become victims of child labour...

parents and community leaders of the role of education as a way out of poverty. Investigators in Odisha, a state with a high rate of extreme poverty even by Indian standards used a survey to identify 544 out-of-school children aged 6-14.

In Tamil Nadu, the southernmost eastern seaboard state, which has more economic development than Odisha and a relatively low primary school dropout rate, 43 out of 46 out-of-school children (23 boys and 20 girls) were placed in schools.

Before knocking on the doors of every house in the selected villages, the investigators received training in how to approach community leaders to explain the project’s objectives and strategies, and obtain their support. They were also trained in the sensitive matter of how to interact with the parents and guardians. Most, but not all, were cooperative.

Meetings arranged to generate a knowledgeable awareness of HIV/AIDS were attended by parents and guardians, community leaders and members, teachers and students. In Odisha, 225 out of 235 participants knew little or nothing about HIV/AIDS before the orientation. Afterwards, a questionnaire indicated that 229 of them understood how it spreads and means of protection. In Tamil Nadu, results were similar for 350 out of 370 participants.

At the eight street rallies in each state, participants bearing slogans and messages about HIV/AIDS, including the need to have tests for infection, were watched by thousands of other villagers.

“The project was well received by the community, and the follow-up data shows that, with community support, the problem of out-of-school children can be appropriately addressed,” says Singh.

AIPTF president Ram Pal Singh notes that India has made “incredible progress” in raising enrolment ratios and curbing the incidence of dropout in recent years, particularly at primary level. The national enrolment ratio has risen to about 88 per cent and the primary dropout rate has fallen from 30 to 18 per cent since 2002, when education was made a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution.
The learning value of storytelling, from *Cinderella* to *Star Wars*, has become anything but the same old story.

BY CYNTHIA KARENA

**More than once upon a time**

Technology is radically changing the way stories can be told. As well as the linear narratives of books and movies, there is now multimedia and transmedia storytelling.

In these forms, one medium can tell a complete story in itself, but it also forms part of a bigger picture and contributes to a larger narrative. The audience can enter a story from more than one point and look at it from different perspectives.

Multimedia storytelling is commonly used in the entertainment industry to draw further stories and experiences from movie themes. It engages fans (and sells product) by creating a bigger world for them to explore after seeing a film. Think *Star Wars* videogames, figurines, comics, costumes and music.

Transmedia storytelling is the new kid on the block in education. It expands and enriches the central narrative through the interactive creation of extra information.

“At the heart of transmedia is a deep, rich, compelling story with a past, present and future,” says Cathie Howe, manager of the Macquarie ICT Innovations Centre (MacICT). “Transmedia [projects] extend the world of the story, where the audience may add or adapt the plot.”

“It’s this participation that sets transmedia stories apart from multimedia stories.”

**Classroom research**

In 2013, MacICT’s research team used an in-schools project to investigate transmedia storytelling for learning. Year 3 students at North Sydney Demonstration School who took part created a transmedia story around *The Composer is Dead*, a whodunit for narrator and orchestra, with text by Lemony Snicket, music by Nathaniel Stookey and illustrations by Carson Ellis.

Deputy principal Laetitia Cross explains the students deeply analysed the text and constructed new ideas with it in multiple modes.

“They found opportunities to create the back, side or future stories they found most enthralling.”

Teachers need a good understanding of the technology if they are to be able to create the flexibility that transmedia storytelling requires, says Cross.

Year 3 students at St Ives North Public School in Sydney extended their reading of Colin Thiele’s *Storm Boy* as their part in the project. They built on significant storypoints (see right), with writing their own prequels and sequels that were the subject of an online discussion group, says educational consultant Dr Nerida McCredie, research advisor at MacICT at the time.
“Their contribution demonstrated how well they understood the story and showed their depth of insight into the characters and how they relate to each other,” she says.

Transmedia creates a world around a story, says Daniel Donahoo, director of digital consultants Project Synthesis. Donahoo, who creates transmedia learning environments for students, developed The Story Trader, a narrative-driven learning experience steeped in performance, in conjunction with the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). It was trialled recently in a number of NSW schools.

In The Story Trader scenario, students arrive at class and find an old canvas bag full of wool, textiles and fabrics with a note that says: “Build a nook and the story can begin”. The next day there’s a package with maps and a USB with audio files giving students more instructions. On another day, a colourfully caped person, the Story Trader, enters the classroom, looking for the package. “And the story world begins,” says Donahoo. “The idea is that, over six weeks, students participate in scenes played out in the classroom. They have tasks to do, such as writing and telling stories, making videos and engaging with characters in the story [played by NIDA actors].”

“Any of these activities become part of the story, and through this they help write the story themselves. Students are both experiencing and creating the story.”

**Media strengths**

In transmedia storytelling, different media forms suit different aspects of the story, says Dr Donna Hancox, senior lecturer in creative arts at Queensland University of Technology, which has had a postgraduate unit in transmedia storytelling since 2010.

“Each type of media brings a different aesthetic and strength to the story. Each does something that no other media can do as well,” says Hancox. “For example, one part of the main story could be told through a blog, in first-person, with a confidential tone, making the most of what blogs have to offer. “Students start to think about the process of storytelling and what each media tool brings to it. In transmedia storytelling, they need to think about what will engage the audience at different points. Will it be Facebook, a game, Twitter, photos?”

Cynthia Karena is a freelance writer.
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**KRYSRAT WIGGINS**
Year 5/6 lead teacher
Kalgoorlie Primary School, WA

Now in her sixth year of teaching, Krystal Wiggins is passionate about using technology in the classroom. “Technology opens up so many options for you as a teacher. It allows students to communicate their understanding of topics using multi-modal approaches and allows them to work to their strengths,” she says.

Apps are particularly useful. “They help students to learn in different ways, and encourage higher levels of engagement,” she adds.

**Krystal’s tip**
“Playing educational gaming apps is a good starting point, then you can get more creative with game-making apps to differentiate and cater to students’ specific needs.”

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**Nearpod**
(Android, iOS, Windows; free)
Wiggins uses the Nearpod content management app for presentations and blended learning. “It allows me to create a lesson for students to work on independently and caters for different abilities through differentiation. I can include quizzes and assignments. This gives students independence to be able to learn and work at their own pace and level.”

**Tiny Tap**
(Android, iOS; free)
Using this game-based learning app, Wiggins asks her students to create a game based on a topic in class. “I love this app. It allows me to see if students have picked up the concepts and how much they’ve learnt. Rather than traditional question and answer to see what they know, this app gives students a different way of learning and expands their thought processes.”

**Aurasma**
(Android, iOS; free)
“This is one of my favourite augmented reality apps,” says Wiggins. Her students scan an image and use the app to attach video links to specific areas of the image. “When we were learning about India, students chose a photo of a landmark in India, such as the Taj Mahal. They created a video presentation and linked that to the photo. This really brings the image to life.”

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**More apps to explore...**

**C-Fit Yoga**
(iOS, $4.49)
Physical education is more than running around a school oval. Yoga also builds fitness, strength, and body awareness. C-Fit Yoga has a series of four 10-minute videos developed specifically to give children a fun yoga work out that can be done in the classroom. Children are taken through a series of poses that work on balance, flexibility and relaxation. Exercises include familiar yoga positions like the tree pose, eagle pose, cow pose, and salutation to the sun. Pretending to be a tree, eagle or cow can be fun. Each stance is broken down into steps that can be practised before playing the video. Things move at a slow enough pace so children won’t get stressed over getting into position quickly. Vocabulary words are written on screen to help children learn new words. At the end of the session, children should be relaxed and able to focus on the next task at hand.

**Tinkerplay**
(Android, iOS, Windows; free)
Students can start playing with design, helping them become aware of good product design. Advances in 3D-printing technology mean products will be created by individuals rather than being mass produced. Tinkerplay helps students get their heads around designing in 3D. The app is fun to use, even if the school doesn’t have a 3D printer. Students can build a toy from interchangeable parts that are dragged and dropped into place, or use character templates to make everything from scorpions to sea creatures. There’s scope to experiment with textures and colours and background scenes.
Teaching should be focused on how the brain works rather than what the brain knows, says academic and author Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa.

BY MARGARET PATON

Thinking about thinking

A suggestion that teachers move away from content-area knowledge is thought-provoking at a time when Australia is rolling out a national curriculum. But what should they do instead? Teaching academic and author Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa urges focusing on life/soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and creative and critical thinking.

“This means moving away from passing tests and answering questions, which has left a generation gap in skills for life-long learning and warped the real purpose of school,” she says.

“We need to help students learn how to generate, answer and research their own questions.” She wants teachers to become ‘learning scientists’ and model the characteristics of lifelong learning for their students.

She says teachers increasingly feel pressured to get through the curriculum instead of consciously cultivating metacognition – thinking about thinking, which is fundamental to lifelong learning.

“Teaching is hard, and great teaching requires a deeper understanding of the brain and the dynamics of social learning environments to reach the higher levels of thinking and in order to cultivate a love of learning,” says Tokuhama-Espinosa.


In other words, students learn about a subject at home, watching videos and reflecting on content through exercises. This, says Tokuhama-Espinosa, allows the teacher to “spend more time attending to individual students’ learning needs rather than teaching a general lesson with hopes of reaching all, but in reality, missing (too) many”.

Brain-based science

Tokuhama-Espinosa, a former dean of education at the Universidad de las Americas in Quito, Ecuador, is a proponent of mind brain education (MBE), a transdisciplinary field that draws on psychology, neuroscience, biology, health and education. It recognises that the brain is “highly plastic and develops throughout the lifespan”.

In 2014, she served on an OECD panel tasked with redefining basic pedagogical knowledge. The work was based on contributions from neuroscience and technology that hadn’t been updated since the late 1980s.

Key teacher attitudes

In Making Classrooms Better, author Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa says teaching needs to be backed by a number of attitudes:

• Value the teacher’s role: you are the decisive factor in the class.
• Develop human potential: intelligence is fluid, not fixed.
• You have to be a model of the behaviour you want to achieve in your class.
• Develop a culture of evaluation: it’s a form of teaching, not meant to punish, establish rank or pre-judge.
• Motivate autonomy: a teacher’s job is to get students to find and answer their own questions.
• Appreciate a teacher’s responsibility: first, do no harm.
With the help of MBE, teachers can now see how the brain reacts to uncomfortable, threatening, stressful or anxious situations and actually becomes incapable of new learning.

Tokuhama-Espinosa says students need to be taught not only how to understand their conscious emotional responses to their own learning but how to take advantage of them.

Making Classrooms Better captures 50 best-practice ideas for teaching based on Professor John Hattie’s research of student learning outcomes. It lists myths about teaching, learning and emotions, including the myth that learning can be isolated from social and emotional contexts. And it explores teachers’ unconscious beliefs such as ‘if only the students were better behaved’, ‘if only my classes were smaller… then I would be a great teacher’.

Teachers need to ditch those myths, Tokuhama-Espinosa argues, so they can begin to embrace MBE principles.

“Teachers often don’t recognise their power to change lives. A five-second conversation can ruin a child’s life or re-energise it – great teachers intuit this, but all teachers can learn this,” she says.

“We can all learn to teach better.”

She argues that teaching from learning sciences rather than just pedagogy is “a very different way of thinking… and a more complete way of approaching learning”.

“It’s about having a single professional who already understands all the disciplinary approaches and who can appreciate the different possible causes of problems as well as distinct approaches to solutions.”

MBE’s evidence-based research has been tested in classrooms in the United States, Chile, Panama, Switzerland, Holland and Australia. Making Classrooms Better is the latest of several books Tokuhama-Espinosa has written on the topic.

She says teachers do more experiments in a day than any neuroscientist in their lifetime. [They] make ‘judgement calls, apply an intervention, evaluate, analyse, modify and tweak their approaches to improve results’.

Weighing emotion

Emotion is a key factor in teaching and learning, although it’s often not weighted that way, says Tokuhama-Espinosa.

“Affect plays a huge role in how, why and what a person can learn, how we feel about the learning situation and how well we learn.

“Teachers do more experiments in a day than any neuroscientist in their lifetime.”

—with Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa

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Margaret Paton is a freelance journalist and former casual primary school teacher in regional NSW and Zagreb, Croatia.
WE ASK ...

ANGELA LEOPOLD

The next time you feel like whinging about a hiccup in your internet access, or spending too much of your lunch hour in an ATM queue, put yourself in Angela Leopold’s shoes.

She teaches at Kangaroo Inn Area School in south-west South Australia, which she describes - fondly - as “the middle of nowhere”. She always wanted to teach at a remote area school and has been happy at Kangaroo Inn for the past 20 years.

But there are challenges aplenty for teachers and students when school is a 30-kilometre drive from the nearest towns, in this case Millicent and Beachport. The services that city schools rely on, such as shops, reliable internet, daily mail deliveries, even a school canteen are non-existent at Kangaroo Inn.

On the other hand, isolation is a big contributor to the school’s strong sense of community, says Leopold.

“It’s a very calm school and our kids are very accepting of difference,” she says. “If the little ones are struggling with something, the older kids help them. There’s beautiful role-modelling.”

Learning network

Kangaroo Inn has 112 students, from kindergarten to Year 12. Leopold, whom the children call ‘Ange’, sees her role as making sure they have as many opportunities as children at less isolated schools.

To make that happen, some of the seniors get involved in open access learning, and the school participates in the Wattle Range Education Network, which brings together students and specialist teachers from ‘nearby’ schools.

“I’m the only teacher in the area who focuses on nutrition,” says Leopold, “so I teach three students from Kangaroo Inn along with some who come in from Penola, Millicent and Kingston.”

Teachers from Penola hold chemistry classes and the Kangaroo Inn maths teacher travels to Millicent for Year 12 specialist maths. The two-hour weekly classes are followed up using the open source e-learning platform Moodle.

Such collaboration extends to supplies. “As a home economics teacher, I rely heavily on people who come in from Millicent to bring all the food,” says Leopold. “Because we don’t have a canteen, I run a café with my VET students, providing lunches for the kids once a week.”

Career watch

Leopold is proud of what many of her former students have achieved since leaving Kangaroo Inn. She can rattle off an impressive list of successful careers in areas including graphic art, speech therapy, remote area nursing and project management. Several now work for overseas aid organisations.

“I think their success comes down to them having to be that little bit more independent and responsible for their own learning,” she says. “Having seen the way we overcome hurdles for them, they become quite innovative and creative self-managers. They’re more resilient and never let being in a small school restrict their options.”

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.

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