

2015 marks 40 years of publication of *Independence*, the biannual journal of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia. To celebrate, AHISA presents for its members and friends a special series of interviews with people of influence in education and educational leadership.



MAY 2015: PROFESSOR YONG ZHAO



PROFESSOR YONG ZHAO is the Presidential Chair and Director of the Institute for Global and Online Education in the College of Education, University of Oregon, where he is also a Professor in the Department of Educational Measurement, Policy and Leadership. He also serves as Director of the University's Centre for Advanced Technology in Education (CATE). He is also a professorial fellow at the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy, Victoria University in Australia.



SIMON MURRAY is Headmaster of St Peter's College, Adelaide, SA. Before taking up leadership of St Peter's College, he was Headmaster of Canberra Grammar School, ACT (1998-2010) and Headmaster of Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School, WA (1991-98). He was AHISA National Chair in 2009-11.

Schooling for the Future

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR YONG ZHAO

Simon Murray interviewed Professor Zhao on his recent visit to St Peter's College as a Fellow under the College's [Rex J Lipman Program: Being and Becoming](#).

SM: Australia has been developing a national curriculum. Are we heading in the right direction, or does the Australian Curriculum represent a lost opportunity?

Australia's move to create a national curriculum represents a global trend. I am not familiar with the specific content of each standard in the Australian Curriculum, but I understand the attempt is to create

a more rigorous, comprehensive curriculum for young Australians in the 21st century. My own view is that this is a very noble attempt, but it might be the wrong direction. We have already arrived in the 21st century, and what we need now are more personalised experiences for students rather than prescribing the same curriculum for all children.

No matter how good a curriculum is, it only serves to describe our expectations of students, but I think education in the 21st century is all about starting from the children; it is about following the child, supporting the child – enhancing their strength, supporting their passion and uncovering their creativity – rather than imposing upon everybody a generic set of knowledge or skills.

Australia is not a big country, but it is not a small country either. You have millions of children who will be educated according to a prescribed curriculum. My concern is that any kind of prescription may squeeze out the autonomies of schools. If there is not enough flexibility in the prescribed curriculum, if everybody does the same thing – and especially if it is coupled with standardised testing and accountability – it could produce mass mediocrity.

SM: Australia has a national standardised testing scheme for reading, writing and numeracy, called NAPLAN, conducted in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and there have been suggestions to expand its coverage to other areas of the curriculum. You have warned nations against the negative impact of standardised testing regimes. Can you tell us what you see as the dangers of such regimes?

With standardised testing, no matter what you do, you cannot include everything that matters. Standardised testing can only measure certain areas, so therefore the number one danger is a narrowing of curriculum. It narrows teaching to the test, narrows educational experiences to focus on what is measured, what is tested, and what we can measure. Standardised testing is very limited. What we cannot measure may be much more important.

Standardised testing is used for different purposes. One thing I worry very much about is when any standardised testing carries high stakes – either for the students, the parents, schools, or teachers; it can become very dangerous if it drives instruction.

Another thing I worry about is that standardised testing rewards your ability to comply, to find answers fast, and that is not what we need for creativity and innovation. And standardised testing, by definition, does not capture the whole variety of talents we have, the human diversity, and does not reflect the uniqueness of every educational setting, the passion of every school.

Standardised testing tends to homogenise the talent of the nation. In the 21st century a diversity of talents might be much more valuable, given that we need a whole range of different kinds of talents to come up with new solutions, new ideas, new businesses and new services when the old industries disappear – and they will be disappearing.

PROFESSOR YONG ZHAO

BIOGRAPHY

[Professor Zhao](#) was born in China's Sichuan Province. He received his BA in English Language Education from Sichuan Institute of Foreign Languages in Chongqing, China in 1986. He commenced his graduate studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1993, where he was awarded Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees. He joined Michigan State University in 1996. Before leaving MSU in 2010 to join the University of Oregon, he had served as University Distinguished Professor at MSU's College of Education, as the Founding Director of the Centre for Teaching and Technology, and as Executive Director of the Confucius Institute and the US-China Centre for Research on Educational Excellence.

Professor Zhao is a recipient of the Early Career Award from the American Educational Research Association and in 2012 was named one of the 10 most influential people in educational technology by [Tech & Learning](#) magazine. He is an elected Fellow of the International Academy for Education.

His recent books include [Who's afraid of the Big Bad Dragon: Why China has the best \(and worst\) education system in the world](#), [Catching up or leading the way: American education in the age of globalization](#) and [World class learners: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students](#).

In May 2015 the Mitchell Institute released Professor Zhao's report, [Lessons that matter: What should we learn from Asia's school systems?](#)

SM: So, following on from the testing theme, should Australia be worried about its PISA rankings?

I don't think so, definitely not to the level that some politicians have made it so. There are a number of reasons for this.

First of all, Australia's PISA ranking is not that bad. You are the middle of the range, sometimes you rank pretty high, and it's not a bad place to be. Top ranking does not necessarily mean that you have a great education system. Some of the high scoring East Asian countries and economies may be happy

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about their scores but they may not necessarily be happy about their education system. Shanghai is a good example, and Korea and Hong Kong. They are concerned about the cost of their high rankings, for example, the lack of truly inventive, innovative entrepreneurs, the low confidence the students have expressed in subjects and the excessive academic burden the students have as a result of practices that might have led to their high PISA rankings.

PISA is a survey of a sample of students; it is a test. No matter what it claims to measure, it still measures specific domains; it measures what you know, not your ability to create something you don't know. So I think Australia's education reforms should not be driven by trying to improve your PISA ranking. I think going after any of those kinds of rankings is a mistake for the future.

SM: If we had the federal Minister for Education here with us this afternoon, is there any advice that you would wish to give him? Any recommendations as to key areas for education reform?

I think that in Australia – and in the US and other developed countries – you have to consider that you have arrived so far and your education system has served you well in the past. But now, what you need to do is to look to the future and not try to fix the past, but to invent the future. And to invent the future, I think number one is that we have to seriously reconsider what matters to our students, and think about the outcomes that matter – and that definitely is not test scores.

What matters is developing a diversity of talents – creativity, entrepreneurial thinking, Asian literacy, global mindedness – and then there are the soft skills, the non-cognitive skills, and wellbeing. If we redefine educational outcomes as those things, we need to rethink what kind of education system can drive that. To produce, for example, a greater diversity of talents, entails making sure everybody is valued, and that everybody is getting better in their own way.

We need to give more autonomy to schools instead of imposing a national curriculum and national testing. We need to find ways to encourage schools to be more innovative, not only to do certain things better, but try to do some things differently because, in the 21st century, education systems in the developed countries like Australia and the US have the responsibility to lead the change.

We should not be going backwards to become the best of the past; we need reinvention to go forward. So let's look at local autonomy, diversity of talents, and a broader, flexible curriculum with serious emphasis on creativity and entrepreneurship – plus global engagement. I think about our young children who will become global citizens, who have a global responsibility to better the world in many different ways.

I would emphasise again: don't look at the successes of the past; don't look at PISA. I think PISA measured the past model very well, but it does not measure the future. The future has to be created. So I would say to your Minister, let's create a new system.

SM: When one thinks about educational policy reform, much of it has been driven around enhancing students' employment prospects. But it seems to be the old model of employment, not the new world into which students in our schools are going to have to navigate and move.

That is absolutely right. Traditionally, our education system was developed to have our students fit into the employment opportunities prescribed to them. But most of the traditional employment opportunities have been replaced by automation technology or gone offshore to other places. So we really have to help our children understand that creativity is job security, that entrepreneurship, or the ability to create job opportunities and jobs – for themselves and others around the globe – is what we have to do. We have to cultivate people not to find jobs, but to create jobs and opportunities.

SM: What do you think should be the strategic priorities of Principals and school leaders in Australia as we look toward 2020 and beyond?

The first strategic priority is to re-imagine which educational outcomes matter. You really have to

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redefine what matters, because traditionally schools go after academic results. Before NAPLAN you had the ATAR scores or your traditional academic scholastic achievements and all those things, but again I think we need to rethink what kind of society we are entering. We need to help our children, not to fit into the future, but to be the creators of the future. We have to help them to create a better future for themselves. So our job is to reimagine their outcomes.

The second thing is, how do we redevelop the outcome? Rather than follow the traditional grammar of schooling, in which every child must learn what we prescribe as valuable, maybe we need to think about a system that brings out the best in every child, that identifies their strengths and weaknesses and their passions, that supports them to become opportunity creators, not just seekers of an opportunity.

Already around the globe we have various schools that are trying different things, but most are on the periphery. In the US we have the [Hi-Tech High](#) model, which is great, supporting truly authentic, product-driven, project-based learning that engages students in making meaningful things and, in so doing, making sure all their years in school are as if they are living their lives. As John Dewey said, ‘Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself’.

And also I want to go back to old schools, like [Summerhill School](#) and the [Sudbury School](#). They are democracy schools that engage students as a true member of the learning community; they allow students to personalise, to follow their passion, and allow children to become children. Those are amazing places. And then there is a personalised school, [Templestowe College](#) in Melbourne, that’s worth mentioning. And your own [School](#), which has a focus on the wellbeing of the students, where each child matters.

There are many great schools. What is common in these schools are that they are truly child centred.

This does not mean that their approach is child centred, but that the outcome is child centred. You follow the child and you think from the child’s perspective and adults back-off and become supporters rather than dictators of children’s learning. They allow children to be the owners of their learning outcomes and their learning process.

SM: So if we were to ask you to give some advice to school leaders, what are three things Principals should start doing and three they should stop doing?

Let’s start with what they should stop doing. Number one: stop judging whether a person is valuable or not based on external standards. Right now we do that. If a child comes to our school who is, say, a great inventor in craftsmanship or carpentry, but who does not read as well as someone has prescribed or tested, we stop them inventing and focus on their reading. We should stop judging the child’s value based on external prescribed standards.

Secondly, we should stop believing that children learn what we tell them to learn. Sometimes we worry too much about teaching and forget about learning. Children are really learning machines; they want to learn. They have a strong desire to learn, but they may be learning things that matter to them, but that don’t matter to us. We need to stop over-prescribing and over-teaching, right now!

The third thing Principals should stop doing is to stop running a school of urgency, having all these targets to meet every few months. You have all these diagrams which make you look very busy. But people don’t march along those linear lines.

So what Principals should start doing is, number one, trust in children, and trust in staff as autonomous beings. Secondly, Principals should start reimaging how they can use the new resources available – technology resources, global resources and students as resources; reimagine how to develop those resources and deploy them. And, finally, Principals should start thinking about their schools as opportunities rather than just selection mechanisms. Schools select too much.

School leaders must be asking, what can we do to ensure that every child thrives on our campus? What opportunities can we create for our students –

whether they are going to be in a classroom or not in a classroom? You don't have to continue the traditional grammar of schooling, by which children are organised based on age, based on small groups, or based on subjects.

Look at every child very hard and see yourself as an opportunity creator for them, someone who helps them get better and who broadens their opportunities.

SM: Looking back on your own education, was there anything about it which had a particular influence on your life?

I was born in Sichuan Province, China and my family was illiterate. I have always said this, that I am a failed Chinese peasant. So the number one lesson learned is not trying to be what you cannot be or what you are not interested in being. I am still physically small, inactive and not interested in farming. I am glad that I did not try to become a better peasant.

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I was fortunate in that there was no straight, dictatorial or planned control over me. Because my family was illiterate, they were not trying to control me, to guide me, and so I was able to pursue my own interests and passion.

I also learned to jump into every opportunity and give it a try. You may fail, but do not judge yourself. Do not be scared of the outcome. The process is as important as the outcome; enjoy the process. Again I go back to John Dewey: education is life, life is education.

SM: Thank you.