

NAPHLANOS – The essence of NAPLAN

Miro Martin says NAPLAN might do more harm than good



Last week I watched *Insight* on SBS. A pall of disappointment overcame me after listening to the naïve rationale offered by Julia Gillard for the implementation of NAPLAN. Yes, we all agree that there needs to be accountability in education, but finding a standard, “one-size-fits-all” instrument to measure this accountability is ridiculous. We have such a wide range of school cultures from low SES to rural Indigenous to migrant and refugee, as well as the average middle class suburban. All of these communities have unique attributes and capabilities, but as far as the government is concerned, only Reading and Maths matter. Even if this is the case, how do you compare the reading results of a remote Indigenous school in The Kimberley with a middle class suburban school in Melbourne? Melbourne children would blitz the Indigenous children in Reading and Maths, but I’m sure the Indigenous children would blitz the Melbourne ones in Art and Dance. Prof Brian Caldwell makes a similar point in a recent Queensland P&F publication, *News in Brief* 2009; Vol 28 (5) July.

“... However, students and schools vary in their starting points based on a range of socio-economic and demographic factors. One problem with simplistic comparisons of school results is that they do not take into account these different starting points and the “value added” by teachers. For example, comparing a school with large numbers of refugee and migrant children who speak English as a second language with a high SES demographic school with no non-English speaking students does not do justice to the efforts of the students and the teachers in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes...” Caldwell makes sense – we don’t need to standardise education, but rather, individualise it.

Julia Gillard maintained that publishing school NAPLAN results enabled parents to compare “like schools” or apples with apples. Again, this is ridiculous. Tell that to the media who are intent on naming and shaming schools with their league of tables. For example, *The Mercury* newspaper in Tasmania identified Bridgewater High School as being the worst

in Tasmania without looking into all the circumstances, i.e. their school had burned down and the students were in temporary accommodation at the time of the tests. What harm has this irresponsible journalism done to the employment prospects of students from this school?

Brian Caldwell, one of the most respected educators in our country at present, was in the audience of the *Insight* program and he was cut off after only a short response. Instead, the producers gave airtime to some New York educator telling us how his schools were now performing much better since test scores were linked to funding.

An Australian teacher who had worked in New York began talking about how New York teachers were only interested in teaching to the tests. Their careers depended on it. She, too, was cut short. It seemed as though the government had pre-arranged this episode in their favour.

Why on Earth would we want to be in any way American? Get good grades, make a lot of money and then make more money. This is all that matters in life. Reading and Maths are important, but they aren’t the be-all and end-all of effective schools. I can’t understand why the government is basing its assessment on such a narrow band of learning and making funding contingent upon achievement in this narrow band.

In the same P&F publication, mentioned above, Sir Ken Robinson says, “...Most children are put through school like a manufacturing line in a factory because the education system was designed to meet the needs of a different age. One of the problems is that the organisation of education in most countries was developed to meet the needs of an industrial economy and that’s simply not suited to the 21st century...” Sir Ken also mentions that the success of a school comes down to great teaching and many teachers have become demoralised because their own creativity is being stressed by the standardised curriculum.

“...Education is being strangled by the culture of standardised testing...”

Damon Young from the University of Melbourne supports the above...

“... Sometimes we must forget our rigid rules and impersonal regulations and embrace a more intimate, spontaneous education. It’s counter-productive to subject teachers to more red tape, more performance indicators, job stress and

blame. Like parents, they need experience and excitement, not grinding surveillance.

In schools and universities teachers are often treated like novices, told to follow rules, tick boxes and crunch numbers. And perhaps most tragically, some end up bowing to this. They lose that spark, that luminescence that drives them to rewrite the rules..." *Bending the rules, Brisbane's Child*, March 2009.

Making silk purses out of sows' ears

Children from low socio-economic areas are behind the eight ball to start with. They may not have the books, resources or parent support at home. Poor performance in tests may have less to do with poor teaching and more to do with other factors. I don't make any excuses and I certainly advocate having expectations, but I don't adhere to the rhetoric of *High Expectations*. I believe in *Realistic Expectations*. I know this isn't the politically correct outlook. It's based on my experience. If I'm wrong, I'll stand corrected.

NAPLAN anomalies

At a recent NAPLAN information in-service I was told...

In Queensland, alone, 3000 students failed

I believe in Realistic Expectations

the tests because they had incorrectly filled in the cover page or used the wrong pencil. Students failed the maths tests for reasons such as the following – putting in extra dollar signs when one was already provided; using a colon : in place of a decimal point, (common among foreign students). We were also instructed to tell late finishers to simply guess and put any answer in the box, How will this tell us what they know?

This stupidity is even advocated by Prof Geoff Masters, commissioned by the Queensland Government to look into the state's poor showing in last year's tests. One of his recommendations is that teachers train their students with old tests to improve their scores. How is this going to improve their reading and maths? Another anomaly is the Danish or Scandinavian scale used. It's worth more points for a bright student to increase from 18 to 19 out of 20 than for an average student to increase from 14 to 15, the first being harder to achieve.

In my last article (ET Term 3, 2009) I said it was time to revolt. Brian Caldwell agrees ...

"... It's time for the community to adopt the language of radical dissent... We need to personalise education, not standardise... most important data are not test results but how students are achieving in relation to their personal learning plans..."

It really makes me frustrated that so many respected educators, as well as my own colleagues that I regularly converse with, see the folly of NAPLAN testing and are powerless to stop a bunch of ill-informed and educationally ill-equipped lawyers (our politicians) from enforcing such stupidity.

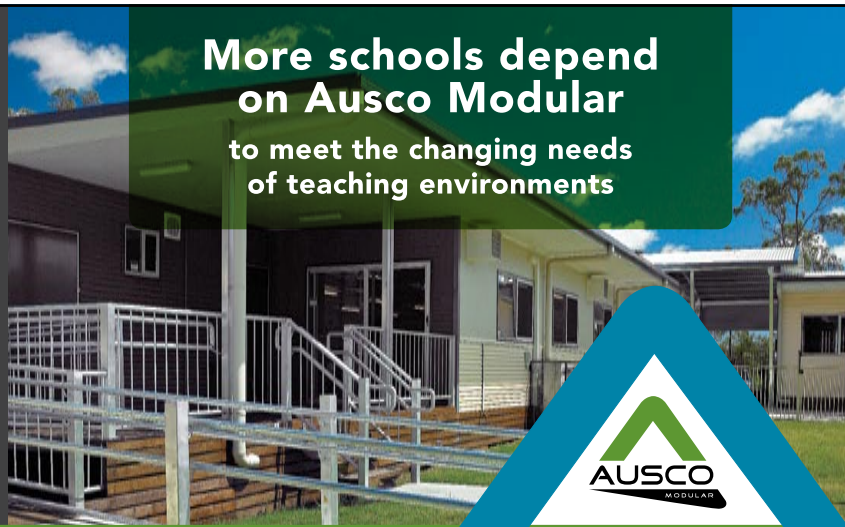
I was extremely fortunate to study Latin at school. Part of my study involved etymology, the study of the origins of language. I am intrigued by the history of our language and I want to share my knowledge with you. I'm sure the word NAPLAN comes from an ancient and obscure colloquial Greek word, 'Naphlanos'. Loosely translated, I believe it means "What a load of crap!"



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.

- Off-site construction fast tracks infrastructure development and minimises disruption
- Aesthetically pleasing buildings and hardy internal finishes
- Sustainable classrooms that lead the way in structural integrity, energy and water efficiency

More schools depend on Ausco Modular
to meet the changing needs of teaching environments



Buildings for Hire or Sale call 13 62 11 or visit www.ausco.com.au

Buildings to Live, Work & Learn

"I read about it on the ET website..."

www.educationtoday.com.au

The daily news service for Australian educators

