

Nasty Naplan

I have had an uneasy feeling in my stomach for quite some time about Julia Gillard's education revolution. Firstly I am concerned that she is following the US models of testing, rather than the excellent models to be found in Europe. The UK education system is far superior than the US, and it has recognized that directing time and energy into teaching social and emotional learning (SEAL) is a key component to quality teaching and to improving educational outcomes.

Then Ms Gillard's passion for testing and making education transparent, well that really has had me concerned. Yes we need to address that our numeracy and literacy levels are not good enough, and yes we need to help parents find the schools that best suit their children – but testing is what politicians and some academics believe will magically create transparency. Well Julia Gillard, you obviously have not had much to do with education or schooling – other than your own. Good education is so much more than being good at tests.

From the Alliance for Children website (USA)

“Facts About Testing You Should Know

The No Child Left Behind law requires standardized tests in public schools starting in third grade. Pressure to raise scores has led many schools to begin testing in kindergarten. But tests given to children younger than 8 often produce misleading results. Young children can't sit and concentrate for long. They may not understand the questions or what is expected of them. And their performance is affected by anxiety, hunger, fatigue, and stress. Because of this, the odds that a test at the kindergarten level will give inaccurate results are about 50-50—the same odds as flipping a coin. (Reference: NAEYC)

Relying on standardized tests to make important decisions about a young child's education violates professional standards and National Academy of Sciences recommendations. Test scores should not determine whether children are placed in special education or gifted and talented programs. Focusing on tests also leads schools to pay less attention to things that are very important but hard to measure, like play skills, self-control, cooperation, physical development, creativity, and love of learning.

Many educators oppose testing of young children but don't speak out against it because they may be accused of being against rigor and “accountability.” Academic pressure in kindergarten has not produced better results. On the contrary, experts believe it contributes to failure, retention, and behavior problems.”

Let's start with the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) which test Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These tests are not all that Ms Gillard hopes for when we look a little closer. Firstly we have a National testing program, and yet we do not have national curriculum. (Professor Esther Care, The Number One Lie, Education Review) So it's a bit like testing apples and oranges! Different curriculums across Australia teach with a different focus, with entrenched differences

– and that’s partly why WA and NT may have such “poor” results The NAPLAN favours the curricula of NSW, ACT and VIC?

And statistically there are big questions to ask about what is being tested? And if these results are a true indicator of a student’s ability? Associate Professor Margaret Wu of the University of Melbourne in her article Naplan For the Lay Person writes,

“Remember that NAPLAN results are based on just one single test of limited test length. A sample of 40 questions is not sufficient to establish, with confidence, the exact numeracy proficiency of a student. The same caution applies to all subject areas tested.”

She goes on to suggest that this multiple choice test has little chance to truly indicate a student’s growth academically over the years between tests.

Interpreting growth measures at the individual student level

For an individual student, the growth measures based on two 40-question tests have an error margin greater than one year’s growth.

Another questionable aspect of the NAPLAN is how we look at “school performance” which is supposed to be reflected by the testing. Essentially this is supposed to mean the effectiveness of school staff (including the principal and teachers), then linking low student NAPLAN results to low school performance and that certainly is not always the case.

“A low result for a school could be due to mis-management or teacher ineffectiveness. But equally, it could be due to circumstances unrelated to school performance. For example, there might have been an outbreak of chicken pox in the school and many students were away for lengthy periods just prior to the test. There could be a high number of new migrant students who had difficulties with the English language. Students with NESB status have varying degrees of language proficiency that may not be captured accurately by the like-school variables.” Ass Prof Wu

There are so many variables that effect student performance that are not going to be obvious by a multiple choice test that happens once every 2 years. Parents are being told these are important indicators of their children’s academic development and THAT MAY NOT BE THE CASE.

And this does not take into account the new “teaching to the test” that is now occurring across Australia. A year one teacher told me recently she feels we are starting to teach to the Year 3 NAPLAN from the first day of Year1. Then I am hearing from so many parents about anxious and stressed children who are feeling really threatened by the test, and they are then anxious waiting for the results. Then what happens to the sensitive psyche of a child who does poorly – the label of poor performer can debilitate them enormously. There are now new resources for teachers to help them prepare for the NAPLAN – taking their focus away from doing so many other things that shape healthy children – music, singing, art, drama, story telling and school excursions.

Sad, tragic and terrifying is how I see it. Today’s children are already struggling – mentally, emotionally, socially and physically and we now have overloaded their fragile worlds because of zealous politicians who have made decisions that have little understanding of the far reaching unintended effects on children currently in our

schools. No wonder kids are giving up trying and wanting to go to school! We cannot have any significant education revolution if students give up trying, many by simply staying away.

Finally, the NAPLAN is not able to show the difference between the good and bad schools!

School comparisons

NAPLAN results alone CANNOT show, with confidence, which schools are more effective and which schools are less effective. Even taking into account of school contextual information such as school socio-economic status, staff numbers and funding breakdowns, we still cannot positively identify poor school performance. Assoc Prof Wu

So please warn parents that there is no perfect school or teacher, and that a school that has happy students who can't wait to get to school and who does not perform well on the NAPLAN, can still be a fabulous place for your student to attend. Schools that value EVERY student, even those with special needs is a safe place where children will learn about embracing diversity, enjoying learning and growing in emotional, social and spiritual competence. Warn parents that the test is just a test and not a true indicator of how our children are doing – if you want to know how your child is doing academically, please do what we have always done – make an appointment to chat to your child's teacher. They will give you a better idea because they see your child do so many activities and they have so many other more reliable ways of assessing your child's performance across the board, rather than a one up test that is "tick a box."

And please reassure your children the NAPLAN test is just a test – and they are so much more than being a test result, they are unique and special because they are a valued part of our lives. Remind them you love them unconditionally – no matter what!

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