



TEACHER VOICE

# So where to next? Gonski, NAPLAN and building coherence and trust in the education landscape

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**N**ational treasure and naturalist Sir David Attenborough once said: “*Many individuals are doing what they can. But real success can only come if there is a change in our societies and in our economics and in our politics.*”

I would add the Education firmament to this sentiment.

Much has been written of late about the efficacy and purpose of NAPLAN and the Minimum Standards in Literacy and

Numeracy. Some underlying driving questions emerge from the space in this narrative.

- What is that we really want for our students? Is there any coherence in this as a school, as a jurisdiction, and as a nation?
- How do we make a meaningful return on our 50 billion dollar plus investment in education? What does or could this look like?

Some etymology is helpful here. But more on that later!

It has become apparent that we have

created a dichotomy between assessment and learning.

This is illustrated by an ancient story about a boy late at night with his finger pointing to the moon. People spent so much time focusing on the boy's finger that they had lost sight of the beauty and wonder of the moon.

Assessment can only fulfil its purpose if it is inextricably embedded in learning and not as a part of learning.

In the recent past, Prime Minister

Gillard arguably backed the ‘wrong horse’. In the Prime Minister’s effort to improve standards by making tests public, publishing league tables and arguably naming and shaming schools she cited the work of New York City’s head of schools, Joel Klein.

Unfortunately, research from New York later showed Klein’s initiatives, led to falling standards, and what was sadly described as a ‘dumbed-down approach’ to the curriculum with a number of unintended consequences. This narrative was later similarly replicated in the United Kingdom. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/education/11scores.html>)

### So what horse should we back?

Perhaps we could begin by developing a culture, in a secondary context, of learning where our Year 7s embrace and naturally welcome continual feedback in their learning spaces by their own self-reflection and regulation, their peers informed judgements and their teachers’ specific comments about their learning.

Perhaps the focus would be on students making their thinking visible and capturing their learning through e-portfolios supported by annotated work by teachers which best illustrate what students can do and what they can build on. NO marks just comments as per the evidence based work of Prof Dylan Williams from Kings College, London ([http://www.dylanwiliam.org/Dylan\\_Wiliams\\_website/Presentations.html](http://www.dylanwiliam.org/Dylan_Wiliams_website/Presentations.html)).

Perhaps in the normal flow of learning activities to ascertain understanding teachers could provide students scripts (This could be a topic test in Maths, Essay in Humanities, Practical Report in Science) with all the answers embedded with errors and then asking students in groups of threes with one pencil to work backwards and identify and amend these errors. Perhaps in time the students could provide these scripts as evidence of their thinking and learning for their peers to complete.

Citing in part the work of Erica McWilliams Professor at Queensland University of Technology and Peter Taylor Establishing Enabling Routines’ project in 2017 (<http://www.ericamcwilliam.com.au/>).

Perhaps in Year 7 we should have the courage to have no formal Assessment tasks. To do this we could support teachers through the work of Professor



Helen Timperley, University of Auckland. ([https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/professional-conversations-literature-review-oct-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=fc2ec3c\\_0](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/professional-conversations-literature-review-oct-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=fc2ec3c_0))

Perhaps students could use their e-portfolios to run student led conferences with their parent(s) and teachers. Perhaps our Year 7 Semester Reports and awards could reflect these practices.

In this way we will develop a different ‘way of seeing’ and then ‘doing’ for our students, parents and teachers who then come to understand that rich Assessment is embedded in authentic learning which grows organically in a relationship that is built in and through learning.

We could do worse than ALL jurisdictions adopt the seven principles of learning from the OECD as our signposts which could captivate in teachers and students the ‘beauty and wonder of the moon’.

Briefly, these principles are

- 1 Learners at the centre ...*learners as its core participants*
- 2 The Social nature of Learning ...*well organised and co-operative learning*
- 3 Emotions are integral to learning ...*highly attuned to learners motivation*
- 4 Recognising Individual difference ...*sensitive to individual difference, in-*

*cluding their prior knowledge*

- 5 Stretching all students ...*demand hard work and challenge without excessive overload*
- 6 Assessment for learning ...*strong emphasis on formative feedback to support learning*
- 7 Building Horizontal connections...*across areas of knowledge and subjects and community and the wider world* (<http://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/50300814.pdf>).

Recommendation 10 in the latest review by Mr David Gonski AC: *Through Growth to Achievements: Report of the Review to Achieve Excellence in Australian Schools*, picks this up well: *Accelerate the development of contemporary pedagogy through the use of collaboration, mentoring, observation, feedback including from colleagues and students by incorporating these practices into the core role of teachers and creating the conditions to enable teachers to engage with them.* (<https://www.education.gov.au/review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-schools>).

In our preoccupation with testing we have lost sight of its real purpose in learning. As stated in the introduction some Etymology is helpful. The word test comes from the Latin *testa* (jug or shell)

and testu (earthen pot). In the Middle Ages it came to embody a small vessel used in evaluating precious metals, ascertaining the quality of a metal by melting it in a pot. So two functions emerged. Firstly to refine and improve the metal and secondly to make a judgement if the metal was worth keeping.

Unfortunately when NAPLAN was coupled with the HSC (Year 9 NAPLAN attaining a Band 8 and thus attaining the HSC minimum standards) and coupling NAPLAN results with the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) on the My School website this confused the final judgement of the 'quality of the metal' (HSC) with ongoing improvement to refine and 'improve the metal' (NAPLAN). Gonski challenged this in Recommendation 11: *Develop a new online and on demand learning assessment tool based on the Australian Curriculum learning progression.*

While tests have a place in learning, it is worth remembering that you cannot fatten a cow by weighing it. The real challenge is to provide clear and well-

resourced early interventions for our students in literacy and numeracy with a sharp and coherent focus. Gonski rightly raises the bar in Recommendation 6: *Prioritise the implementation of learning progression for literacy and numeracy in curriculum delivery during the early years of schooling to ensure the core foundations for learning are developed by age eight.*

**The only way to have authentic sector blind funding** is for each school to have their parents' income assessed by the **Australian Taxation Office**

In the social

commentary on NAPLAN what is the precious metal in our earthen vessel?

With the clamor to improve Australia's PISA results it is important to reflect upon what is also do we want to measure? Creativity and Critical thinking?

How do we compare world wide in these domains and how does this overlay with PISA? It is a conversation worth having.

Gonski somewhat resurrects this in Recommendation 5: *Revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum progressively over the next five years to present the learning area and general capabilities as learning progressions.*

Pasi Sahlberg in *Finland: A Non-Com-*

*petitive Education for a Competitive Economy* system outlines five drivers of successful reform. They provide a useful framework on which to evaluate our Education landscape. The five drivers are:

- 1 Equity and well-being
- 2 Teachers who are highly valued and highly trained
- 3 Smart Accountability policies
- 4 A culture of trust
- 5 Sustainable leadership and political coherence.

(<https://pasisahlberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/OECD-Finland-Lessons-for-Japan-2012.pdf>)

Pasi Sahlberg's first driver of Equity is a significant challenge for Australia. For many reasons, including historical ones, we are a long way from the Finnish maxim that the nearest school is the best school for their students.

A key piece to this puzzle is to properly implement Sector-blind funding. Anomalies still occur with the current model. How can two Independent schools on the same SRS – one high feeing attract thousands of dollars of funding over the next ten-year period while the other low fee paying lose millions of dollars of funding



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in the same period? The only way to have authentic sector blind funding is for each school to have their parents' income assessed by the Australian Taxation Office.

Part of Sahlberg's fifth driver reflects the need for coherence between and in schools, jurisdictions and National peak bodies. Finding the right drivers, as per the work of Michael Fullan, is instructive here (<https://michaelfullan.ca/coherence-the-right-drivers-in-action-for-schools-districts-and-systems/>).

Perhaps we could implement an Independent Education Commission which sits outside the Federal and State Governments, to ensure that education is not caught up in election cycles.

Perhaps governments could trust teachers and jurisdictions more and conversely as teachers we could be more optimistic as some ministers do want to listen to our collective wisdom.

At a recent gathering of educators in late May, I asked the State Education Minister the Hon Rob Stokes whether we could be brave enough to trust our teachers more, and in the syllabus space reduce the mandated content by 30–40% so authentic student learning

could organically grow. Minister Stokes responded by saying this was '*music to his ears*' and that he is a strong advocate for teachers as authors in the upcoming NSW reforms which seek to align Gonski 2.0 in a NSW context.

Perhaps we could abandon registration as in Finland and trust our teachers. Perhaps we could abandon the HSC in NSW.

At another gathering late last year I asked Mr David De Carvalho, Chief Executive Office NESAs *What would be the worst thing that could happen for our students if they did not have a HSC?*

While change is slow as David De Carvalho mentioned in his response it is question worth exploring, particularly if we want congruence in our practice of Assessment inextricably embedded in learning from Year 7–12 in a learning continuum. The second half of Sahlberg's first driver of student well-being also plays into this exploration.

It is important to remember that we cannot do it alone.

Minister Stokes reminded the gathering that *Education cannot be solved by*

*schools*. Gonski in Recommendation 8 touched on this: *Strengthen school-community engagement to enrich school learning through the establishment of mechanisms to facilitate quality partnerships between schools, employers, members of the community, community organisations and tertiary institutions.*

In this period of a myriad of changes in Education where teachers feel the weight of reform fatigue, may we remember the words of Pope Francis: *Education, right now, is like the metaphor of the Good Sower who is busy sowing without always having the possibility to see the fruits of his work. Educating requires working with hope and confidence. Education and teaching must be concerned with constant self-improvement and verifying the effectiveness of its tools, being aware that not all expected results can always be seen or ascertained.* ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20140407\\_educare-oggi-e-domani\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html))

The clock is ticking for our young people.



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