



BEYOND THE CROSSROADS

THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT AND TESTING

By Denis Fitzgerald

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“There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come”

— Victor Hugo

It is clear that a new and thoroughly different approach needs to be taken in relation to student assessment and reporting. The existing regime based on NAPLAN and My School is completely discredited.

In NSW for example, the Minister for Education, the shadow Minister for Education and the Secretary of the NSW Department of Education have all forthrightly recognised the profound shortcomings and distortions that existing approaches have caused. These calls have been echoed by the great majority of leaders of education across Australia. Further, they have all recognised the need for fundamental change.

Major education stakeholders also have recognised this need. No credible voice maintains a view that the existing state of affairs ought to continue.

As such, it would be irresponsible to delay the move towards more human, educationally responsible and intellectually sound forms of assessment and reporting. Millions of Australian students should not have to endure years more of the destructive, low standard, regressive processes that have dominated in the last, wasted decade.

Into this context, educators are faced with the Gonski2 Report Through Growth to Achievement and a major Review of Curriculum in NSW to be led by Professor Geoff Masters.

Less happily, many teachers are faced with a tsunami of data collection that has distorted the understanding and balance of what real evidence in education should comprise along with a clumsy introduction of learning progressions into some schools that has frustrated, distracted and infuriated many school communities.

SOME INITIAL PRINCIPLES

So, let's start at the very beginning. What might useful assessment look like?

NESA provides us with a good starting point with their Principles of Effective Assessment:

Assessment is the broad name for the collection and evaluation of evidence of a student's learning. It is integral to teaching and learning and has multiple purposes. Assessment can enhance student engagement and motivation, particularly when it incorporates interaction with teachers, other students and a range of resources.

Teachers should consider the effect that assessment and feedback have on student motivation and self-esteem, and the importance of the active involvement of students in their own learning.

Assessment:

- Provides opportunities for teachers to gather evidence about student achievement in relation to syllabus outcomes
- Enables students to demonstrate what they know and can do
- Clarifies student understanding of concepts and promotes deeper understanding
- Provides evidence that current understanding is a suitable basis for future learning.

Assessment activities should:

- Be based on syllabus outcomes
- Be a valid instrument for what they are designed to assess
- Include criteria to clarify for students what aspects of learning are being assessed
- Enable students to demonstrate their learning in a range of task types
- Be reliable, measure what the task intends to assess, and provide accurate information on each student's achievement
- Be free from bias and provide evidence that accurately represents a student's knowledge, understanding and skills
- Enable teachers and students to use feedback effectively and reflect on the learning process
- Be inclusive of and accessible for all students
- Be part of an ongoing process where progress is monitored over time.

This is all very sound and useful.

REFORMING THE NAPLAN TEST IS NOT SUFFICIENT

While the consensual realisation that the NAPLAN test is a shoddy, substandard exercise is welcome it is clearly not sufficient to tinker with its formulation or modes of delivery. Assessment and reporting are an indivisible quinnella, essential components of good teacher practice and must always be in intellectual alignment.

We cannot fundamentally reshape major assessment systems such as NAPLAN without dismantling its wayward offspring, My School. It is instructive to recall that this linking of NAPLAN and My School was the legislative brainchild of Julia Gillard, in thrall at the time to bizarre US education pundits. It would drive increased performance and provide a useful tool for school choice, Gillard declared in her Second Reading Speech in 2008.

The outcome was the mass reporting across the nation of these notionally diagnostic tests. Schools were colour-coded into winners and losers. Children were placed on reporting continuums lining the country's kids up in a linear sequence of achievement or failure. The winners were given public accolades. The devil took the hindmost. By the time many students had completed Year 9 they had been told repeatedly and in technicolour that they were very poor at learning. Many heeded the lesson.

It is encouraging therefore to note the conclusions drawn by Geoff Masters on what the decade of NAPLAN/My School has wrought.

The professor observed in a recent piece in *The Conversation*:

“Since the introduction of NAPLAN, there has been a marked increase in the stakes attached to these tests. School results have been made available for public comparison on the My School website. Some schools even use NAPLAN in their marketing and student selection processes...

Parents, teachers and schools now place greater importance on NAPLAN results in comparison to the earlier state-based tests. This has led to reports of inappropriate levels of practice testing and increased student test anxiety. It has also narrowed teaching to the test, and led to occasional cheating.

The decision to make all schools' NAPLAN results public was based on a belief this would provide parents with better information when choosing schools.

This was a market-driven belief that, for schools, the risk of losing students would be a powerful incentive to improve. But test-based incentives have proven largely ineffective in driving school improvement.

Parents have sometimes drawn incorrect conclusions about the quality of a school from publicly reported test results. And public comparisons of schools

have resulted in a range of unanticipated negative consequences such as narrowing teaching and increasing levels of teacher and student stress.

An obvious strategy is to stop reporting school results publicly and to restrict access to school-level NAPLAN data to individual schools and school systems. The primary focus of literacy and numeracy testing might then return to its original purpose of informing teaching and learning.

Masters sets us on a course that is compelling. My School was conceptually flawed from the outset but it has become further corrupted over time such that now it is, in the words of Minister Rob Stokes, “used dishonestly as a school rating system”.

We need however to consider the other element of student feedback that also derived from nostalgic fancies about how all children should be treated in reporting – A-E grades being made compulsory as a result of coercive dictates that force schools to line all students up on a common, reductive, hierarchical report framework again with mandated winners and losers.

Under this system, a battling primary school student might have been given over a hundred dispiriting low grades by the time they had finished Year 6 and all under their school’s crest and over the validating signature of their teachers and principal.

In its submission to the Gonski2 review, the Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER] called for a thoroughly different approach than what A-E reporting currently provides. It made it plain:

“The problem with A-E grades and similar methods of reporting is that they do not show where students are in their long-term learning or progress over time. A student can receive the same grade (eg a grade of D) year after year. The first problem with this is that it does not enable students to see the absolute progress they are making (and in fact hides this progress). The second problem is that this method of reporting risks sending a message that there is something stable about the student’s ability to learn (eg they are a D student).”

Elsewhere, ACER also argues that A-E reporting sends the worst of messages to a vast range of students transmitting counterproductive signals about effort and reward. The battling student can gain a profound sense of sustained failure often leading to disappointment, a sense of futility in their learning and deepening disengagement. Meanwhile, very able students may consistently gain high grades based on minimal effort and draw the inference that they need not work hard at their own personal learning and they can develop a nonchalant attitude to their future learning, often with regrettable outcomes.

If one needed a case study of the damage that the A-E system can engender

the Daily Telegraph provided it in their edition of July 27, 2018. On that day the tabloid named and shamed a Sydney primary school and its principal in a page 3 story and the editorial.

It castigated the principal for writing in her school newsletter words of encouragement for students who had received a “C” grade. It described the principal as engaging in “merriment over mediocrity”. It uncovered some Psychology academic who was quoted as declaiming that, “Aiming for mediocrity wasn’t in the students’ best interests”.

Using My School data, the Daily Telegraph then proceeded to tell the state that the school’s pupils, “have not been faring well in NAPLAN ... since 2012 its average results in numeracy of Year 5 students has fallen below similar schools. In spelling the school has returned below average performances since 2015. Year 5 students have been below in grammar and punctuation since 2013.”

The tabloid then felt the need to further belittle the school and its principal and its community in the day’s editorial.

As long as A-E reporting and its mothership, My School, are allowed to continue this cruel, damaging and ignorant chatter will continue.

The simple historical fact is that A-E reporting is the brainchild of traditionalist, detached ideologues and pundits from yesteryear who have scant regard for the human consequences for young children of their policy whimsy. Each year hundreds of thousands of students are harmed, in various ways, by their thoughtlessness.

Along with My School, A-E reporting belongs in the dustbin of history.

SOME NEW DIRECTIONS

There are clear signs that the push towards a post-NAPLAN consensus is emerging.

This is embodied in the title of the Gonski2 report, Through Growth to Achievement, that prefigures a more positive and student-centred approach to policy. This is also to be found within the report. Finding 7 concludes that, “there is compelling evidence, in Australian schools and internationally, that tailored teaching based on ongoing formative assessment and feedback are the key to enabling students to progress to higher levels of achievement” while Recommendation 11 calls for the development of, “a new online and on demand student learning assessment tool based on the Australian Curriculum learning progressions.”

Learning Progressions have however become highly controversial because of their hurried, inelegant, under-resourced and ill-considered rollout in some NSW schools. If they are to be embraced a much more professionally respectful approach needs to be taken if the Gonski recommendations are to be made flesh.

What is clear and welcome in Gonski2 is its philosophical endorsement of, “individualised growth-focused teaching and learning” and its call for massive and sustained professional learning funds and opportunity.

Further, Gonski2 is highly critical of the profound limitations of A-E reporting and it argues for more meaningful and positive forms of reporting to parents on students’ capacities and potential areas of improvement. It calls for a process of, “adopting assessment and reporting models that can describe both achievement and learning growth”.

In particular, it endorses, “low stakes, low key and regular assessment ... followed by teaching tailored to challenge the student to reach the next level of achievement ...”.

Significantly, the Gonski2 report provides a realistic timeline by declaring that, “the reform be developed for implementation in stages over the next five years” and that it be rolled out in the early years of schooling as a first priority.

Along with the shaky experience of progressions the teaching profession also has deep concerns about the related “formative assessment tool” that Gonski2 foreshadows. Teachers can readily identify the spectre of Edubusiness salivating over the opportunity this might provide. An all-powerful “tool”, centrally manufactured that might become the taught curriculum is not the basis for enriched teaching nor a diverse and broad curriculum.

This will be a contestable area as the teaching profession cautiously observes its development. If such a tool is entirely on demand; if it does allow for the replacement of the existing NAPLAN by the deployment of low stakes, confidential, regular, individualised, syllabus-based assessment then it will be worthwhile.

If its introduction is ham-fisted and draconian, professionally disrespectful and data-obsessed it will be rejected.

Timespan and professional support are important here. There is some cause for optimism as the report makes clear:

“The success of these reforms depends upon the concurrent provision of a suite of professional learning resources and tools for teachers, implemented over several years as the progressions and the online learning tool become available. It is likely that there will be a need to reduce teaching contact time to enable this to occur”.

There is one final cause for concern that warrants unambiguous comment.

The Gonski2 report includes in its list of significant changes a shift in the nature of teachers' work that includes,

“Basing the learning program on learning progressions not on an annual package of curriculum content”.

This is unacceptable.

For the progressions to ever work they must derive directly from existing syllabuses, consistent with the NESA assessment principles previously cited.

A syllabus is a profound, broadly-encompassing professional document that describes the depth and scope of an area of learning or discipline. It is the resource from which high order programming can develop. Syllabuses in NSW also align with the Australian Curriculum.

It is also timely to reflect that there is little that is new about the notion of “progressions”. In the recent past, we have had various initiatives around national profiles, scales, benchmarks, continuums and competencies.

In an era where Education Departments and other authorities are in decline and consequently the level of support to teachers and the profession appears to be in inexorable contraction the centrality of the syllabus is ever more important. It is a constant. It crosses schools and systems. It defines professional goals. It is the starting point for quality. Progressions might one day derive from syllabuses but they must never replace them.

If progressions become the essential focus then teaching can well then be reduced, as we know from our TAFE colleagues, to a dispiriting, linear, context-free, reductive set of competencies. There might well then be a fine line between a list of progressions and a script.

There is much in Gonski2 that can lead us to a better world of assessment and reporting. It is too good an opportunity to oppose outright as some reactionary voices might want us to. Other matters within however need much greater elaboration.

OH CANADA

It is useful to also examine what is taking place in other parts of the world in terms of standardised assessment and reporting.

While the policy-clever nations never embraced the monolithic assessment and reporting systems children have had to endure in recent times in Australia

other nations form part of the movement that is taking shape in our country to jettison the worst of these ideological experiments and are examining ways to construct something better.

In Ontario, Canada, for example cross party support developed for radical change after 20 years of large-scale provincial assessment and reporting.

In a government-commissioned report, Ontario: A Learning Province, released earlier this year its authors outlined their vision:

“Students’ experiences – their needs, learning, progress and wellbeing – are at the centre of decisions about future assessment design and use. We propose a system of assessment that prioritizes classroom assessments to support each student’s learning and development, engage parents/guardians meaningfully in knowing about their child’s achievement and progress, and enable educators to develop and share their professional practices”.

The report calls for the winding back of province-wide testing and argues for mass sample testing to identify system priorities and areas of need and disadvantage.

They also recommend that the Ontario government, “establish a range of evidence-informed, modularized, online assessments and print versions of assessment resources, aligned to curriculum expectations, as optional, on demand resources for teachers who are seeking quality assured resources to support formative assessments with their classes”.

The report does speak of an assessment tool or platform to offer resources to teachers but identifies them as resources to enhance classroom assessments and professional judgements for use in communication with students and parents/guardians.

It is noteworthy that this recommendation might provide a more sophisticated and professionally acceptable form of what Gonski2 is edging towards as it maintains the primacy of the syllabus and provides targeted resource support. It also allows teachers to determine the timing of the assessments while insisting that any data collected, “should not be used to rank schools”.

Another familiar component of the report is its recommendation to, “implement professional learning and development for educators at all levels of the education system”. The report also uses a common sense approach to the best way that parents might find out about a school. They put it plainly: “The main source of information about a school is that school itself”.

CENSUS TESTING OR MASS SAMPLES

Ontario is also heading towards replacing monolithic testing of every student as the means of locating policy areas of need and disadvantage. They argue that regular mass sample testing of representative groups of students and communities across their province will achieve the same end. Of course they are correct.

Some diehard acolytes of the existing NAPLAN argue for its existence on the grounds that it provides this information to policymakers. Included in this group in Australia is the Grattan Institute which reveals a lack of an understanding of the history of education and of the longstanding existence and identification of disadvantage and inequality in Australian education.

Long before latter-day thinktanks, these realities were well known and well researched in this country. Academics have been engaged in this research since the 1960's and the teaching profession and their allies in education departments were their partners and colleagues.

The NSW Disadvantaged Schools Program [DSP] decades ago had sophisticated means of locating, in fine grain, areas of inequality and socially-framed need. Tellingly, the wisest analyses did not characterise educational disadvantage as some individually-based phenomenon but rather they identified this inequality as socially located with intersecting elements of disadvantage that intensified the nature and extent of the need.

Hence, the programs that were mounted successfully as a result of this research and sampling addressed the needs of communities and the multiple phases of their disadvantage. NAPLAN has never had any capacity nor the inclination to so identify educational need.

As Associate Professor Nicole Mockler from the University of Sydney makes clear about the best way to gather this essential information about educational disadvantage:

“We could collect the data we need by using a rigorous sampling method, where a smaller number of children are tested (a sample) rather than having every student in every school sit tests every two years. This is a move that would be a lot more cost effective, both financially and in terms of other costs to our education system”.

Tim Dodd in the Australian Financial Review reaches the same conclusion: “There’s no need to test all of Australia’s 3.8 million students on a regular cycle to get this information. We could test a far smaller sample”.

A national sample size of 100,000 students with an appropriate sampling frame and weighted sample elements could achieve everything the current

NAPLAN does in relation to identifying where funding and resource priorities should be directed.

CHILDREN AND THEIR PRIVACY

As concerns about the protection of children and the burgeoning invasion of privacy for adults and their private information spreads it is timely to consider the implications mass data collection in education has for the rights of children and communities. It is interesting here to observe the similarity in terminology between My School and My Health and the concerns the latter has generated for the privacy rights of adults.

As we have seen, from the time that the Federal ALP instituted the My School reporting system it was designed to make the results of every school in Australia open to anyone who cared to visit that website. Hence, the private academic performance of children, (some as young as eight), sitting a government-mandated test is fair game for all. People can now idle away hours uncovering how this or that school community went and to speculate, often quite brainlessly, as to what type of school it might be and what conversations might be had at their next dinner party.

With three clicks anyone can discover the academic performance, the level of disadvantage, the cultural background, the language background, and the level of indigeneity of the children within any school community. One could scarcely design a more efficient tool for social division and an aid for snobbery. And remember of course that it was explicitly designed as a device for school choice.

Such an invasion of privacy would not be allowed in the world of adults. Quite rightly, citizens the world over are alarmed at the encroachments on privacy by large corporations and some governments. However, in the world of NAPLAN, what young children do in their compulsory assessments is sport for journalists and prurient browsers and those wishing to make ill-informed conclusions about whole school communities.

We do not allow this intrusion into the performance of older students at the Year 12 level, nor that of university students. Strict protocols increasingly protect the privacy of the data collected by government departments and corporations. But if you are a Year 3 kid you are fair game.

As Professor Geoff Masters has established My School has failed in its original stated purposes. It has also grievously failed the nation's children by being perhaps the greatest invasion of the privacy of youngsters and their school communities in the nation.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] – the worryingly furtive organisation that is responsible for the conduct of NAPLAN testing – must also reveal where the NAPLAN data it gathers is stored. Do they take responsibility for storing it; is it in the cloud or do they privatise the storage of this data? And if they contract out responsibility for the security and storage of the data is this contracted out to corporations beyond our shores to companies subject to other nation’s laws? Questions of sovereignty and security are vital when protecting the interests of children.

Along with the existing NAPLAN, My School must be discontinued. Urgently.

STATUTORY PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

The reckless culture of invading the privacy of children that the NAPLAN regime has engendered is in fact in stark contrast to the recent, proud heritage of test data protection that used to prevail in NSW.

With the introduction of basic skills testing in the 1990’s, there were stringent and bipartisan statutory protections of the results of these tests.

The Coalition Education Minister, Virginia Chadwick, insisted on a regulation within the Education Reform Act 1990 relating to these tests. The Regulations were clear and protective:

“Basic skills testing

6. The following provisions apply with respect to the confidentiality of the results of basic skills testing under section 18 of the Act:

- (a) The results of a particular child may be revealed only to the child, to the child’s parents and to the school in which the child is currently enrolled;
- (b) The results of individual schools must not be publicly revealed;
- (c) Aggregate State-wide results may be publicly revealed if comparisons are not made (and are not capable of being made) between different children, different schools or different systems or groups of schools.”

When the ALP government came to power somewhat later they strengthened the provision. The Education Minister, John Aquilina, introduced a further Regulation to the Act in 1996. It read:

“5. (3) The results of basic skills testing must not be publicly revealed in a way that ranks or otherwise compares the results of particular schools.”

In the following year, Aquilina extended these protections to the results of the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate and these protections are still largely intact for Year 12 students.

However, as a result of coercive federalism within the national schools funding agreements and the coming of the NAPLAN-My School monolith the NSW State Government was compelled to withdraw their statutory protections for children's formerly private test outcomes.

In the decades since children were first provided with these statutory protections concerns about data collection, privacy, pervasive technology, irresponsible journalism and social division have increased mightily. The time is surely overdue that we reintroduced these principles of legal protection for children and reinstated in appropriate legislation the regulatory confinement of student test data that was a clear and proud component of our educational heritage a generation ago.

Schoolchildren have a right to have their private assessment performance results protected from outside organisations, both private and public. We need vigilance also to protect them from future technological developments, future algorithms, AI and analytic technology intrusions.

A CHARTER FOR ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING

Monolithic mass testing of decontextualized skills and knowledge needs to be replaced with assessment that has a range of intellectual demands for different student capacities at different times. This needs to be embedded in syllabuses and curriculum as developed by the appropriate statutory authorities.

This requires assessments to be differentiated, to be derived from what exists in NESA syllabus documents and for teaching programs to be derived from these syllabuses. Quality, equity, personalised learning and curriculum-assessment alignment would all be enhanced through this process.

What follows is a Charter that seeks to deliver a fundamentally better assessment and reporting system for students.

1. It is necessary to invert the current educational distortion that sees teaching to the test as central and replace it with the overarching approach of testing to the teaching;
2. Schools and systems have an obligation to conduct substantial and regular internal and externally-referenced assessments of the academic progress of students;

3. Quality pedagogy involves a direct relationship between the stated, shared curriculum, the delivery of that curriculum and the assessment of student learning for the purpose of facilitating future learning and meaningful reporting. Hence, assessment needs to be diagnostic in purpose and function becoming private assessments of the progress of individuals and groups of students to determine their progress and growth against professionally set indicators. Students also have the right to understand what aspects of their learning is being assessed in order to enhance their future learning and for them to appreciate the learning programs they are undertaking;
4. The current NAPLAN system has failed and must be urgently replaced by tailored, on demand assessments that allow for differentiation and adjustment and that assess what has been taught in individual classroom programs based on syllabus outcomes;
5. These assessment items, organised into national resource banks may be in the form of Guidelines (progressions, profiles, guidelines, milestones, or commonly shared measures) and should be solely developed, controlled and disseminated by responsible public agencies;
6. The development of these differentiated items must be conducted in constant consultation with the teaching profession and are to be designed so that students can demonstrate what they know, what they understand and what they can do;
7. Over time, these item banks can be developed to cover curriculum areas beyond literacy and numeracy;
8. These banks need to allow for schools to request the specific, diverse and culturally appropriate assessment profiles in assessment items to correspond to the needs of students within a particular school and the teaching programs and differentiation that have been developed to respond to these needs and capacities. The range of these items will need to be tailored and finite in order to allow to for their utility as assessment devices;
9. These assessments should be capable of being conducted online, with pen and paper, or in oral or visual form;
10. The timing of these assessments should be determined by the professional judgement of each school;
11. My School must be immediately abandoned;
12. A-E reporting must also be abandoned as it causes great harm to the most vulnerable children and encourages complacency among the very able -- it is inconsistent with a growth focus in assessment policy;

13. Statutory protections of the privacy of students' academic performance should be reintroduced and cover all children from Kinder to Year 12;
14. Mass national sample testing of students should be regularly conducted to determine and locate the distribution and nature of educational need and disadvantage and to form the basis of the discretionary priorities of funding and resource support for educational communities;
15. Any data that is collected through these processes must be stored and secured by public authorities and within Australia.
