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A little perspective on this new testing regime, NAPLAN

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I taught high school students and TAFE students for ten years (early 80s to early 90s). In both situations, I worked with students who weren't achieving.

In the school system, non-achievers had complex social problems and/or learning disorders. However, the adults I saw at TAFE changed this picture. The older ones were often paralyzed by a perception of failure.

This means I had people in their forties or fifties, completely illiterate, whom I found to have no social, learning or physical disability whatever. These adults were visibly terrified of classrooms. For example, one man smoked two packets of cigarettes outside the TAFE entry, pacing and sweating, before he could make himself come in and ask for help. He shook with fright while talking to me, but was absolutely determined to do something about his total illiteracy. I tried hard to reassure him and support him in the interview (and I'm good at that), but his fear was overwhelming. He kept asking desperately, "But what if I can't learn?"

I kept reassuring him that there were no actual penalties for failure, that you just kept on trying until you got there. I couldn't get through to him. He heard the words, he understood the logic, but he was too frightened to accept them. Eventually, when he asked again, "But what do you do when people can't learn?" I answered, "We shoot them and bury them out the back".

For one awful moment I thought he believed me, and the trenches dug for the new irrigating system probably didn't help. But then, the tension broke at last, and he laughed. He laughed and cried for quite some time.

Finally, I had got through to him that he wasn't going to be punished for failure. Over the next two weeks, I found out that during his school experience he had been told repeatedly that he was "stupid", "intellectually disabled" and "incapable of learning". He wasn't: far from it. In two weeks, his fear-barrier broken, he went from being unable to write his name to writing me a letter when he had to move on to his next job.

I don't think of this as a teaching miracle: far from it. This was a human being doing what he was capable of doing from the beginning. We just had to remove the fear barrier.

This man was not the only "non-achieving" adult student I had who was paralyzed by fear. It was a common problem in his age bracket (40s or 50s at that time). It dated from an education system which imposed frequent, high-stakes testing, and then labelled the students based on those tests. I remember thinking, each time I encountered one of these terrified people, "Thank God we don't do that anymore".

But it seems we have started doing it again. Already, I read of anxious students and pressure from family and teachers. Already people are being labelled as high-achieving (get them to school for the test!) or low-achieving (keep them away!). I can assure you, from my years of expertise specializing in "non-achieving" students, that you are already damaging

students and their futures.

1. If you do need to do NAPLAN testing, do it as little as possible and as late as possible. Don't impose it on children just because you can get more data. It's important that they can develop confidence without being labelled, and the earlier you label them, the more damaging it is.
2. Send the parents confidential reports by all means, but don't publicize the data in any other way. Schools are bodies of people, so invidious comparisons also damage schools. A less confident school is less capable.
3. Don't allow comparisons between schools. The data is not accurate for that purpose, and the pressure involved damages the progress of both students and schools. It's one thing to make information available to the public; it's quite another to present the information in such a way that the public will obviously misinterpret it.

Thankyou for your time and consideration.

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