

May We Live in Educating Times

As I come to reflect on the year that was, hand-wringing and argument seem to be the new pastime in the education testing space. You name it and there'll be comment or observation about its impact and what needs to change, often with a range of emotive metaphors brought in to amplify the effect; and that's within just the political arena.

There's no such thing as a standardised student

With the latest outcomes of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results coming out this week on the back of the results from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), there has been plenty of opportunity to make comment about Australia's place in the world, and especially the ranking of our students' capabilities in comparison with others from a completely different culture, system and teaching methodology. What it has done is to bring to the fore the usual hobby horses of teacher quality, funding, testing methods and supposed political ineptitude that have been saddled up, let loose, and will possibly be given a fresh feed of oats when the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results come out next week.

What we are discussing are averages that perhaps muffle the deeper implications of education outcomes within our proud nation. We often hear the phrase 'not good enough' and 'we need to be better than this'. It would be an abject failure of national ambition to be satisfied with being just average – where the worst of the best meets the best of the worst. Within these averages there are states, territories and individual sectors doing very well indeed and others that have significant challenges to improvement.

Diversity of outcomes

What is inescapable is the diversity of outcomes once the data is broken down and interpreted; something where cool heads need to prevail. Rob Randall, as the CEO of the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), is a champion of this approach. ACARA has taken a novel lead by identifying individual schools that have excelled in both attainment and student gain. It is perhaps these examples of best practice and education strengths that need to be explored and the findings shared with every school and jurisdiction in Australia. Within this group there will be, to quote Richard Pascale et al's term, Positive Deviants that despite the same challenges as other similar schools will have found a way to succeed using their innate resources and skills.

Double shift school days?

In some states and territories there is a rapidly growing number of school age student enrolments. As a result of this we are faced with the increasingly fraught scenario of an undersupply of public school spaces in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. It is even getting to the extent where a brand new public school can open with twenty-five percent more students arriving on the first day than the designed maximum capacity of the school. Some schools are considering double shift schooling days just to cope with the demand for spaces. To say that many of our public schools are working in a deficit situation is perhaps grossly understating the impact of this. The irony appears to be that the cost of education, and the necessary resourcing to support the fifteen year schooling process for most students, is all too often seen as a liability that has to be managed rather than a national investment opportunity to be embraced and exploited. In terms of demographics alone, having a nation with a burgeoning supply of young and potentially well educated people ready to enter the workforce and grow the economy, must bring encouragement to even the most hardened of economic pessimists. The flip side of this is that if inadequate provision is made then we run the risk that they will not be well educated with the implicit suggestion that the nation does not value the role of our next generation; it would result in a complete loss of opportunity and the failure of the system that must support our public schools, and the students and staff within them.

2018 funding negotiations commence

Talking of systems and systemic control brings me to the heart of the current debate. The Minister brought the Government's Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes (QSQO) policy paper to the attention of September's Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council meeting. This was the formal start of negotiations over the post 2018 education funding agreements and led to robust public statements from those present. With the next meeting scheduled for the 16th December we hope that ACSSO's call for Fair, Simple and Transparent and truly needs based funding agreements will be heeded by all parties. The current twenty-seven agreements with a range of additional special deals only preserve unfair advantage with entrenched discrimination, and need to end.

Selectivity skews testing outcomes

The TIMSS and PISA international test results are perhaps a sobering point of reflection for all sides. We need to acknowledge that the selective schools that enjoy teaching the most highly resourced, most able and cheap to teach students are producing fewer Australian students in the high performing cohort; whilst the increasing demands and challenges placed on our open to all non-selective public schools need to be recognised and supported. Our public schools educate the most diverse and challenging student

demographics without fear or favour. Entrenched unfairness must be eradicated with a truly needs based redistribution of funding to those communities with real need. This has to be a key point of policy change and a foundation on which any further reforms are based.

Say that again?

Sometimes you have to pinch yourself to make sure you've heard it right. In this case it was the Coalition Government's Education Minister openly declaring that some schools are overfunded and then recently the Labor Shadow Minister who stated that this is not an issue. Perhaps what does unite them both is a recognition of the true value of needs based funding – it then becomes a matter of how and how much – leading another bone of contention between them. Occasionally in a time of tumult a new tangential approach pops up from left of field. A case in point is the Grattan Institute's 'New Compact' model with a proposed adjustment of year on year indexing to rebalance funding in relation to the School Resource Standard (SRS) and new teaching mentoring and leadership roles both championed by Peter Goss, its School Education Program Director. With a strong and learned reference group to reinforce the model's potential, extensive media interest in these ideas, and drawing comment from all sides of the house this could potentially be the catalyst for a way forward and towards consensus in the coming deliberations. The Minister has recognised the risk of a simplistic interpretation of the TIMSS and PISA results, hinted at a necessarily collaborative approach with next week's Education Council discussions and expressed a desire to see change with new nationally consistent funding agreements.

Skills both hard and soft

The Foundation for Young Australians has been taking a specific interest in the strengths that young people need to make their way in the ever-changing world. They have published a series of reports exploring this theme, one of which looked at the twenty-first century skills employers need in their staff teams. Now is time for those twenty-first century soft skills of problem solving, creativity, communication and collaborative team working to be brought to the Education Council's table for our education ministers to lead the way. The hard technical skills of Mathematics and Science education need help and support to thrive. The soft skills might be just what is needed to draw out a possible solution- and then perhaps the persuaders amongst us can inspire us all. First on this list of considerations for reform, as the foundation for fairness in education, is restoring the integrity of education funding. Fair, Simple and Transparent agreements are the only way forward – nothing hidden, nothing unfair and nothing but the best outcomes for all

our children – the many and various governments of Australia owe our children nothing less.

Enjoy your summer

It has been an extraordinary year so far and next year looks to be much the same. I wish you all a refreshing break ready for the year ahead together with the opportunities and challenges we all face in the education space,

Phillip Spratt

December 2016