

NAPLAN testing

A teacher view.

I teach at a small Area School in rural SA. I teach science and mathematics to students from years 8 to 12. I have administered the tests and attended training and development on how the tests are marked, how performance is judged and how the tests are reported to parents and schools. I also have 3 children at school, in years 5, 7 and 9 who all sat the tests this year, in two different schools.

My first and overriding concern is over the equity of the tests and the reliability of the testing methodology. It is apparent from looking at the contents and results of the tests that they:

- Represent a short, typically 45 minute, snapshot of a student's performance at a specific time of the year in a very limited and constrained circumstance, rather than an in depth look at the achievements of the student as a whole.
- Fail to take into account the learning the student might not have completed up to that point. For example, the year 9 numeracy testing includes teaching material that is delivered over the whole year, yet is assessed in term 2. Many teachers would not, quite reasonably, have covered aspects of the test which they have programmed for later in the year.
- Fail to assess the areas they purport to assess in literacy conventions. The language conventions test (year 9 2010) had an extraordinary emphasis on use of commas, apostrophes, italics, square and round brackets and debatable, archaic conventions that do little to inform us of the state of a student's literacy. The spelling questions in that test overlook the driving force behind students' learning of spelling, which comes from electronic technology and the readily available ability to check a word. I am not arguing that spelling is redundant in the IT age, but that students take advantage of a variety of strategies to spell words correctly and that doesn't necessarily involve rote learning of the spelling of uncommon words. It involves knowing there is doubt about the spelling and taking steps to ensure the correct spelling is used.
- Fail to assess a student's ability in literacy comprehension. The year 9 2010 "comprehension" test included diverse, implausible, inaccessible and convoluted examples of writing. Analysing a piece of writing about blindness where the subject is not explicitly identified as being blind tells us more about the student's ability to make inferences than logical and useful comprehension. It is nothing more than a literary artifice. That set of questions was more of a guessing game for most students as they struggled to come to grips with a short story convention that was taken totally out of context. The questions on the piece titled "And then there were 8" is summarised by the farcical question about the tone of the title. Was it playful or ironic? The supposed internet forum discussion that followed

included false analogies, sub implications and flowery language more reminiscent of the Greek philosophers than modern day internet dialogue. The final question on science writing was so indulgent, contradictory and obtuse that most readers would rightfully dismiss the article after the first paragraph as being a waste of time. Yet we asked year 9 students tortuous questions on the intent of the writer. Most students would simply write td:dr (too long, didn't read). The comprehension test totally overlooked the possibility that students are highly literate and communicate effectively, accurately and lucidly using a variety of means and conventions that don't involve making inferences about prose, relying on years of reading novels or deciphering text that is completely outside their area of experience.

- Exhibit extraordinary bias to a western culture and are quite inaccessible to students from a non-english speaking background or even students whose experience of the world is rural rather than metropolitan. The use of language, naming conventions, setting of the narrative pieces and reliance on knowledge of western culture, severely disadvantaged students not familiar with these conventions. It is not an assessment of the teaching nor the learning when students are caught out of their area of experience. A metropolitan student whose experience is of the western culture, whose reading material consists of adolescent books and media, including magazines and popular television shows would fare better than a highly intelligent student whose reading material might be technical or factual in nature. Add in the cultural bias and this is not fair.
- Apply pressure on students to perform. The pressure comes from the expectation of parents and teachers. Parents who want their children ranked highly and teachers who feel such tests are an indication of their teaching prowess. The result of such pressure, on students is ultimately detrimental to the teaching and learning process. Asking students to provide answers that have not been taught, in confusing and challenging circumstances, over an extended period of time, does not bring out the best in them. It demotivates them, makes them feel less than adequate, damages their self esteem and thus makes future learning difficult. It is hard to explain to a student why they should fail a literacy test because they don't know how to spell selected words even though they are capable of constructing sophisticated scientific conclusions. It is difficult to explain to students why they are being asked the correct usage of square brackets in sentences when they have never seen or been taught this. I am also aware of students who just didn't care and are over the whole idea of doing tests for three days who guessed at most of the answers, such is the reverse effect of pressure.
- Apply pressure on teachers to perform. I am aware of teachers who restructured their teaching to explicitly cover all areas of the tests, using previous years tests as examples. In doing so they overlooked the higher learning objectives for the trivial and mundane. I am aware of teachers who advised students to use pre-written answers for the writing test, understanding that a particular style of

writing and use of language would achieve higher marks, irrespective of whether they addressed the stimulus material that they were supposed to write about. I am aware of teachers who did last minute, emergency preparation to teach students basic writing conventions that might be expected to be taught over an extended period of time. I am aware of teachers who crammed mathematical concepts into their course, out of sequence and based on trivial examples taken from previous tests. I am aware of teachers who advised poorly achieving students to remain at home to protect the student from the ignominy of performing poorly in the test. I am aware of teachers who dropped hints to students during the test. I am aware of teachers who didn't invigilate the test correctly to ensure mobile phones were not used for cheating. I am aware of teachers, oblivious to the jeopardy they were placing themselves in, read through the students' answers to see how their students had performed.. The pressure from the tests does not contribute to the delivery of effective teaching. We expect teachers to behave professionally and be aware of the attributes of the whole child, yet ask them to administer tests that assess some trivial and low level aspects of a child. We then place the results of the tests in schools where class performance (and by extension, teacher performance) is public amongst the staff. We then take the school performance and place it in the public domain. It is not surprising, given the pressure that teachers are under to perform, that improper conduct has resulted. I suspect, anecdotally, that abuse of the testing process was widespread.

- Reveal that the tests are not about the teaching they purport to be about. The tests are not about the effective learning done by the students, nor the teaching standards to which they have been exposed. The tests in most cases come down to assessing the intelligence of the students. Like any academic test, there is a mean, a standard deviation and a range of student performance. The tests assess, in quite low level ways, the range of abilities of the student cohort. It has little to do with the teaching or learning that has been achieved.
- Reveal that the playing field between students, classes and schools is not level. It comes as no surprise that selective schools perform better in these tests. Small rural schools, schools with a high immigrant population, schools that have access to lesser resources and hard to staff schools perform at the lower end. How in all honesty can comparisons be made that suggest some schools are performing better in education? Allow a school to be selective and the playing field is not level. It is equally pointless even attempting to compare "like" schools. The comparison is always going to be between the first ranked and the lowest ranked school. It is perhaps an indictment of the society that selective Private School X with fees of \$10,000 a year and laptops for all students outperforms the school where 30% of the student families are on school card. It is a meaningless and divisive assessment that is detrimental to providing a fair education for all students. It certainly does nothing to lift the level of literacy or numeracy in the classroom.

Fundamentally, the testing methodology is flawed. The tests are not equitable, the tests are damaging and the results of the test should be treated with the greatest caution. Under

no circumstances should the tests be used to make an assessment of a child's learning or level of achievement beyond the superficial. Under no circumstances should the tests be used to compare students, classes or schools with each other. I hold the value of my students far greater than their capacity to spell a word, make a guess about an author's intent or be confident in the use of italics. National comparisons done on a 45 minute test cannot be valid nor beneficial.