

NOTES FOR WRAP-UP ON DAY ONE

Ken Boston

Initial comment

'Teacher quality': let's not use the term again. Australia has never had better or more qualified teachers than now. We don't talk about 'doctor quality' or 'dentist quality' but about the 'quality of health care' - which varies markedly from place to place according to the numbers of generalist and specialist health care workers available.

Let's talk only about the 'quality of teaching' (a very different thing from 'teacher quality') or about the 'quality of education'. This also varies markedly from place to place. Our disadvantaged and underperforming schools are the intensive care and emergency wards of the education system, and should be resourced with generalist and specialist education workers as they are by health care workers in hospitals.

Main point

Some comments on Burford and Masters presentations. Clash between profession as a moral agency, and governments requiring hard evidence of educational improvement. Both legitimate.

Diagram: The professional/political tension

Diagram from a recent book by Mick Waters, entitled 'Thinking Allowed on Schooling', published this year by Independent Thinking Press. Read it – Mick is one of the most enlightened and challenging commentators on schooling today. This particular diagram shows the tension between professional and political power.

In the centre of the diagram, both the schools and the government say "we want good education", although what they both mean by that is not necessarily the same thing.

A UK example: perhaps the most far-reaching of the actions taken by the British Government in the belief that it would improve education in England was to introduce national tests in 1997 in English and maths and science at the end of key stage 1 (year 2, age 7), key stage 2 (age 11, end of primary school) and key stage 3 (age 14). Initially, they were known as Standard Assessment Tasks, to be carried out with small groups of students over a period of a few weeks. Originally, they were intended to provide information on progress, for parents.

They then became paper-and-pencil tests, to be done on the same day, so that whole classes could be tested at once. Successive governments saw them as a way of measuring improvement in the almost totally devolved education system, over which they had no other real process of accountability.

By 2008, the key stage 2 tests were being used by the Department and the local authorities for no fewer than sixteen different purposes. Two points:

First, the tests were being used for many purposes for which they had never been designed and for which they simply were not fit, such as diagnosing learning difficulties, determining eligibility for special education, judging school and teacher effectiveness, or to adjust national output indicators for national accounting.

Second, a benign task-oriented assessment process intended to inform parents about a child's progress against standard measures, which then became an annual national measure of the state of education, developed within a decade into an incredibly high stakes summative testing regime with a multiplicity of objectives, many of them flawed.

On the basis of test results, and going back to our diagram, the Government sought to reassure the electorate that education was improving. Great attention was paid by Government and the media to the annual change in the national performance figures. An increase of even one per cent in the reading performance of 11 year-olds was hailed by government as evidence of its literacy policies working, and condemned by the media as evidence of dumbing down. A fall of as little as one per cent was seen as cause for concern by government, and by the media as a real decline in performance.

The fact is there are 650,000 students in the final year of primary school in England. At the critical threshold pass level, level 4, there are typically up to 4 per cent of the cohort (26,000 students) at the mark just below the threshold, and a similar number on the mark just above the threshold. It would in fact be a miracle if exactly the same percentage of the cohort got level 4 in one year as in the previous year. The minor annual fluctuations tell us nothing, and yet they were – and still are - the subject of national headlines and heated interviews on radio and television, motions of no confidence in the House of Commons, and lengthy meetings of boards of governors in schools.

On the professional side of the diagram, the creation of league tables and the use of high stakes national tests for a multiplicity of purposes has forced schools to compromise their beliefs and practices, while pushing on the boundaries set by the political side so far as is possible within the rules of the game.

The curriculum actually covered by schools has become narrower and poorer than it was when the tests were introduced in 1997. In many schools, the time spent on areas of the curriculum that are not externally assessed had contracted sharply.

A survey we conducted at QCA in 2007 showed that 68 per cent of primary schools employed additional staff to prepare students for the key stage 2 tests, 78 per cent set additional homework, more than 80 per cent had revision classes and used practice tests they had purchased commercially. In 80 per cent of primary schools, the amount of time spent on test preparation had increased over the past 10 years, and in the second half of the spring term 70 per cent of schools spent more than three hours per week on test preparation. In some extreme cases, months have been spent in the final year of primary schooling on nothing else than test preparation, to the neglect of the other areas of the curriculum and hence to the great detriment of the quality of the children's education.

Now, I have focused on England only to hold it up as a mirror against Australia. We must avoid heading down a similar path. On paper, head teachers of schools in England have far greater governance and management autonomy than in Australia. Yet their power as educational leaders is sharply constrained by an external testing program mandated by a government that most values those aspects of the curriculum that can be tested externally.

Ministers can devolve everything but their accountability. Despite the high degree of school autonomy in England, the Secretary of State needs to be able to stand up in the House of Commons and give an authoritative answer to any question about the performance of any school in the Realm. The testing program is a device to ensure that accountability, no matter how inadequate. Similarly in Australia, no Minister can say that he cannot answer the question because it touches on a matter that has been devolved to the school.

Devolution has flowed and ebbed in all Australian states over many years. It has always ebbed away, that is failed, because of an inadequate accountability structure to support it. Now we have NAPLAN. While I support it in principle as a summative assessment tool with a precise purpose and a defined and limited scope, I believe not one hour should be spent explicitly in drilling children to take it. But with the current push towards further devolution there is a real danger that the purposes for which NAPLAN is used will be expanded, or that a new range of tests will be introduced by the State or Commonwealth Governments for the legitimate purpose of meeting their accountability requirements, no matter how unsatisfactorily.

The professional power side of our diagram has much to gain by showing the political side a better way in which to achieve the kind of external accountability which is not only required by government, but greatly in the interests of students and schools. If we fail to do so, we face the prospect greater external testing.

Hence the importance of Geoff Masters' National School Improvement Tool, which shows a way forward. Broadened in scope, and externally validated, it could provide governments with a publicly credible accountability framework that is also highly beneficial for schools.