

**TT Series 3**  
**Stephen Gniel**  
**Transcript October 2024**

**Don Carter**

Well, Jane, I'm certainly looking forward to today's interview. We're interviewing Steve Gniel, the chief executive officer of ACARA. As our listeners will know, ACARA is the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority.

Now, Steve was appointed as ACARA CEO in July this year. He'd been acting in the role since November 2023, and he's been appointed for a three-year term. He's got experience across early childhood education, schools and tertiary portfolios right across the education sector.

He's got quite an illustrious background. He was a member of the ACARA board. He served as the CEO of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, as well as other senior positions within the Victorian and ACT education departments. He's been national president and board chair of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders between 2016 and 2022.

It's quite a CV, wouldn't you agree?

**Jane Hunter**

Indeed, it's a great CV. But also, I think Don, Steve has such a rich background as a classroom teacher. As a primary principal, he is from my hometown Canberra and has been in those in leadership roles in Canberra for a number of years. So it's wonderful to have a person with such a solid classroom background. So welcome, Steve.

**Stephen Gniel**

Thank you. It's great to be here.

**Jane Hunter**

So, Steve, in those leadership positions that you've been in education over the years, be it as executive officer or in the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, you've been appointed now to ACARA. So why at this time, apart from the fact that it was a career opportunity.

Why are you seeking this position or did you seek this position at this time?

**Stephen Gniel**

Well, thank you for the nice words to start with, and I'm really, really happy, Jane, that you mentioned the background there, because that's really where this comes from.

For me, it's always come from my deep passion around education. And that started, as you say, as a primary school teacher.

I need to remember when things are hard and I'm dealing with the politics of education or the funding or all of those sort of things. All I want to do is step back into a classroom, particularly in the early childhood, and I remember why I'm here.

So I sort of take it back to that point around my teaching background and my time in schools, because that's why I'm now at ACARA.

And I feel that, as you said, that those combination of roles have made it for me. This being really an amazing opportunity for me. You know, someone from the suburbs of Canberra, a primary school teacher then, who would never have dreamed of, you know, having a fantastic role in education and being involved in leadership around the Australian curriculum and assessment and that reporting.

So it's I think that ability to influence and lead education for the millions of kids that go to school, you know, every day, still what drives me, you know, is what drove me when I had, you know, 32 or 33, I think kids in my first ever teaching class that interestingly was a Year 3, 4, 5, and I was teaching with a four or five six. So, you know, had 60 odd kids there.

And I still see that as my role when I was regional director in Victoria, and that was with the 400 government schools from Port Melbourne out to Mallacoota. And I'd drive down the freeway there to Dandenong and there were kids crossing the bridge there. And I, I think those, those are the kids that I'm responsible for. So now to ACARA, so that responsibility of course across Australia.

#### **Don Carter**

So, Steve, what are the major challenges facing ACARA at the moment?

#### **Stephen Gniel**

Oh, there's no shortage, I think, you know, I think I always see education being in the media as a good thing. I think we should care about education. I think everyone should care about education.

That means that there are contested parts of that as well. And some of the challenges for us is making sure that we're still serving the teachers in the classrooms and giving them the support that they need, and the leaders in there, the curriculum leaders, the principals and, you know, those school leaders that are looking after those children on a daily basis.

So that's where we need to remain seated, you know, in that education practice.

But part of my role now is obviously also dealing with those contentious issues that do come out.

And, you know, we're probably seeing more and more of those in terms of what we want schools to deal with and what we're asking of our teachers in terms of particularly the type of society we want to live in, but also the rapid pace of change. You know, so they are some of our challenges.

We used to probably be quite comfortable in having a curriculum set and seeing that being pretty stable for a number of years. You know, you've only got to look at artificial intelligence and what's happening there in terms of the change. What we've seen over my teaching career where, you know, we didn't have mobile phones, let alone smartphones and all those things.

So those challenges are increasing for national authorities, I think as well. They're certainly increasing in schools.

When I talk to people in schools now, it is really different to when I was in a school, you know, even 15 years ago as a principal, things have changed. So that rapid pace is one of our challenges. How do we keep up with that without overloading teachers?

So, you know, how do you keep a contemporary curriculum relevant to the kids that are in the classroom preparing them for the future whilst not increasing beyond what teachers can do in terms of their work life?

**Jane Hunter**

I think that, you know, when you were speaking the words or the phrase curriculum fatigue comes to mind. And in my own research, I see a lot of that in schools and that's a big concern.

I think we have so many layers now that the teachers have to not only look at, say, for example, in New South Wales, they've got to look at what the curriculum or the syllabus dictates and then they have to think about how the national curriculum is overlaid on that.

And so, in the work that I do around building capacity, and that's sort of at the invitation of groups of principals working with small teams, they really struggle to then insert, for example, the general capabilities. I know that they're not compulsory, but many teachers and I certainly in my work like to bring those into what they're planning in terms of learning sequences, because the other alternative and we're seeing more of this now, I would argue in this kind of back to basics agenda that we're in at the moment is the importance of template teaching.

And companies like Pearson, for example, who are producing huge resources which supposedly tick all those boxes.

So, I was just wondering if you could make a comment about what I've described to you.

**Stephen Gniel**

I think we've got to be careful not to talk about the role of a teacher as if it's simple because it's not. And I often talk about and this comes from my own experience and also, you know, my work with teachers and principals as well is, you know, not only is every classroom and class different in this country and every school, but every morning the class can be different when you walk in, you know.

And so I would agree, Jane.

I think that it is an incredibly complex job that we ask of teachers. It's why I spent those six years as the president of the Council for Educational Leaders as well. Right. Because this is about a profession.

So, there's a couple of things that you mentioned there that I can comment on.

The main one is that I think we have to be really careful that we don't signal to teachers that the job is just teaching from a book or a or a set of instructions that might not work for the kids in front of them on that day.

The job of the teacher to me is to respond to the children that are in front of them. And that's, you know, that's around the differentiation. We talk about that a lot, but that is an incredible skill about,

you know, and you see that with our best teachers. They are the ones that when the children walk in the door, they know their background. They know them really well, they know their point of learning.

I still go back to Vygotsky, familiar about the zone and proximal development. You know, where is it they're up to. That's different for each child.

And the profession of teaching is how you bring all of that together and move all of those kids along. Now that is not simple.

And so, one of the things I think we need to keep looking at is how do we prioritise the work we really want teachers to do.

And to me, that's that work. It is the differentiation, the connecting with kids, engaging kids. And I think, you know, I then pick up on your other point, Jane, around that the capabilities are really important in that, you know, this isn't just about imparting knowledge.

This is about children learning and setting them up for a lifelong learning experience so that we want them to be creative, we want them to be problem solvers. And again, if we look at the way in which the world of work and those things are going, that's the kind of thing that they're going to need more and more of.

Now, you can't do that without content. You have to have content and knowledge. So it's not an either or.

You know, I think the three dimensions of the Australian curriculum are a good representation of what we want for our children.

There's a huge expectation on teachers and schools about how you bring that together and bring that to life for the kids in front of you.

### **Don Carter**

Steve it's really refreshing to hear someone talk about the complexities of teaching rather than portraying it as it's the same in every classroom, in every school, etc.

And you describe teaching as a profession, which it is - highly qualified individuals in classrooms.

So, given the complexities of teaching and the different contexts across schools, regional areas, etc., what do you think of a mandated approach such as explicit instruction, explicit teaching, where teachers are meant to follow what's basically a recipe?

How does it sit with you?

### **Stephen Gniel**

First of all, I've been in this space a long time now, and so I've seen not only with this type of thing, but a lot of others where we use terminology that we then assume everyone's talking about the same thing.

So, I mean, play-based learning was the other one for me is that if you talk to someone about play based learning, you might be using the same words, but you're actually might be talking about slightly different things and where your focus is. And I think that's the same really with explicit instruction.

There is a place absolutely for being explicit in your teaching, you know, and for the children in front of you.

Taking that example, Don, helping those children to move from where they are now to the next stages of learning, there is a science to that. You know, we can know how kids learn and what the sequences are and things like that, but it's not the same for every kid all the time.

So, I think it's the extremes that we've got to be careful about with this sort of language and oversimplification.

As I was saying about the role of the teacher, I would say that I think we can give teachers as much support as possible.

So, in that sort of language, I'm talking about the differentiation and that includes supporting teachers with resources that they then can translate into what that looks like in their classroom.

I think what we've got to be careful of is that we're not signalling that we can create a resource for someone that's sitting in the middle of Sydney today that might work in an inner city school and think that that will be the same kind of thing that will engage kids in the bush who may not have been to the city, who may not have seen the ocean, the snow, whatever it might be.

So, I think we just got to be careful about extremes there. You know, I've certainly not going to talk against having an explicit instruction as part of the way in which we help children learn.

### **Jane Hunter**

So, yes, so it's a part of a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

So, what you're saying is really you don't see it as a binary. And the trouble is, I think a lot of what I'm seeing and in conversations with early career teachers that they are being encouraged to be the sole director of the learning in a classroom.

And that really concerns me because it means their repertoire right from the early stages of their career.

I had a class yesterday and they were talking about their recent professional experience and they were all very concerned about the fact that they're being channelled into being the centre of the of

the classroom and that nervousness around doing group work, peer work collaboration really came through in their conversation and so for me it was a case of really talking to them about this is part of your repertoire.

You can't just think that this, that you are the sole provider of the knowledge in the classroom. Your students will bring lots to the classroom. You've got to see where that is and build that up. But I don't know that they're necessarily getting that message, though. That was an observation that I made yesterday.

I want to just now talk in terms of your leadership role.

We can't not mention NAPLAN. So, the literacy and numeracy tests have long been controversial in Australia and many colleagues say within teacher education feel that and others feel that NAPLAN is definitely past its use by date, that many of the results are flat-lining.

There's been research conducted by colleagues in the new wing at the University of New England, for example, who've looked at results over time, and those results actually haven't been going backwards the way that they have been reported in the press, for example, that students have been on an upward trajectory across the country.

So I'm just wondering, do you think, given I know that you were criticised in Victoria and you're asked about the fact that, you know, results came out for schools earlier on in the year, but parents didn't necessarily get those results until much later.

So where are we with NAPLAN and where should we be aiming for and do we need it in fact?

**Stephen Gniel**

So probably unsurprisingly, absolutely. We need a national assessment program.

How we improve upon that and continue to evolve that, I think is crucial.

But I can guarantee you. Well, I probably shouldn't, but I can. I will guarantee you if we were sitting here and we didn't have a national assessment program, we'd be asking why the thinking that we wouldn't have some way of knowing whether our children in this country are developing the skills that we want for them at a national level. I think there would be massive questions about that.

So, I've always - and this has been as a teacher and principal - thought that a national assessment program is really important. Now then the next layer is and what do you assess?

All right. So, we've got a really strong focus on literacy and numeracy in this country, which we've had for a long time. But at a national level, that's been since 2008 with NAPLAN coming in before that, of course the jurisdictions had their own assessments. So, it's not new.

You know, I think that's the other thing, the expectations about returning results and all those sorts of things, they are somewhat new. And some of that is the changing expectations of community members around us as well.

And what we expect to get now in all walks of life in terms of responsiveness.

So, when students did a paper-based test and everyone knew it had to be sent away and it had to be marked and it was humans doing all the marking. And so that took time. And then we had to analyse all those things. There was an acceptance that that might take a while to come back.

Now you put things into your computer, onto websites and things like that and it generates results immediately. And so people's expectations about what they will receive back have changed.

So, we have to evolve with that.

And, you know, I think ACARA has done a good job with that in terms the last few years. This is not, you know, in my time, but translating from paper to online. I mean, it's a massive task. This is about 1.4 million students across the country, four and a half million assessments themselves moving that online in a country that has remote areas and low bandwidth and connectivity in some parts of our country. So it's a huge undertaking.

So, I think the importance of a national assessment program is still there. I would mention that one of the things that I think we forget about or we don't talk enough about is the other parts of the national assessment program, which is the sample assessment, which lets us know in a couple of areas that, you know, ministers have decided were really important beyond literacy and numeracy.

So, science literacy is one of them. Of course, digital literacy and ICT skills and civics and citizenship. And those things start to round out actually what do we want for our children? And yes, we want them to be literate and yes, we want them to be numerate.

But when we look at the goals for schooling, it's not just that that almost becomes the baseline of what we want for our children. And then we have all of those other things that we need them to do.

I'll digress for a minute. When I was a principal, I used to have the pre-school parents even before they'd come into kindergarten. And I'd say, 'What do you want for your child? What is it that you want from school and literacy?'

'I want them to read and write and be able to add up.'

And those things were up in one really small corner of the whiteboard and the rest was covered with, 'I want them to have friends', you know, 'I want them to learn to get along with other people'. 'I want them to understand other cultures'. 'I want them to learn to paint, to draw', whatever that else that might be.

So, you know, those are the type of things that, you know, there is an element where we do want base level literacy and numeracy skills, but we want so much more for our children.

### **Jane Hunter**

I just want to take you up on a couple of those points. Steve.

I think what we've seen and what I'm seeing over the last couple of probably 10, 15 years now is, you know, we talk about teaching to the test, especially in primary schools.

And when I have interviewed groups of principals in those various research projects, one thing those principals have noted, and I've written about this, is that those teachers have become expert at literacy and numeracy.

So, the other for KLAs for example, if you like, in a primary school curriculum, often bought in in terms of support or those teachers don't see, they see themselves now as literacy and numeracy specialists instead of being across six classes. And I think that that's a problem.

And certainly, coupled with that, not only teaching to the test, we hear through the media about how parents are reporting increased levels of stress amongst children about students being told by teachers, by principals to stay away because it's going to affect the overall mark of that particular cohort within a school.

So, I think added on to that and this year was a really good example of the appalling reporting, and I'm going to call it appalling of those NAPLAN results and a lot of the journalists who had prepared their work to be released had actually based what they were going to write on data from 2023. So there was a lot of errors in that, in fact, students' results hadn't gone down in a number of areas.

So, I just wondered, because it's such a highly political project in NAPLAN and Julia Gillard was instrumental in exposing that and so that led to parents moving into areas where they could see their primary school for their child was a green area. All green results in neighbouring schools.

So, you know, parents I guess have one view of this, journalists have another view. But what about the students in all of this? I mean, how are they getting the best deal here?

**Stephen Gniel**

So, there's a lot in that. Jane, I'll go back to the assessment first.

A number of the things that you point out there about how it's reported and used. So I just want to make that distinction.

One of the things that I said, you know, before about, you know, I think we'd be wanting to have a national assessment program if we didn't have one, I would, you know, go back to that even by the very fact that you mentioned, we're not seeing the results go backwards. It's a good thing we know that. Right?

So, it's not it's NAPLAN that tells us that we're not going backwards. In fact, if we didn't have NAPLAN, we wouldn't know. And we'd be asking ourselves, well, what is happening?

So, I think NAPLAN is an assessment that can then be used for multiple purposes. And I think that's where some of the challenge remains. And that's when I was saying before around I think a national assessment program is really important.



But I do think there are ways that we need to continue to challenge ourselves about the best way to do that. So that's the first point.

The second one, you mentioned the work of the University of New England. I'm thinking that's probably Sally Larsen you're talking about there. And I've actually met with Sally and also read her work, which I think is really interesting and is actually informing some of my thinking about how we continue to evolve NAPLAN.

Those points, I think, are really valid about making sure that we get the most out of it. The work that I think we need to continue to do is to show what a positive impact our teachers and our schools are having. And I think that message gets drowned out too much. And I'll come back to the reporting in the use of the NAPLAN data. But you're right, Jane, that students continue to grow. Right?

This is the thing that we've got to continue to educate people outside of education about. It's not flat-lining as these kids are not learning. The growth between Year 3 and 5 happens. You know, even kids that are, you know, need additional support in year three who then may still need additional support. A Year 5 has still grown.

You know, and I think we've got to be better at telling that story because that's what teachers see in their classroom. You know, they put hard work into every day getting these kids to grow and to learn. And I think we owe it to them to be able to demonstrate that that's the case.

So, there's a challenge for us, and that's actually the work that I've been talking to Sally Larsen about, is how do we show the growth of students within those proficiency levels? Because it can sound like they're flat-lining. You know, they've just stayed in the one band. It's the same criticism as you get for the grading that a student got a D, a D, a D, a D.

We forget that the expectations have gone up. And so actually it's not that they haven't grown, it's that they may not have caught up in the way we want them to.

And that's you know, I do think that's important for us to have information about and to be talking more about the realities that there are still some kids that don't have the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need and we will need them to have as a society in maintaining the wonderful country we have.

So, in here, I've still got that passion for children they're in mind. I'm not blind to the things that we've still got to work on. You know, there are still things that we can improve.

It's still talking to, you know, university researchers like Sally and yourself, as you mentioned, that look at things from different angles that I need to still listen to and understand.

#### **Don Carter**

So, Steve, we come to that part of the interview where you get to talk for 30 seconds, but it's a rant, a 30-second rant, not 30 minutes, not 20 minutes, but 30 seconds. So over to you.

#### **Stephen Gniel**

Well, thank you. I could probably go on for 30 minutes. As you've heard, I don't mind talking.

What I would use the time for is really to get back to how we're using that data and reporting that data. And how is that reflecting the really great work of our teachers? And that's in combination with our students.

You know, not to forget that they're the ones out there in schools doing the work. It's the grandparents that sit with them, you know, and read with them. It's the communities that surround them. It's all of those things.

You know, my rant is really about we know we need to do that better. We need to be able to provide information that shows the growth of our children.

We have heaps more kids in our schools now than we've had before. There's still more to go, right? But, you know, it wasn't that long ago.

In fact, I think I was teaching when we changed the leaving age, you know, from 15 to 17. I think we forget those things.

So, what we've got to do is talk up our wonderful teachers and principals in the schools and communities that they run. And I think it's for ACARA as well to work through the ways in which we can do that. And how can we show the growth of students, not just the sort of scores or the colour or whatever?

How can we really reflect that great work that's happening, you know, in our classrooms on a daily basis?

Whilst coming back to that passion of mine, there are still kids that need help. Yes, and they're in our country, and we should have a society that really cares about that. I'll go back to, I think, national assessment helps us focus on that.

What we've got to do is continue to evolve that, continue to educate people about what are these showing, how do we use it and how do we not use it. You know, we haven't talked about that a lot.

But, you know, NAPLAN is a limited assessment one day for that one kid who sees that one domain. And it's how that's seen in combination with what the parent knows, but also what the teacher knows from walking through the classroom on a daily basis for the 200 odd days of the school year with that child.

So, I think if we can continue to improve and make the most of the national assessment program without overreaching to what it can't replace is good teaching.

**Don Carter**

Excellent. Thanks, Steve. That was really interesting. Thank you very much.

**Jane Hunter**

Thanks so much, Steve. It was great to meet you. And we both wish you well in this new role. And it's we've heard a lot of very refreshing good news stories. And the fact that you're really focused on teachers, but also you're acutely aware because of your rich background in classrooms, in schools, and really wanting to work with the profession to change the narrative and work with the media so that they do a better job in this space. Thank you so much.

**Stephen Gniel**

Great. Thanks for having me.

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**Don Carter**

Well, Jane. That was fascinating. And I certainly had more questions to ask of Steve, but he's given us both. I think lots to think about.

I mean, I was really impressed that he's talking to teacher education academics about their research. I was really impressed that he kept coming back to the child.

We're all in education for the children as such, and it was great to hear him talk about NAPLAN with regards to student growth rather than results, just results as we often get in the media. Lots more questions to ask. What a shame we didn't have more time.

**Jane Hunter**

Yes, I think we only got to the first couple of dot points today from our cheat sheets.

It was refreshing, changing the narrative, thinking about research, tracking over time. So many parts of what he was talking about today really were a joy to listen to.

So, it's a big job.

He's probably got to do a lot of culture change within ACARA.

There are wonderful people within that organisation and now he really wants to bring the profession on board in a much more active way. He's already met with all of the principal associations across the country and he also acknowledges the fact that literacy and numeracy has become such a focus of teachers professional knowledge in the primary domain, and he's very concerned about the fact that teachers in those years are really decreased their opportunity to be able to teach in a rigorous and ongoing way the other four classes that they're skilled to teach in.

So, I was really impressed and I really look forward to seeing what he does because I guess at the end of the day, the rhetoric is one thing. It's the action. And those steps that count.

**Don Carter**

Look, that's quite true, Jane. And one last thing and I'll comment on. I was really pleased to hear Steve talk about the general capabilities and their importance.

Certainly, my research with New South Wales primary school teachers, they see the general capabilities is really important. And even though they don't have to, they're not compulsory to report on, they use them in their classrooms as a matter of course because they see the importance of them.

**Jane Hunter**

Yeah.

And he also, I guess we were talking offline a little bit about afterwards, but he acknowledged the whole area of critical and creative thinking and the fact that the media this year just didn't pick up on those results, those global results that Australian children did extremely well.

We're ranked fourth in the world, but that was a non-news story.

So, he certainly was very aware of that and is going to try to turn that ship around.

So, thank you, Don. I really enjoyed our conversation today.

**Don Carter**

Thank you, Jane. It's been a great interview.