

In the past few years the repetitive refrain has been that educational outcomes in Australia are stagnant; and the policy response has been to ramp up the focus on standardised testing.

It is not just the outcomes that are stagnant but the education debate itself.

The problem is that NAPLAN (Australia's National Test) has moved from being a mechanism to check the pulse of one part of the education system, to being the reason that schools exist.

Improved NAPLAN results have become the purpose of education.

Despite the fact that it only deals with literacy and numeracy, NAPLAN has become the surrogate arbiter of educational standards in all aspects of education.

As more NAPLAN-based targets are set each year, the focus on the annual standardised test becomes ever more intense, and the education debate is narrowed.

And as it narrows, we ignore some of the big trends that are causing considerable damage to our education systems, including:

- *Inequitable educational outcomes* – students in the bottom socioeconomic scale are falling further and further behind their more advantaged peers;
- *A socially segregated schooling system* – the proportion of students who attend a socially mixed school is lower in Australia than in most other comparable countries, including Canada, New Zealand and the UK;
- *Downgraded systems of public education* – through inequitable funding policies, public schools are seen increasingly as safety nets for families who can't afford private schools instead of as the centre-piece of schooling provision;
- *An impoverished view about the role of education in the 21st century* – the richness of education is reduced to a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy, and the kinds of creative capacities needed for the future are ignored.

The response to these wide-ranging and damaging effects of current education policy cannot be addressed by simply modifying or even removing NAPLAN after a 'review'.

The more we focus on NAPLAN in the name of lifting educational standards, the more we get away from what really constitutes a deep and enriching educational experience.

Clearly, we need to expand our education horizons.

For the past 40 years education policy makers have been in the grip of a standardising educational narrative of which NAPLAN is just the most prominent feature. It includes school choice, competition between schools in an education market, narrowing the curriculum, and mistrust of educator.

We educate for a purpose, not for a mark

By many measures – even the NAPLAN results! – these policies are taking us backward.

But the answer is not to inflict more of the same by tinkering with one aspect of the standardising policy agenda. Rather, the best way to address the damage that has been done as well as meet the challenges of the future is to alter the nature of our educational debate.

In short, we need a new narrative for Australian education.

Developing a new educational narrative involves achieving community agreement about the purposes, principles and values which should inform education policy and practice; and to ensure that our policy-makers use such an agreement as a reference point for education policy.

Importantly, it also means devising new processes for deeper, wider and ongoing professional and community debates about education.

If the future is uncertain then it is clear that educational policies and strategies must be flexible and open to change, not fixed, uniform and immovable.

The real policy challenge in Australian education is to end the groundhog day of the annual NAPLAN debates, and to embrace richer views about education.

Only then can we really exploit the potential of education to address the massive societal challenges that are bearing down on us.

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