

Transcript

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 Compere: MIKE JEFFREYS Summary ID: M00033374851
 Item: DISCUSSIONS ON THE WAY WE TEACH MATHEMATICS IN AUSTRALIA.

INTERVIEW: PETER TAYLOR, PROFESSOR, THE AUSTRALIAN MATHEMATICS TRUST

Demographics:	Male 16+	Female 16+	All people	ABs	GBs
	3800	3500	7300	2500	4300

MIKE JEFFREYS: The Australian Mathematics Trust is concerned that Australia risks falling behind, falling into a rut, because of the way we teach maths. To comment further, Professor Peter Taylor who is with the Australian Mathematics Trust at the University of Canberra.

Professor Taylor, good morning, thanks for your time.

PETER TAYLOR: Good morning, Mike.

MIKE JEFFREYS: So, the comments that you have made imply to me that the teachers are teaching students, I guess, to pass the exams, but they're not leaving them with a way of thinking that will let them deal with mathematics at a higher level, or perhaps even anything useful in real life when it comes to maths?

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, lets make it clear. I'm not actually criticising the teachers for the way they're teaching. They're

following a syllabus. What I'm suggesting is that the - having a very tight syllabus itself, it's more the system. If the syllabus is tight and has predictable exams, you're in danger of getting the student who will get the highest UAI score, but necessarily the one who can solve problems in real life later on.

MIKE JEFFREYS: Mmm.

PETER TAYLOR: Now, I've been co-chairing a study, an international study, with the international professional society for the last six years and the results are just coming out. Now, we haven't actually been able to measure the value of adding some form of challenge into the syllabus, but we've investigated all the ways in which it's provided in different forms in and out - outside the classroom around the world.

And, you know, we're in no doubt that it adds to the product of the learning process.

MIKE JEFFREYS: But it's a direction and probably the wrong one which has been followed for quite some time now isn't it?

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, you mean the existing - the way we're going, yeah.

MIKE JEFFREYS: The way we're going has been building for a couple of decades [indistinct]...



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PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, the way we're going - I think we're in the direction of the more trying to decide on the syllabus so the students knows exactly what they've got to learn and - whereas there are some, you know, well intentioned meanings in that, it does lead to a predictability, and that's not how real life works.

MIKE JEFFREYS: Very true, very true. But, in support of that argument that it's been building for a while, the Teacher's Union saying that teachers are being retrained from other topics. I don't know whether it just became unfashionable to teach mathematics. People were frightened of it, people shied away from it, whatever. But it was something that seemed to happen at the teacher level, and you're saying though that it's actually the syllabus, what they're required to follow that's leading to this kind of thinking?

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, yeah, there's no problem. I mean, I agree completely with the Teacher's Union and everything that - there is a real problem in finding enough teachers. Now, the reason for that is more complex and I think that kids need a lot of time - we don't - none of us really understand why there's a shortage of teachers.

It's partly salary. And certainly teachers are not paid enough, but there's more to it than that. The teachers in their profession don't, for instance, have access to the resources they need. They don't have enough access to professional development. And so,



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it's a more complex issue than - I mean, we can identify there's a shortage of teachers, but the reasons for it are more difficult to analyse.

MIKE JEFFREYS:

When we look at the bigger picture professor, where Australia is going to be as a nation, mathematics is an absolute cornerstone. If we aren't solid there, we have a real problem don't we?

PETER TAYLOR:

Yeah we have. And the latest TIMSS(*) results suggest, for instance, particularly at the Year 8 level, that Australia may have taken a backward step since the last one a few years ago. Yet, some countries have done something about this, Singapore. And it may not be directly related, but at least Singapore has, at present, added problem solving as an explicit part of its teaching syllabus. And you know, this can be done and it could be debated.

We - in Australia, we might do this in a different way, but while we're entering the discussion about a national curriculum, it's probably the time to have the debate.

MIKE JEFFREYS:

Well at least we're talking about it. At least we seem to be acknowledging it.

Professor, I appreciate your time this morning. Thank you very much.

PETER TAYLOR:

It's a pleasure.



MIKE JEFFREYS: Professor Peter Taylor with the Australian Mathematics Trust at the University of Canberra.

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ABs = Managers, administrators, professions. GBs = Grocery buyers.
