

The pathology of NAPLAN

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Unhelpfully, someone used medical terminology in an education setting that eventually led to the lie that a child's learning needs can be scientifically pinpointed with a test; much like a medical test can detect a disease. For years we have heard standardised tests described as diagnostic.

Clearly, they are not. Nothing is being diagnosed. Our children are not patients. They are not ill. Teachers are not medical practitioners seeing a patient irregularly at a clinic. A teaching program is not a prescription. Learning is not a treatment. And schoolwork is not a cure. Mind you, I am not aware of any medical test where the doctor who ordered it has to wait four or five months for the results to be returned.

“What [standardised testing] does do, however, is give the illusion that something constructive is being done, that a pseudo-scientific method is being applied to student need, that political accountability is being served and that the human mind and its progress can be simply mapped. It is scarcely the much-heralded twenty-first century approach to learning. In fact, it bears the hallmarks of a nineteenth century approach to schooling, rather akin to phrenology.” Denis Fitzgerald, *Crossroads: A Green Paper on Assessment Policy*.



Denis Fitzgerald is right. As far as NAPLAN tests giving us any reliable information at the classroom level, we may as well hand every teacher a craniometer to collect skull measurements before asking them to feel for the lumps and bumps on each child's head.

But the pseudo-science of standardised testing has taken hold and the recent release of NAPLAN results is a case study of what the US military describes as “incestuous amplification”; that is, loud voices each repeating the same nonsense with no individual willing to be the odd one out.

To make matters worse, it was as though this year's NAPLAN debacle had not occurred, when students were forced to sit for the test on more than one occasion due to massive technical failures, some with paper and pen, others on a computer. Talk about short memories.

Can you imagine the public outrage if politicians insisted on the continued use of a medical test that doctors and health practitioners had found to be faulty and unreliable? Yet, this is exactly the situation teachers experience when it comes to NAPLAN.

So teachers and students had to endure toxic discussions once again upon the release of the NAPLAN data. When the results were announced it was almost impossible to find a single public commentator talking about NAPLAN who possessed a teaching qualification or who had any teaching experience. The first predictable

statement came from the politicians who declared the results showed that we need to go “back to basics”. It is a glib comment that is as regular as an atomic clock. My response to the call for children to return to “basics” is to point out that millions of school children understand the complex science of climate change, and can speak, read and write about it, unlike many adults in positions of power and influence.

The creation of My School turned NAPLAN from a clumsy, low-quality test into a high-stakes, low-quality test. Back in 2008, then federal education minister Julia Gillard had been seduced by the then New York chancellor of schools, Joel Klein, into believing that publishing test scores on a website — effectively turning student assessment into an adult spectator sport — would somehow improve school performance. Ignoring the evidence, and disdainful of the opinions of teachers, she pressed ahead.

Within a few years of Klein being brought to Australia by Gillard, he had moved on to work for Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation promoting its investment in testing software, which was being sold to school systems. The obvious conflict of interest was the subject of media speculation. Later, he was Murdoch’s main adviser in the notorious News of the World phone hacking scandal in the UK.

It was only the industrial action of members of the Australian Education Union that secured protections that prevented the mass harvesting of My School data, thus making the creation of “league tables” much more difficult.

So, what are we left with? The costly NAPLAN test itself, its dishonest data still published on My School, increased levels of student and teacher stress, the curriculum narrowed, coaching clinics hothousing children, schools colour-coded into winners and losers, student privacy compromised, children labelled as failures from an early age, education treated as a market, ignorant public commentary, and individual schools and principals named and shamed.

Teachers are tired of the argument that governments need the test data in order to set long-term policy directions and to direct the resources to where they are needed. The reality is, despite the evidence that Australia has one of the most socially segregated education systems in the world, and despite knowing exactly which schools need additional resources, the Federal Government has entrenched a schools funding regime that shifts billions of recurrent and capital dollars to advantaged children in rich over-resourced private schools while deliberately under-funding the public schools that have the highest concentrations of disadvantage.

Let’s be clear: no child fails NAPLAN, but NAPLAN fails all children.

— Maurie Mulheron, President