

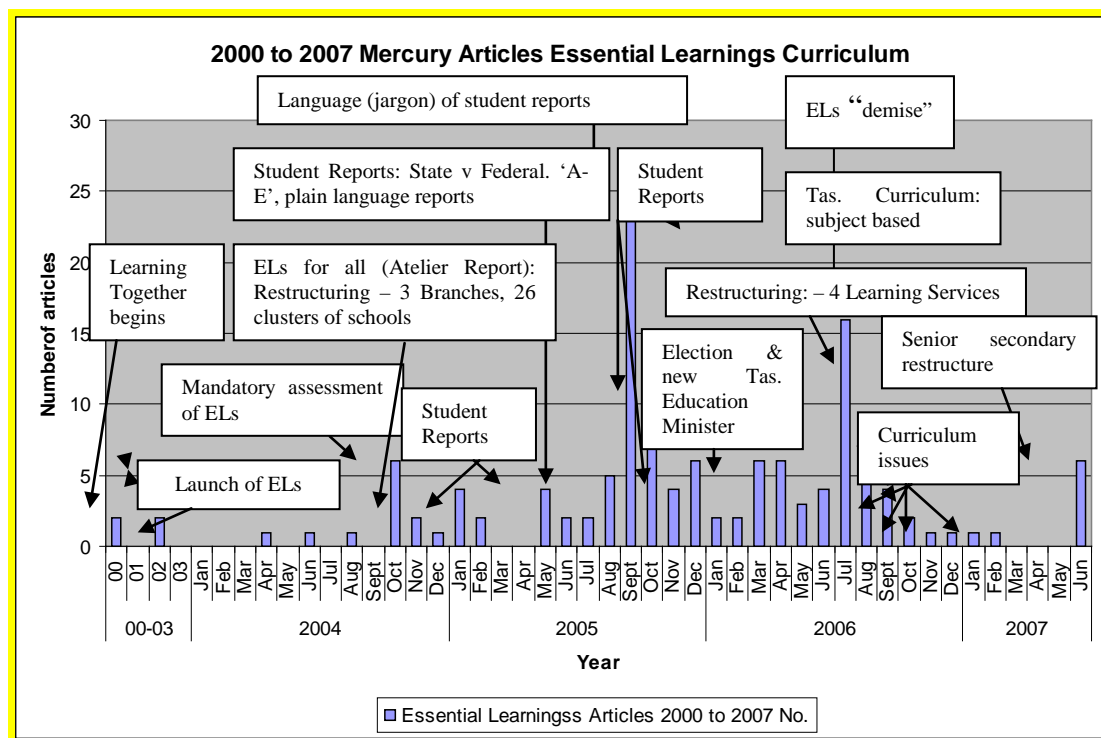
LINK 12: The media and education: *The Mercury* newspaper reporting on the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum 2000 – 2007

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1. Introduction

What role does the media play in the enactment of the public purposes of education? The aim of this case study is to analyse the articles reported in the Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper about the implementation of major curriculum change that included as a major focus the public purposes of education, i.e., the ELs curriculum during the first six years of the twenty-first century. One hundred and forty one articles related to the ELs curriculum were published between September 2000 and June 2007 (see Chart 4.1). The context in which those articles were written is described in the next section and is also summarised in Chart 4.1.

Chart 1.



This case study of Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper reporting on the Tasmanian Essential Learnings (ELs) Curriculum is organised into four further sections. Section 2 outlines the changing context within which schools have operated in Tasmania, section 3 the Hobart *Mercury* reporting of the ELs curriculum, section 4 lessons learned, and section 5 concluding comments.

2. The Changing Context within which Schools Operate in Tasmania

2.1 The Essential Learnings Curriculum (ELs)

In February 1999 the Tasmanian Premier, Jim Bacon, initiated *Tasmania Together*, a strategy intended to develop a 20 year social, environmental and economic plan for Tasmania. A Community Leaders' Group held 60 forums across Tasmanian communities to hear views about social, environmental and economic issues. Following extensive consultation representatives of government agencies, community groups and the Community Leaders' Group engaged in a bench marking process representing six areas: Community Well Being; Employment and Economy, Sustainable Development; Arts, Culture and Heritage; and Open Inclusive Government. In September 2001 The Community Leaders Group released the vision, goals and benchmarks for *Tasmania Together*.

In mid 1999 a separate, but complementary process was begun by the Minister for Education, Paula Wriedt, who held a series of meetings with Department of Education officials and representatives from principals' associations, teacher and public sector unions, and parent associations at which concerns about issues relating to education were raised, as evidenced by the following articles in the Hobart *Mercury*.

MERCURY

Tue 12 Sep 2000, Page 10

Schools open doors to community role

The *Mercury* urged the Tasmanian community to have a say in the education of its children as part of the Education Department's Curriculum consultation program. A departmental spokesperson said education from birth to year 10 was being considered and participants were asked to focus on what values and purposes they wanted to underpin education, that it was important to include parents, students and business in the consultation process. It was reported by the Department coordinator of the consultation process that "We have had a huge response from parents and have already held a successful forum for industry in the north of the state."

MERCURY

Fri 17 Nov 2000, Page 12

School report deadline

The *Mercury* advised that parents only had that day to respond to the draft copy of the Curriculum Consultation Report: Values and Purposes.

Outcomes of these discussions were draft proposals for education, training and information provision that were released for public review over a two month period in February 2000. Over 160 responses were received. The early period of consultations consisted of identifying the goals and purposes of a new curriculum, the formation of a consultation team and participation of partnership schools. The model for participation was one of co-construction.

Selected in November 2000, 20 partnership schools worked with the Consultation Team throughout 2001 to refine the 'working' new curriculum, to be called the Essential Learnings (ELs). They determined outcomes and standards to describe knowledge, skills and competencies, and identified teaching and assessment practices consistent with the values and purposes.

Five goal-based working groups took the five themes that emerged from the public consultation process, and identified concrete actions and strategies to achieve these goals. A policy statement, *Learning Together*, was released by the Minister in December 2000. *Learning Together* was intended to complement *Tasmania Together*. (For comments made by the Minister at the launch of Learning Together please refer to Appendix 1.)

In June 2001 a 13 member Learning Together Council was formed by the Minister to monitor the implementation of the 46 strategies consisting of 139 initiatives matched to the five goals. The Learning Together Council reported directly to the Minister and had the power to request

Department of Education officers to report on the progress made with the implementation of Learning Together initiatives.

The five goals articulated in Learning Together were as follows:

1. Responsive and continually improving services that ensure all Tasmanians develop the knowledge, skills and confidence they need
2. Enriching and fulfilling learning opportunities that enable people to work effectively and participate in society
3. Safe and inclusive learning environments that encourage and support participation in learning throughout life
4. An information-rich community with access to global and local information resources so that everyone has the opportunity to participate in, and contribute to, a healthy democracy and a prosperous society
5. A valued and supported education workforce that reflects the importance of teaching as a profession.

Whilst Goal 1 relates to personal purposes of schooling it is clear that Goals 2-5 exemplify the public purposes of schooling/education as defined in the Educational Investment in Australian Schooling project. These goals are strengthened through the identification of complementary statements of value and purpose as detailed in what follows.

2.2 Development and Implementation of the Essential Learnings Curriculum Framework

Following the release of the draft proposals for education, training and information provision in February 2000, a nine-member Consultation Team was appointed to conduct a three-year project to develop a curriculum, consisting of three phases: clarifying values and purposes; specifying content; and developing teaching and assessment practices. Beginning in June 2000, district reference groups led more than 6,900 teachers, child-care professionals, business people, community members and students at meetings focusing on clarifying the values and purposes of public education. The report on the consultation, released in October 2000, led to the publication of a statement in December 2000 identifying seven values and six purposes as important.

Values:

We are guided by a set of core values

- Connectedness
- Resilience
- Achievement
- Creativity
- Integrity
- Responsibility
- Equity

Purposes:

We share the purposes of ensuring our students and children are:

- Learning to relate, participate and care
- Learning to live full and healthy lives
- Learning to create purposeful futures
- Learning to act ethically
- Learning to learn
- Learning to think, know and understand

The Values and Purposes Statement formed the basis for developing 'emerging' essential learnings. Responses collected from a review were used to produce 'working' essential learnings consisting of five categories, each containing a description and several key elements. Practitioners in schools were insistent that 'thinking' be included.

Essential Learnings:

1. Thinking

- a. Inquiry
- b. Reflective thinking
- 2. Communicating
 - a. Being literate
 - b. Being numerate
 - c. Being information literate
 - d. Being arts literate
- 3. Personal futures
 - a. Building and maintaining identity and relationships
 - b. Maintaining wellbeing
 - c. Being ethical
 - d. Creating and pursuing goals
- 4. Social responsibility
 - a. Building social capital
 - b. Valuing diversity
 - c. Acting democratically
 - d. Understanding the past and creating preferred futures
- 5. World futures
 - a. Investigating the natural and constructed world
 - b. Understanding systems
 - c. Designing and evaluating technological solutions
 - d. Creating sustainable futures

The process used to create the ELs curriculum framework was also ‘public’ employing extensive meetings and discussions with parents, teachers, business leaders and members of the community to identify the public purposes of education, not only in terms of the benefits to the individual, but particularly in terms of promoting the welfare of the whole community. The product of these discussions, The Essential Learnings Curriculum Framework, clearly articulates the public purposes of education, such as learning to relate to others and participation in workplace and community life and having a regard for others. Public purposes include living full and healthy lives, creating purposeful futures, acting ethically, thinking, knowing and understanding. These are exemplified in the key elements of the ELs that highlight the public purposes of education through a focus on social responsibility, world futures and particularly through the skill development of thinking and communicating.

Teachers from more than 40 schools (i.e. the initial 20 schools that commenced the project in 2001 plus an additional 20 schools who joined in 2002) worked with the Consultation Team during 2002 to specify sets of expectations for students at different levels to provide the basis for outcomes and standards. As a result of this work, in March, 2003, the Tasmanian Department of Education released *Essential Learnings Framework 2* consisting of three components. Introduction to the Outcomes and Standards outlines the structure of the framework, and describes reporting procedures and support available to assist teachers. Outcomes and Standards organised the key element outcomes and standards by the key elements of the essential learnings. Learners and Learning Provision discusses some key advances in the understanding of how learning occurs, and what is known about distinctive features of learners at different stages in their development. Developed by the Consultation Team and 53 partnership schools, the *Learning, Teaching and Assessment Guide*, released on the Internet in April 2003, described effective teaching, assessing, planning, professional learning, transforming schools, working with parents and the community, and different levels of schooling and essential learnings. The *Learning, Teaching and Assessment Guide* was designed to be dynamic, and undergo refinement and expansion on the Internet.

The intention was to phase implementation of the *Essential Learnings Framework* in public, Catholic and some independent schools over five years commencing in 2004 with full implementation in 2009. In 2004, the Department of Education released several resources to

support implementation of the *Essential Learnings Framework*.¹

2.3 Change following the ELs implementation process and the impact on Tasmanian schools

2005 became a turning point in the acceptance by teachers of the ELs due to the introduction of mandatory assessment and reporting process together with the restructuring of the Department of Education following the 2004 Essential Learnings for All Report (Executive Summary see Appendix 3). The Essential Learnings for All Report completed for the Department of Education in June 2004 by a private consulting firm and released to the public in October 2004 followed a Review of Services for Students with Special and/or Additional Educational Needs. The report stated that

. . . a truly inclusive system of public education with Essential Learnings for All needs to be reflected in an organisational structure that underpins, guarantees and leads the inclusive learning of all students. In such an organisational structure, service provision places students with special and/or additional needs in the mainstream. It does this by securing the tightest possible alignment between all aspects of its operations. It ensures that support for all students is placed as closely as possible to the schools in which they learn.

The sequence of events and ensuing outcomes can be outlined as follows:

Mandatory reporting

In September 2004 the Department of Education advised schools that reporting on the ELs Curriculum would be mandatory in 2005, despite the fact that many schools had not commenced participation in activities associated with the implementation of the ELs. This action on the part of the Department of Education was significant, as until this time, the model used was one of co-construction. In addition, it was a requirement of the Department of Education that teachers used the computerised Student Assessment and Reporting Information System (SARIS) for all student reports.

Essential Learnings for All Report

The adoption of the Essential Learnings for All Report (Appendix 2) meant major changes for the structure of the Department and the accountability processes for the delivery of services to schools prior to the commencement of 2005. Resources to support students with special needs had previously been allocated centrally and by the six education districts. In order for decisions to be made as closely as possible to the delivery point, as recommended in the report, the distribution of resources to support students with special needs would now be made by principals within each newly created cluster of schools.

The Department of Education changed from six education districts to three branches. Schools were grouped into 26 clusters made up of varying numbers of schools in reasonably close proximity to each other.

A-E Federal Government reporting requirements.

During August 2005 the Federal Government Education Minister, Brendan Nelson reiterated his determination to have a plain language report card for Tasmanian students. He proposed that all students should be rated A to E on their reports to enable parents to gain a clearer, simpler picture of their children's progress. In September 2005 he threatened that \$341 million worth of federal schools funding could be affected if a suitable report card was not

¹ *Essential Connections: A Guide to Young Children's Learning* provides a detailed explanation of learning for young children from birth to age five, produced to assist child-carers and early childhood teachers design programs related to the *Essential Learnings Framework* (Connor, 2004). *Guiding Learning Communities* presents sets of modules organised around eight topics to support school leaders in providing professional training for implementing the *Essential Learnings Framework*. A booklet and CD-ROM, *Planning Learning Sequences*, supports individual and collaborative planning by teachers in using the *Essential Learnings Framework*. A video CD-ROM, *A Curriculum for the 21st Century*, informs parents about the *Essential Learnings Framework*. Other resources released to support implementation of the *Essential Learnings Framework* include *Unlocking Literacy*, *Mental Computation*, *Numeracy is Everywhere*, and *Research into Action Also, Essential Learnings Assessing Guide (2005) and Essential Learnings for All (2006)*.

issued. Such a mandated approach caused much deliberation as to how the requirements of both the state and the federal Minister for Education could be met. The result was that students received two reports in December 2005 due to problems equating the five standards and progressions relating to student achievement in the ELs with the A-E scale.

Language of reports

In September 2005 the shadow education minister for the Tasmanian Liberal opposition party raised the issue of the appropriateness of the language – the jargon – used in the student reporting process mandated by the Department of Education. The ‘jargon buster’ produced by the Department of Education was intended to be helpful for teachers when compiling reports. However, its release into the public domain added fuel to the debate about the quality of the language in student reports. The appropriateness of the proposed student reports was the subject of intense media focus by the *Mercury* newspaper during September and continuing into October, 2005.

An analysis of articles relating to the reporting to parents on student progress showed that the first media reporting commenced in October 2004 and reached a crisis point in September/October 2005. What was particularly noticeable was the minimal response by the hierarchy of the Department of Education in the *Mercury* to defuse or clarify issues during the public debate. This occurred despite the fact that the Department made it publicly known that teachers, under the Public Service Act, were not permitted to comment publicly on the issue. The Minister for Education was on leave in September 2004 when the *Mercury* frenzy on student reporting commenced and thus may have entered the debate too late to make a difference, or gain control of the situation. Failure to adequately resolve the issue of student reporting led to criticism of the ELs and the ultimate demise of the ELs curriculum under the jurisdiction of a new Minister for Education in 2006.

Tasmanian State Election March 2006 – change of Education Minister

The Minister for Education, Paula Wriedt, struggled to retain her seat following the state election, just managing to be elected after the distribution of preferences. *Mercury* reporting at the time attributed the unpopularity of the ELs curriculum as part of the reason for her low number of votes. Ms Wriedt had been Minister of Education for nearly eight years and had personally overseen changes in Tasmania aimed at achieving her vision of an education system based on world’s best practice. The newly appointed Minister for Education, David Bartlett, immediately ordered a review of the ELs curriculum, the outcome of which has been that the ELs curriculum has undergone severe modification to make it more acceptable to the community, employers and some teachers. The new Tasmania curriculum no longer represents the original ELs curriculum. In addition modifications were made to the reporting process. The new, revised curriculum is now referred to as the Tasmania Curriculum. Curriculum documents were rewritten and distributed to schools in July/August 2007. The Minister also made the decision to restructure the Department in order to better provide services to schools. The decision to restructure the Education Department meant that schools were experiencing a third, major structural and organisational change within four years.

Restructuring of the Department of Education – Again, 2007

The Minister for Education, with the intent of placing ‘the student at the centre’² restructured schools into four Learning Centres from the beginning of 2007, each with a former principal as its general manager. One Centre is on the North-West Coast, one in Northern Tasmania and two centres in the South (South and South-East) of the state. Each centre will have its own board of management comprised of principals and members of the community. Complementary to these changes was the down-sizing of the central support services of the Department of Education and the establishment of a leaner system located in the Learning Centres. In addition, there would be one small and strategic central unit, Learning Support, to

² Some publically wondered where the students had been all this time!

coordinate policy and research. The five general managers will be members of the Department's corporate management team and will report directly to the Education Department Secretary. One intent of the restructuring is, at a later stage, to sell the education department head office following the relocation of essential departmental services into under-utilised school building stock.

The majority of changes, in the context in which Tasmanian schools have operated during the past six years, are reflected in the reporting of education in Hobart's *Mercury* Newspaper. During the seven year period 2000 – 2007 one hundred and forty one articles relating to the ELs were published (See appendix 4 for a summary of each article).

3. *Mercury* reporting on the Essential Learnings (ELs) Curriculum

3.1 Public release of ELs 2002

The Hobart *Mercury* published two articles on the Essential Learnings in March 2002, the first following reports of the consultation process in 2000. This article provided a very detailed description of the ELs, listing the five essential learnings and the key elements for each.

MERCURY
Wed 20 Mar 2002,
page 30
**Fresh Direction for
schooling**

Reporter Alison Ribbon reported on the launch of the ELs at the Clarence High School. The Minister of Education, Paula Wriedt, advised that the ELs Framework had been developed in 2000 and tested in 20 different project schools in 2001 for relevance and practicality. Ms Wriedt said this was the first time such a new framework had been formulated with input from stakeholders. She went on to say, "Across the world and throughout Australia recently there has been a search for new curriculum approaches suited to new times and new student needs."

MERCURY
Thu 21 Oct 2004, page 1
**School shock Major
changes to Tassie
Education system leave
teachers floundering**
Ribbon

In the same article the Education Department Secretary is reported to have said that *he could not specify what noticeable changes would be made in schools – the department had simply established a framework for schools to incorporate if, when and how they wished.* (Future actions by the Department of Education in mandating the reform agenda would prove to be the undoing of ELs.)

No further articles referring to the ELs appeared until April 2004. Initially, the number of schools in the ELs project increased by 20 per year, however, by 2004 all schools were participating at varying levels, each with their own ELs co-ordinator.

3.2 Two years on: 2004

The first article announced the release of the 'dynamic and practical online resource' the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Guide that highlights what has been learned by schools and their communities about learning, teaching and assessing as they work with the new curriculum.

MERCURY
Tue 27 Apr 2004, p27
**Essential resource of
curriculum gets online
support**
Summers, LeLong

Quality sample units of work for each of the different year levels have been placed on the guide. The Director of the Office for Curriculum, Leadership and Learning, David Hanlon, is reported to have said, "Foundational to all our work was the idea that we really needed to talk to all Tasmanians about what it was they wanted for our public education system."

In June 2004 The *Mercury*, under its headline, **Study at Harvard online**, reported that Harvard offered courses such as Engaging Students in Deeper Understanding and Teaching to Standards with New Technologies, both directly based on the Teaching for Understanding

Guide. A further article in August entitled, **Experts in literacy**, reinforced the positive aspects of ELs through a focus on the communicating element of the ELs framework in a Hobart primary school.

3.3 Mandated changes cause concern

Six articles concerning the ELs including three sets of Letters to the Editor were published in the *Mercury* between 21 and 31 October, 2004. The introduction of ELs into the school sector, to this date, had been phased in, with schools progressively coming on stream. Despite the fact that many schools had yet to adopt the ELs it was mandated by the Department of Education that all schools would adopt the Essential Learnings Framework, and, New assessments for students from kindergarten to year 10 would be enforced in 2005. In addition, from the commencement of 2005, the Department of Education was to be restructured into three Branches and 26 clusters of schools.

MERCURY
Thu 21 Oct 2004, page 1
**School shock Major
changes to Tassie
Education system leave
teachers floundering**
Paine

The AEU survey of 1334 teachers across the state showed 92% said they did not have a good understanding of the marking system. The Union doesn't have problems with the curriculum, only with the time frame. Some schools have been working with ELs for four years but some have only been on since last year. Peter Gutwein, the Opposition Spokesperson on Education asked, "If teachers are struggling with this new, obviously bureaucrat driven reporting system, how does Ms Wriedt expect parents to make head or tail of their child's report cards? ... Teachers and principals were also having to come to grips with the major restructure from six districts to three branches."

The AEU said Tasmania's curriculum and assessment overhaul had left teachers and parents behind. Several teachers said they would quit and knew others who were considering quitting out of anger and fear. Minister Wriedt said retirement rates were steady. One secondary senior teacher said the system was already creating mediocrity, "It's not just assessment. The more subject areas become blurred, the more standards drop. It's turning out mediocrity."

MERCURY
Sat 23 Oct 2004, page1
**State teacher exodus
fears Anger at Tassie's
education shake-up**
Paine

Three of the eight Letters to the Editor on 25, 26 and 28 October expressed support for the ELS (Minister for Education, the President of the Tasmanian Principals Association and a teacher), one letter expressed the importance of changing to meet emerging needs and four correspondents vehemently opposed the change to the ELs curriculum.

However, Tasmanian high school principals have spoken out in support of the 'state's controversial ELs curriculum overhaul. The Clarence High School principal, who played a role in drafting the new system, said it was 'built by teachers' and the Brooks High School principal said concerns about senior teachers going into early retirement were "alarmist . . . twaddle". The Clarence principal added, ". . . the basic disciplines would continue to be taught in ways more relevant to today's students."

MERCURY
Tue 26 Oct 2004, page
14
**Principals back new
curriculum**
Rose

Whilst the opposition spokesperson on education referred to a major restructuring of the Department of Education in the *Mercury* on 21 October, above, the changes were not reported in the *Mercury* until 3 November 2004 with the Minister announcing the Essential Learnings For All implementation plan that adopted recommendations from the Atelier report (released in July 2004. (See Appendices).

3.4 Forging ahead with sweeping reforms

The Education Department planned sweeping reforms of Tasmania's school system with the release of the Essential Learnings for All implementation Plan.

MERCURY

Wed 3 Nov 2004 page 15

Wriedt outlines details of radical education plan School reforms press on

She said . . . three operational branches would replace the six districts and establishing 26 clusters of schools that would have direct control over their own funding allocation. . . . changes would complement the new Essential Learnings curriculum by allowing clusters and individual schools to have more flexibility in tailoring programs to meet the needs of individual children . . . about trying to ensure that we improve the educational outcome for all students, not just students with disabilities. A new role of principal leader (8) had been established to support the new clusters in formation and development.

AEU President said the Education Department's plan of action was an acceptable one but maintained the devil was in the detail.

Liberal education spokesman Peter Gutwein said that 2005 was shaping up to be a horror year for Tasmanian teachers, who were already struggling with curriculum reforms. ". . . And it is hard to see how students will benefit from the fact that their teachers are going to be spending so much time coming to grips with the new curriculum, let alone the structural changes."

Martain

MERCURY
Fri 10 December 2004, page 18
Failure to match rhetoric
Editorial

The *Mercury* Editorial of 10 December drew attention to . . . *the fact that Tasmania was the worst performing state in Australia in the OECD survey of 15 year olds in 41 countries at reading, maths and science cannot be dismissed lightly.* The Editor went on to say that at the very least, there is large

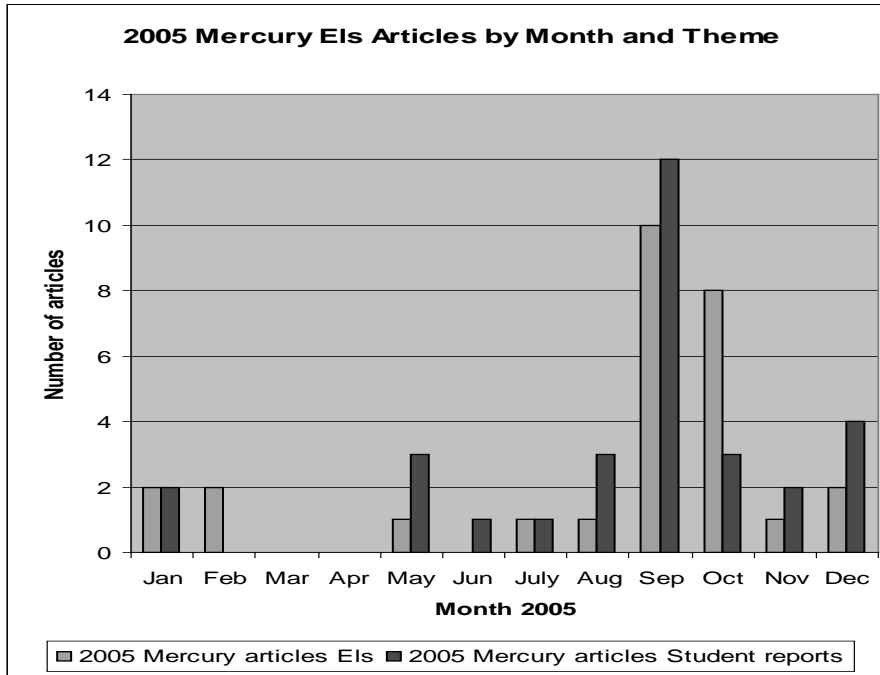
discrepancy between the government's rhetoric on education performance and what the international survey shows. ". . . that said, Ms Wriedt has at least admitted that there is a larger proportion of students in Tasmania performing at lower levels than the other states. . . . what they (the results) underscore is that Tasmania should be striving harder to top the table in future surveys. Only then will the reality match the political rhetoric."

3.5 2005 "...a horror year" (predicted Peter Gutwein, Opposition spokesman on education)

During 2005 there were fifty four articles related to the ELs curriculum in the *Mercury* Newspaper. Five of these articles were positive, being published in the Learning section, Schools guide and Back to school features. Twenty two articles addressed the appropriateness of ELs, Twenty seven focussed on student reports – particularly the quality of the language, or jargon used to describe student achievement. One article expressed concern at the drift of enrolments to non-government schools while another chided the Secretary of the Department of Education for his use of jargon. An analysis of the two key areas articles reported on is as follows.

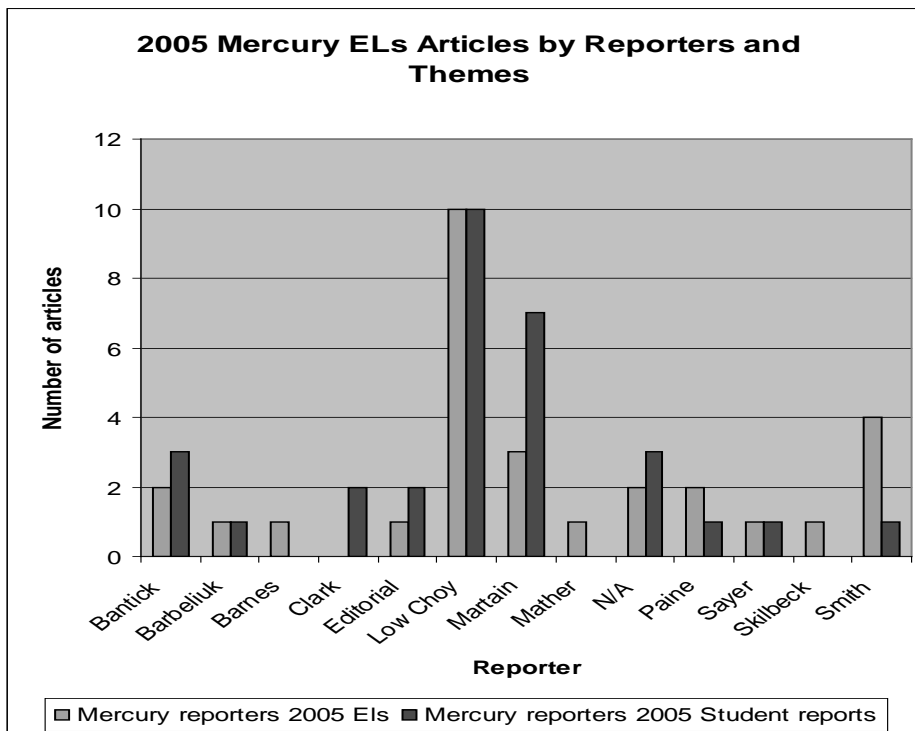
The number of articles published per month during 2005 peaked in September when both the appropriateness of the Essential Learnings curriculum and the method of reporting student progress came into question (Refer to Chart 4.2).

Chart 2.



An analyses of the articles published by each reporter for the *Mercury* during 2005 revealed that 13 reporters contributed articles about two main areas : Essential Learnings and its merits as a curriculum and the appropriateness of reporting student progress. One reporter, Low Choy, contributed twenty articles, fifteen of which were printed during September. These were equally spread between the main areas of interest. Four of her articles reported on the positive aspects of the Essential Learnings curriculum. Martain was the other reporter who wrote principally about issues relating to the student reporting process (See chart 4.3)

Chart 3.



3.6 Essential Learnings: - accept or reject?

MERCURY
18 Jan 2005
All eyes are on Tasmania
Bantick

Prior to September 2005 reporting of the ELs was positive. It was reported that Tasmanian schools will be watched by the rest of the country this year (2005), with educationists in other states keen to see how the essential Learnings curriculum will work. The Tasmanian Minister Wriedt was reported as saying, . . . *The key to success is to be engaged in education. World class is not as simple as academic results . . . we are striving for success for all.*

Professor Marilyn Flear from Melbourne's Monash University said that the new curriculum would help connect learning in schools with learning experiences outside of school. "I think you are going to see children who are more engaged," she said, "It's very much about authentic learning and engaging children."

MERCURY
13 Jul 2005
Expert favours new learnings
Martain

During the debate on the language used in reporting on the ELs to parents in September 2005 (Refer to next section) Professor Arnold, Dean of Education at the University of Tasmania, was reported in the media as saying that parents should not lose faith in the new Essential Learnings curriculum. She said, "It would be a shame to lose confidence in the new curriculum because of the language. Essential Learnings is based on the best theories of learning and thinking development available. Its foundations are very sound." Professor Arnold said a possible explanation for students' lack of enthusiasm for ELs was its intellectually challenging nature. "I say that because they are being asked to think about what they are learning, to engage with each other, to develop understanding, not just repeat memorised information," she said. The Acting Minister for Education said that if Tasmanian children are to succeed we need them to be able to think independently with an emphasis on ideas and creativity. The Editor, in the *Mercury* Editorial of 12 September hoped that the Department of Education would seize on the words of the Dean as it goes about doing a better job of informing the Tasmanian Community – *we are not talking about her (the Dean's) defence of ELs and a stout one it was . . . it's her lucid, uncomplicated explanation, in a single sentence, of what ELs is about.*

MERCURY
10 Sep 2005
Tassie top of class
People will move here
for our schools, says
professor
Low Choy

MERCURY
12 Sept 2005
Essential lesson for educators
Editorial

The validity of the ELs curriculum came under increasingly intense scrutiny and criticism from the media, teachers and members of the community, during September and October, as the debate on the appropriateness of the language used in reporting student progress raged. The responses tended to indicate that change in education can be difficult to implement, particularly, for example, as the negative publicity on report writing increased wave of criticism of the Essential Learnings curriculum was spurned.

MERCURY
12 Sept 2005
ELs Rubbish, say teachers
Students now learning less
Low Choy

A secondary teacher claimed that, *When the Department of Education enforcers are around we toe the party line*, while a primary teacher stated, *I don't think the kids are learning nearly enough*. The Education department understood that there were some concerns. The Liberal spokesman on education urged teachers to air their views publicly. In response Minister Wriedt said teachers have had opportunity to contribute to the discussion and the Deputy Secretary of Education asserted that . . . *State Public Service employees must not make any public comment as part of their duties . . . without permission.*

MERCURY
14 Sept 2005
Libs urge teachers to discuss ELs plan
Low Choy

Two letters to the Editor, on 14 September, expressed support for the ELs expressing the views that, *Students need to articulate their view thoughtfully and persuasively so they can fully participate in our community and ELs is a brave attempt to adapt the school curriculum to an ever changing world.*

Student teachers were reported (15 September) as saying that the *ELs curriculum is terrific* but admitted to the reporter that it was the only way they know how to teach. It was also reported on that day that Tasmanian principals were getting annual bonuses of up to \$10 000 if they successfully implemented the new ELs curriculum. The Tasmanian Principals Association President denied that this coloured principals' views. The department advised that principals received, as part of an industrial agreement in 2003, 11% bonuses for the completion of an agreed plan.

Interestingly, on 17 September the *Mercury* reported that *Education's hierarchy was keen to pass the buck as far as clarifying matters re ELs. Regardless, all the swapping of "authoritative" statements would seem to indicate that the head honchos are trying to keep out of the line of fire.* Also on that date a letter to the Editor claimed it was *Not possible to defend ELs pushed on schools by a misguided minister.*

A relief teacher near Launceston criticised the curriculum for requiring her to assess a child's spirituality. She said she was worried that children would believe that *nothing was right or wrong* under the new enquiry based system that encouraged children to think for themselves. *What is ethical behaviour? People have different views of what's ethical. . . . when I ask about teaching and assessing values, I can't get a good answer . . . knowledge and skills should come before enquiry based thinking.*

<p>MERCURY 26 Sept 2005 Essential Learnings debate turns spiritual Paine</p>

The Minister for Education slammed the criticism about spirituality.

Tasmania's controversial Essential Learnings curriculum is the worst primary school system in Australia, according to a new national report. Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula blasts aspects of the ELs as being *vague and lacking academic rigour*. ELs was rated bottom of the class in all three subject areas the Federal Government report assessed. Dr

<p>MERCURY 29 Sept 2005 page 1 BOTTOM OF THE CLASS National report slams Tassie education ELs bottom of class, says national report Low Choy</p> <p>MERCURY 30 Sept 2005 page 1 TASSIE EDUCATION STORM Wriedt blasts school critics Wriedt blast for school Critics Low Choy</p>
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Donnelly, the report's author, noted that Victoria's curriculum also employs the word essential, *but unlike . . . Tasmania there is a greater recognition of the importance of academic discipline.* Federal Minister Nelson said, *the report recommends that Australia's education system, which has been infected by what's known as the out-comes based model, needs to return to a much more concise, prescriptive syllabus which teaches [in a way that] parents can understand and assess the progress of children on a year-to-year basis.* (The ELs curriculum is described by Education Department personnel as being 'standards based', of

which there are five.) Minister Wriedt said Dr Donnelly was an educational conservative who had authored other attacks on education. She said a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report backed Tasmania's approach to learning. Minister Wriedt did launch a spirited defence of the ELs and blasted critics who suggested it was not teaching basics on 30 September 2005. Ms wried said the Federal report was only based on opinion, *We are not at the bottom of the pile. We are highly competitive with other states . . . It makes me cross that people are putting weight on this report when it's based on personal judgment and not results because the results don't show that sort of ranking.* Ms Wriedt said Dr Donnelly had not done his research well. *He talks about how terrible out-comes based education is and how it has been tried in other parts of the world and failed miserably.*

Finland outranks every other country in the OECD on the way their 15-year-old students perform and their system is outcomes based. Ms Wriedt said that the opposition's description of ELs as an experiment was an outrageous and laughable statement – *I'm the parent of a child at a government school. I've got my own child's future at stake as well and I'm not going to experiment on him or anybody else's children.*

The *Mercury* asked parents and students to text them to: Tell us what you think of Essential Learnings. Does it work for you? If not, why not? Two students, three parents and one teacher responded in support of the ELs while four students, ten parents and three teachers expressed disapproval of the ELs.

MERCURY
3 Oct 2005
Donnelly gets an 'F' for objectivity
Barnes

Strong support for the ELs was received from *Mercury* Features writer, Greg Barnes who wrote that serious and generally vigorous research shows that Paula Wriedt's education reforms are ensuring the state is doing a good deal better than Donnelly and his buddy, federal education

minister, Brendan Nelson, suggest. *Parents should consign Donnelly's hatchet job to the waste bin.*

MERCURY
4 Oct 2005
ELs criticism 'widespread'
Low Choy

The Union says that the Department of Education must stop giving the impression that only conservative or older teachers are criticising ELs as teachers across the age groups were critical of the state's controversial new

curriculum. Ms Walker said that . . . *just as teachers across a range of ages were critical of ELs, a range of teachers were supporting the new curriculum . . . I think with any radically new system there are bound to be things that can be criticised and then improved. . . . I think many teachers feel, rightly or wrongly, they aren't allowed to criticise and that if they do there will be retribution . . . Some of them do find that a little ironic when the ELs is very much based on a critical thinking model.*

Education Minister Paula Wriedt said ELs was supported across the profession and age was not a factor in whether or not teachers supported reform.

MERCURY
11 Oct 2005
An essential innovation
Skilbeck

Professor Malcolm Skilbeck, an educational researcher and consultant, has been director of the Australian Curriculum Centre, Vice Chancellor of Deakin University, and Deputy Director for Education at the OECD in Paris wrote that . . .

*In the vanguard of educational innovation nationally, Tasmania's program of Essential Learnings is squarely addressing the challenge (of aiming for the very highest standards of performance in learning while ensuring that the needs of every child are met in a fair and inclusive way) Similar changes in schooling and childcare are occurring or likely in all Australian states and territories. Why, then, are the Tasmanian and similar initiatives coming under fire, as in the just published report by Dr Kevin Donnelly Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula? The short answer is a bid by the Federal Government for power over the nation's schools and teachers. The reasons states and territories want changes in their schools vary but four stand out: *A densely packed curriculum jungle lacking clear pathways for students and teachers. * Too many students not motivated to learn and are under-performing or dissatisfied with school or both. * The national requirement to foster innovation and creativity. * The widely acknowledged need for highly trained intelligence and ethical values in the resolution of complex environmental and social issue . . . The ELs are not a narrow prescription but challenge everyone to think more fundamentally about what kind of education we as a society need and how schooling can help us achieve fuller, more successful and, yes, more rewarding lives.*

In this article Bantick revisits criticism of the ELs curriculum but also highlights strong support for the ELs. The union said that the majority of teachers were ready to assess ELs at

MERCURY
15 Oct 2005
ELs demands test of time
Bantick

the end of the year. Gay Activist Rodney Croome said that ELs *lays a foundation for a more creative, pluralistic and prosperous society in Tasmania*. Catholic Education Director Dan White strongly endorsed ELs by saying, *ELs is proving effective in lifting educational standards in Tasmania. It would be a pity to see the great work that has been done by many dedicated and conscientious teachers undermined in a debate over terminology*. Bantick reported that that before ELs is dismissed as an unworkable, jargon laden and inappropriate educational experiment, it was worth reflecting on the words of Dr Barry McGraw, an Australian and previous director of ACER who now heads the OECD education directorate: *Where there is more innovation in teaching practices and creativity, that's how you convince parents public education is worthwhile*. ELs curriculum needs reform but it may also need time.

MERCURY
20 Oct 2005
Education the key to reducing Tassie poverty
Sayer

ANZ chief economist Saul Eslake said that Tasmania's poor education report card was a major contributor to poverty in the state. He said many of Tasmania's social challenges, including high rates of poverty, could be attributed to the lower level of educational attainment compared to other states. While he did not wish to enter the ELs debate he did . . . *believe that improving the quantity and quality of education received by Tasmania's children ought to be an integral part of any long term strategy aimed at reducing poverty and deprivation in Tasmania*.

MERCURY
31 Oct 2005
Ad blitz for ELs targets parents
Mather

The state government launched an \$165,000 advertising campaign to sell Tasmania's controversial Essential Learnings curriculum. The Education Minister advised that the campaign's focus was to reassure parents their children were still learning the basics. *We got the message loudly and clearly from members of the community and commentators that we needed to get a clearer message out there. . . the advertisements also correct some of the myths about Essential Learnings that a few critics have perpetuated*. The Union suggested that the Minister could have saved money by beginning the campaign some 18 months ago.

MERCURY
19 Dec 2005
'You have to be able to connect and communicate.' New boss books in 'simple talk' course
Low Choy

In an article on 19 December the New Education Department head John Smyth said he may give staff copies of Frank McCourt's new memoir 'Teacher Man' to improve their communication skills, also saying that the department must improve the way it communicates with the community about ELs. John Smyth was reported as saying, *I've been hugely impressed by what's happening in schools. I'm very comfortable with ELs. The learning kids are getting really develops their thinking. I think we'll see very different young people coming out of our schools who really can think and challenge and manage and live in what is an increasingly complex and challenging world. As more and more children move through Essential Learnings and become real thinkers they will really contribute to this state*. Mr Smyth encouraged parents to respond to the Tasmanian State School Parents and Friends survey on ELs reports to be issued at the start of the new year.

Inherent in the articles written in support for or against the Essential Learnings curriculum is an emerging list of public purposes of education which includes:

- Ensuring students learn the basics of reading, writing and mathematics,
- Tailoring learning to suit individual needs,
- Connecting learning in schools with learning outside schools,

- Students thinking about learning,
- Students engaging with each other in the learning process,
- Thinking independently with an emphasis on ideas and creativity,
- Students being ethical in their behaviour,
- Help students achieve fuller, more successful and, yes, more rewarding lives
- Improving education levels of students as a means of, or strategy for, reducing poverty in the community

3.7 Student reports

Report writing was the second major issue to dominate the press during 2005, commencing in January and progressively building up a head of steam until erupting in September. The first article in January proved to be indicative of what was to come.

MERCURY
Sat 8 Jan 2005 page 17
Report cards "please explain"

"The minister either hopelessly contradicted herself or unwittingly exposed a Labor back-flip over calls for a standardised, plain-English report card," Mr Gutwein said yesterday. On Thursday Ms Wriedt said Labor did not believe in a "one-size-fits-all approach" to report cards – but on October 14 she had said her department was working on "... a standardised and informative format". Although the reporting would be 'standardised' there would be flexibility to account for individual school needs, Ms Wriedt said, "schools will be required to report against the Essential Learnings framework and there will be a capacity for schools to provide for other reporting in subject areas and other areas negotiated with their communities.

The Schools Guide in the *Mercury* on 18 Jan 2005 advised that the Year 10 Assessment Report would show achievement against five of the key outcomes of the ELs (Being literate, Being numerate, Maintaining Well-being, Thinking inquiry with Being information-literate to be reported on in 2006), replacing the Tasmanian Certificate of Education.

The opposition spokesman on education expressed concern that reports sent home were *one-line reports* and *next to useless*. The Minister for Education advised that the new ELs reporting system would not come into effect until the end of the year. The AEU expressed concern about the changes in assessment, saying that *the Essential Learnings program had been introduced to schools at a staggered pace over the past five years. This year the changes became mandatory across all schools. In those schools where the changes were new, many teachers felt confused. . . . most teachers are happy with the curriculum but those who came on-line most recently say they want more time to understand and feel comfortable with the assessment and reporting.*

On Wednesday 18 May it was reported that the Minister for Education announced that schools now had an extra year to report on the Key element , Inquiry. The extension meant that the entire 18 reporting elements due to be implemented by 2008 will not be fully implemented till 2009.

MERCURY
20 May 2005
Libs blast new school reports
Martain

The Liberal Party called for standardised school reports after receiving complaints from schools. *These school reports provide no information whatsoever on the performance of an individual child and are no more than a mail-merged document.* The Union president said the reports may have looked vague and caused some confusion for parents. Under the new curriculum the end-of-year report would not assess traditional areas.

MERCURY
27 May 2005
Teacher poll fury claim
Smith

A poll conducted by the Education Union asked teachers whether they felt ready to assess students using key elements of the new curriculum. Minister Wriedt questioned the polls integrity as a

yes/no answer was the only option to the question: 'Are you ready to assess on reporting, yes or no? The Liberal spokesperson said that teacher concerns were not being met.

MERCURY
28 June 2005
**State, federal curriculum rift could end
in fiasco Two school reports fear**
Martain

Different requirements by state and federal governments could result in two different reports for children, the AEU says. *Teachers feared bearing the brunt of the extra paperwork created by the conflict over easy-to-read report cards. Dr Nelson's insistence on report cards marked from*

A to E against the eight core learning areas, such as maths and English, poses a problem for Tasmanian teachers who must mark students against the ELs by the end of this year. Reporting twice for every student is a tremendous amount of work and quite frankly teachers won't do it. The AEU would continue to seek a compromise.

On 29 July it was reported by Nick Clarke that four southern high schools had major problems issuing half year reports because the computer software (SARIS) at the centre of the new ELs curriculum had crashed. It was understood that major changes would be made to the software would be tested and made available to schools on the following Tuesday.

MERCURY
4 Aug 2005
**Confusion over reports Format
yet to get federal go-ahead**
Martain

The Education Minister launched information packs that would explain to parents what the new ELs curriculum is and what reports would look like. The original report card put forward by Tasmania did not meet the requirements set by Federal Education Minister Nelson for schools to produce plain English reports that were simple for parents to read. As federal education

funding was dependent on the states adhering to Dr Nelson's guidelines the Tasmanian Minister had been in negotiations with him over what the final form of the reports would take. The AEU's main concern was that teachers at some schools still felt that they had not been given adequate time and assistance in preparing to report under ELs at the end of this year. *They've had less time than the others*, she said.

The federal education minister reiterated his determination to have a plain language report card for Tasmanian students during his visit to Hobart. He threatened that \$341 million worth of

MERCURY
6 August 2005
Schools funding easy as ABC, says Nelson
Clark

federal schools funding could be affected if a suitable report card was not issued. He said the report card should have a grading of A, B, C, D, E for each student in each subject. *We want to know in which quartile in performance in a particular subject a student fails . . .*

How Tasmania reports to parents is its business so long as it also reports that if it wants \$350 million of government funding over four years, it will report in plain language. Negotiations with the state were continuing.

MERCURY
28 June 2005
**State, federal curriculum rift
could end in fiasco Two school
reports fear**
Martain

Ms Wriedt said she still hoped to negotiate with Dr Nelson over the format of Tasmania's report cards but the AEU's Chris Lane was less optimistic. Mr Lane said, "Reporting twice for every student is a tremendous amount of work and quite frankly teachers won't do it." However, he said they would continue to seek a compromise. A compromise was announced in the *Mercury* on 25 August 2005. In addition to assessment against the new Essential Learnings criteria, state school report cards would include equivalent marks in A-E format commencing in 2006. Department of Education Acting Deputy Secretary, David Hanlon, said teachers would still mark students against ELs and

MERCURY
25 Aug 2005
**Compromise in student
marking row New report cards
pact**
Martain

the department would then convert those marks into ABCDE equivalents, ensuring statewide consistency and no added workload for teachers. Tasmanian State School Parents and Friends President Jenny Branch was unimpressed saying the new reports would probably still confuse parents *-I'm not convinced it's a fair way to report on children's learning.* The AEU was

pleased the change meant no extra work for teachers but said, . . . *parents would still need to be informed about how to read the dual reporting systems.*

MERCURY
7 Sep 2005
Essential Learning report card

September saw a dramatic increase in the reporting of the ELs assessment process and the reporting of student progress to parents. A draft copy of the Essential Learnings report card drew major criticism from language expert Don Watson who analysed the Education Department's spiel about providing for student assessment against a set of 'key element outcomes'. . . . *Anyone who use, 'key element outcomes' isn't thinking properly. No-one is ever going to know what a set of key outcomes is. If you are going to talk about key element outcomes, do us a favour and tell us what one looks like.* Peter Gutwein MHA highlighted the difficulty of the language used by reading a section of the report card in parliament, *Teachers will collaborate to record student progress on each key element at a point on a continuum consisting of five standards. Common progression of statements which describes each student's acquired skills and understandings are provided at each point of continuum for each key element.* (Brochures concerning the report card had been outsourced by the Department of Education. The language in these proved to be unacceptable to commentators. The original pamphlets prepared by departmental officers had not created any problems.)

MERCURY
7 Sept 2005
Courses jargon 'like something out of Soviet Union' Simply put: it fails
Low Choy

It's language not unlike Stalinist language in being totally abstract. It's hung from some invented framework – Watson said.

Watson proceeded to destroy the credibility of the Education Department in using a foreign jargon to explain its new Essential Learnings curriculum.

The opposition education spokesperson said Mr Watson was correct.

MERCURY
8 Sep 2005
Words fail us, Minister
Editorial

Acting department secretary Alison Jacob said the brochures were one way the department was endeavouring to inform parents about the new curriculum. Ms Jacob said, *Terms such as 'key elements', which describe important parts of the curriculum, have been publicised and referred to in newsletters, parent forums and earlier brochures since 2001.*

The Mercury Editorial added to the debate by stating that, *Every generation, parents lament the fact that they don't understand what the kids are saying. Now they're also bound to be lost for words when trying to understand Education Minister Paula Wriedt's Essential Learnings curriculum. 'Key element outcomes', 'on balance judgment' and 'culminating performance' are going to leave parents, not to mention students, feeling they've been left off the 'concept map'. . . . School never used to be this hard when we were content with plain English.*

MERCURY
8 Sep 2005
Dud decoder of courses jargon
Low Choy

The next day reporter Low Choy quoted University of Queensland's applied language studies professor, Roly Sussex as saying that most parents would find the Jargon Buster unintelligible – *There needs to be a jargon buster to explain what's in the jargon buster. . . . if you have a five year old saying 'Mummy my culminating performance was such and such' that's not good.*

MERCURY
8 Sep 2005
Extract from the Jargon Buster – the Education Department's attempt to demystify the new Essentials Learnings curriculum

Opposition spokesman said that the language used in the jargon buster is the same, corporate, bureaucratic language used in most of the other ELs reporting system.

- The explanation of such terms as 'rubric', 'formative assessment' and 'on balance judgment' are filled with language that drones on and no parent could expect to gain a significantly clearer understanding of these terms after reading the jargon buster.

On the same day the *Mercury* published extracts from the Jargon buster which included explanations of words frequently used in assessing student progress such as: ‘concept map’, and ‘on balance’.

MERCURY
9 Sep 2005
English manglers cop a full Nelson
Pos

The following day it was reported that Federal Education Minister Nelson had lampooned the ELs in parliament. – *You cannot consult the community in this language because the community does not speak it. You might as well talk in Swahili.*

MERCURY
9 Sep 2005
A jargon knockout! Department waves white flag on curriculum lingo
Low Choy

Also, on 9 September, reporter Low Choy had two articles on page 3 that again, focussed on the use of language by the Education Department. Acting secretary Alison Jacob says the department accepts criticism it has received this week. She says, . . . *we’ve really, in good faith, tried to communicate well and we really do genuinely want to do that. If we’re missing the boat on that we would want to get other advice. . . . there is always tension between professional language and plain English.* The president of the Tasmanian State School Parents and Friends Association said she had heard from many parents who did not understand the language used . . . *some parents get really upset because they want to communicate with students about what’s going on, and if you can’t understand how do you talk to your child.*

MERCURY
9 Sep 2005
The language barrier test
Low Choy

The acting executive director of curriculum standards and support, Penny Andersen, explained the terms ‘rubric’ and ‘on balance judgment’ to the reporter. Then the *Mercury* placed Ms Jacob on the spot by asking her to ‘take a shot’ at explaining a concept map. Whilst the Acting Secretary explained that it was more appropriate to explain the term within the context of a conversation about ELs. The reporter persisted with, *But parents don’t get context. When Johnny comes home and mentions a context map they don’t have this whole “framework”, as you call it to look at. They just want to know what a concept map is.* [Ms Andersen steps in to explain on Ms Jacobs behalf that it was just a map of concepts – *I’m not sure there’s any other way you can explain it.*] The article went on to explain the background to the jargon buster.

MERCURY
13 Sep 2005
Business hits ELs reports make no sense, say employers
Low Choy

The *Mercury* reported that Tasmania’s business community does not understand the Education Department’s new Essential Learnings report cards. – two of the state’s top human resources firms say the reports do not make sense to employers. One said, – *A framework that does not indicate whether a potential employee can read, write and add up is of little benefit to their daily business operations.* The other is reported to have said, *they make it harder to differentiate between people by not awarding recognisable grades.* The Acting Deputy Secretary of Education David Hanlon said that the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry had been involved in the development of the ELs – *They continue to be consulted on curriculum changes, particularly assessment and reporting. There has been a positive response from employers on these matters and recently 30 employers and employer groups gave overwhelming positive feedback about reporting.*

MERCURY
21 Sep 2005
Minister buckets bureaucrats Jargon bust, says Wriedt
Low Choy

A report on 21 September focussed on the use of language once more. In this the Minister of Education admitted that the jargon buster was ‘completely unhelpful’ for parents and acknowledged that the Education Department’s communications with parents could have been ‘a whole lot clearer’. Following several interchanges between members of state parliament Ms Wriedt, *that there will be a more concerted effort to use clearer language in all documents used to communicate with school communities.* It was acknowledged in the article that Ms Wriedt was on annual leave while the jargon buster debacle played out. However, it was revealed by her

husband in the *Mercury* during 2007 that Ms Wriedt was suffering quite badly from post-natal depression during this period.

MERCURY
10 Oct 2005
**Lobby group to canvass views
on new report cards Parents
vote on ELs**
Low Choy

On 10 October 2005 the Tasmanian Parents and Friends Association were reported as saying that they would survey parents as soon as school resumed in 2006 seeking parents' opinions on the new ELs report cards as they will have received their first student report at the end of 2005. However, the liberals still held some major concerns about the reports.

Parents were advised that students would receive two report cards at the end of the year. One

MERCURY
27 Oct 2005
**ELs marking doubles Students
to receive two report cards from
this year**
Paine

would be a full report marking Essential Learnings and done by teachers. The other so-called 'Nelson plain-English report' required by Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson – rate each student A,B,C,D, or E depending how they performed on each ELs area. This report would be generated by Department of Education computers. The AEU president said the Department

and the union had come to an agreement. She said, *We believe whatever difficulties we've had with the time lines assessing and reporting ELs, it's a far more educationally sound process than the Nelson requirements. Marking students in such a simplistic way had ended many years ago and had limitations. For example, putting the same student always in the bottom quartile would tell a parent little about the child's performance.*

MERCURY
3 Nov 2005
Teacher sickies an ELs work ploy: MP
Sayer

Opposition spokesman Peter Gutwein raised the issue that teachers were taking sick days in order to write their reports saying how confusing and difficult it was for teachers to write their student reports. Education Minister Wriedt did not deny the allegations about teachers taking

sick leave, and said they had been given unprecedented support on the new assessment and reporting process. She said it had always been recognised that additional support for teachers would be required in the first year. Ms Wriedt said \$4 million had been invested in laptops to help with assessment and reporting. Reporting was back in the headlines on 25 November with

MERCURY
25 Nov 2005
Heat on schools over reports
Martain

the *Mercury* reporting that technical glitches and long hours of overtime had hit Tasmanian public schools as they prepared to send the first Essential Learnings reports home. Information packs would be sent home with each report. The Liberal education spokesman said the sample

reports released by Ms Wriedt showed she still did not understand the concept of easy-to-read, meaningful school reports.

MERCURY
9 Dec 2005
Rewrite woes hit school report saga
Martain

Serious issues arose in December when the Department of Education generated A-E reports showed inconsistencies in the report of students between the A-E reports and the ELs reports prepared by teachers. Office of Educational Review director Jenny Gale said the department's concern was to ensure consistency. *There might be the odd teacher here or there whose ideas about a particular standard for a particular group may be different from what is set.* However, a teacher at one Hobart primary school said most of the staff at her school had been told to rewrite their comments to more closely reflect the A-E marks – *The whole things a mess, the left hand doesn't know what the right is doing in the department. Sometimes the left doesn't even know the right exists.* It was reported that the

MERCURY
10 Dec 2005
C-grade rating likely in new reports:
Libs

MERCURY
16 Dec 2005
**School report 'nonsensical' ELs blasted
from within**
Low Choy

Union had been told of teachers working up to 78 hours a week to complete their ELs reports. The Liberals expressed concern that most school reports would rate students with a 'C' and was

equally concerned that some parents had received advice from schools saying that ‘this report does not indicate the progress made’. Ms Collins, a Labor candidate at the state election said her greatest concern was ‘the sliding continuum’. A black dot charts a child’s progress on a scale with five ‘standards’, each divided into three levels.- *I have no idea what the black dot means, to be blunt, to use straight language.* But Ms Wriedt said the significance of the ‘dot’ was clearly spelt out in the accompanying material.

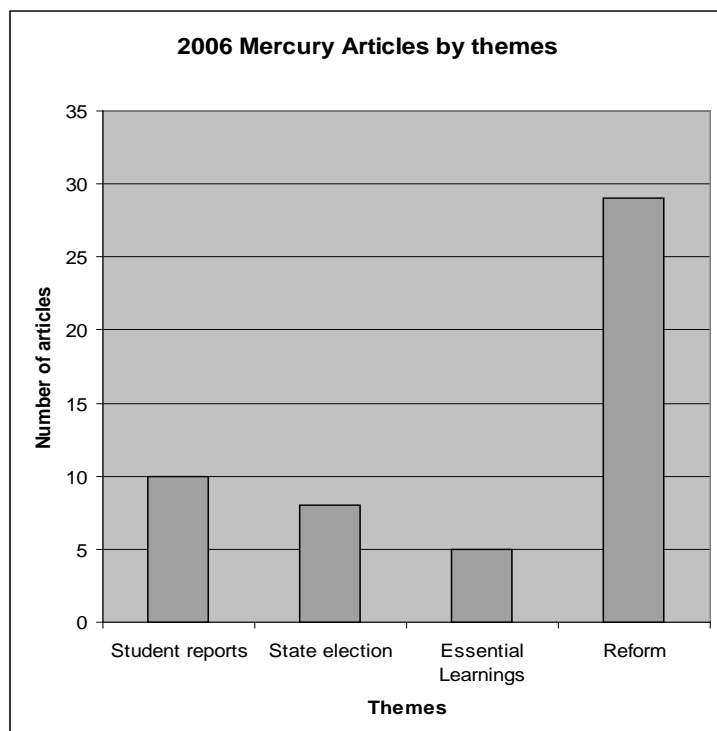
MERCURY
23 Dec 2005
Parents mystified by new school reports
Martain

The final article on school reports for 2005 claimed that, according to the opposition, parents had been dumbfounded by their first look at school reports under the new Essential Learnings curriculum. *I can’t see any possibility of any employer obtaining any useful information from the new Year 10 graduation certificate*, Mr Gutwein said. The Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry employment education training also criticised the report and certificate formats. – *The Essential Learnings does reflect the valuable skills that employers are looking for, but we can’t tell from these reports and certificates.* But Education Minister Wriedt said the certificates had been developed after wide consultation with employers.

3.8 2006

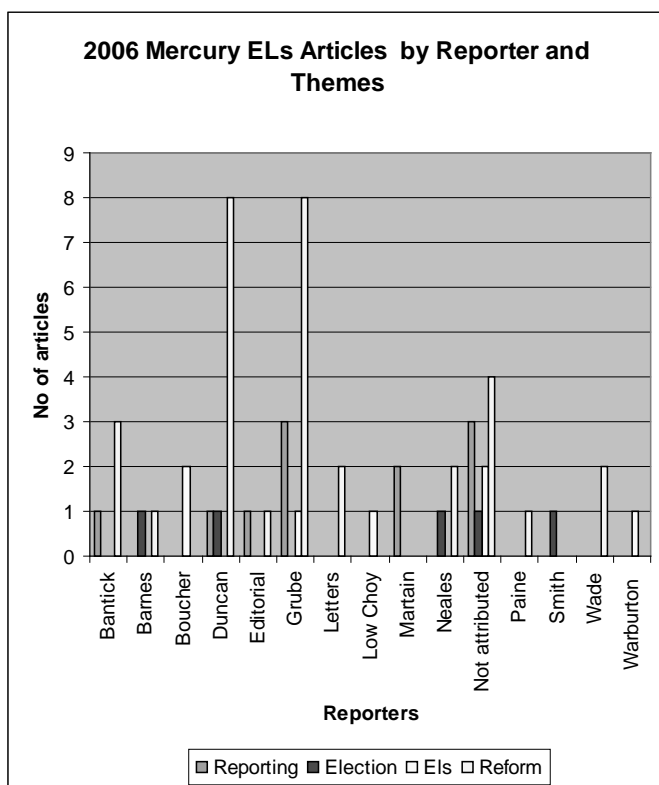
There were fifty two articles about the Essential Learnings curriculum and related matters published by the *Mercury* in 2006. The articles were grouped under four themes that will be detailed in the following notes. Ten articles were concerned with the ongoing issue of the appropriateness of student reporting formats, eight related to the state election, including articles on thinking democratically related to school programs, and the change in the Tasmanian Education Minister. five articles focussed on the Essential Learnings curriculum and 29 articles addressed reforms that emerged under a new minister and (See chart 4.4).

Chart 4.



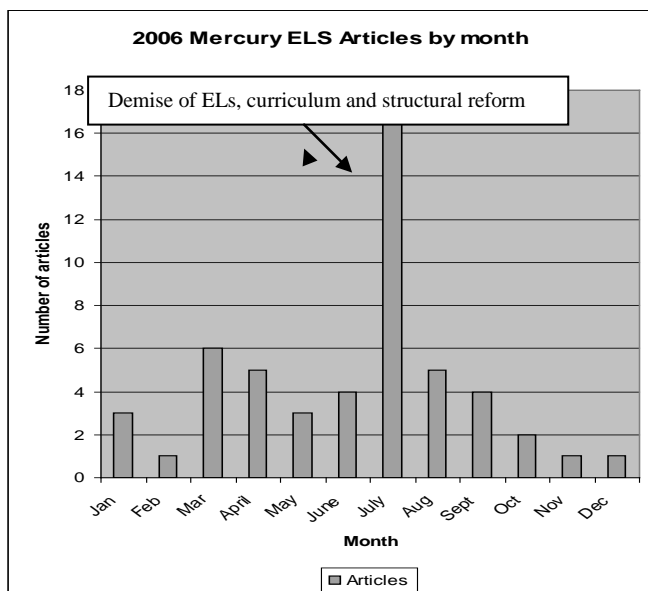
Fifteen reporters contributed articles on education. Most articles published in the *Mercury*, during 2006, were attributed to Grube (11), Duncan (10) and a further 10 for which the author was unknown (See chart 4.5). Low Choy, who wrote so prolifically in 2005 had the one article published in 2006.

Chart 5.



In July 2006, three months after taking office Education Minister Bartlett announced the demise of ELs and several reforms to curriculum and the structure of the Education Department. The resultant increase in *Mercury* reporting, due to the reforms, is evident in Chart 4.6.

Chart 6.



MERCURY
17 Jan 2006
Reports progress

The first article for 2006, on 17 January advised readers that, for the first time, parents will get reports that shows the progress their child makes from one year to the next. The Essential Learnings reports track a students progress over time. On 31 March the *Mercury* reported that jargon and poor

MERCURY
31 Mar 2006
Parents' turn to rate school report system
Martain

communications are expected to be the main issues identified by a survey of parents about Essential Learnings school reports. Parents and Friends president Jenny Branch reported hundreds of responses from across the state were received and were being collated. Australian Education Union president Jean Walker said that the survey concerns of teachers. – *Anecdotally, I hear parents are very impressed with teachers' comments but not so impressed with dots on the grid.* Education Minister Paula Wriedt conceded that public concerns over the ELs may have cost her votes in the recent election.

The *Mercury* reported that parents would push for changes to the ELs report card, following analysis of 1200 surveys. Parents and Friends (P&F) would urge the new, incoming Minister for Education to alter the ELs reports. The state government had agreed to union and parents requests to slow the implementation of ELs reporting of student progress.

MERCURY
27 Apr 2006
Parents push for proper reports
Duncan

MERCURY
3 May 2006
Parents flounder in a sea of jargon

The P&F review found the ELs reports to be too jargon-filled and do not give parents a good idea of how children are progressing. Most parents agreed the reports were easy to understand and showed what was to be expected of students at their year level, but did not show parents what their child was able to do and could better identify areas where help was needed.

MERCURY
3 May 2006
Bartlett announces move to soften impact of new school reports
Taskforce to tackle ELs
Martain

Minister Bartlett set up a special reporting to parents task force under the chairmanship of Education Secretary John Smyth. Included on the task force were the P&F president and the language commentator Don Watson. It will present its findings to the Minister on November 30.

MERCURY
21 June 2006
Elementary, my dear Watson
Editorial

MERCURY
21 Jun 2006
ELs critic joins taskforce on school reports
ELs critic on school taskforce
Grube

On 21 June the *Mercury* Editorial headline read, 'Elementary, my dear Watson' with the editorial praising the appointment of Watson to the report task force. It went on to say that the appointment of Mr Watson would bring to the task force his view that if the department wants the public and teachers to accept its ideas, it should have the courage to present them in understandable English. It advised that the make-up of the panel was 2 parents, the P&F president and three teachers and suggested that there was an omission of students from the group. On the same day the *Mercury* carried an article by Kathy Grube which made similar comments about the appropriateness of appointing Mr Watson to the report task force.

MERCURY
23 June 2006
Opt out call on school reports
Grube

P&F president Jenny Branch advised parents that they could opt out of the A-E report cards. She thought the task force may recommend the remodelling of the reports into one report. Jenny Gale from the Education Department's Office of Educational Review said that A-E reports would be sent to parents on 31 July and would include comments on all graded criteria.

MERCURY
27 Dec 2006
Not up to the task
Bantick

A report in the *Mercury* on 27 December 2006 claimed that as the Minister for Education had not yet approved the recommendations of the Reporting to Parents Taskforce, the task force had to do better. It said that while the emphasis is on the primacy of simple language and clarity of school

communication in school reports, inadequate attention has been given to early diagnostic assessment of student achievement. It claimed also that . . . *the standard bar as shown in the report is confusing and utterly unspecific in terms of where a child's actual achievement lies . . . progressions are a jargonised expression for not being able to determine what a child has learnt and his or her specific level of achievement at a given moment.*

Reporting to parents had remained a high profile issue of concern for two years!

3.9 State election

The Tasmanian state election was held in March 2006. In the lead-up to the election several newspaper reports focussed on activities in schools that were an enactment of one of the key elements in the ELs curriculum, 'Thinking democratically'. Schools can observe democracy at work as politicians try to convince electors that they have the best policies. Democratic principles are at work as teachers create classrooms where all students see themselves as integral to everyday decision making processes. As well as stimulating classroom discussion on politics, politicians and the idiosyncrasies of Tasmania's Hare-Clark system, students learn the vocabulary needed to discuss the voting procedures and the make-up of parliament.

MERCURY
7 Mar 2006
**Classroom
democracy**
Boucher

MERCURY
7 Mar 2006
**Civics now
essential**

MERCURY
14 Mar 2006
**Acting
democratically**
Boucher

MERCURY
20 Mar 2006
**Wriedt waits for verdict Liberal likely
to get boost from huge Hodgman vote**
Smith

MERCURY
30 Mar 2006
Paula tested as voters spell it out
Duncan

Greg Barnes in his political comment on the candidates for seats in southern Tasmanian electorates praised the Minister for Education, Paula Wriedt, who has ... *proved a highly capable minister for education who has stood firm against vested interests and conservatives to pursue a world's best practice*

Essential Learnings framework. The minister, however, struggled to retain her seat. It was reported that it was possible that controversy surrounding the new Essential Learnings school curriculum may have contributed to her drop in popularity. Ten days after the election Wriedt was declared elected but lost the education portfolio and would assume responsibilities for tourism, arts and heritage. On 6 April the make-up of the new cabinet was announced by Premier Paul Lennon with Paula Wriedt confirmed in the tourism, arts and heritage portfolio and David Bartlett in

education. It was reported that *Mr Bartlett takes on education at a time when there is still concern about the ground breaking Essential Learnings curriculum and education standards generally. He has to do the job begun by Paula Wriedt and break new ground.*

3.10 The Essential Learnings curriculum

A very positive article on the ELs curriculum appeared in the *Mercury's* Schools' Guide saying that the curriculum is designed to equip students with skills for a lifetime of learning experience. Whilst the ELs was being used in all government schools from kindergarten to year 10 many Catholic and Independent schools were also using the ELs. The article said *The ELs is about hands-on real life learning. It's about engaging students and equipping them with skills, understanding and values so that they can apply what they are learning to their life and experiences.*

MERCURY
17 Jan 2006
Life in the learning lane

MERCURY
9 May 2006
**State schools spurned Parents
increasingly favour private, Catholic
education.**
Neales

The *Mercury* reported that at least 3000 students appeared to have left the government system in favour of Catholic and Independent schools. The figures are understood to have jolted the state government. *It is understood the controversy over the Essential Learnings curriculum introduced into state schools last year by former Labor Education Minister*

Paula Wriedt, is blamed in part for pushing parents towards independent private schools. New

Education Minister David Bartlett was expected to launch a drive to restore public confidence in the state education system.

On 11 August the *Mercury* foreshadowed the release of results from the AEU survey of state school teachers on the Essential Learnings Curriculum, saying that feedback had been received from 90 per cent of schools. On 26 August it was reported that the Education Minister refused to provide the full survey results.

MERCURY
26 Aug 2006
ELs useful but onerous
Teachers poll calls for
clarity
Grube

AEU President Jean Walker said, *The general opinion of teachers is that there are many good things about the Essential Learnings curriculum that they want to retain, but they are also telling us that they want a reduction in the work load in the assessment and reporting requirements. Teachers saw the assessment and reporting needed to be greatly simplified, made clearer, less jargonistic and less onerous. They believe that the number of key element outcomes need to be reduced and that the standards and progression statements need greater clarity and need simplifying and reducing. They also believe there is a need for a greater number of gradations in assessment to more accurately represent student progress.*

In September 2006 it was reported that while the education minister might have yielded to public criticism by scrapping the Essential Learnings there are many students who support the outcomes based curriculum. Students at Clarence High School study Essential Learnings subjects such as world futures, global inquiry, futures inquiry and well being as well as traditionally named English, mathematics and science subjects. Comments of students included: . . . *teaching is focussed on the understanding of how something works. . . . every thing is integrated. . . . we know where we are going and have developed goals. . . . linking mathematical theory to the real world is essential. . . . in Wellbeing we learn the theory of how teams work together . . . rubrics list in dot points what you have achieved at that standard for that piece of work. . . . the same standards are being used to mark students from kindergarten to year 10.*

Further articles reported on the Essential Learnings curriculum however, these were within the context of the new reform process being undertaken by the Minister for Education David Bartlett.

3.11 Education reform

The Minister for Education announced that the ELs would be dumped, less than two years after

MERCURY
30 Jun 2006
ELs axed after \$20m, years of confusion and frustration for
teachers and parents, the new Education Minister acts . . .
Minister acts on criticism and axes ELs
Duncan

it was introduced to all schools, at the beginning of the following year (2007). His Deputy Secretary David Hanlon did not rule out a return to the traditional subjects of maths and English. Mr Bartlett said his department head John Smyth

and some principals had already begun work on 'Tasmania's curriculum' to replace ELs. He promised the result would radically simplify the language and the framework but was reluctant to concede ELs had been scrapped. The *Mercury* Editorial, the next day (1 July), placed some levity on the situation when it quoted a joke doing the rounds of school staffrooms on 2006 – What's the best things about Christmas holidays? No ELs. The article did say that, *adding to the confusion, the ELs had been implemented in the midst of a wider national curriculum debate between the traditionalists and the reformers. It has become a political battle ground and the conservative Federal Government has insisted on its own assessment process. . . . The farcical situation and the competing philosophies has to be resolved.*

Chief reporter Sue Neales when reporting major hits on the government during Budget Estimates hearings wrote (on 1 July) that *there was the extraordinary revelation of his own volition on Thursday by the increasingly cocky Education Minister David Bartlett, that the controversial \$20 million Essential Learnings school curriculum was to be scrapped. It was a bold announcement, . . . unfortunately spoiled by an unnecessary-arrogant swipe at the poor performance of his equally-dedicated predecessor and colleague Paula Wriedt.* Also on 1 July, Philippa Duncan reported the concerns of the Vice President of the AEU, who said, *teachers had held meetings for the past four years coming to grips with the ELs. Weekly planning meetings have been held across the state. Teachers would find the change frustrating and some older teachers might ask: 'What's the next thing David Bartlett will be doing?'. . . Teachers have been ignored for political expedience. Opposition education spokesman, Peter Gutwein said the education of Tasmanian children had suffered during the failed ELs experiment* and criticised the Union for not speaking out sooner. The *Mercury* reported that the Catholic education sector supported the review of Essential Learnings. The state director looked forward working with Mr Bartlett to develop a more user-friendly curriculum. On 5 July College principals from all sectors of education in Tasmania met to the Post Year 10 Curriculum Framework – still based on subjects but with three additional components – Personal pathways, Extended Studies and Working Within Communities. Also on 5 July, Philippa Duncan reported David Bartlett had tried to mend his relationship with predecessor Paula Wriedt after saying she had ‘not done a very good job’.

MERCURY
1 July 2006
Now its 3 Rs but no ELs
Editorial

MERCURY
1 July 2006
Fears rise over scars from ELs
Duncan

MERCURY
3 July 2006
'Mute teacher union hit ELs reform should have started sooner: Gutwein
Duncan

MERCURY
10 July 2006
ELs . . . the right answer
Barnes

Greg Barnes asked, *What is it about Tasmania? Because a well-known author, a few school teachers, conservative politicians and a government gang up on a major reform, we adjudge it to be a failure. The attempt by the Education Minister, David Bartlett and, and his colleagues is a case of popularism and lack of leadership. . .*

. If Mr Bartlett and the Lennon government had wanted to show genuine leadership in education policy, then they would have continued to implement what would have been the most far-sighted and much needed reform to education in Australia. What has been disturbing about the events of the past fortnight is that education has been viewed as a commodity, an object or product that can be marketed to consumers. ELs is simply one product on the supermarket shelf and it's going to be replaced by a parochial and dumbed down Tasmanian curriculum. . . . If technical terminology is the only criticism of ELs then simply reduce its impact, but don't abandon the term ELs and the heart of the philosophy underpinning it.

The *Mercury* reported that David Bartlett had renewed a commitment to take on board the findings from the AEU survey of teachers.

MERCURY
13 July 2006
Basics-plus not much to ask
Bantick

Reporter Bantick foreshadowed the release of the discussion paper on the new Tasmanian curriculum. He advised that *Minister Bartlett may be prudent to return to the readily defined and understood traditional subject definitions. There are more advantages in going this way than ameliorating public concern. A traditional curriculum focus would help to restore employer surety about the standards Tasmanian children attain. English and maths in particular, offered in a formal way. would better prepare students for the national benchmark assessment and reduce difficulties in comparing Tasmanian students on the benchmarks for literacy and numeracy.*

One hundred days after taking over as Education Minister, David Bartlett's mission, reported Kathy Grube (14 July), was to get more money through the school gate. The plan redirects

MERCURY
15 July 2006
**School admin lifted Let the teachers
teach: Bartlett**
Duncan

resources from the department's head office straight into schools and gives principals more strategic leadership and control over how resources are spent. It will involve a significant number of staff at the department's head office being deployed to schools or school support units. The restructure will see the three school branches replaced with four 'Learning service units'. Elements of the reform were the subject of Philippa Duncan's article the following day. *Restoring power to school principals is the thrust of a back to basics plan . . . will send 150 bureaucrats back to Tasmania's state schools – not to the classroom to teach . . . schools will be more business-like and have to answer to boards of principals rather than distant bureaucrats . . . corporate benchmarking will be used to measure how schools are going and direct resources to those not up to scratch. . . it was time for educators to lead reform, which he promised would cause minimum disruption in schools . . . an 'organic network' will replace a top-down hierarchical structure . . . the eighteen month restructure would be called 'Student at the centre'.*

It was rather ironic that the *Mercury* reported (17 July) that an Education Department paper on the proposed Student at the Centre restructure is so bureaucratic the teachers union cannot translate it. The AEU said the paper was, *elitist, confusing and written in a language ordinary people would not understand*. Peter Gutwein said the language was *bizarre and overly complex*. . . *why can't it just say learning services groups will support schools to support students?* Parents, however, say (Grube 19 July) they have no trouble understanding the language in Bartlett's plan for restructuring his department.

MERCURY
5 Aug 2006
Fomenting a schools revolution
Bantick

When interviewed by Christopher Bantick, David Bartlett acknowledged that he was a politician in a hurry. During the interview the Minister said there are there were three areas that he wanted to improve: *Firstly there is the early pre-school years. I want every Tasmanian kid to arrive as a learner. Secondly, we need to improve our literacy and numeracy standards in the middle years, particularly from years 5 to 9. . . I think there's a gap and we need to get this right. The third area is the post year 10 retention rates. We have the worst in the country and there is no way of avoiding that.* During the interview he made the following comment on school performance: *If a school wasn't performing even when it had resources and support, would it be closed and amalgamated with a more successful school? Only if it was led by the school community. . . . not succeeding is not an option - - not for me but for the future of our schools. People have accused me of being in a hurry. I am in a hurry. There's no job second to learning. There are 70 000 kids in our schools who deserve the best.*

Kathy Grube reported that the Tasmanian State Schools Parents and Friends Association intended to put a motion at their annual conference to eliminate student free days. The AEU said the student free days were used to provide time to train teachers in the ELs curriculum.

MERCURY
26 Aug 2006
ELs useful but onerous
Teachers poll calls for clarity
Grube

The major findings of the survey on the ELs conducted by the AEU were released in a joint press conference by the AEU President and the Minister for Education but they refused to provide the full survey results. The AEU President said the union executive had agreed not to make the survey results public because raw data could be 'confusing and misrepresented and misquoted'. She said, 90 per cent of government schools said they found ELs a 'useful approach' but said the workload of assessment and reporting was too much. She went on to say, "The general opinion of teachers is that there are many good things with the Essential Learnings curriculum that they want to retain, but they are also telling us that they want a reduction in the workload in the assessment and reporting requirements."

MERCURY
30 Aug 2006
Classes back to basics
Duncan

Within four days (although the Minister had given a commitment, reported on July 10, to take on board the views of teachers (in the AEU survey) before embarking on any major changes to the ELs curriculum framework). The *Mercury* reported that David Bartlett released the Tasmania Curriculum to replace the ELs curriculum,. Traditional subjects including history and the arts will be compulsory in all state high schools from the beginning of 2007. The Tasmanian curriculum entrenches the traditional subjects of maths, English, science and technology. History, personal development and information and communication technology make up the seven compulsory subjects. The eighteen key elements of ELs that had included acting democratically, maintaining wellbeing and building social capital had been axed. State School P&F President, Jenny Branch said the curriculum would give teachers more time in the classroom but was concerned that some teachers would return to nineteenth century teaching methods.

On 1 September the *Mercury* reported that, according to the Dean of Education, abolishing the Essential Learnings curriculum will not have a significant effect on the training of teachers. Trainee teachers studied the curricula of mainland states and overseas countries in addition to Tasmania's curriculum. On 2 September a n article on Clarence High School indicated that they had endorsed the proposed curriculum changes stating that *Changing our programs to best meet the needs of our students is an ongoing and evolving process. Our decisions will always be made with the student being placed at the centre of the learning.*

MERCURY
14 Sep 2006
Bartlett spells it out to students
Duncan

Minister Bartlett promised that student literacy and numeracy skills will improve under his watch. *I accept anecdotally there will always be people arriving as job starters without the literacy and numeracy rates that industry requires – we want to fix that problem.* Opposition spokesman, Peter Gutwein said the government needed to reduce class sizes, improve year seven results and provide more resources and support for teachers.

MERCURY
7 Oct 2006
Schools hijack caned
Paine

Tasmania's Education Minister said the call by the Federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop for a national curriculum was unnecessary. It was reported that Ms Bishop's call sparked an angry response from premiers due to her statement that schools had been hijacked by trendy, left-wing education departments – she said it was time for a back-to-basics curriculum set by a board of studies. – states were wasting \$180 million on duplication. The AEU branded Ms Bishop's comments as insulting and ill-informed.

MERCURY
12 Oct 2006
Our school our rules
Bantick

Mr Bartlett said that, *my visits to over 100 schools have clearly shown me that it is excellence in teaching that makes a difference in kid's lives, not an ideological or theoretical debate about curriculum . . . we need to be looking at universities and the sorts of skills and knowledge they are providing student teachers . . . we must continue to raise literacy standards across Australia.*

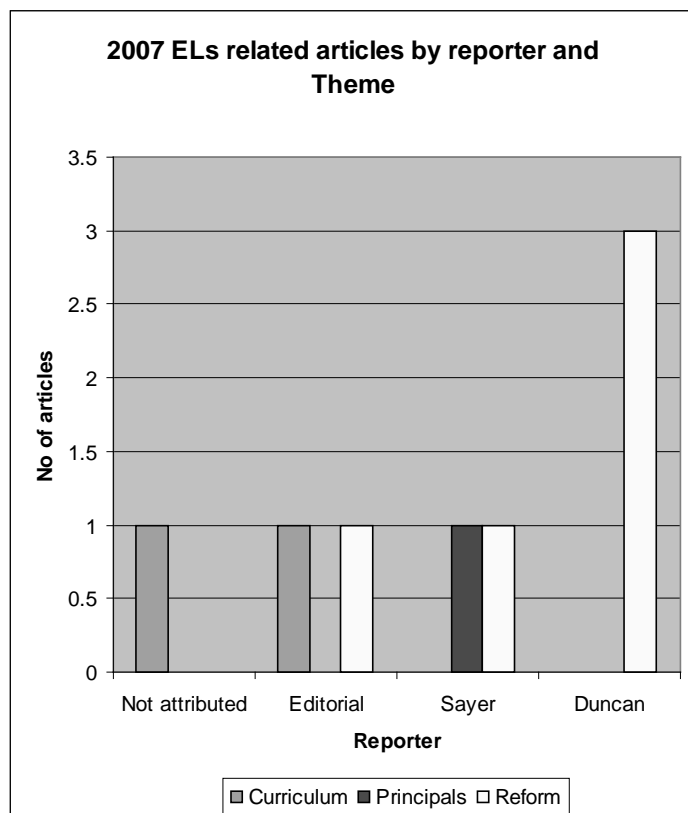
MERCURY
16 Nov 2006
Education staff in fear of shake-up
Grube

Education bureaucrats, reported Kathy Grube, have not been told whether they will be relocated as part of the department's restructure, four months after the changes were announced. The Community and Public Sector Union said, *no-one knows how the plan will be carried out and how it will affect them.* The Education Department Secretary said the department was actively working to identify staff, functions and resources that are best to work in and closer to schools. – *The eighteen month implementation phase will ensure that changes are made at the right time so that we continue to support the work of schools during the transition to the Learning Services groups.*

3.12 2007 January to June

The summary of education articles in the *Mercury* newspaper concludes on 30 June 2007. There were 8 reports in this half of the year. Two articles prior to the start of the 2007 school year outlined the Tasmania curriculum and the rebuilding of trust and respect in departmental processes by teachers. There were no articles linked to ELs until June 2007 when six of the 8 articles for 2007 were published. The first fore shadowed a leadership crisis in schools as more principals were expected to retire and the other five focussed on reform in the senior secondary sector.

Chart 7.



MERCURY
23 Jan 2007
**Framework to deliver
best of the best**

The article on 23 January reinforced the notion that the refined Tasmanian Curriculum would be simpler, easier to understand and easier to report on than the Essential Learnings. The new curriculum assessment procedures distinguished between primary and secondary education. An outline of the curriculum and assessment procedures followed.

MERCURY
16 Feb 2007
**Learning Essential
Lessons**
Editorial

The editorial on 16 February, following the start of the new year, expressed the *need to rebuild confidence in the system and lift standards after years of upheaval*. It went on to say that some teachers had yet to be placed in schools and there had been rumours of school closures which had a few communities on edge, and that school reports were still not jargon-free. There were favourable comments on the announcement that the Tasmanian Certificate of Education will set minimum standards for literacy, maths and computer skills. Despite the difficulties mentioned the editorial said there were reasons for optimism.

Tasmania's Professor Bill Mulford who is part of a study of successful school principals was featured on 20 June, was reported as saying that students could suffer unless something positive

MERCURY
20 June 2007
**A matter of principals
Warning over dearth of
future school chiefs**
Sayer

was done to replace and retain principals. He said it was a critical time in education with the latest raft of changes about to begin. *Too much change is coming from the top down. We thought Tasmania would've learned from the [failed ELs curriculum] that it won't work if it keeps coming from the top down and you don't involve leaders in the schools. Nothing aborts an ambitious school improvement effort, we now know, faster than a change in principal.*

Education Minister Bartlett is reported as supporting the study and said enhancing school leadership was a priority. He affirmed that he would be consulting with the Parents and Friends Association, the Tasmanian Principals Association and the AEU. He wanted principals to provide support wisdom and leadership.

MERCURY
23 June 2007
**Stunned teachers threaten
to revolt over reform
Teacher row brews**
Sayer

The Minister's pledge to consult was short-lived as on 22 June he announced a reform of senior secondary reform in the state. It was reported that educators were stunned at the lack of information available about the Tasmania Tomorrow project announced in the state budget. The AEU said many teachers had reacted with a stunned numbness to the changes and were not convinced that the changes would result in increased retention of students in years 11 and 12. The proposal would replace TAFE and senior secondary colleges with academies and polytechnics.

MERCURY
27 June 2007
**Teachers set to do battle
Bartlett's school plan
blasted**
Duncan

The AEU voted to fight the structure. The Chairman of the College Principals Group said some issues would need to be addressed before the model gained the support of principals as they had to ensure that the needs of all students would be met. The Minister reiterated that he wanted to see retention rates improved and promised to consult with teachers. The AEU claimed that the changes were not based on authoritative research. The State Opposition Leader questioned whether the reforms would become *ELs Mark II*. Tasmanian Greens education spokesman said reports that morale of teachers had never been lower among teachers and support staff could not be ignored.

MERCURY
28 June 2007
Bartlett's learning curve
Editorial

The Editorial on 28 June opened with the statement that *Education Minister David Bartlett says he will consult widely before restructuring Tasmanian Senior secondary schools in 2009. –It is a pity that he did not start before the radical overhaul was announced with a flourish in the State Budget this month. The scale of the transformation came as a complete surprise to most in the education system. . . teachers are still recovering after the debacle of the Essential Learnings curriculum . . . When Mr Bartlett became Minister 15 months ago, he promised breathing space, a chance for the system to settle down after the ELs upheavals. He said he would be open to consult . . . the only way Mr Bartlett can win people over is by involving them in the process. The department and schools are full of people passionate about the education of Tasmanian students. It is an enormous reserve of talent but to harness it fully, Mr Bartlett still has a lot of work to do.*

MERCURY
30 June 2007
**Bold plan to plug student
gap**
Duncan

The Secretary of Education outlined the plan for changes in senior secondary education in an interview conducted by reporter Philippa Duncan. As evidence that the changes would work the Secretary pointed to the increase in the number of students gaining a post-school qualification in New Zealand, Singapore, Finland and Ireland.

However, it was also reported on 30 June that The Education Department Secretary John Smyth had met college principals and told them to keep quiet about concerns over his reforms. Opposition education spokesperson Sue Napier said Education Minister David Bartlett had not

MERCURY
30 June 2007
College heads taken to
task
Duncan

justified why TAFE should be dismantled. *There had been years of work go into making TAFE Tasmania a nationally recognised brand and the Minister would need to provide some pretty compelling reasons to get rid of it altogether. After the Essential Learnings debacle, there is a grave danger of teachers and students suffering*

reform overload.

4. Lessons Learned

What has been learned about the role played by the media (specifically Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper) in the public purposes of education (specifically the ELs curriculum with its strong focus on public purposes)? The seven areas to be covered in this section relate to the reporting on the ELs by the *Mercury*, the roles played by the Minister for Education, the Opposition spokesman on education and the Department of Education, the response of educators and parents and the impact of media reporting on the process of educational change.

Mercury Reporting

- Descriptive or factual articles about the Essential Learnings (ELs) curriculum, whether provided by the Department of education, schools or researched by reporters, were presented in the *Mercury* in a full and thorough manner and would likely to be most informative to the reader.
- When the *Mercury* was presenting issues that were negative towards the ELs, in particular the articles about issues to do with the reporting of student progress to parents, the reading public were continuously reminded of the negative nature of the issue as each new article contained reminders of "the story so far". In this manner, the impression was given that the "issue" was growing, as it did in September 2005 until it reached fever pitch.
- The *Mercury's* interest in reporting on the ELs gathered momentum following the mandating of the reporting process due to the conflicts that arose in school communities due to the language and content of reports and was fanned by the Federal Government's insistence on A-E ratings in reports. The *Mercury* brought the issue to public attention which ultimately proved detrimental to the curriculum itself. It might be argued that it is the media's role to raise issues in a public way whereas it is the Department of Education's role to foresee issues, address them, and move on.
- The *Mercury* did not have a dedicated person to report on educational matters. One wonders whether the 'story' would have unfolded differently had the story of the ELs been before the public more often than just at 'issue-time'. Articles during the six year period were attributed to 18 different reporters plus the Editor, non-attributed articles and letters to the editor. In 2005, 13 different writers contributed to ELs related articles. This is in stark contrast to the situation in Launceston in the north of Tasmania where the Examiner newspaper has dominance. The Examiner has for many years had a dedicated education reporter. The Department of Education Branch heads in the north of the state and a number of influential principals kept this education reporter fully informed about ELs and its implementation. The result was favourable reporting about ELs.
- An analysis of the content of the *Mercury*, ELs related articles identified four, main recurring themes: learning/schools guide, curriculum and assessment, reporting to parents, and school reform. The issue of reporting led to a focus on the ELs curriculum, that in turn moved to school reform and the announcement of the Tasmania curriculum. The ELs and reporting to parents received similar amounts of attention by reporters in the *Mercury* during 2005 however, in 2006 and 2007 following the

appointment of a new Minister for Education, attention shifted to school reform. Comments relating to educational matters of concern, following analysis of the articles published, seem to be sourced from five key persons: the Minister for Education, the Opposition Spokesman on Education, The President of the AEU, The President of the Parents and Friends governing body, and Department of Education Officers. As stated previously, the Opposition Spokesman on education matters was instrumental in continually highlighting issues related to the ELs and reporting to parents thus keeping the issues uppermost in the reader's eye.

- Three peak periods of reporting occurred during the period of this study: mandated assessment and reporting in October 2004, the language of reporting in September 2005, and school reform in July 2006. During these peak periods one might be forgiven for drawing the analogy of the 'wounded animal' (the ELs) with many non-education 'hyenas' (reporters) moving in for their 'share of the kill' (published articles) – a media frenzy!
- Letters to the Editor may not be indicative of the depth of feeling on an issue within a community as not all letters sent to the Editor are published. It is the Editor's choice as to which letter is published. Feedback from Department of Education personnel, in positions attempting to limit the public debate on the reporting process, indicated to the researchers that they were aware of many teachers who wrote letters in support of the ELs to the Editor of the *Mercury* that were never published. Fourteen letters were published: ten in October 2004 following mandated reporting requirements on student progress and the change from subject-based curriculum, four in September 2005 regarding concern over the language used in reports, and six in July 2006 following the announcement of the Tasmania curriculum. Overall there were six letters in support of the ELs and 14 letters against.

Minister of Education

- This case study has demonstrated that it is of critical importance that Ministers and departments become proactive in addressing issues in the early stages of their development before they become issues of widespread public concern. This may include the Department hierarchy acknowledging that the issue does actually exist. The Minister of Education Paula Wriedt did try to reinforce the positive aspects of ELs in late September 2005 but this appeared to do little to diminish the number of articles on student reporting, as these continued well into October 2005.
- Additional research on the Minister for Education's performance revealed that she had been on leave when the frenzy of *Mercury* articles on the reporting process began in September. As a consequence she joined the debate too late to make a difference, as the issue seemed to have gained a "life of its own".
- Ministerial responses in early September were made by the Minister for Economic Development who was acting in the role and it became clear that she did not have any where near the intimate knowledge of the ELs as Ms Wriedt. In addition, in the early months of 2007 it was reported in the *Mercury* that Ms Wriedt was suffering severe post natal depression when issues relating to the reporting of ELs became uncontrollable. The Department of Education appeared to be ineffective in their efforts to support the Minister.
- It may be concluded that the Minister, in relation to the ELs, was "hung out to dry" by her Department, particularly as the issue of reporting to parents had commenced some eleven months previously. There is little evidence in the *Mercury* reporting that the Department of Education was seriously trying to assist the Minister or to address or manage the issue during that time.

Opposition spokesman

- The education spokesman for the Liberal Opposition Party, Peter Gutwein was consistently reported in the *Mercury* either raising issues concerning the ELs curriculum or responding to questions regarding issues raised by others. During 2005 there were 58 articles reporting on the ELs in the *Mercury*. Mr Gutwein was quoted in 18 articles during 2005 with 10 of those during September and October 2005. In November 2004 he foreshadowed 2005 being a “horror year for teachers coping with system restructuring arising from the Atelier Report” and the “one size fits all”, system mandated requirement for all teachers to report each student’s learning progress in the ELs irrespective of when a teacher (or school) commenced rolling out ELs in their classroom(s). It may well be, from the evidence contained within the ELs articles, that the Department of Education were, at best, tardy in addressing the issues raised by Mr Gutwein thus allowing debates to soar out of control.

Department of Education

- The Department of Education central office bureaucracy made limited responses to the issues raised by *Mercury* reporters which, following an analysis of the articles on the ELs, proved to be ineffectual in minimising the “fall-out” from these articles. There is little evidence in the *Mercury* articles of the Department of Education adopting a proactive stance on media related issues. While not all of their submissions to the *Mercury* may have been reported, it would be reasonable to say, on the available evidence, that they were found wanting on media issues.

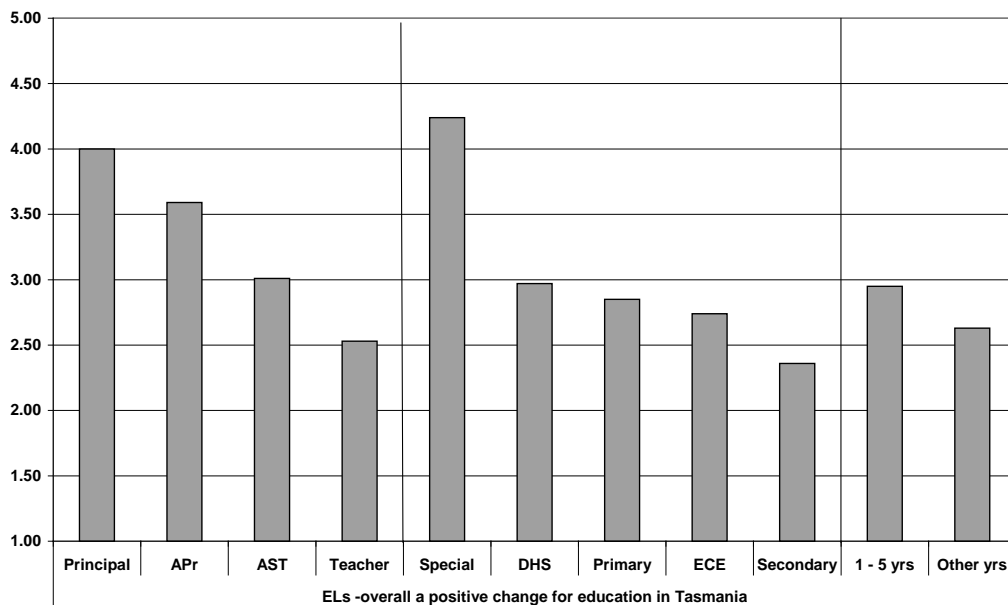
Educators’ responses

- None of the bodies representing educators seemed to have the fortitude to ignore the gag on public servants speaking publicly, even where this would be in the best interests of the children of the state. The principals’ association responses, in relation to key items reported in the *Mercury*, were noticeable by their absence. The *Mercury* chose to publish one letter to the Editor from the TPA in October 2004 which was about backing for the new curriculum. That the principals were basically silent on the ELs would, in retrospect, seem to be a misjudgement both by the principals association and the Department of Education, especially given that they were the most favourably disposed of all those in schools to ELs (see following charts).
- The union took an industrial rather than a professional position in relation to ELs. This is difficult to reconcile with the union’s usually strong support for the public purposes of education.

The Australian Education Union (AEU), whilst generally supportive of the ELs, was consistently reported in the *Mercury* as having concerns about the ‘one-size-fits-all’ expectation on the part of the Department of Education in respect to all teachers needing to report student progress on the ELs curriculum irrespective of the time their school had been committed to changing from a subject based curriculum. The AEU polled its members in 2005 to ascertain school readiness to participate in the mandated reporting process. The readiness on the part of AEU members was found to be low. In primary schools a third of those who commenced in 2001 indicated they were ready to report compared with a sixth of those who commenced ELs in subsequent years. In secondary schools only a tenth of AEU members who commenced in all years indicated they were ready to report. Perhaps the results of the survey are indicative of the complexity of the changes in approaches to teaching under the ELs and, in teachers’ quest to develop their own understanding of the new curriculum, they perceived it would take much more time to be able to adequately report on student progress.

In 2006 the union undertook a survey of all of its teachers. 2635 responses were received which represented a 58 per cent response rate. Respondents were asked whether overall ELs has been a positive change for education in Tasmania. The Mean score was 2.69 (SD 1.31) on the five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statistically significant differences (t-tests, two-tailed, $p < 0.05$) among subgroups indicate (see the following chart) that the higher one's role in the school and less experience the teacher the more favourable the response. Also Special schools responded more favourably when compared to district high, primary and early childhood schools with secondary schools responding least favourably. Other data indicated that within secondary schools there were concerns about the ELs curriculum from specialist/subject oriented teachers. Broader acceptance of the ELs curriculum by primary school teachers was reported by the AEU. However, forty seven per cent of teachers strongly disagreed that their workload since the ELs assessment and reporting began was reasonable. Fifty-two per cent of teachers responding to the survey indicated that they strongly disagreed with the proposition that reporting on the nine ELs elements by 2009 was a reasonable expectation. (Chart 8)

Chart 8.

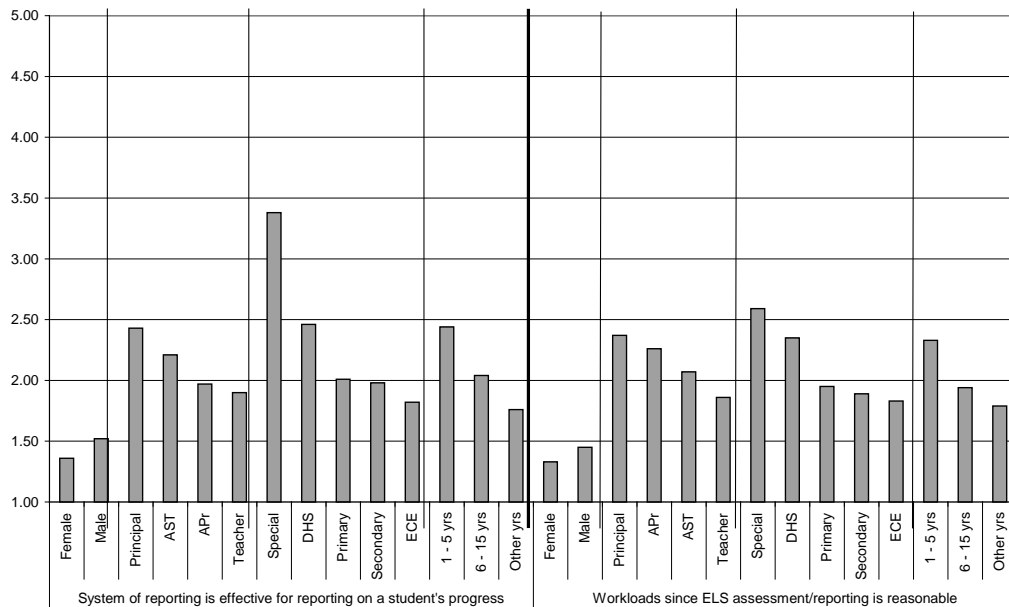


It is clear from the responses to other items that the system of reporting (Mean 1.40, SD 0.70) and the additional workload (Mean 1.93, SD 1.07) it created were the major reasons for this unfavourable response to ELs. As the following chart demonstrates, the statistically significant differences based on position, experience and type of school were repeated. These negative results to the mandated assessment and reporting system had been foreshadowed a year earlier in the smaller union survey referred to above. This survey found (Chart 4.9) that for both the effectiveness of the reporting and reasonableness of the workloads related to reporting the responses were very low and well below the mid-point on the scale. Within these low scores, those higher in the hierarchy (for example principals as opposed to teachers), those in Special or District High school as opposed to Primary and Secondary schools, and those with less as opposed to more experience had higher scores.

It is interesting to note that the results of the latter AEU survey were never made public with the union preferring to come to an agreement with the new Minister for

Education that in exchange for its silence (“The union executive had agreed not to make the survey results public because raw data could be ‘confusing and misrepresented and misquoted’ ” - *Mercury*, 26 August, 2006, p. 16) the union would be fully included in the decision making processes about the new curriculum. (The Minister’s actual public statement was: “I will be listening to the union and listening to classroom teachers and mapping a way forward.” *Mercury*, 26 August, 2006, p. 16.)

Chart 9.



- Teachers in Tasmania are gagged and barred from speaking out publicly on issues of concern. *Mercury* reporting showed that the Department of Education Secretary, on two occasions, when a topic became of intense interest to the media, reminded teachers that under the Public Service provisions they were not permitted to speak publicly on any issue. One wonders whether or not history may have been different if teachers had been able to speak publicly in support of the ELs, or if there had been greater teacher participation in decision-making processes, i.e., through co-construction of appropriate models of student reports by teachers and appropriate personnel within the Department of Education.

Parents response

- The Tasmanian Parents and Friends Association’s response to the ELs story is quite limited in its scope. In 2004 the then president said the association supported the philosophy of the ELs. During 2005 parents made six contributions in *Mercury* articles on reporting student progress. They were concerned about the language used in the reports and found there was no correlation between the ELs reports and the Federal A-E rated reports. Parents had the initiative to survey parents views on the format used by the Department of Education to report on student progress and generally found it unsatisfactory. In 2006, Parents were reported in the *Mercury* as supporting Minister Bartlett’s plan to restructure schools into four Learning Services groups.

The process of change

- Implementing curriculum change can be problematic when inadequate time is provided to develop understanding in teachers to enable them to confidently adopt the

change, especially in respect of the ELs curriculum which was based around the fundamental shift from subjects to notions of thinking, enquiry, health and well-being. Most adults have experienced a school, particularly one using a subject and knowledge based curriculum, and have opinions as to what a school provides by way of education. This inevitably contributes to a constricted community view, including that of the media, of what schooling might be. At the end of 2004 all schools had varying depths of knowledge about the implementation of the ELs. Adding to the number of project schools had been an incremental process each year. In spite of the plan to work towards full implementation of the ELs in 2009, the mandate by the Department of Education that all schools would report on the ELs in 2005 made little sense and negated the good-will that had previously been established during a collaborative and inclusive process between the ELs consultation team and teachers in schools. The problem was compounded by the fact that a substantial number of schools had, to that point, had little or no time to become acquainted with the ELs. Had the assessment requirements been matched to the stage of implementation experienced by schools the difficulties that occurred in subsequent years may have been avoided.

- Change is on-going and becoming more frequent within Departments of Education. After a long period of stability, system changes have become more rapid in Tasmanian education. On top of the ELs and the issues relating to assessment and reporting, the structure of the Department of Education kept changing. The District model for managing groups of schools commenced in 1991 and continued with only superficial change until 2004. From the beginning of 2005 the Department of Education adopted a three Branch model supported by 26 school clusters within those branches. A new Minister of Education was appointed in April 2006 who announced another restructuring into four “Student at the Centre” Learning Centres. Associated with this new structure was the demise of the ELs curriculum following a six year introductory period, to be replaced by a subject oriented Tasmania Curriculum. Whilst the ELs themselves were subjected to very little criticism in the *Mercury* before the end of 2005, the language of reporting to parents did receive severe criticism. This, in turn led to the ELs being questioned by some before being replaced by the Tasmania curriculum in 2006/2007. In 2007 the new Minister also announced changes to the senior secondary sector of education. The *Mercury* articles have consistently focussed on issues arising from what has been perceived as poor and inadequate communication and consultation between the Department, teachers, parents and the community. The new Minister does claim to be consultative, however the Editorial in the *Mercury* of June 28, 2007 seriously questions the Minister’s commitment to a consultative process. As our case study has indicated, unless communication and consultation are an integral part of the change process successful implementation is unlikely.
- Public and media concern increased dramatically when language used within the profession was not translated into language appropriate for the wider community. This was particularly so when the Department of Education expressed an intent to communicate with parents, employers and the populace in general. The use of everyday language would have helped demystify the proposed changes and been much more inclusive of the readership. The furore that arose in *Mercury* reporting during September 2005 did so because of the inappropriate language used by the Department of Education to report student progress on the ELs curriculum to parents. The Department of Education did publish a ‘jargon buster’ but there is no evidence in the *Mercury* reports that the ‘jargon buster’ helped alleviate the situation. There was confusion between what actually was “language of the profession” and “language for the wider community”.

5. Concluding comments

This section attempts to identify some outcomes derived from the study concerning the Essential Learnings curriculum, the process of curriculum change, assessment, reporting and the role of the *Mercury* and their impact on the public purposes of education. Unanswered questions are identified, together with some concluding remarks.

The Essential Learnings curriculum

- The Essential Learnings curriculum was developed around a set of clearly articulated public purposes employing a very public process of co-construction that were co-constructed by the Minister for Education, officers of the Department of Education, teachers, principals and parents with inputs from members of the wider community. Essential Learnings was developed as part of the State of Tasmania's vision for education - Learning Together, which in turn was part of the State Government's visionary, over-all plan for Tasmania – Tasmania Together.
- The Essential Learnings curriculum was a genuine attempt to provide an educational experience for students that was relevant to living in the Twenty-first Century, was inclusive of students and promoted many public purposes of education.
- It takes time to understand, let alone be able to assess and report on, the public purposes of education. The analysis of the articles published in the *Mercury* did little to build on that understanding.

The process of curriculum change

- The conclusion which could be drawn from reading the *Mercury* articles is that for change in education to be brought to a logical and successful completion it is essential for the Minister, Departmental heads, supporting officers and those in schools to move as one. This necessitates time being spent on developing ideas and sharing ideas. ELs commenced in such a manner but impatience on the part of the Department hierarchy and their move to mandate requirements at an inappropriate time was the major contributor to the demise of ELs. Moving forward with a common purpose could limit the emergence of major issues and being prone to high levels of media exposure.
- Continually restructuring departments of education may not, and have not realised the educational outcomes expected by the promoters of those changes, even though these met with a favourable response from the *Mercury* reporters. Changes look good and demonstrate to the public that something may be happening but may lead to some insecurity by teachers within the system. There is the often stated belief by teachers that if they waited long enough structures will revert to what they were, i.e., 'what goes around comes around'. The ELs focus appeared to be about attitudinal change with an emphasis on improving teacher understanding of the art of teaching, particularly of the pedagogy, through high levels of collegiality, collaboration and cooperation. The ELs was a growing and living experience with teachers initially engaged in its co-construction. Much dialogue ensued as teachers teased out issues concerning what and how to teach. Contrast this with the recently distributed Tasmanian curriculum which was developed in six months by an "expert group", then delivered to schools with an expectation that teachers were ready to pick up the Tasmanian curriculum and teach from the document. This is a much more simplistic approach and may superficially address recent issues concerning the curriculum but may not have the far reaching benefits promoted under the ELs. The level of teacher commitment to this new mandated curriculum may also be questioned over time. However, Ministers may be keen to be seen to be acting and, if recent experience is any guide, will not be around long enough to see let alone take responsibility for their top-down decisions!
- Analysis of the *Mercury* articles would indicate that, in contrast to the then Tasmanian Minister for Education, the Federal Government Minister supported a more conservative stance on educational matters, such as promoting traditional subjects such as English,

mathematics and history and reporting student progress through the use of A-E ratings. The Federal Government was prepared to withdraw Commonwealth funding from the state if it refused to co-operate. This placed at risk the move by Tasmania to develop an innovative, new curriculum based in the public purposes of education.

The *Mercury*

- The *Mercury* was conservative in its reporting of the ELs and actively promoted the return to a subject based curriculum following the appointment of a new Tasmanian Minister of Education.

Managing societal change

- The difficulty of managing institutional and societal change has been brought to the fore in this study of the *Mercury* and the publication of ELs related articles. In one sense it has demonstrated why the nature of schooling with its focus on knowledge-based subjects has been so difficult to change during the past one hundred and fifty years. Whilst the ELs offered promise and the chance to revitalise the secondary sector of education in which so many children are reported to be disaffected, the Tasmania curriculum has quickly reverted to a subject based curriculum, more traditional in its offerings and simplified to make it more acceptable for teachers, parents and employers. It may well take teachers with special attributes to maintain the ELs thrust of developing thinking, understanding and public purposes under such circumstances. It may be critical to focus on the ‘thinking of teachers’ as well as that of students and in so doing, realise greater potential for education and its public purposes.

Assessment and reporting

- Assessment and reporting of student progress of public purposes by teachers is difficult.

Unanswered questions

- This media case study has raised a number of questions that have been inadequately answered:
 - How is change in schooling to provide a greater focus on public purposes achieved when so many in the community see their school experience to be the appropriate way in which their children should be educated?
 - What can ministers’ departments do to better promote the public purposes of education?
 - Would education be better served if public service limitations were lifted and teachers and principals were encouraged to participate in a full and open debate about the public purposes of education and the merits of the curriculum used – that is, the process was as public as the purpose?
 - How can student progress, especially on the public purposes of education, be reported on in a way that is acceptable to the parents and employers?
 - On the assumption that the media does not accept any responsibility for the consequences of its reporting, is “managing the media’ a critical part of the whole experience?
 - How much time is required in order to establish a sufficiently large critical mass that major changes such as ELs and its public purposes will continue?
 - What is the public purpose of the media?

In conclusion, ELs started with such promise for the public purposes of education and with the intent to revitalise pedagogy in a way that had never before been attempted. The early years were exemplary using a model of co-construction to great effect. Impatience on the part of the bureaucracy and a return to mandated, systems of control saw the ELs process quickly unravel.

Once problems surfaced, the ‘hyenas’, fanned by the media pounced, allowing the rather shaky commitment to the ELs by the bureaucracy, those who had not been part of the staged implementation process and certain groups of teachers, such as female teachers, those with more than 15 years experience and those in secondary schools, to quickly erode. Conservatism has ruled and the status quo has been maintained. Teachers who lead the renewal of curriculum and pedagogical change can be severely bruised as a result of the demolition of the educational change efforts. Anecdotal reports indicate a reluctance by those involved in the ELs to ever again participate in a major educational change process. Such an outcome is sad given that a leading ANZ economist has constantly flagged that Tasmania’s education system needs revitalising as the students in it are the least well-educated in the nation with very low student retention rates (Eastlake, 2005, 2007, 2008).

The ELs story is a sad episode for the public purposes of education and their enactment. Greg Barnes, a columnist with the *Mercury* (10 July 2006, p.16)³ provided an appropriate concluding summary of the whole sorry ELs saga:

ELs should not be subjected to the whims of political sloganeering, and those in the education movement who do not have the wherewithal to embrace the reforms.

The fact remains that ELs is the education system of the twenty-first century. It is widely praised by education authorities around the world for that very reason. The students of today and tomorrow cannot learn in silos. They cannot learn in a values vacuum. They are living in a globalised world where flexibility of thought, active citizenship and evolving process are critical tools.

Tasmania, due largely to a visionary and tenacious minister, Paula Wriedt, was fortunate enough to be leading Australia in developing a twenty-first century curriculum. Ms Wriedt took on the educational establishment, conservative parent groups and the media in developing and implementing a curriculum that would set Tasmanian children apart and in front of their colleagues interstate.

6. References

- Eslake, S. (2005). Poverty in Tasmania: An economist’s perspective. The Third Annual Dorothy Pearce Address to the Tasmanian Council of Social Services. Hobart, October 19.
- Eslake, S. (2007). Tasmania’s economy: How much change in enough? Presentation to the Economic Society of Australia’s Tasmanian Economic Forum. Hobart, December 6.
- Eslake, S. (2008). Tasmania’s economy: Not a ‘basket case’ but one which is making progress and still has some way to go. Presentation to Economic Society of Australia’s Tasmanian Economic Forum. Hobart, December 1.

³ There is more than a touch of irony in the fact that this article strongly supporting ELs appeared in the *Mercury*.