

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**AN INQUIRY INTO IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES
FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIANS OF ALL AGES**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2012**

Members

**Dr J.M. Woollard (Chairman)
Mr P.B. Watson (Deputy Chairman)
Dr G.G. Jacobs
Ms L.L. Baker
Mr P. Abetz**

Hearing commenced at 9.31 am**LOUDEN, PROFESSOR WILLIAM****Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Western Australia, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into improving educational outcomes of Western Australians of all ages.

At this stage I would like to introduce myself, Janet Woollard; other members of the committee, Peter Watson, next to him we have Graham Jacobs and then Peter Abetz. Possibly joining us a little later will be Lisa Baker. In our secretariat we have Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts. From Hansard this morning we have Kelly Clausen and Geraldine O'Loughlin.

The Education and Health Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly. This hearing is a formal procedure of Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the House.

As a public hearing, Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document or documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed to our discussion and questions that we have for you today, I need to check that you have completed the "Details of Witness" form.

Prof. Loudon: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

Prof. Loudon: I do, thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided today?

Prof. Loudon: I did.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

Prof. Loudon: No, thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: In that case, would you please state your full name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee today?

Prof. Loudon: My name is William Raymond Loudon, although I am known to everyone except my mother as Bill. My current role is Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: Professor Loudon, thank you so much for coming along this morning. Brian will have sent you a copy of the terms of reference for this inquiry, and members are anxious to ask you questions but I thought that we might give you an opportunity, first, having looked at those terms of reference, to talk about those terms of reference in terms of educational outcomes, in terms of factors that you see that positively influence educational outcomes—or maybe factors that negatively influence—and if this funding was there, where you would like to see or suggest there be some change to try to improve educational outcomes.

Prof. Louden: Thank you for the invitation. I am more able to comment on some of your terms of reference than others, but if I could speak for a minute or two about those I feel well informed on.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Prof. Louden: With respect to your first term of reference, which concerns current and future resourcing of new methods and activities, such as e-learning and school partnerships, I thought it might be useful for us to talk a bit about the interaction between new technologies and the Australian curriculum. One of the interesting things about the advent of the Australian curriculum for schools is that the very large number of electronic learning objects that have been created by all kinds of agencies and interest groups and governments in the past have had no way of being connected to the curriculum, and we have had eight separate school curriculums in Australia. One of the interesting things that is happening now is that vast collection of learning objects is now being electronically indexed back to the national curriculum. To give you a trivial example: there is a large set of these things managed by an organisation called Educational Services Australia. You could go to that if you were a teacher and type in “frogs” and you would find hundreds of learning objects to do with frogs and tadpoles and the life cycle and the lessons they have for us about elementary biology, but they would not be easily connectable to what do you do about frogs and tadpoles in year three. If you think of some scientific concepts that have simple explanations and complex explanations—the water cycle—I can think of examples. So the great thing about the new curriculum is that this vast set of electronic learning objects that have been created—videos, games, tasks, projects—is now properly indexed so that you can look at the topic or you can look at the curriculum and have them properly connected.

The CHAIRMAN: So it is now connected by a grade, is it?

Prof. Louden: Yes, because the national curriculum is like a skeleton. It is a structure which says: do these things, learn these things in year three in science; learn these things in year 10 in English. But the most interesting thing, particularly for a state like Western Australia, is that now all of the learning resources of all of the states and all of the interest groups that provide learning resources for free can now be properly connected to the skeleton, to the structure.

So I think that as the speed of internet access increases for every citizen and every school, there will be more opportunities for people to use electronic learning. But without something like the national curriculum to provide a structure to connect all the bits to, it has been a bit like a shoebox full of photographs, a great big shoebox which you would put your hand into and find something about frogs, but is it a year five thing about frogs or is it a year 10 thing about frogs? So that is one of the things I would draw your attention to, because it is all very well to have high-speed internet access available, to have lots of computers available in schools—and we have both those things in most schools now—but unless you have something to connect them to, it is just a shoebox full of stuff.

Mr P. ABETZ: Who is doing the indexing?

Prof. Louden: This has been done as a project by Educational Services Australia. Each state has its own repository, but, as you know, we have had all this activity, which early childhood teachers would call parallel play, where each state has been creating its own resources and its own curriculum and they do not speak to each other. Graham mentioned mathematics teaching a little while ago when he said that my dad had taught him maths. In Western Australia we use New South Wales’ year 11 and 12 maths books because it is a big state and it is worthwhile writing a good textbook. But the books do not actually describe our curriculum, so the teacher has to figure out which chapter to chuck out and what order to do things in. So the resources are good, but they are not directly indexed.

One of the not understood virtues of the national curriculum is not just that it is a recent look at what we should be teaching, but that it is a common structure. So, now, when anyone creates any resource for teachers and students to work with, it is indexed back to the same structure. So the

curriculum resources available in small states like Tasmania, which has typically almost had nothing to spend on production of resources and syllabuses, will now be of the same quality as New South Wales which has always spent a great deal on this.

The CHAIRMAN: So we will still have an ESA in each state?

Prof. Loudon: The ESA is a national authority.

The CHAIRMAN: So it will just have a branch?

Prof. Loudon: It is a federal government agency and what it is doing is carefully checking through the rights that attach to each digital object and checking that they can be made available free to teachers; whereas at the moment each state has its own box. That will be a wonderfully integrating thing, so I thought I might draw your attention to that, because we have lots of computers and internet access, people have created a lot of these learning objects, but the question has been which one to use. For every teacher the question always is: how will I explain this; what task will I give the kids that will help them understand this? So I see this as a very important innovation for Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: Will there be in-service for teachers to encourage them to use it?

Prof. Loudon: Each of the states and sectors will be running in-service courses, but over and above that I have to say that when a teacher is preparing to teach, the question always is what is the activity I am going to do and what materials will I use, and so teachers will search that stuff out themselves. The key thing is that it is sensible to search for it; there is a sensible search strategy now because you will have a common structure. So that was the first thing I might say, rather than talk about e-learning myself, I take for granted that everyone will be wandering around with these devices which we have just turned off, and that kids will have them in their pockets and that kids will have iPads, and those things will get smarter and better and more beautiful. Take for granted that the technology will be there, but the question is, how do you get access to the resources and how do you know what to look for in the giant shoebox of the internet? So that was the first thing I thought I might comment on.

The second thing, which concerns your term of reference 2 about positive and negative childhood development from birth to year 12, is that much of that is not in my own area of specialism, but what I wanted to draw to your attention is the great importance for children who come from families who have not benefitted from education in previous generations, is that they get high quality early childhood teaching, and that, for me, is particularly important that that begins to happen for kids as soon as they are ready to learn formally. Some children are ready to teach themselves to read when they are four-and-a-half or five and some are not ready to learn to read until they are seven. I have two kids and they learned to read at quite different times, but it is important to me that schools are organised so that kids who are ready to learn can learn when they are ready rather than being told, "Well, you are in preschool now and we do not teach reading in preschool". This has been a matter of great contention among teachers of young children for many years, and I feel that the evidence firmly is that young children who are ready to learn to read should be taught, should be allowed to learn as soon as they are able rather than being held back, and that children who are least likely to prosper in schooling are those for whom it is most important that explicit teaching happens early.

The CHAIRMAN: And by explicit teaching, you mean?

[9.45am]

Prof. Loudon: I mean that it is useful to draw—there are all kinds of things you can do before kids are ready to read that will make it easier for them to learn to read, because what is reading? It is a set of written symbols that are intended to approximate the sounds. So pointing out to children the relationship between words and sounds can happen very early, and should be done early, particularly if your kids are not going to prosper. So teachers of young children have thousands of

games in their repertoire that help them to do this, but kids do not know naturally, to give you a trivial example, that words are made up of syllables and the syllables represent single sounds, by and large. So if you do the games you see when you look in the windows of kindies and preschools—the kids clapping out syllables—then you are helping the kids to see that words are broken up into bits, and that is how you attack them to try to understand, and they need to think about what the bits are here. I will not go on any further about teaching reading.

The CHAIRMAN: So you are talking about phonetic awareness?

Prof. Louden: You need to be explicit about those things. Some smart kids get it without any teaching, but that is no excuse to not teach those who do not. So these are the many things you can do before kids are ready to learn to read that you should do rather than just waiting for them.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think that the Australian early development index is being utilised to its maximum in Western Australia to identify and assist in those areas where children do not have the same support system to enable their preparation and readiness for school and for learning?

Prof. Louden: The thing about the Australian early development index that people need to understand is that it is an index designed to identify areas, geographical areas, in which kids have more needs, not to identify children, because the number of literacy related items in the ADI is, I think, four. So there is a tiny sampling of kids' skills in the index and it looks at all kinds of other things as well, so it is an area-based index. So it is not useful at all in identifying whether little Johnny is at risk. It is quite useful at identifying whether the children at Maylands Primary School are more or less at risk than the children at Mt Lawley Primary School.

The CHAIRMAN: But if it was, say, Maylands Primary School that was identified, given that information, should more resources be put in the Maylands area so that—how often do they do the ADI? Is it yearly or every two years?

Ms L.L. BAKER: Every two, I think.

The CHAIRMAN: Every two years, so that the next one that is done in two years' time, maybe the children have improved on one or more domains depending on where the failings were previously.

Prof. Louden: Just to say again that the ADI itself is not a test of achievement; it is a way of figuring out geographically where the greatest needs are, and it does that well. But you could also probably do that in a slightly less scientific way and get much the same results because deprivation is not hard to spot. I am not suggesting that we replace looking in the car park or the drop-off line at school to measure where the schools at risk are, but you can see some differences between school communities.

So, yes, in general, I do agree with you, that in schools where the challenges are greatest the resources should be greatest. The resources, of course, are not always money, because the greatest resource of all is a knowledgeable and skilful teacher who cares about that group of kids, who believes they can learn. So everything you do in education has got to be about supporting teachers to be more knowledgeable, to choose and keep teachers who care about those kids and who believe that those kids can learn.

The CHAIRMAN: But is it just the teacher or should it be—have we not placed enough emphasis on the role of parents? Should it not be the teacher, and encouraging teachers, particularly in those early childhood areas, to work closer with parents so that it is not just support during the school hours but so that whatever has been given to the children during the school hours is hopefully being reinforced when the children are at home?

Prof. Louden: Of course, and many schools work very closely with parents, but sadly the schools in which the parents and teachers are least likely to work together are the ones where there is most likely to be concerns about kids learning, and so in those schools I am particularly anxious about the quality of teaching and support for the quality of the teaching. My little formulation there talked

about their knowledge and their care for those kids, but also talked about the belief that those kids can learn, because one of the things that can happen to a teacher faced by schools where there is not a lot of support from home, where kids do not attend sometimes, and so on, is they can begin to believe that these kids cannot learn, or that we should not expect too much of these kids. That is the most corrosive thing of all in education—if you give up on your belief that these kids can maybe progress and that it is your responsibility to do that.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I am on a school board in Albany—they have become an independent public school—and we love it because we can pick the teachers who want to be there. My main concern is that we have teachers who have been in the system for a long time. There is no way of saying if you are a good or bad teacher—we have been carrying bad teachers for a long time. You just said that the answer is that we have teachers who want to teach and have confidence in the class. I do not know how to put this, but how do we get rid of the bad teachers who are not doing it or how do we—

Ms L.L. BAKER: That might be something that the government needs to look at, Peter, not the committee.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Maybe not get rid of them, but how do we stimulate them?

Mr P. ABETZ: How do we upskill them?

Mr P.B. WATSON: How do we upskill them?

Prof. Loudon: It is that important question. However you put it, it is an important question. When I used to be an active educational researcher—and I have not done any new empirical research in the last four or five years, but in the last set of projects I worked on we were interested in trying to work out what the relationship was between children's growth and the behaviour of the teacher in the classroom, and particularly around literature and mathematics. That was the last round of projects I worked on. What we did was look at hundreds of schools across the country and the growth of children in those schools and then we looked in some schools at the behaviour of teachers and tried to see what the relationship was. The interesting thing is that it was quite easy. Once you bear in mind the power of the test, the statistical power of the test, there were about 10 per cent of teachers whose kids' performance seemed clearly to have less value added than other teachers; there were 10 per cent whose kids seemed to grow more than you would expect; and there were about 80 per cent who grew about as much as you would expect.

So when you are talking about bad teachers or teachers who need special help, or so forth, it is important to realise that the great bulk of people do a good job and the job they do is about as good as the person next door to them. Most of us are pretty much average. There are a few people that everyone thinks, just by walking past the classroom door or looking at the kids' work, or by testing the kids, clearly do much better than you would expect, and there is a small group who clearly do much worse than you would expect. So the two tails are of interest. But I am reluctant to be drawn into imagining that many of the people in the middle 80 per cent are not doing a good job, because the vast proportion of people's work, when you look at it statistically, has about the same effect: that is, kids grow about as much in a year as a year's growth would take with a whole pile of teachers.

Now, there are some teachers whose kids do not grow as much as you would hope, and if a kid gets a teacher like that three times in a row, then they are in trouble. So we do need to think about teachers whose kids do not make a lot of progress, but it is a relatively small group, and I would not—you are on a school board so you will know how hard this is.

Mr P.B. WATSON: It is a small percentage.

Prof. Loudon: But I would be working with those teachers to ask them what it was.

Ms L.L. BAKER: It is performance management.

Prof. Louden: It is about performance, talking to them about what they think they are doing, giving them some feedback about their performance, asking them what kind of help they want.

The CHAIRMAN: When you say about the feedback, we looked a few weeks ago at the model that is being used in Singapore, where it is not just face to face with a student 80 or 90 per cent of the time with the teacher; it is team teaching. It is all sorts of other things that come into curriculum. Less face to face and more support for the teachers and more—I was just trying to think of all those things that we had. There would be classroom observations, teaching, school-based research, feedback, identifying learning, modelling good practice, active collaboration. So it is not that one on one, it is a different approach in the classroom to what we traditionally have in Western Australia. Do you think that it would help if we moved a little more towards the Singaporean model?

Prof. Louden: In the best schools, or the best parts of good schools, one of the things you find is that teachers know a bit about what other teachers are doing, because they have been in their classroom, that people are willing to have other adults watch them teach, people are interested in what other people are finding successful. So that learning from each other, getting feedback about your teaching, lesson observation, that happens in the best parts of schools or the best schools. It was happening at John Wilcox High School in Geraldton in 1977—I was there. I was in a group of teachers and we were looking at each other's work and trying to give each other structured feedback about how to do better. So there is nothing new about working in teams, mentoring, feedback for teachers; it is just hard to do and requires people to get over the sense that teaching is a private activity.

Mr P.B. WATSON: We have a school in Albany where members of the school council are encouraged to sit in with the class. It is a private school.

Prof. Louden: It is a good thing. If you allow it to remain private, it is something that an adult does with children and only the adult and the children know what is going on, and then it is hard to see how teachers learn and grow.

What has been done with structuring in Singapore is helpful. I do not know whether our school system should be doing it or our schools, in the case of independent public schools, should be doing more of that structurally, but I definitely agree that where teachers learn the most and have the most job satisfaction is when they work with their colleagues at getting the best for the kids, not when they retreat to their private classroom and shut the door.

The CHAIRMAN: Peter, I think you have one more question before we carry on.

Mr P. ABETZ: I have a special interest in the history of teaching in remote Aboriginal communities. One of the things that has struck me is, from having gone to a community for about 15 years every year, the old fellers were taught to read and write by the missionaries, who were not trained teachers, and they can read and write English reasonably well. Yet their grandchildren, they tell me with tears in their eyes, cannot read or write, and we send university-qualified teachers up there to teach and they are not learning. Now the missionaries should have been failures as teachers because they were not qualified and yet they were able to teach them. Is that partly because of the relationship they had with that community? What is the dynamic? Does that go back to what you said before, that they believed that those kids could learn? What is the dynamic that is going on?

Prof. Louden: There are a lot of things, Peter. One obvious thing to say would be that if you attend school, you are more likely to learn.

Mr P. ABETZ: That helps.

Prof. Louden: So in a community where, practically speaking, attendance is voluntary or intermittent, then you have less hours at school and you are less likely to learn. That is one thing that people in remote community schools struggle with: getting kids to go to school every day so that tomorrow's lesson can build on today's lesson, rather than having a whole lot of random stuff that the kid cannot put together because he or she was not there last week. So getting school attendance is one of the primary things that people work on and do not always achieve, and have all kinds of schemes

and strategies for; such as, no school, no pool—all kinds of things that people have thought of that work somewhat. So that is one thing. If you do not attend, how are you going to improve?

A second thing is that in communities where many of the people who are important in the community do not owe their status in the community to their success at school it is harder to persuade people that being good at school and trying hard is worthwhile.

[10.00 am]

That is a second thing that everyone has to work on—trying to get the community to agree not just to the words but to the practice of getting kids to come to school, getting them to come to school after they have had a good night's sleep and getting on with the program. It is quite hard to persuade people who probably need a bit of persuading when you are a young and inexperienced person living in what for you is an alien environment. It is a very hard job. It is very hard to do well. I know that the best successes come when people are able to make a reasonably long-term commitment to working in those schools and communities becoming a significant part of the community, and therefore be able to work on the things about attendance and trying hard. I do agree; it is a remarkable thing to notice that some of the old ladies have got beautiful handwriting and their children do not. "Missions" is a complex topic. There are certainly some things that missions did well and some prices that have been paid for it, but those kids and missions used to go to school every day and they used to do as they were told.

The CHAIRMAN: What was the pedagogy—the methods and the strategies in those schools?

Prof. Louden: I must say that beyond my general point about you need to teach children deliberately and not just have them sit there, all kinds of things work, particularly if people really care and they really believe these kids can prosper. All kinds of things will work.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I do not know how you take the validity of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, but it follows on a little bit from Peter about literacy skills. That survey suggested that only 52 per cent of high school students have literacy skills sufficient to cope with the complexities of life. That might not be valid, but could you give us your understanding of why this might be the case? Do you think that is a fair assessment? That is pretty darn high. Obviously you have talked a little bit about what we should do about that. Could you give us your understanding of why this might be the case; if you believe it is in fact a valid survey?

Prof. Louden: Let me try a different tack on that. With something like literacy, it is a skill that can exist with very limited capacity or very great capacity. I mean it is called "literacy". In the 1800s, when my family came to Australia, I think their literacy would have been restricted to being able to sign their name on the ship's register and probably to sit in church and sing along and say prayers. I do not think my family could have written a lot when they came to Australia, but they would have been classed as literate because they could write their name rather than mark with a cross. Then at the other end you have professors of poetry who are enormously able to deal with words. If you think of literacy as a vast continuum of skills from hardly any to a great amount, then a survey like the one you are describing is saying, "At this point that is enough. Below that point, that is not enough." That is always the hard question, though. When they say that 40 per cent of people are below the standard, or 60 per cent, you have always got to ask, "What is the standard?" Of course there is the remarkable phenomenon observed over time that half the people in the world are below average. That is it—that is what an average is. Half will always be below average, and there will be 25 per cent in the top quarter usually! The idea that everyone could be "above average" is not that helpful. You have to pick a point on the scale. I guess they have picked a point where they think that the ability to read a simple contract, such as you might need to sign up for a credit card—what are the literacy demands in that and do kids have them?—is probably where they got their cut-off point. It is where you put the cut-off point and what the uses are.

Let me make one more point. What I found about literacy with adults—it is not my area of expertise—people become remarkably literate once you point them at an occupational domain where they need to be literate or numerate. To shift to numerate for a moment, I spent a year working in the Commonwealth Bank as a teller. I arrived with a reasonable amount of algebra but hardly any mental arithmetic because I had not been practising it. After a year of filling in people's passports by hand and subtracting in my head—before calculators were invented, folks—my mental arithmetic was remarkably good because I practised it. I think it is the same. Young blokes who join the Australian Defence Force with very low literacy skills, when they find they have got to pass an exam that requires them to improve their literacy so they can operate a machine or something, they improve remarkably quickly in that domain, which has its own particular words and structures and things that count as important. A lot of people have got quite well developed literacy skills in areas that matter to them and hardly any in areas that do not matter to them. People can learn quite quickly when it is important.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: In the numeracy area: I went into a supermarket in Burt Street, Boulder—I was sharing this with the committee earlier—I bought a bottle of water. I gave the girl \$5. I did not think this was particularly complicated maths but out came the calculator. My expectation is that she would have been able to do that in her head. Maybe she could have done more complex things on the computer than I would have never got my head around. It is just that expectation that I would have thought she could have taken \$1.50 or whatever from \$5 without the calculator.

Prof. Louden: I must say I am constantly amazed by the same phenomenon. I can work out what the change is going to be because I have got quite good mental arithmetic and the person behind the counter is using the machine. In literacy and in numeracy with young children it is very important to develop what is called automaticity—being able to do things automatically. That is one of the things that we used to do at school. We used to chant our tables and practice our combinations, and once we had mastered those automatically, it made it really easy to do calculations because you did not have to use your fingers. You did not have to stop and think about what eight plus seven was or what eight times seven was. Getting that stuff in automatically is really helpful. In testing of young children these days, there are calculator and non-calculator sections of exams because you need to continue to encourage kids to have that automaticity. Unless you are fluent with numbers, the algebra is no use to you because you will get caught on the fluency things even when you have got the algebra right. In the new national curriculum, one of the key things that is supposed to be developed in mathematics is fluency—automaticity, capacity to do maths quickly. I must say I am appalled by some of the people in my house and their mental arithmetic!

Ms L.L. BAKER: I remember standing on the balcony at Darlington Primary School and Helena College rehearsing my times tables. It was the first thing we did every morning.

In defence of the young woman, she is probably accountable to pay that money, if she gets it wrong, out of her salary. If I was her and I tried and got it wrong a couple of times, I would be using a calculator too!

Prof. Louden: Sometimes the routine with the cash register will be that they are obliged to do it that way—you have to put in the amount.

Ms L.L. BAKER: That is right. In defence of her, she might be accountable for that money.

Prof. Louden: The kids at the small bar at the end of my street are pretty good at working out what two times \$9 is for two glasses of wine. They do not use the cash register for that.

Ms L.L. BAKER: This is a question about teacher training and teachers. I know the degree to which the proficiency of teaching and the training of teachers impacts on education. You know about this study, because I think you were involved in it at some level: there was a PhD study completed and some curriculum developed about 10 years ago around the study of teaching for high school students so that it became an option for them to select in year 11 or year 12, if they thought

they wanted to become a teacher maybe when they grow up, they could elect this elective unit called the study of teaching. There were quite good results for the PhD thesis. Is that course still running or anything comparable developed for the national curriculum around that?

Prof. Louden: No, there is not. It seemed like a good idea, but with the national curriculum in years 11 and 12 it is a national academic curriculum. The strategy that has been followed is to write the curriculum for what might be thought of as the main subjects and leave space in the curriculum for states and schools to add other subjects. There is the national curriculum being negotiated for years 11 and 12 in English, where there are three or four subjects; maths, where there are three or four subjects; history, ancient and modern; biology; chemistry; physics; geology or earth sciences and so on. The intention is not to produce a national curriculum of all of the subjects that every kid would want to study but to do the core academic subjects. Space needs to be left. If you think about your third term of reference about opportunities for all students to engage in years 11 and 12, there will be need to be some other things in the curriculum other than maths and physics for some kids.

The CHAIRMAN: And additional things you think should be included?

Prof. Louden: Not additional to what is in schools, but clearly there will need to be things other than academic subjects for kids who go to university. I think everyone should continue to do English and maths probably while they stay at school, but the proportion of vocational education in a school program should vary from kid to kid and from school to school in terms of provision.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the approach in the national curriculum towards the weighing up of phonics versus the whole language? I have not looked at the details for the national curriculum, but it is something that, as a committee, we have been very impressed when we have visited and spoken with teachers who are using a phonetic approach in those early years. What is the balance in the national curriculum towards phonics and whole language?

Prof. Louden: The position that has been taken, which I think is entirely correct, is that for very young children you need explicit teaching about the relationship between words and sounds, but that as they develop their facility they need to work more and more with words in context.

The CHAIRMAN: Phonetics first and then whole language later?

Prof. Louden: It is not described like that; but yes, it is commitment to teaching kids phonics, improving their phonological awareness and improving their phonemic awareness.

The CHAIRMAN: With that phonetics first, could it be phonetics first in preprimary and grade 1 with whole language, or phonetics preprimary and grade 1 when they have mastered the sounds and then move on to the whole language?

Prof. Louden: It is not really an either/or question. If you do nothing about explicit teaching of letters and sounds, then I do not think you are doing the right thing, but given that you are doing that, you will still need to work on language in context. Children, for example, have to develop their vocabulary ahead of their ability to sound out words. Kids always have an oral vocabulary in their head that is much more elaborated than their written vocabulary. They need to develop their oral vocabulary in order to later be able to make that their written vocabulary.

[10.15 am]

So you have got to fill their head with words, and you fill their heads with words by talking to them, by asking them questions, by playing games and by reading them books that they can only just understand, and that fills their head with verbal richness which they can then use their decoding skills to unpack. So it is not either/or. You have still got to give them a very rich language environment.

The CHAIRMAN: And that would be because a sentence like “The cat sat on the mat”, where they are clapping them phonetically, that is the phonetic approach, but the whole language is actually putting that together as a sentence.

Prof. Louden: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Would that be how they blend?

Prof. Louden: Books with sentences like “The cat sat on the mat” would not be very interesting to read, would they?

The CHAIRMAN: No.

Prof. Louden: But you might have —

Mr P.B. WATSON: It could be the judo of the Olympics with cat on the map or something like that!

Prof. Louden: But you might well want to be reading kids’ books in which there are cats, and maybe the only word on the page—they might know the “the” and the “and” and the “cat” word, but you would want to have a lot of other words in the book, including words they cannot spell or write down but which they will be able to spell or write down because their oral vocabulary develops ahead of their written vocabulary, and you need to have lots of words in your head if you are going to use decoding skills, even on simple words.

The CHAIRMAN: So the words in the head is the whole language approach —

Prof. Louden: Kind of, yes, but one of the key things to develop in young children is their oral language, their vocabulary, because it develops earlier and it gives them a scaffold to work with.

Mr P. ABETZ: You asked the question I was going to ask, but it is interesting about the vocabulary. One of the witnesses—I cannot remember his name now—was saying that with kids from lower socioeconomic areas, if you increase their vocab to be up to the same level as that of kids from better-off areas by, I think, grade 3, their educational outcomes later are actually almost identical in a broad grouping. Would that be what you —

Prof. Louden: I cannot quote a study to prove it, but it seems very likely; and, even if it were not provably so, it is a good thing because, as I say, you need that oral language richness if you are going to make anything of written language, and so one of the things that privileged kids often bring to school is a history of a lot of time spent reading to them, talking to them, asking them questions, so their heads have got a lot more words in them. If you do not talk to kids, how do they get the words?

Mr P. ABETZ: Coming back to the phonetics thing, one of the witnesses told us that in teacher training, a unit on phonetics is an optional unit that teachers can do. Is that changing so that it is now a compulsory thing that teachers actually learn how to teach explicitly that, or is that still sort of an optional unit? Would you be aware of what is happening in teacher education there?

Prof. Louden: That certainly would not be happening at the university with the largest number of teacher trainees. It would not be happening at Edith Cowan. I have not worked there for six years, but it was not the case when I left.

Mr P. ABETZ: It was compulsory to —

Prof. Louden: Absolutely; absolutely. I think there may be places where it is not, but I do not approve of them —

Mr P. ABETZ: Fair enough.

Prof. Louden: — and I cannot name them.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Bill, with the Olympics on and Coates coming out and saying that we should have more exercise in school, I am a great believer in healthy body, healthy mind. Do you think we have enough—not on the Olympic side of things—physical education for kids? I know when we were at school it was a very important part, but now it seems to drop off a bit.

Prof. Louden: I would like to be able to help but I cannot really. The general proposition is appealing, but it is not my area; I cannot really say. But there are all kinds of reasons why you want kids to run around. One is to burn off some energy so when they come back into class they will sit still.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Or go to sleep. I used to go to sleep.

Mr P. ABETZ: Given the whole issue that our literacy success or the literacy rate of students coming through our schools is not as high as we would like it to be, just for a broad prospective, if you had total control of the education system and teachers, what would you want to change?

Prof. Louden: I would be afraid to get out of bed in the morning if I had total control of anything. Look, it is very important to be calibrated here. Australia, and Western Australia included, has one of the best school education systems in the world. It has, compared with many countries, relatively even provision for all children. Compared with almost any country that I can name—and Canada is probably one of the few exceptions, but virtually every country other than Canada—we deal better with children who come from homes where learning is going to be more of a struggle than other countries do. So it is not true that we have got a very long tale of poor-performing students compared with other countries. It is true that our tale of poor-performing children dramatically over-represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; that is true. But it does not over-represent, to put it in these words, working-class kids any more than any other country. I think Canada does a tiny bit better, but we do better in terms of the sort of social gradient of school achievement than the United States and Britain. The countries that do much better than us in terms of the social gradient—you know, the impact of being poor on the likelihood of learning well—are of two kinds: very homogeneous countries like Finland, where they have a very compressed social structure and ethnically homogeneous population. So Finland is a bit of a special case. Some of the Nordic countries do a little bit better. The other kinds of countries that do very well are countries with what you might call a Confucian heritage culture, where the amount of effort that goes into learning is larger than the amount of effort that goes in in Australia.

So in what way is Australia falling behind? It is not falling behind in the achievement of average kids; it is not falling behind in the achievement of kids who are less likely to do well. We do quite okay there. Where we are falling behind is in the level of achievement of the most able children, because the amount of hours and the amount of directed effort that young Korean children put into school achievement is much greater than the amount of directed effort that most Australian kids put in—so the countries that have done better than us in the OECD tests in recent years. Our performance has stayed about the same at most levels, but at the very top, kids in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea are pushing ahead of us because the most committed students are more committed than most of our most committed students.

The CHAIRMAN: So we should have more than one Perth Modern in Perth, then.

Prof. Louden: I am not offering a structural solution here. What I am saying is that our performance is not too bad, and I might go on to say that some of the countries that are passing us, and we need to worry about those, you would not be entirely happy with the amount of pressure that is put on young people in order to get that extra amount of achievement. So it is a mixed blessing. I do think that it is important that we have structures that cause children, especially older teenagers and young adults, to work very hard, because if you try hard, you will do well. It is not a bad motto. If you do not try hard, you probably will not do well. And there are a lot of kids in China who are trying hard and who will do well. So I think it is very important that at the end of our schooling system we have structures that encourage kids who are going to go on in education to try hard, and I think examinations are an important part of that. I would not be in favour of and I am not in favour of having small proportions of kids doing examinations. I think examinations are a fruitful way of gearing up energy and effort.

The CHAIRMAN: At these hearings, we have been told as a committee that when children start to fall behind, if they fall behind in grades 3 or 4, as they go up through school, they fall further and further behind. We have asked what is being done, and we have not actually been given, I believe, a good response in terms of what is being done for those children who are falling behind. What should be happening? One of the questions we asked at one of our previous hearings was: should children in grade 6 be moved on to grade 7 if they have not achieved what they should achieve in grade 6, or even grade 4 to grade 5? Yet the children get moved up year by year, and they have not mastered what they should have mastered. Is the national curriculum going to make a difference, or what can be done to stop that gap from getting larger and larger?

Prof. Louden: Of course, always what makes a difference is well-informed teachers who are trying hard and believe these kids can learn. That is going to be more important than any curriculum. Any old curriculum will do if you have got those things; that would be my view. But it is true that the gap in performance continues to open right up. There are small gaps in performance when kids are six or seven, and the children who do not prosper at school do not do much better in tests of literacy and numeracy when they are 15 than when they are 10, and kids who are prospering know an enormous amount more when they are 15 than when they are 10. So the national curriculum is set up so that there are underlying continua of learning in all the subjects, so that teachers who have got kids who are not doing well know what they are supposed to be taught even though they are in year 6 and other year 6s know a lot more. Generally speaking, it has not been a good experiment to stop kids moving forward with their age group. It is very demoralising for kids. It is done in some countries, but I do not think anyone who is not doing it is planning to introduce it. Schooling is a very social experience, and if you —

The CHAIRMAN: But, then, should these subjects be competency-based so that the child can progress with their age group but still keep working on the grade 4 competencies in a particular area, because they might be fine in sport with their own age group, and they might be fine with metalwork or domestic science, but —

Ms L.L. BAKER: A bit like outcomes-based education, Janet, which was fairly topical, I think, recently.

Prof. Louden: Yes. That is generally so, Janet. A teacher's obligation is to take the kid with what they know now and move them further down the continuum. That is every teacher's obligation. So the fact that you have a kid in year 8 who only knows as much as an average kid in year 6 does not mean you can abandon them. You have still got to teach them from where they are and move them on. That is everyone's task. But the national curriculum has been set up so that there are underlying sequences.

The CHAIRMAN: Will it be competency based?

Prof. Louden: No.

The CHAIRMAN: So those gaps are still going to continue.

Prof. Louden: The gaps are not caused by the curriculum; the curriculum does not cause the gap. Failure to learn causes the gap, and failure to learn has got many causes: failure to make an effort, failure to believe that you will do well, missing certain key concepts on which you build, poor teaching, being hungry. There are many causes of failure to learn. It is not caused by a curriculum. You cannot solve that problem with a curriculum.

The CHAIRMAN: So how do we address the failure to learn, then, and all those factors? As a committee, we know that the gaps are getting bigger and bigger. What can we recommend to try to close that down?

Prof. Louden: The gap gets bigger and bigger by the year, but it is not in the sense that as a child who is not doing well gets older it gets bigger, but the gap in society is not getting bigger. There

have always been big disparities between what some 16-year-olds know and some other 16-year-olds know. That is not a new phenomenon. That is not getting worse. That has always been the case.

The CHAIRMAN: There has always been a gap, but there have been some children who have succeeded and some children who have failed, and do we just accept that there are failures —

Prof. Louden: No, no. I am not suggesting that we —

The CHAIRMAN: — or do we say that for these failures, additional things can be done in the classroom and in the school, and resources that will be put in the school are X, Y and Z to try to help those children? What are the X, Y and Z?

[10.30 am]

Prof. Louden: It is mostly X, Janet. Mostly it is just X, not Y and Z, and X is good teachers. The effect on learning of a good teacher is much greater than the effect on learning of a good curriculum. So anything that we do that reduces the standard of people entering teaching or the amount of effort that people who are in teaching are prepared to make or the amount of belief they have got that kids can learn, those things will have a negative effect. There are differences between children which cannot be eradicated. There are differences in social background that we work to eradicate but will never succeed in, but the main thing you can control is the quality of teaching.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: There has been a lot in the press about class sizes. Is class size a big deal? Is it as big a deal on student outcomes as is often made out?

Prof. Louden: The idea of reducing class sizes is very appealing to teachers because they look at their class and think, “If I have fewer kids, I’m going to give them more attention.” So on the face of it, it is a very appealing idea. Every teacher more or less, I think, believes that having fewer kids in the class would enable them to do better. The empirical evidence is that that is not so. The empirical evidence is that you have got to get class sizes down to tiny numbers and change the pedagogy if you want to change the results. We have spent a great deal of money in Australia on reducing class sizes and I do not believe that has yielded the benefits. But I do understand why every teacher thinks smaller classes would be better, because I have been a teacher. It just happens not to be demonstrably the case. Think about it like this: what is the difference between teaching 28 and 32 students? Thirty-two is still too many to give lots of daily one-on-one attention to every single child; 28 is still too many for that. The difference between 28 and 32 is not much but it might be half a billion dollars for every class in the state. So, a lot of money is being spent reducing class sizes. My view is that although there are some particular circumstances when very small classes are absolutely essential, in general reducing the average class size of regular classes is not the best way to spend money.

The CHAIRMAN: Bill, because of the time, are you happy to take one more question from each of us? Are you in a rush?

Prof. Louden: No, I have got all morning.

The CHAIRMAN: In that case, I might just ask a question in relation to that and then we will go round.

In both primary school and high school, should literacy and numeracy not just be taught as maths and English but should there be a component of literacy and numeracy in science, history, geography? Should all teachers be asked to focus on kind of a basic level of those building blocks in all of the classes that children are in?

Prof. Louden: Yes they are, and the Australian curriculum has been designed to draw attention to the opportunities in subjects other than English and mathematics to improve kids’ literacy and numeracy.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: This is a question that I think you were touching on. If a kid going into high school has below average literacy and/or numeracy, what is the likelihood in high school that that

can be remediated? I remember one of my kids doing a science project and the spelling was absolutely atrocious. It was not corrected because this was considered to be science and not English, and that was a bit of a surprise. What is the likelihood that we can remediate that if a kid is below par when they go into high school as far as literacy or numeracy is concerned?

Prof. Louden: If kids have not done well at school, the older they get, the harder it is to remedy anything, mostly because they will not be so motivated. Their sense of likely failure will get in the way of learning.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: They are on the slippery slope.

Prof. Louden: Put it this way: learning is always about taking a risk. If you are learning to windsurf, the risk is you will fall in the water. If you are learning to read, the risk is that you will be sounding things out like a baby and you will get it wrong, if you are an adolescent. It is harder and harder to teach people when they have a history of not being successful. So, it is really crucial that everyone gets the basic literacy and numeracy building blocks by the time they are eight or nine, because if you have the basic building blocks that average eight or nine-year-olds have, that will do, probably, when you decide you really need to improve. But if you are counting on your fingers instead of using arithmetic and you only know 50 common words and the rest are a blur to you, it is going to be really hard to pick it up later. So it is really important. By the time kids are eight, if they have been unsuccessful at school, they begin to kind of go off—this is the phenomenon Janet is talking about—if they are not learning anymore because they think, “School’s not for me. I’ll never be any good at this and it is not very important anyway.” It is just like my own attitude to my own school as a footballer—not very important, not very good at it.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Are graduate teachers sufficiently prepared for the classroom, particularly in terms of being prepared to teach literacy and numeracy?

Prof. Louden: In the best programs they are extremely well prepared.

Mr P.B. WATSON: And in the not the best?

Prof. Louden: They are not very well prepared. There is quite a lot of variation, but a great deal of effort nationally has gone into ensuring that they will be properly prepared. For example, there is an organisation that I am the deputy chair of called the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, which is a commonwealth government statutory authority responsible for accreditation of teacher education, among other things. I was in Melbourne the day before working on the fine details of what universities will have to be able to show to the regulator about how they manage the literacy of teacher candidates in order to be accredited to offer teacher education programs. There is a lot of activity going on in this area.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I am on the school board of Lockyer and we are looking at trying to get Notre Dame to send their fourth-year teachers out so they get experience of the schools, so they see what it is like and if they are willing to do it. Do you think that would be a good idea as part of their curriculum?

Prof. Louden: I think, yes. I mean, in teacher education the trick is how you get an appropriate balance between preparing people with the skills to do a quite difficult task, which is teach, and give them the practice at doing it. So it is a balance between preparing them and practising. Obviously, if you practise with no background, your practice will not be very useful. It is kind of two interlocking triangles; the longer the program goes on, the less you will be teaching the teacher education students content and the more you will be expecting them to practise. At the beginning you need to fill their heads with quite a lot of stuff. Towards the end you do not put much in their heads anymore; you want them to practise what they know.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: My profession is like that. I mean, that is the general rule for a lot of professions. That is the way they learn, is it not? They do it.

Prof. Louden: Absolutely.

Ms L.L. BAKER: The dropout rate for teachers going from high school into their first year of teacher training is enormous in the first year of teacher training and then, like with other degrees, it shrinks down to a small core group who actually understand what teaching is going to be about after the first year and decide that it is for them. That course that I was talking about, the study of teaching, was aiming to push in the year 11 and 12 students, take them out to communities, show them how teaching actually works when they are kids themselves, so that when they get to make a career decision about is teaching for me, that first year is not such a shock, so you do not have such a massive dropout rate, therefore, such an expense to the system. That was what that program was about—the study of teaching—in years 11 and 12.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Just getting them out in their last year, in their fourth year, is going to help the schools, it is going to help the teachers. They know, especially if they come to Lockyer, which has a lot of very good programs, and they can say, “I like this” or “I don’t”. A few of the ones who have come out just independently have stayed.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I have a final question to ask Bill. In relation to English as a second language, is there a particular pedagogy around training literacy to that kind of person that works better than another? Or is there a way of training someone in literacy skills in English if English is your second language that you prefer?

Prof. Louden: I am not an expert in it myself, Lisa, but there is a very well-developed set of teaching strategies around teaching learners of English who speak another language. It is quite different teaching people to read in English if they can already read in some other language.

Ms L.L. BAKER: There is a big federal program on adult literacy which is specially targeted at ESL.

Prof. Louden: Of course, it is different teaching kids who already have another language at home and it is different teaching adults from children.

Mr P. ABETZ: There has been a lot of emphasis on sort of mainstreaming kids with intellectual disabilities into the sort of normal classroom. From what I hear from teachers, that sometimes can be an incredible burden for the teacher in that one child that is only sort of semi-verbal, say, cerebral palsy or whatever, it actually holds the whole class back in terms of what the teacher can do and often there is not enough teacher aide time and all that sort of thing. What is your sort of general view of that whole problem that we have got in our schools?

Prof. Louden: I am familiar with what teachers say about the effect on the rest of the class. I am familiar with what parents of children with disabilities say about the benefit for their children being with other kids rather than in a ghetto. There is obviously a balance between those two things and I am not really professionally competent to comment on the balance, but I understand both the concerns. I just did one of those academic things—on the one hand, on the other hand. I do not know. There are certainly a lot more kids with serious disabilities in classes than there were when I was a kid and I can see the challenge that provides. But when you have children with disabilities in your family you also think about what it is like for them to be separated.

The CHAIRMAN: In a minute or two I am going to ask you whether you would like to kind of sum up and there are things maybe that we have not asked that you would like to address. But before I do that—it is not really a last question—we became aware when we did our trip to the north west two years ago that some of our schools may have 25, 30 even higher percentages than other schools of children who have FASD, which you will see is in our terms of reference. We are aware that in Canada now, they have some schools for children who have FASD and in those schools they might have things like marks on the floor so that children learn what an appropriate distance is to stand so that you are not standing on top of someone, or they might have classrooms where there are not too many posters on the wall so that children are not distracted and can listen

more to the teacher. Do you think that in those areas where we know FASD is very high we should be looking at something like that; or, in a year or so once we have a diagnostic tool that says a child has FASD, should we be then saying to the teachers, "You now have 10 children in your class who have FASD. Measures that you can take in this classroom to help that child learn include"?

Prof. Loudon: It is not an area I am expert in, Janet. I can only make the general comment that teachers have to work with the children that they have got whatever the circumstances are. If you had many children with foetal alcohol syndrome in a class, then you would have to deal with them differently from other kids. But it is a bit like that question about mainstreaming, I think there are probably benefits for those kids to be in the same class as their cousins.

[10.45 am]

The CHAIRMAN: I guess one of the things that we might want to consider then is having another meeting with the principal of the member for Albany's school, who has worked with a lot of FASD children in the school, and asking him those questions.

Prof. Loudon: I think you should ask an expert.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Could I just make a comment on that? One of the issues which started off the origins of the terms of reference on FASD was that in fact there was a significant cohort of kids, particularly in the north of Western Australia, where you would sort of go to Fitzroy Crossing and talk to the principal and he would anecdotally say, "There are probably 25 per cent of these kids suffering some form of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder," and there was no other assistance for the classroom teacher or for that significant cohort and it was not recognised in the school's class program as a disability. So that was my interest initially in this whole issue.

The CHAIRMAN: But we were not aware then of different actual approaches to teaching as well.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: No.

The CHAIRMAN: And so who is teaching our teachers how to teach children with FASD? Maybe we can talk to the principals and maybe there is not the knowledge there now but maybe someone needs to start putting that; because it is a growing problem throughout WA, maybe it needs to come in under teacher training.

Prof. Loudon: I am afraid I do not know.

The CHAIRMAN: In that case would you like to spend a couple of minutes and just sum up?

Prof. Loudon: Yes. I guess my response to most of your questions has been a response about teacher quality. So, for me there are many things that cannot be changed in schools; there are some things that are easy to change and do not have much effect; but the thing you can change and it has a lot of effect is the quality of teachers and the quality of their teaching. And so I will evaluate every proposed initiative about whether this is likely to support the growth of skill in teachers, support the growth of effort; support the growth of their belief that the children that are in front of them can learn something; and things that do not contribute to that in any way I am not so interested in. So I am interested in things like the national curriculum, not because they solve the problem but because they make it easier for teachers to do a good job. The larger number of innovations in education are not focused on the main game, which is about quality of teachers and quality of teaching. And you should always ask the question: how would this help one of those 80 per cent of teachers that is in the middle with me do a better job?

The CHAIRMAN: And entrance requirements for teachers, does that come into the equation?

Prof. Loudon: Entrance requirements for teachers, this is a very troubling area because what has happened over the last 40 or 50 years is that there are many more occupational choices for bright young school leavers than there were hitherto. Most of the occupations that have been invented in

the last 30 or 40 years that require degrees did not exist before. So school leavers have many choices. There was a time when many girls who finished year 12 would have chosen between teaching and nursing. Now half our law students and a bit more than half our medical students are young women. If we go back 50 years, people did not do business degrees at universities. They went and worked in a bank and then they did some night school to get an industry qualification in accounting, so that many degrees have opened up and many forms of training and professional preparation did not exist in the past and people are now choosing those. So it is very hard for teaching to attract and retain a good proportion of the most able school leavers, which is just a result of there being so much more higher education and so many more regulated professions. So it is important to choose among school leavers who themselves have done well at school. But school leavers are not the main entrants to teaching any more. They are people who have not done well at school and have done something else in their life and are now ready to become a teacher, which is a good thing.

The CHAIRMAN: They are of a more mature age?

Prof. Louden: People who did not care at school and now do, people who have had children and got interested in schooling by being at the school and now want to be a teacher, they make very good teachers; and people who have been in other occupations and have felt the need to do something that is more human and more obviously valuable day-to-day than some occupations are.

Mr P. ABETZ: What percentage would that be for the teacher intake now?

Prof. Louden: It varies from university to university, so I could not give you a firm figure, but it is of the order of half or less that come directly from school.

Mr P. ABETZ: Really! That is interesting.

Prof. Louden: So the average academic ability of those school leavers has declined as women have withdrawn their previous genetic subsidy from the profession and gone somewhere else. But that has to be made up by recruiting people who are right but had other intentions when they were 16 and now want to be teachers—and they make very good teachers. There are plenty of able people out there.

The CHAIRMAN: In that case, Bill, I would like to thank you very much for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such correction must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to it. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via your corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. However, should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, we invite you to include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. And thank you very much.

Prof. Louden: Thank you again. It has been a pleasure to talk to you.

Hearing concluded at 10.51 am
