

UNDO THE DAMAGE BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Brian J. Caldwell¹

My School 2.0 has been launched after a false start in late 2010. Parents and the wider community now have, after 10 months, information on school performance in NAPLAN tests conducted in May 2010. In addition to the assumptions that must be made if claims of validity are to be justified, there are new assumptions that must be factored in as to whether the school has added value in literacy and numeracy, and on the connection between school income and student performance. Without denying the critical and foundational importance of literacy and numeracy, it is fair to ask when performance in other domains will be reported, including the arts. This should be the target for My School 3.0.

Apart from priorities in getting things under way, a constraint appears to be the difficulty of assessing and reporting student performance in these domains, or unwillingness to do so, despite the fact that assessments have been made of individual and group performance for centuries. In many instances these are assessments of quality and value in the richest senses of these terms.

In this contribution I will describe the long-term harm to the national interest if the current focus of NAPLAN and My School is sustained. I draw from research in a range of national settings including Australia, England, Finland, New Zealand and the United States. I conclude that damage will be done to society and the economy unless these matters are addressed. As far as schools are concerned, that damage will be greatest in government schools.

It is important that I make clear at the outset my belief that the design and delivery of a national curriculum is necessary, and that I have confidence that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) will be successful in this endeavour. Work on a national curriculum in the arts is under way. It is worth noting that Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, Peter Garrett, took the initiative to get arts on the agenda in his previous role as Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts, in representations he made to ministers for education in early 2009. I have no doubt that he will keep a close watch on progress.

I also believe that no nation has more able people to lead the effort than Professor Barry McGaw (Chair) and Dr Peter Hill (CEO). I am comfortable with NAPLAN as a short-term project, despite its current narrow focus, although in the longer term I believe it ought to be a sampling exercise to monitor the educational health of the school sector as far as the basics are concerned (see Caldwell, 2010a for a vision on NAPLAN for 2020).

The Melbourne Declaration and 21st Century Skills

My concern is about what My School currently reports and the dysfunctional effects of its current design. Much of that concern relates to how we assess students across

¹ Brian J. Caldwell is Managing Director and Principal Consultant at Educational Transformations and Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne where he served as Dean of Education from 1998 to 2004. He is Associate Director of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in England, supporting its global initiative International Networking for Educational Transformation (iNet). He is Deputy Chair of the ACER Board. This paper was presented in a symposium on 'Value Adding in Australian Schools' hosted by the Faculty of Education at Notre Dame University, Fremantle WA on 9 March 2011.

the range of goals in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) which made clear that successful learners can do the following:

- develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
- have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy and are creative and productive users of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas
- are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines
- are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines
- are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas
- are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are
- are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives
- are motivated to reach their full potential.

While many people reject the nomenclature, the 21st century skills are generally considered to include those in the Cisco (2008) report entitled *Equipping Every Learner for the 21st Century* which proposed that all learners:

- Are to acquire a range of skills including problem solving and decision-making, creative and critical thinking, collaboration, communication and negotiation, and intellectual curiosity
- Receive tailored instruction
- Connect to their communities
- Continue learning through their lives

An integrating theme

There is a danger in Australia that the dysfunctional effects of current policy will inhibit passion in learning as well as innovation and creativity in schooling. In an eloquent statement at the launch of the NAB ACER Schools First initiative in 2008, Julia Gillard declared that 'All children have some gift and even some potential greatness within them. Finding that gift, nurturing it and bringing it to life is the responsibility of every single one of us'. Her words echo those of Sir Ken Robinson, who is a powerful advocate of an intensely personal approach to learning. Writing in *The Element* (Robinson, 2009) he stated that:

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.

But Robinson warns that the policy framework in England, now being replicated to a large extent in Australia, will impair the nurturing of the 'gift' and 'potential greatness' of which Gillard spoke:

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education. (Robinson, 2009)

Learning from international experience

Developments in two countries should serve as a warning. These are United States and England. On the other hand there are positive experiences in Finland and New Zealand.

United States

Yong Zhao is Presidential Chair and Associate Dean for Global Education, College of Education, University of Oregon. In my view he is the outstanding scholar on matters we are exploring in this symposium. Zhao highlights the achievements of America on various indicators of innovation and creativity, including the number of patents, the number of Nobel Prizes and leadership in science and medicine. He argues that these strengths could not be achieved if American education at all levels was as poor as it is often painted to be. National reports over several decades continue to highlight its weaknesses. Zhao acknowledged these weaknesses, and is highly critical on a range of matters, including aspects of curriculum. However, he connects student experiences in schools with the aforementioned strengths, including diversity in curriculum and extra-curriculum programs, the encouragement of individuality, and the intensity and extensity of team-oriented programs. He acknowledges that these strengths are viewed by some as weaknesses when the criterion is performance on international tests. However, he notes that several high-performing nations seek to emulate the United States in its areas of strength:

While the United States is moving toward more standardization and centralization, the Asian countries are working hard to allow more flexibility and autonomy at the local level. While the United States is investing resources to ensure all students take the same courses and pass the same tests, the Asian countries are advocating for more individualization and attending to emotions, creativity and other skills. While the United States is raising the stakes on testing, the Asian countries are exerting great efforts to reduce the power and pressure of testing. (Zhao, 2009, p. 63)

As we enter a new world rapidly changed by globalization and technology, we need to change course. Instead of instilling fear in the public about the rise of other countries, bureaucratizing education with bean-counting policies, demoralizing educators through dubious accountability measures, homogenizing school curriculum, and turning children into test takers, we should inform the public about the possibilities brought about by globalization, encourage educational innovations, inspire educators with genuine support, diversify and decentralize curriculum, and educate children as confident, unique, and well-rounded human beings. (Zhao, 2009, p. 198)

I recommend Yong Zhao's postings at <http://zhaolearning.com>. His post on 26 February 2011 on the topic 'Entrepreneurship and creativity: Where do they come from and how not to destroy them' is recommended. It includes the following:

I found it amazing that a president [Obama] who spends time [coaching] his daughter's basketball team and who sends his children to a private school that believes 'all our students have within them the light of creativity and can

learn much of value from their own and others' and thus provides rich art, music, and sports programs and teaches foreign languages starting from Pre-K, wants only more math and science for other people's children. It is equally amazing for the Secretary of Education [Duncan], whose love for basketball helped him get to Harvard, [find] his wife, and become close friends with a man who made him the secretary of education, to think other people's children should only focus on getting good test scores on the so called core academic subjects. Somehow, arts, music, sports, foreign languages, or any subjects other than English, mathematics, and science have been considered soft or 'useless' in American education reforms judging from the Federal education funding priorities or public statements made by the political leaders. These are also the programs that are typically first to be cut or reduced when schools face financial difficulties or need to improve student test scores to meet AYP [Annual Yearly Progress].

England

The Cambridge Primary Review of policy and practice in England was published in 2009 under the title *Children, Their World, Their Education* (Alexander, 2009). Project Director Robin Alexander delivered the Miegunyah Distinguished Lecture in the Dean's Lecture Series at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in March 2010 on the topic 'The Perils of Policy: Success, Amnesia and Collateral Damage in Systematic Educational Reform' (Alexander, 2010). Many of the fears in Australia about the dysfunctional effects of national testing, an excessive focus on and unrealistic expectations for standards, the narrowing of curriculum, and high levels of stress for students and teachers have been borne out in experience in England.

Alexander was careful not to make comparisons or offer recommendations about the implications for Australia, but the message was not lost on his audience. I sensed that many were shell-shocked, especially when he drew comparisons of England with Finland, which has no national tests, has decentralised decision-making, and provides high levels of school and teacher autonomy. Finland has a high-performing school system where students do not start school until they are seven. Finland is in the top ranks of nations as far as innovation is concerned. All but about two percent of students attend public (state) schools.

Also sobering was the way Alexander contrasted the 'spin' of government, overstating outcomes, with the 'substance' of the reforms, which mostly reflect flat-lining in achievement.

This is not, or not only, about reducing prescription overall. In the first instance, it requires a much more confident – perhaps even aggressive – assertion of the educational importance of the arts and humanities in human development, culture and education, and a refusal to capitulate to narrowly-conceived criteria of 'relevance'. Ministerial support for the arts in education tends to sound token and insincere, whether or not it is. Authoritative official enquiries on the arts, creativity and culture are warmly applauded, and then disappear without trace. (Alexander, 2009, p. 252)

A new primary curriculum was recommended in the Cambridge Review, with the first as follows:

[The proposed curriculum] Addresses and seeks to resolve the problems of present and past arrangements, especially: overload, micro-management from the centre, the distorting impact of testing and the national strategies,

the dislocation of English/literacy, the qualitative imbalance between 'the basics' and the rest, the marginalisation of the arts and humanities, tokenism in respect of aims, and the muddled discourse of subjects, knowledge and skills. (Alexander, 2009, p. 275)

The proposed curriculum domains are: arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; mathematics; physical and emotional health; place and time; science and technology (Alexander, 2009, p. 494).

Finland

Much has been written about the performance of Finland on international tests of student achievement such as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Its reputation is well-deserved; although it should be pointed out that it did not do so well in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) when it participated, prior to its switch to PISA. Many reasons are offered in explanation of Finland's performance in PISA, including the quality of its teachers, the relatively high degree of school autonomy, an outstanding approach to providing support to its students, and the capacity of schools to adapt the broad national curriculum to the mix of student needs at the local level. A recent report that compared performance in the United States with other countries, drawing on the results of PISA 2009, drew attention to other features of schooling in Finland:

The emphasis on learner-centred, collaborative instruction and a future oriented, relevant curriculum that focuses on creativity and problem solving has made PISA *the* international test for reformers promoting constructivist learning and 21st-century skills. Finland implemented reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s that embraced the tenets of these movements. Several education researchers from Finland have attributed their nation's strong showing to the compatibility of recent reforms with the content of PISA. (Loveless, 2011, p. 11)

In addition to the foregoing, it is important to note that Finland does not have a national testing program like NAPLAN, so that schools are freed up from the pressures associated with such an approach. However, it is equally important to note that teachers have high levels of skill in testing students and personalising learning, especially in respect to the way specially trained staff provide immediate support for students who fall behind. All of these factors are likely to contribute to the ranking of Finland on various indices of creativity, performing well above Australia (see Florida, 2005).

New Zealand

New Zealand is also a top performer in PISA. It has a better balanced approach to assessment than Australia, if our preoccupation with NAPLAN and My School is taken as an indicator. A recent discussion paper of the Ministry of Education makes this clear. In my view it is one of the finest statements on the nature and purpose of assessment to have been produced in recent times. Here are two excerpts that highlight the importance of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Assessment information consists of *quantitative* and *qualitative* data. The nature and content of the information will differ depending on the immediate purpose for its collection and the level of the sector at which it is collected. A range of rich assessment data will be captured and shared at the school-level. Subsets of information will be made available with appropriate qualitative and

quantitative context to other agencies in the education system to enable them to fulfil their roles. (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 50)

The Ministry maintains that the publishing of raw, highly aggregated assessment data without qualitative context information will both undermine this collegial environment and subvert the reliability of the assessment data collected. The Ministry of Education considers that it is not appropriate to compare schools on a simplistic and misleading basis. This is a consistent position held by successive Governments in New Zealand and dating back at least to the 1998 Green Paper entitled *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools*. (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 50)

The paper goes further to give weight to the 'professional qualitative judgements' of teachers. It should be noted that New Zealand has no national tests and gives special priority to the learning of Māori students.

In the primary sector, *The New Zealand Curriculum National Standards* for literacy and numeracy and *Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori* for te reo and pāngarau are being implemented, from 2010 and 2011 respectively, for Years 1-8. This implementation is underpinned by *assessment for learning* principles and relies on professional qualitative judgments made by teachers on the basis of what they have learned about a student's achievement and progress across a range of assessment information (both formal and informal) . . . There is no national test. This is a novel approach when compared with approaches elsewhere in the world. (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 14)

Finally, in this extended reference to the way things are done in New Zealand, the discussion paper highlights the importance of 'overall teacher judgements' that are based on both 'tacit information' and 'explicit information' that is drawn from multiple sources.

Teachers are expected to make professional judgments about student progress and achievement in relation to what is expected by the appropriate standard of reference. These qualitative judgments are termed *overall teacher judgments* because they are 'on balance' judgments made across a range of information and across the range of skills, knowledge and understanding expected at any given reference point. They make use of tacit information held by the teacher as well as a range of explicit information collected by the teacher from multiple sources. (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 16)

A competitive disadvantage for government schools

A major concern is that the dysfunctions I have described tend to place government schools at a disadvantage for three inter-related reasons. First, while some are outstanding, few offer the range of programs in the arts, and have the facilities to deliver them, as do many if not most of their counterparts in the non-government sector. This is, of course, a resource issue, but it is also a commentary on what is perceived to be the core of learning, and what may be desirable but is treated as peripheral 'when the chips are down'.

Second, government schools seem to operate in a command-and-control culture when it comes to NAPLAN and how their performance is reported on My School. In some instances, Key Performance Indicators for system leaders include lifting the performance of government schools. System-organised meetings of school principals,

often extending over several days, have a focus on NAPLAN and improving school capacity to understand and act on data on student achievement. These are, of course, worthy purposes; the concern here is the narrow and unrelenting focus.

Third, related to the first and second, is the relative lack of autonomy of government schools to resist the pressure, as their counterparts in the non-government sector are able to do. Non-government schools experience the same pressures, but they are better placed to mitigate the dysfunctional effects and respond more directly to the concerns of parents, who enrol their children for the breadth of the curriculum and other qualitative considerations. It is unlikely that NAPLAN and My School will staunch the flow of students from the public to the private sector (see Caldwell, 2010b for a more detailed account of parent preference for private schools in Australia).

A *gestalt* for creating schools for the knowledge society

At this point I would like to stress that I am not a 'Johnny come lately' on these issues. My second book with Jim Spinks *Leading the Self-Managing School* was published in 1992 (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992). We had the following to say about the impact of high stakes testing in the light of developments in England, where the Conservative Government had introduced national testing in primary and secondary schools and league tables were starting to appear.

There are limitations in these approaches to testing, not the least of which is their narrow focus and the resultant distortion which may occur in learning and teaching, especially for testing at the primary level. Highly valued goals may be devalued (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, p. 142).

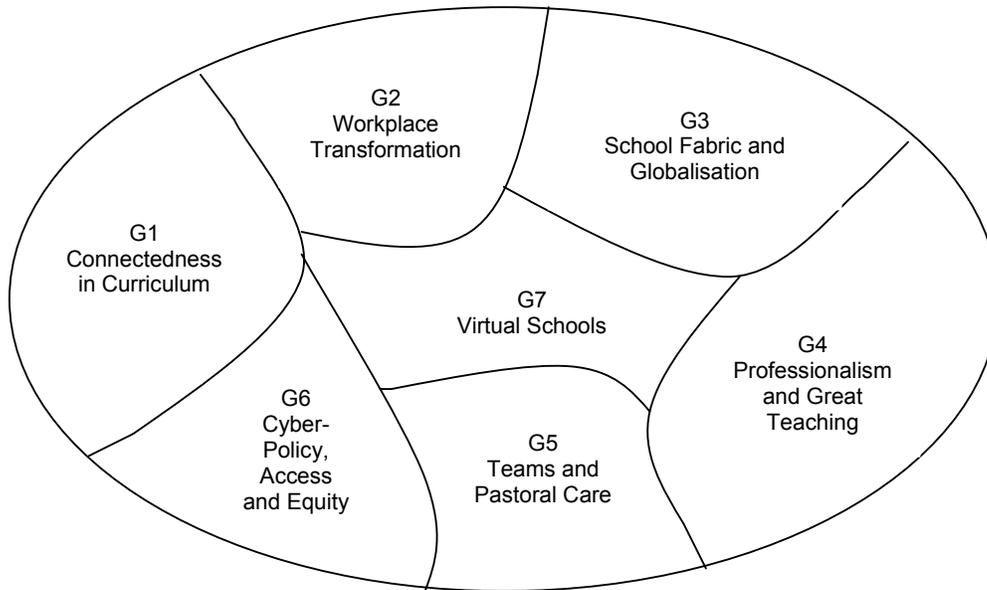
There will be great pressure to release the raw data of school-by-school comparisons in a manner that will distort the accountability process . . . In our view the strongest possible stand should be taken against the release of such data when accompanied by claims or implications of relative effectiveness (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, p. 155)

Our third book *Beyond the Self-Managing School* was published in 1998 (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998). Our review of developments around the world suggested that there were three different movements under way. The image of a 'track' rather than 'stage' seemed appropriate, because the three movements were occurring at the same time in most places: schools, school systems and nations varied in the distance they had moved down each track:

- Track 1: Building systems of self-managing schools
- Track 2: Unrelenting focus on learning outcomes
- Track 3: Creating schools for the knowledge society

As far as Track 3 was concerned, we concluded that it was difficult to specify the many innovations that were involved in 'creating schools for the knowledge society'. It seemed better to describe what was involved as a *gestalt*: 'a perceived organised whole that is more than the sum of its parts'. The *gestalt* is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Schooling for the knowledge society illustrated in a *gestalt* (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998, p. 13)



G1 Connectedness in the Curriculum: Dramatic change in approaches to learning and teaching is in store as electronic networking allows ‘cutting across and so challenging the very idea of subject boundaries’ and ‘changing the emphasis from impersonal curriculum to exciting ‘live exploration’ (citing Seymour Papert in *The Children’s Machine*)

G2 Workplace Transformation: Schools as workplaces are transformed in every dimension including the scheduling of time for learning and approaches to human resource management.

G3 School Fabric and Globalisation: Everything from building design to the size, shape, alignment, and furnishing of space for the ‘knowledge worker’ in the school is transformed. In one sense, of course, the school has no walls, for there are global learning networks. Much of the learning that previously called for the student to be located at school occurs in many places, at home, at school, and at the upper level years of secondary schooling and for lifelong learning, at the workplace.

G4 Professionalism and Great Teaching: A wide range of professionals and para-professionals support learning in an educational parallel to the diversity of support that may be found in modern health care. The role of the teacher is elevated, for it demands wisdom, judgment and a facility to manage learning in modes more complex and varied than ever.

G5 Teams and Pastoral Care: A capacity to work in teams is more evident in approaches to learning, given the primacy of the work team in every formulation of the knowledge society.

G6 Cyber-policy, Access and Equity: The issues of access and equity will drive public debate until such time as prices fall to make electronic networks as common as the

telephone or radio, and that may soon be a reality, given trends in networked computers.

G7: Virtual Schools: The concept of the virtual organisation or the learning network organisation is a reality in the knowledge society. Schools take on many of the characteristics of such organisations, given that learning occurs in so many modes and from so many sources, all networked electronically.

While we might re-cast the *gestalt* in 2011, its essential features remain the same. As far as the three tracks are concerned, we remain pre-occupied with Track 2, with a disconcertingly narrow focus. Some systems, but not Western Australia, seem 'stuck' on Track 1 (self-management and school autonomy) and it is proving difficult to get moving on Track 3, although some schools are making excellent progress. If the *gestalt* in Figure 1 is a representation of what constitutes a good school in the 21st century, then a preoccupation with NAPLAN and transparency through My School, as currently constructed, captures only a small part of it. As far as assessment and use of data are concerned, preoccupation with the quantitative gives parents and the wider community a very limited view indeed.

Why discount time-honoured approaches to assessment?

The discussion paper on assessment of the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, cited earlier, describes the kind of re-focusing that is necessary in Australia. Part of this re-focusing is to reinforce if not re-capture time-honoured approaches to assessment, for example, in the arts. We know how to assess achievement in art, dance, drama, literature, music and singing. We have local, state, national and international competitions. They enrich our society and grow in strength as far as the economy is concerned. Prestigious awards are made. Teachers are trained in their assessment, which are both quantitative and qualitative. Professional judgement is required. In many instances, there is a requirement for communication, creativity, innovation, problem-solving and teamwork – the so-called 21st century skills.

While most of this paper is concerned with the arts, it is worth highlighting how damage can be done in English. Writing in *Imagination Innovation Creativity: Re-visioning English in Education*, Manuel, Brock, Sawyer and Carter set out to:

. . . stress the importance of reconnecting and re-engaging with what teachers – and thereby, potentially, students – love about English: its unique capacity to engage the mind, the spirit and the heart; to stimulate imagination, curiosity and creative capacities through meaningful immersion in the stories of humanity, and to enrich and develop students' cognitive and affective command and understanding of language in all its expansive dimensions, contexts and purposes (Manuel, Brock, Sawyer & Carter, 2009, p. 7).

They conclude, as do I, that 'At a moment in Australian history when the National Curriculum is being developed, the warnings are here about the kind of testing that would defeat any well-intentioned move for richness and depth in that curriculum' (p. 9).

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