



Big Picture

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The past few years has seen various educational commentators and politicians rising to the cause of educational standards, literacy and numeracy and more transparent evaluation and ranking for Australian schools. Whilst this is laudable it sits in the context of a limited critique and narrow perspective.

True, a national curriculum framework will give impetus to more evenly spread national standards. It may guarantee a level of portability of qualifications across the country. A focus on conventional literacy and numeracy is overdue and, yes, there has been some slippage in expectation and achievement as post compulsory education has been opened to an ever increasing proportion of school cohorts. It is reasonable that parents and students know how their schools, either chosen or assigned, rate on regional and national scales. Such measures will induce improvements as schools and teachers realise that resources depend on achievement of national expectations.

However, there are some powerful caveats that need to be injected into the national debate. Principal among these is that a national system pushing uniform standards drives conformity and compliance and not always to good effect. A clever society is a diverse society – one that encourages and embraces difference and a heterogeneous approach to developing individuals, groups and communities. It is a society that works with differences in social profile. It

embraces regional qualities and even eccentricities and is considerate of different economic conditions. It reflects differences in geography and climatic zone; it embraces the variability in heritage and culture and celebrates the realities of an Australia deeply immersed in and inspired by its multicultural base. This mix reflects in education as it does in all other aspects of Australian life. Celebrating difference, whilst embracing a sense of national unity is what this country is all about.

An education system that does not recognise and integrate diversity and difference is not in the national interest. A national curriculum framework must work from a base of unity within diversity. Encourage schools to develop different ways of interpreting and adding value to that curriculum, according to their particular circumstances. Allow schools and teachers to focus different teaching and learning styles on students from different backgrounds and with different needs and potentials. Encourage the great social and cultural mix that is Australia to be reflected in education so that we do not regress to some insipid amalgam that devalues our heritage. Value students from different schools for the special qualities that they and their school have developed. There will be common ground but it need not be a common denominator.

Confronted by national curriculum and assessment requirements, schools will comply and compete for rankings. With few exceptions the results are predictable and will vary mainly with the socio-economic hinterland and levels of (dis)advantage of the schools involved. Adherence to educational norms will regulate national schooling, illuminate relative performance of schools and direct equity inputs. But it can also reduce diversity unless some balancing force comes into play. National policy should ensure that adherence to centralised criteria is balanced by regional and local factors. Disadvantaged schools, that add value to students in a depleted environment, may well be highly significant, nationally,

even though they may not match up with a national average. Perhaps schools need to be benchmarked with their peers in other places, nationally and globally, rather than compete in a national chalk and cheese ranking system?

The argument for diversity also extends to literacy and numeracy. Many commentators who make pronouncements about falling standards usually lament a golden age – usually their own. Of course conventional standards have changed. Education is no longer an elite option but integral with broad social progress. A wider range of students with different levels of achievement and generic qualities aiming at different outcomes is now the result of post compulsory education. As a nation, we are the better for it. Society accepts that not all our students and undergraduates have read the seminal works of nineteenth century novelists. They may not be able to write using the conventions that we drilled into previous generations. Rather, they bring new generic qualities and skills. They embrace highly interactive technologies and are information literate in ways that leave us breathless; they have a far more sophisticated grasp of visual symbols and they are media savvy. They are more attuned to today's issues even if they cannot immediately relate them to the Treaty of Versailles or Euclid. They are more confident and more willing to articulate and share their ideas. More experimental and experiential, they have greater social and networking skills than previous generations could ever have dreamed of. And, what's more, they have access to knowledge and models of nature and human nature that simply did not exist a generation, or even a decade ago. In short, it's a different world, changing rapidly, and they are in it. Many of our commentators may not be.

Can we have a different debate about literacy and numeracy? It's not just about modernism versus post-modernism but about the new generation's potential for comprehending complexity, change and a deep uncertainty. In formulating

national policy can we recognise the generic talents of today's generation? Can we celebrate the differences that individuals, groups and communities actually possess rather than shackling them to the myths of a golden age gone by?

We must ensure that education is the key that unlocks the unique potential of each student so that they see the world in new ways, imagine futures that we cannot and then work together within the diversity of Australian society to achieve this.

A little more respect for our schools, their teachers and most of all, for their young and multitalented students wouldn't go astray.

Daryl Le Grew