

8 February 2013

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write in response to the invitation to make a submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012. This submission relates primarily to Section 3 (iii) of the Bill, namely “for Australia to be ranked, by 2025, as one of the Top 5 highest performing countries based on the performance of Australian school students in reading, mathematics and science, and based on the quality and equity of Australian schooling” and Section 7 (iv) Transparency and Accountability (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). My comments are based upon my professional knowledge as a classroom teacher of 13 years experience, and my role as a teacher educator since 2009. My PhD in Education, awarded in 2009, looked at the ways that students negotiate the competing and contradictory expectations on being a ‘good’ student. In 2011 I was awarded an Australia Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) to examine the effects of NAPLAN on Australian school communities. I have published numerous books, theoretical and empirical papers as well as presenting at professional and academic conferences on the subject of school accountability, high-stakes testing and teachers’ work.

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Submission

Disclaimer: These views are my own and based on my research. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the School of Education at Murdoch University or the wider University leadership and community.

Across the Western world there seems to be much enthusiasm for reforming education. In Australia the Federal Government has embarked on an “Education Revolution” that aspires to “build a culture of high expectations in our schools for students and teachers. This culture must also be matched to effective transparency and accountability mechanisms that meet the needs of parents, policy makers and the broader community” (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5). The Federal Government's commitment to improving schools and schooling in Australia through accountability and transparency have lead to policy interventions such as NAPLAN, MySchool, performance pay, AITSL teacher standards and the Australian Curriculum. I read the Education Bill 2012 as a continuation of these policy interventions. In particular I would like to draw attention to the Bill's ambition that our students are ranked in the Top 5 by 2025 and that increasing the accountability of schools “to the community in relation to performance” through “analysing and applying data” will drive improvement in student outcomes (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 6). However, central to this submission is international research that suggests that increasing external accountability only increases unintended consequences and that it does not significantly improve student learning or outcomes.

Before I begin I would like to make the following claims about Australia's education system based on national and international data:

1. Australia has a high-quality, high-performing education system (OECD, 2012).
2. However, there are areas in which Australia could improve, largely in terms of the equity of educational outcomes as a result of schooling (Perry & McConney, 2011).
3. There is emerging evidence that the way that ‘choice’ is playing out in schools could be a barrier to equity of educational achievement (Windle, 2009).

Gonski

I heartily endorse the commitment of the Education Bill 2012 to institute a model of funding that is fair and equitable across all systems for all schools (often known colloquially as the Gonski Report) (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales, & Tannock, 2011). The Government is to be applauded for undertaking this review and endorsing the recommendations. One of the challenges for the Australian nation is how we create a more equitable system for our students where their outcomes are not determined by the situations their families find themselves in. Currently we have a system where funding illogically flows to the most advantaged students, and those with the most need of support are not funded as well. Gonski as a more equitable funding mechanism could do a lot to improve the equity of educational outcomes across Australia. However, I remain concerned that potential benefits of Gonski could be swept away by the commensurate rising tide of external accountability and narrow understanding as to what constitutes ‘quality’.

Accountability

One of the features of education policy since 2007 in Australia has been the importance placed on accountability as a mechanism to improve the quality of Australia's education system. As noted above, Australia is generally considered to have a high-performing, high-quality education system, notwithstanding that there are areas for improvement. It has been very clear at the policy level that the impetus for this improvement is expected to be more transparency linked to external forms of accountability. It appears as though external, quantitative accountability of schools and teachers is assumed to be the only form of accountability entertained at the policy level. I think this is concerning and deserves to be challenged. In other words, our policy climate seems to equate accountability with pressure: "if students and teachers are held to account they will each work harder to achieve better results. Under accountability measures schools, teachers and students will strive to do their best to receive rewards and to avoid punishment" (Lobascher, 2011, p. 9).

There appears to be a perception in the legislation that teachers, principals, schools and school systems are averse to accountability. In my experience, and the research I have undertaken, this is not true. Most education Professionals that I have spoken to in my research are supportive of accountability measures if they are educative and supportive of improving student learning and teacher practice in timely ways. In other words, schools are crying out for policy makers to devise accountability measures that will drive improvement that has practical applications at the classroom level. A policy direction that focuses on generating data that is useful to schools and teachers, explicit and able to inform practice in a timely manner with the goal of improving the learning that occurs in each classroom is the key challenge. We should also hold accountability measures to account – if they are not having a positive impact on classrooms, if they are not educative, if they do not empower teachers to make decisions that benefit their students, it is doubtful that they will bring the desired improvement.

When I look at the Education Bill 2012 I see emphasis on generating data and designing new systems of measurement in the belief that will improve performance. However, generating data does not necessarily assist teachers in improving the individual learning in their classrooms. Nor does it provide suggestions as to how to improve outcomes. Nowhere can I see evidence that thought has been put into considering what the likely effects of these accountability measures will be on classrooms and students. In other words, no one seems to be paying any attention to how these can be/will be educative, except for the implied suggestion that increasing pressure improves results.

It appears that there are different definitions of accountability at work here. Loosely defined, I would suggest that there is accountability for learning and accountability to performance. Accountability for learning is where teachers and schools use a variety of diagnostic, measurement and data gathering tools to directly support learning in their local context. Accountability to performance is where the 'products' of education processes are measured and ranked, assuming that the (usually) statistical representations of what counts as quality are indicative of the complexity and holistic understanding of education. The Education Bill 2012 legislates for a form of school accountability that is predicated on a series of performance measures. In each of these measures, the needs of the policy maker seem to override attention being given to:

1. How it will impact on schools?
2. In what ways will the data be useful, and to whom?

3. How will the data generated translate into improvements in the classroom?
4. What are the impacts on those areas not assessed?
5. What can we learn from international experience?
6. How are the impacts of the policy evaluated, and how can teachers 'speak back' to policy?

I note in the policy document the driver for accountability is performance not learning. That is problematic. A focus on performance often distorts education processes; firstly, rather than our education system being driven by what we value, it often becomes driven by what we can measure easily and simply. Secondly an emphasis on performance is often associated with unintended consequences that can make the policy objectives of improving equity and quality less likely. Thirdly valuing our teachers, empowering them as trusted Professionals requires designing accountability measures that affirm, not erode, trust and this must be a key strategy if we want to improve student outcomes. This is a fundamental challenge that the Bill fails to address.

For example, if we reflect on the United States experience of 'No Child Left Behind' and 'Race To The Top' we may gain some insight into the problems associated with setting performance goals. Like the Education Bill 2012, the US adopted Federal education policy that enshrined the achievement of external goals in legislation. Similar to the Education Bill 2012, these policies linked the creation of data to accountability in the belief that this would create the impetus to improve the quality of American schools (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). It is more than 20 years since NCLB, and there is a large body of research that suggests that these policies have had the opposite effect than expected. Most argue that this is because the unintended consequences of using accountability to trigger improvement often have a negative impact on learning. These negative consequences have included:

1. Teaching to the test or the performance measure (Au, 2008; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012).
2. Narrowing the curriculum to emphasise only that which is being measured (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Au, 2007).
3. Schools and individuals 'gaming' the system so that they are portrayed in the best possible light (Jacob & Levitt, 2003).
4. The learning of students becoming fractured and incoherent rather than holistic as superficial coverage of content that could be assessed replaces deep learning (Jones, 2008; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009).
5. The impact of these policies disproportionately disadvantages students who attend schools in disadvantaged contexts (Diamond & Spillane, 2004).

Despite the vast money and resources being spent, most research suggests that student achievement in the US education system has not improved since 1990, most likely due to the unintended consequences of the accountability measures and the failure to tackle out of school factors that influence student achievement. In 2012 Nicholls, Glass and Berliner published an analysis of the effects of standardised testing and other accountability measures on student achievement and found:

high-stakes testing has little or no relationship to reading achievement, and a weak to moderate relationship to math, especially in fourth grade but only for certain student groups. This particular pattern of results (only affecting fourth grade math) raises serious

questions about whether high-stakes testing increases learning or merely more vigorous test preparation practices (i.e., teaching to the test) (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012).

Furthermore, their research shows that

1. accountability pressure has some relationship to fourth grade Mathematics, but only for certain sub-groups (African-American students)
2. virtually no influence on reading
3. negative influence on student graduation (as the NCLB target of 100% graduation increased student exclusions, leaving school early etc).
4. Studies focusing on both high- and low-stakes exit exams repeatedly reveal that these types of incentives/threats have little to no impact on student achievement over time
5. the reduction of the achievement gap between income groups and between racial and ethnic groups, a major goal of the high-stakes accountability movement, either did not occur or was only marginally effective in the years these policies have been in place (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012).

Already we are seeing in Australia a number of responses to the data collected through NAPLAN that would seem to indicate that the problems the US systems have experienced are being repeated here (Thompson, 2012). Borrowing policy from overseas, without researching the likely impacts of that policy and designing checks and balances to protect education systems from negative and unintended consequences may be a political, but cannot be an educative, endeavour.

So the goal to be Top 5 by 2025 through increasing the saturation and impact of accountability measures may not bring about the improvements expected. Whilst it may appear an admirable, commonsense goal, there are a number of problems with it. Firstly, how do we define quality? If as a nation the goal for our schools is to perform better on a series of standardised tests, and for us this is acceptable as our standard of quality, it would appear that being Top 5 by 2025 “based on the performance of Australian school students in reading, mathematics and science” meets that definition (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 3). If, however, we as a nation feel that education should be valued for more than student performance on standardised tests conducted by the OECD (PISA) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (TIMMS/PIRLS) then it would appear that the Education Bill 2012 adopts an inappropriate definition of quality.

Even when we recognise the limitations of PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS as measures of quality – that there is far more to quality education than they can measure – in practice they often become default measures of quality, overriding other, unmeasured and unmeasurable facets of the education process. As Biesta argues when reflecting on accountability measures in the UK:

More than just the question of the *technical validity* of our measurements-i.e., the question whether we are measuring what we intend to measure-the problem lies in what I suggest is referred to as the *normative validity* of our measurements. This has to do with the question whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what

we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13).

So, what strategies do we have in place in Australia that will ameliorate or overcome the non-existent or negative impact of accountability on student achievement in the US? What are we doing to ensure that the performance measure “Top 5 by 2025” does not further entrench the unintended consequences so well described in international research?

To conclude I would suggest that we should set up protocols for use of accountability measures that monitor the impacts of these measures, how they assist and empower teachers to continue to improve their pedagogy and what mechanisms will be used to evaluate the impacts on learning and achievement. There must also be a facility for teachers and school leaders to speak back to those accountability measures. After all, if policy attempts to improve outcomes requires changing pedagogy, those in schools are best-placed to respond to what is working and what is not. Teaching is a complex task that should be supported by policy, not hindered by a narrow focus on performance. After all, the goal as I understand it is to “provide an excellent education for school students” (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 3).

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