

Dear Ms/Sir/Madam

Testing, for both diagnostic and planning purposes is necessary.

Without it, the nation is ignorant of its educational base, and the equity groups, such as long-term disadvantaged low SES and indigenous groups are under-researched, under-supported ... and the needs of public schools go muted and unheralded. Also, the victims of a deadly boring schooling system become victims of those with vested interests [school authorities, unions, governments] who widely publicise the good news [Australia does well, on average compared with OECD countries] but suppress the bad news such as:

- * Australia is amongst the worst OECD countries on a measure of "equity" [our bottom half of students have a greater gap between them and the top half than most OECD countries]

- * Australia is amongst the worst handful of OECD countries when it comes to student boredom [not surprising given our fractured system and an absence of a statement of social purposes to which all other policies and processes need be aligned [basic quality management principle].

So ... testing is necessary.

Testing can be dangerous. First, it can dominate school proceedings to the detriment of learning as many researchers are now suggesting the UK and US systems are experiencing ... and must therefore be used sparingly and strategically. Second, if testing is narrowly conceived [such as literacy and numeracy] then most obviously, and particularly in a competitive system, the areas to be tested will be regarded as the most important work schools do, and new "teaching" strategies will be employed to maximise results in the tests. Much of these new strategies are, at best, cheating and, at worst, mangled pedagogy greatly detrimental to [a] the country [b] students generally [c] equity victims in particular [as they are herded into the most unproductively boring remedial "literacy" groups ... themselves attached to the tests and entirely unrelated to the really engaging matters of life with intrinsic value to disempowered peoples. Narrowly damaging and dangerous testing is currently used in the UK and US and, with great ignorance, is now being proposed by some in Australia to be used as the basis for funding, programmatic, staffing, salary levels, other teacher rewards and other policy decisions ... ignorant madness.

How do we bring these two strands of thought together? That is, what is compatible about:

- * light and strategically formulated testing is necessary
- * testing will narrow the curriculum to the detriment of students, the nation and particularly the disadvantaged?

Answer: we need to lightly test all areas of learning that the nation regards as essential.

From this point it is more difficult to make a simple argument because schooling is almost totally reliant on the form and function associated with the subject disciplines. That this is so boggles the mind because the current structure [subject disciplines with some compulsorily "core" and others not] and content [subject disciplined, non-thematic, rapidly specialist] of curriculum is anaesthetic to pedagogical principles such as

"wholistic" and "experiential" learning ... and moving students from their known knowledge [and context] to the unknown.

With no social purposes laid down by the polity for use by educators as a shaping tool for both the structure and content of the curriculum, we have no "essential" curriculum ... just subject disciplines ... and an array of concerns which have variously captured the imagination of politicians [driver, sex, citizen, values, etc] which are grafted on.

Essential? Before we can test that which is essential we must have determined that which we believe to be essential. Australia has not done this. Australia's multi-fractured schooling system has no set of social purposes outlining a set of objectives to which all policies and management processes should be aligned. Outside the Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne Declarations there is nothing – and these declarations comprise only a maddeningly loose aggregation of socio-political concerns, culpably contradictory settings concerning equity, and an unsurprising but pedagogically deadening reliance on traditional subject disciplines. In any event, the declarations were never intended, nor are they designed so they are able, to drive the form or function of any of the major arms of policy: curriculum structure, content and support; teacher education; teacher selection; teacher promotion; resourcing.

This submission is becoming too long. In 2009 I received my PhD after research into this and associated matters. My doctoral thesis was examined by Professors Kenway, McGaw and Reid and was given 3 "top" boxes. It can be found at URL:

<http://ogma.newcastle.edu.au:8080/vital/access/services/Download/uon:3545/ATTACHMENT02?view=true>

There is a yet darker side to this "debate". Testing and reporting schools' test results is predicated on a dominant view that "what really matters" is the quality of teacher. With schools reported then each school can be targetted for extra attention [if the motives are thoughtful and supportive], or they can be targetted for punishment [less funding, shaming]. All of this is management-easy and attractive to socio-politically lazy and ignorant system managers such as control big public school systems. It is my view that the philosophic basis of this strategy is wrong and bad. Of course, it is a no-brainer that the better the teacher the better the teaching. I do not attempt to stand in the way of better teachers. But, where is the data to show all, or most, crook teachers are currently teaching Aboriginal and/or low SES students?

No, this is woolly-brained thinking! Armed with the data we have about indigenous and low SES students, and with the successful experiences we have had with turning "girls' education" around, we are more likely to find the answers to our problems with poor performers [indigenous and low SES students] in the mainstream policies of the systems, particularly the public school and Catholic systems where most of these students enrol.

In my view it is likely that the skill set, and the socio-political understandings and demonstrated attitude of a "good" teacher in a school with concentrations of indigenous and/or low SES students will differ from a "good" teacher in higher SES schools. To put it another way, the "good" teacher at a higher SES school will find him/herself out of context and out of depth in a low SES school unless s/he has a complementary skill set, and a profoundly empathetic understanding and approach to social struggle and the

need for empowerment.

Complementing the teachers' skills and socio-political understandings is not enough. Arguably, the major element of schooling is the curriculum. Yet, even in our comprehensive knowledge that classroom work bores a big majority of our students, that the bulk of low SES students and indigenous students leave school before they can exercise any curriculum choice, and that kids will learn when they are motivated [have intention - Boomer] to learn, our system managers put their entire emphasis on "what really matters" [teacher quality] and no emphasis on the structure or content of curriculum!

A fortunate outcome of this strategy, for the systems' managers, is that when schools fail it is seen to be the schools' fault, or else individual teachers' fault, or even the stupid kids fault, when the culpability really lies with management which has denied the importance of low SES for decades, placed too much reliance on "good" teachers [and a uni-dimensional strategy focussed on literacy] while doing nothing to research a series of extremely important questions concerning low SES, the nature of low SES, and implications for all major policy areas such as:

- * structure of curriculum [there is no choice -empowering choice - for children until secondary school by which time low SES kids are so comprehensively damaged educationally that they have no choice except the safety net choice we gave these kids when we, with cowardice, euphemistically branded them "non-achievers, non-university oriented, non-academically inclined"]

- * content of curriculum [no system provides insight for teachers concerning elements of the subject disciplines which might have "intrinsic" value for variously disempowered students and communities. No thematic treatment of interesting, contested, engaging socio-political issues with the help of the disciplines - just the disciplines.]

- * curriculum support [use of new technologies to enhance experiences, interest, interactivity ... for students, and lesson insights, techniques, and actual lessons ... for teachers]

- * values embedded in teacher promotion processes

- * teacher & school leadership education

- * teacher & school leadership selection

- * the socio-political place of the school, its leadership and its teachers ... in the schools' community and life

- * system management & leadership: education & selection

- * student welfare: hunger, cold, safety and security, accommodation, emotional support.

Despite the knowledge of damning data since the 1973 Karmel Report, systems have failed to produce a plan for the Education of Students from Low SES Communities, whereas plans [some successful] have been drawn up for every other equity group such as: Girls, Boys, Disabled Students, Migrant Students/ESL/Multicultural; Rural education ... even Aboriginal Education Plans. The matter of low SES has been in management denial for decades ... even as recently as 2008, the new NSW Institute of Teachers produced an otherwise excellent matrix of skills and understandings it believes all NSW teachers must have. In recognition of "equity" concerns the matrix contains separate lines for: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders; Students with Special Education needs; NESB students; students with challenging behaviours ... low SES, the really big area of

concern for systems, particularly public systems, denied!

So ... NAPLAN is badly conceived. It rests on a series of poor judgements: literacy and numeracy is what really counts; teacher quality is what really matters; in respect of disadvantage, the curriculum is neutral... teachers have to fix it at the school level!

If governments really want to find out where the problems are, simply give each school an [accurate] SES score, then correlate these with schooling outcomes. The results will be much more accurate, illuminating, and free of individual teacher, student or school damage. I have done this exercise, and the association is dramatic. The differences between low SES and mid- SES several times greater than the differences between, for example, the urgency-generating differences between boys and girls in the 90's.

In a separate exercise, with separate goals, set the educo-political processes in motion designed to establish a widely agreed socially determined set of social purposes for schooling ... related to a stated preferred future society. Following this, hand this set of social purposes to education experts and ask them to come up with a curriculum structure, content and support materials, which are consistent with the purposes. THEN ... we can sensibly test in a strategic manner, across the span of curriculum

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