

Gonski, learning and the case for change

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I've been saying recently that the Gonski 2.0 recommendations may provide our best hope of reversing the long-term decline in the reading, mathematics and science levels of Australian 15-year-olds. Why do I say this?

A notable feature of Gonski's report was that it looked at learning from the perspective of learners and recognised that the way we currently organise the school curriculum disadvantages some students.

To see the issue that Gonski saw it is necessary to go to the heart of the learning process.

Fifty years ago educational psychologist David Ausubel observed that the most significant factor influencing learning is what a learner already knows. Ascertain this, he wrote, then teach the learner accordingly.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky went a step further. Successful learning, Vygotsky concluded, is most likely when a learner is provided with challenges that are beyond their comfort zone, but not so far beyond that they are destined to fail. Learning is maximised by stretch challenges on which success is possible, but often only with assistance.

Ausubel and Vygotsky understood that learning is unlikely when people are taught what they already know or when they lack the prerequisite knowledge or skills for success. Effective teaching depends on ascertaining where individuals are in their learning (which usually means establishing what they know, understand and can do) and then providing stretch challenges that are neither too easy nor too difficult.

Gonski recognised this principle as a key to improving learning in Australian schools.

The reason this principle is so crucial to improved performance is that students in the same year of school are at vastly different levels of attainment. The most advanced 10 per cent of students in any year of school are at least five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent of students. This means that challenges appropriate for some students are likely to be much too easy or much too difficult for others.

This variation in attainment could be seen as an issue for teachers to address. And of course it is. The best teachers understand that some students may be two or three years ahead of year-level expectations and others may be two or three years behind. They work to ascertain where individuals are in their learning and to teach accordingly.

But, importantly, Gonski recognised that this is also an issue for education systems and curriculum developers. His review heard how high-performing school systems create conditions that make it more likely that students' differing learning needs are identified and addressed with well-targeted teaching. It also heard how some systems create conditions that make this less likely.

For example, the common practice of organising the school curriculum into year levels with accompanying year-level performance expectations (or 'standards') can promote the assumption that students of the same age are more or less equally ready for the same learning challenges. This assumption is reinforced when teachers are told – directly or indirectly – that their task is to 'deliver' the same curriculum to all students in the same year of school. It is further reinforced if teachers are then expected to assess and grade all students against the same year-level performance standards.

When the curriculum is organised in this way, less advanced students who make good ongoing progress often perform below year-level expectations and so receive low grades year after year. More advanced students often are not challenged by year-level expectations and receive high grades without being stretched or achieving the levels of which they are capable.

School systems sometimes justify this practice by asserting that the best way to improve performance is to hold all students in the same year of school to the same performance standard. But this fails to recognise that students are at different levels of attainment and so require different levels of challenge. No single year-level 'standard' (even a high standard) can deliver this. In general, holding all students to the same standard is likely to be less effective than supporting teachers to establish where individuals are in their learning and then assisting them to set appropriate stretch challenges for each student's further learning.

It is also sometimes considered 'equitable' to set the same learning expectations for all students. But this is an incomplete understanding of equity. An 'equitable' system is one in which each student's learning needs are identified and addressed with appropriately targeted learning challenges, and in which every student is expected to make excellent progress every year towards the achievement of high standards.

System initiatives

High-performing school systems create conditions to address students' differing levels of attainment and learning needs.

For example, Finland provides systematic assistance to students who are falling behind in their learning. The government trains and provides additional payment to 'special education' teachers who work alongside classroom teachers to provide one-on-one and small group tutoring. Up to 30 per cent of all students in Finland are given additional support by these teachers in any given year, perhaps explaining why Finnish students are among the highest performers in the world.

In East Asian countries, systematic efforts to assist students who fall behind in their learning include working with

students outside regular school hours. This strategy is coupled with a strong cultural belief that all students are capable of successful learning and high achievement given the right conditions and ongoing support.

High-performing systems promote a belief that every student is capable of making excellent progress in their learning if they can be engaged, motivated to make the required effort and provided with appropriately-targeted learning challenges. This belief is an alternative to the view that there are inherently good and poor learners. These school systems promote the belief that almost all students are capable of achieving high standards given appropriate support and sufficient time.

They also find ways to support the learning needs of particular groups of students such as newly arrived immigrants and the least and most advanced learners in each year of school. This may include providing special arrangements and resources and building teachers' capacities to differentiate their teaching to address the very different learning needs of their students.

School systems also can promote targeted teaching through their assessment policies. Rather than prioritising assessment to establish how well students perform against common year-level standards, they promote an understanding of assessment as the process of ascertaining where individuals are in their learning – to identify next steps, monitor progress and evaluate teaching effectiveness. They also may provide teachers with quality assessment resources for diagnostic and teaching purposes.

And they support this approach to assessment with aligned reporting. Rather than defining what it means to learn successfully by reference to year-level standards (for example, by requiring teachers to grade every student's performance using A to E), they promote forms of reporting that indicate to students and parents where individuals are in their learning and what progress they have made over time.

Gonski's core proposals

The Gonski recommendations build on this understanding of the conditions for successful learning. They include a number of mutually supporting proposals, with perhaps three core proposals.

First, rethink how we organise the content of the school curriculum. Rather than packaging the curriculum into year levels, with the accompanying assumption that students in the same year of school are more or less equally ready for the same learning challenges, Gonski proposes repackaging the curriculum into proficiency (or attainment) levels. In this way teachers are provided with a basis for ascertaining the level an individual has reached in their long-term progress, targeting their teaching accordingly, and monitoring and reporting learning progress. Students, rather than being delivered the same year-level curriculum, would be challenged at their current proficiency level (for example, Level 9 in mathematics), regardless of their age or year level.

The advantage of this first proposal is that every student is more likely to work at an appropriate level of stretch challenge. Students would continue to be grouped by year level, but within any year group, individuals are likely to be working at different proficiency levels. The hierarchy of proficiency levels would provide the frame of reference for monitoring growth over time.

Second, provide assessment resources aligned with this reorganised curriculum. The purpose of these resources would be to assist teachers to ascertain where individuals are in their learning. What proficiency level have they reached, and what are appropriate stretch challenges for further learning? Well-designed online assessment resources also have the potential to provide diagnostic information about individuals' patterns of development and areas of difficulty. And these resources should assist teachers to monitor and report student growth within and through the hierarchy of proficiency levels.

The advantage of this second proposal is that it provides teachers with quality information about where learners are in their learning to supplement their own assessments and professional judgements. It also provides a basis for more informative reports of the levels students have reached in their learning and the progress they make over time.

Third, find ways to promote evidence-based teaching practices. Teachers require different kinds of evidence to inform and guide their practice. One form of evidence is information about where individuals are in their learning, including diagnostic information about the difficulties they are experiencing. A second form of evidence is information about targeted teaching interventions and strategies likely to promote further growth (as identified through research). A third form of evidence is information about the progress students make, which is crucial information for evaluating learning and teaching effectiveness.

The advantage of this third proposal is that it builds professional knowledge and supports the use of effective, clinical teaching practices. Improvements in ascertaining where students are in their learning will lead to better performances in our schools only if teachers know how to meet individuals' differing learning needs with effective, targeted teaching that challenges further learning.