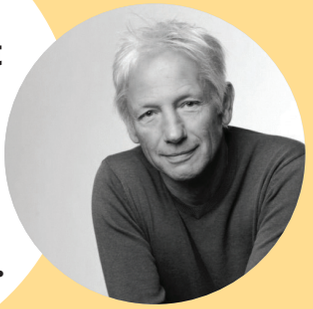
COMMENT

The right sort of teacher

In having to meet increasingly narrow standards, we are no longer able to meet our students' needs.



Forcing teachers into a one-size-fits-all model prevents them from doing their best work, NED MANNING writes.

When I first started teaching in the early 1970s, I tried to be the right sort of teacher. I was very young. Barely 22. I put on my mauve body-shirt and wide purple tie and walked into Tenterfield High School trying to pretend I knew what I was doing. I had the words of the department's man ringing in my ears. "Forget all this airy-fairy nonsense you've heard at university. Your place is at the bottom of the pile. My advice to you is shut up and do as you are told. In ten years' time you might become a good teacher."

For a few weeks, I tried to follow his words, but before long I realised that I couldn't be a standard-order teacher. I had to relax and be myself. From that moment on, I began learning how to teach.

Because it was the 70s – and I was in one of the smallest and most remote high schools in the state – I was pretty much able to do my own thing. I threw Wordsworth out the window and taught Cat Stevens (as Yusef Islam was called then). I encouraged my students to draft and perform scripts; to write about what they felt and experienced and not worry too much about grammar and spelling.

While I am the first to admit I went a bit too far with this, the fact is I got kids who hated writing to write. I took my class into the park and they performed *Jabberwocky* in the rotunda. I coached the rugby league team and drove a car-load of kids to their homes scattered around the district every night after footy training.

Looking back, I have to concede I was a very opinionated 22-year-old, sure he knew anything and everything – and yet, the fact is I had a lot of success with those students. And the reason for that was the level of professional autonomy I was given. Or, perhaps more accurately, the level of professional autonomy I *took*.

I wasn't the only one. A group of young teachers at Tenterfield High, unshackled from rigid course prescriptions and excessive paperwork, were free to express themselves and change the lives of their students in ways that would be almost impossible today.

These days, I find I spend as much time filling in forms as I do preparing lessons. I am told that this is about 'accountability'. In my humble opinion, there was a lot of accountability at Tenterfield. If you didn't do your job, the kids tore you apart!

Now, if I have a class that is struggling with the curriculum, I am not only forbidden from wavering from it, I have to prove I haven't wavered by filling in reams of paperwork. The message seems to be that if the admin is up to scratch, then I must be doing my job. The fact that many of my students might be disengaged doesn't matter. What matters is that someone can point to the paperwork and 'prove' that they have been *taught*.

The problem is that teaching isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' profession. In any one class, the needs of the students may vary greatly. Trying to standardise them or force square pegs into round holes is not serving anyone, except the politicians and bureaucrats who point to the paperwork as evidence of success. The fact is that Australian schools are lagging behind in the international league tables, while the most lauded education system on the planet (Finland's) eschews standardisation in favour of gearing its teaching to students' individual needs. Sadly, this is a fact that seems to have escaped most Australian politicians.

I have witnessed, first hand, the dire consequences of putting unnatural pressure on teenagers at the end of their high-school careers by forcing them to reach certain standards. The focus on academic achievement over personal development makes that last year at school a nightmare for many kids – and their parents. Year 12 students are so driven by academic success they opt out of all the activities that, once upon a time, made their last year at school so memorable.

Sadly, teachers are now obliged to spend more time on administration than providing pastoral care and guidance. Instead of helping students learn to express themselves, teachers are overloaded with 'accountability' measures. They don't have time to coach sporting teams or direct plays. School reports have become so standardised they leave no room for meaningful, individual comment. Rather than develop the whole person, we are focusing on a very limited version – that tiny part of a student that can be quantified within one-size-fits-all standards.

In short, the biggest obstacle to teaching is having to prove that we're doing it. A large part of being a good teacher is the ability to draw on your own unique abilities and experiences to build a connection with students; to put the content in a context they can understand. Meeting students' needs means giving teachers the professional autonomy to be themselves, free of endless paperwork and constrictive reporting models. Without this, we might be ticking all the right boxes but we are failing our students.

Ned Manning's memoir *Playground Duty* is published by NewSouth Books.