



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
Mr Michael Petterson MLA (Chair), Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA (Deputy Chair)
Mr Chris Steel MLA, Mr Andrew Wall MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Submission Number: 7

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30 July 2018

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Reference: Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Dear Committee Chair,

I am writing on behalf of the Canberra Montessori Society, which operates the Canberra Montessori School, a fully-registered ACT School offering the Early Years Learning Framework from age three, and Australian Curriculum from age six to 12 years, all achieved under the Montessori method of education in full compliance with the Australian Montessori Quality Assurance Program. We welcome and fully embrace the Government's review of standardised testing in ACT schools.

We are proud of the Canberra Montessori School's exceptional Principal, leadership team and highly qualified teachers, who not only comply with Teacher Quality Institute pre-requisites for teaching the primary years in the ACT, but also hold or are working towards internationally recognised Montessori Diplomas.

We have seen first-hand the benefit of the Montessori method and the challenges that standardised testing presents, particularly NAPLAN which offers a point-in-time measure of knowledge that is not helpful for informing teaching practice, individualised learning or ability and particularly given the test format and the extensive delay between testing and results.

Therefore, we are very happy to support the attached submission from our Principal, Mr Anthony Vandermolen, and would encourage you to hear from him directly as a Witness. Mr Vandermolen has an impressive resume that combines educational psychology (*including the use of standardised testing in educational contexts*) and teaching, for more than a decade now, as a Principal. Mr Vandermolen has also worked across a range of educational structures and methods in various Australian states and territories, and now networks internationally on behalf of our school as the Montessori method is a truly global offering. Mr Vandermolen offers a great diversity of experience which could directly benefit the important work of the Committee.

Warm regards,

Tara Wood
Board Chair, Canberra Montessori Society

30 July 2018

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601.

Reference: Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Dear Committee Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer feedback and perspective in regards to the prevalence of standardised testing requirements in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Our submission (**Attachment A**) sets out three specific problems with the current arrangements: the 'one size fits all' approach to education; assessment misuse; and unhelpful labelling of students. The submission also sets out three opportunities to improve current arrangements based on Montessori educational approaches: personalised student learning; establishing a learning culture for students that fosters teacher development through collaborative discourse and challenge; and an alternate approach for assessment informed learning.

As contextual background, Canberra Montessori School is centred around the Montessori method of education that began in 1907 under Dr Maria Montessori; first a Medical Doctor, the first woman admitted to a medical school in Italy in 1890 (University of Rome) and then a Lecturer and Teacher following her further studies in education philosophy and anthropology. This now internationally prevalent pedagogical approach is based on the observation and guidance of children, conducted by qualified adults (Montessori trained teachers, often referred to as directors) in specifically prepared environments that are designed purposefully for the intricate developmental needs of its children. The method engages children through their innate desire for learning from newbornhood, in which we as humans first learn to survive by feeding and then moving through learning to roll, crawl and so on. The Montessori method of education aims to keep that desire alive. It is suitable for children from birth to late-adulthood and has proven successful in a range of applications across the globe.

The key components of the Montessori method include:

- Multi-aged classrooms allowing for optimal learning as the younger children watch and learn from the older children. The older children consolidate their learning when they present materials to eager learners. When we present a lesson or activity, watching how the person responds and expresses understanding is a measure of our knowledge of the subject. The person presenting is learning as much as the recipient of the lesson. Even though we at CMS only have environments for ages up to 12, a Montessori designed curriculum exists for 12 to 15 year olds and 15 to 18 year olds.
- The prepared adult is vital for the whole method to be successful. Specially trained, the adult acts as a guide to support the learning in the room. The role is passive where the adult does not rule the room, rather the community of children accept presentations of new materials to develop their own learning. The main task of the adult is that of a link for the child to their environment.
- The three-hour work cycle is protected by the trained adult who recognises the importance of uninterrupted time allowing unbroken periods of concentration to develop in the individual.

- ‘*Sensitive Periods*’ or windows of opportunity are observed by the adult in the child (*in the early years*). These are times that concepts are learned effortlessly and therefore a cognitively pleasurable time to learn. The adult ensures this learning is free to flourish by protecting this time in practical ways such as preventing interruptions or providing materials to enhance the experience.
- Rewards and punishments are not used in Montessori schools as the love of learning provides a deep satisfaction for the learner.
- Materials are sequenced as the child goes from simple to complex and concrete to abstract. Once the children reach abstraction, they are seen working out problems in their mind without paper or the use of materials.
- Importantly, free choices are given to children as they exercise decisions on what to do and what to learn based on their own interests.
- Individualised learning is often mentioned when the Method is described, but it is also important to emphasise children from the age of approximately six years, enjoy working collaboratively. At this stage, in Cycle 2 and above, the children receive group presentations and occasionally individual presentations.
- Repetition is used to deepen understanding. This is a natural tendency especially for younger children who like to interact with materials over and over until they have mastered the activity. These purposeful and contextually relevant repetitions replace rote learning in traditional settings.
- The younger children are sensory learners, but even into the upper cycles, hands-on learning is fun and effective for remembering and understanding concepts.

I would be happy to share the Canberra Montessori School’s experience introducing a standardised assessment program for reading, and why we chose to step away from the approach. As a former educational psychologist/counsellor I understand the benefit testing can provide. I can also assist the Committee to understand the impact of these tests under current arrangements, both at our school and in other educational contexts (*remote Indigenous, public, private, independent and government, including a recent sabbatical to the Northern Territory*).

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Vandermolen
Principal, Canberra Montessori School

Submission to the Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

This submission sets out the case for change describing three specific problems with the current arrangements: the *'one size fits all'* approach to education; assessment misuse; and unhelpful labelling of students. The submission also sets out three opportunities to improve current arrangements based on Montessori educational approaches: personalised student learning; establishing a learning culture for students that fosters teacher development through collaborative discourse and challenge; and an alternate approach for assessment informed learning.

The Case for Change

Arguably, it has become evident, traditional models of education are based on efficiency, political agendas and a rigidity of pedagogy, failing to respect the individuality of every learner. An evaluation of contemporary pedagogical processes is imperative in a climate of educational change and angst "...*there is too much focus on academic outcomes and a very narrow view of success, with a one size fits all approach that negates individuality*" ('How the education system is making kids sick and stressed', 2016). This well recognised and documented angst in regards to the effectiveness of 21st century education has been an agenda of social and political concern for some time, as articulated by Singleton and Howard (2013), "*Our modern schools kill imagination, kill initiative, kill the ability to make decisions and judgements, and most of all kill the desire to learn and the love of learning*". Masters (2016), who acknowledges the array of issues and advocates reform has suggested "*Despite reform efforts, regular government reviews and ongoing calls for change, progress in addressing our most significant challenges is often slow and solutions continue to elude us*".

In 'Reforming Educational Assessment' (AER57, 2013) Masters acknowledges the global trend for assessment being used as a decision-making tool to understand school performance at a national and international level. This has arguably led to negative outcomes, such as inherent depersonalisation and schools preparing students with practice tests and presenting *'clone'* test items to ensure their cohort, or school does well on *'high stakes'* assessments (Popham, 2001). In this era of *'high stakes'* testing, it is argued by Masters (2013), assessment practices need to be better understood and aligned with current understandings of learning. With a flood of assessment options both external and internally within a school context (NAPLAN, PAT, ToRCH, PISA, subject based, etc.) there is evidently a data rich environment, but information poor. Masters (2013) recognises the importance of assessment, and this plethora of data available, but affirms the need for *'Assessment Literacy'* and a clear starting point to be a priority, this assertion is not a new expectation in the education world.

"To accomplish the kind of transformation envisioned, we have not only to make assessment more informative, more insightfully tied to learning steps, but at the same time we need to change the social meaning of evaluation" (Shepard, 2000)

Practised teachers acknowledge the array of differing abilities within cohorts of students, and yet are expected to conform to teaching content material, in a cycle of *'teach, review, assess'*, often with only minor adjustments to accommodate student ability. Many students are able to successfully respond to this approach, but assessment often fails to measure understanding and the learning progress of the student. Failure on the part of the student, to meet *'standardised'* expectations can in turn, lead to negative associations with learning and as such "...*learning and memory are affected*" (Masters, 2013). Masters (2013), further suggests the most successful forms of assessment are those which provide learners with the capacity to self-monitor their progress over time.

This concept of reflection and self-monitoring is supported by Education Services Australia (2017), who have identified such procedural elements as rubrics, conferencing, learning targets and graphic organisers as being conducive to appreciating what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. This capacity for the student to monitor their own performance and self-recognise error, fosters their ability to work independently and is *“...a manageable way to be self-reflective about their [student] learning, while they are learning”* (Heritage, 2008). It is this premise of self monitoring one’s own learning journey and progress mapped against mastery, that lies at the heart of Montessori pedagogy and a *‘personalised’* approach to education.

Black and Wiliam (1998), identify the many tests used in schools are encouraging rote and superficial learning and are inconsistent with discerning true learning needs, thus limiting real individualised understanding of a student’s capacity or understanding. Masters (2013) maintains that with the advent of technology, far more diagnostic and assistive tools are being developed which may well assist in refining our understanding of individualised learning as constructed over time, and are representative of an idiosyncratic, personal, active, collaborative and rational process.

West (2011), suggests *“...past efforts at educational reform, ... focus on raising performance, but do not alter the manner in which instruction is offered”* (p.5). The same can be applied to assessment practices, as current methods of assessment, particularly standard paper and pen tasks, invariably fail or are inadequate to the charge of assessing contemporary skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, flexibility, initiative to analyse and apply skills to abstract problems, and to create new solutions. This potential of new technologies to enhance assessment through predictive tools, strategically designed to determine current ability and extend a student through interactive simulations and flexible instruments, offer a pathway for embedded, adaptive and immediate feedback and can *“...assist students to see the progress they are making over time”* (Masters, 2013, p.30). The premise of applying an evolving technology to the task of enhancing our capacity for progressive assessment and feedback could be aligned to the theory of Marzano (1992), who identified factors influencing students to learn included task clarity, relevance and potential for success. Such personalisation of applied technologies to timely and adaptive measures *“...provides opportunities to measure student performance in a more nuanced and multi-faceted manner than was previously the case”* (West, 2011, p.8).

Our current age based, lock step approach to learners and the delivery of curriculum and subsequent assessment, caters poorly to the elements of individual difference, motivation, personal circumstances and engagement, but rather, ensures most of our students and teachers are driven to meet *‘minimum expected standards’*. Their success as students and teachers are based largely on the capacity to meet these standards in a specified time frame. These pressures raise serious concerns around engendering a passion for lifelong learning in students and an acknowledged attrition of teachers *“...researchers estimating 30-50% of teachers leaving in the first five years”* (“Teachers are leaving the profession”, 2016), who lose their passion for teaching in the mire of administrivia and external pressures. William (2011) argues, *“Within a typical classroom there is clearly not enough time for a teacher to treat each student as an individual...”* and that we must focus on moving from a *‘generalised’* approach to education to preparing students individually for the complex and unpredictable world within which they reside.

Clearly, the need for reform is real, and it appears we the stakeholders, remain largely in a confused state delivering curriculum to students within constraints no longer relevant. Adhering to a 20th century model of education is dissonant with our 21st century understanding of students, assessment, learning, curriculum, technology, societal needs, and globalisation. The underlying tenet of Masters (2013) suggestions for reform are neither new nor profound, but clearly articulate the need to move from a 20th century perspective of *‘judging’* to a 21st century perspective of *‘understanding’* our learners, helping shift the paradigm from outdated practices and understandings of assessment theory to more informed and adaptive methods of assessment.



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In doing so, retaining the motivation of both our students and teachers, rescuing them from unnecessary constraints and improving our delivery of education at all levels.

Concerns with the Current Approach

Concern 1: 'One size fits all' approach to Education

Robinson and Aronica (2009) argue *“Education doesn’t need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed”* (p.445). I believe any such transformation of education needs to consider the efficacy of systems, government and policy, creating a top down approach to change, as this top down approach is not overly sensitive to the crucial role of teachers and students in the learning equation. Arguably, schools have become very good at evaluating the ‘average’ expectation of students, and even identify to students how to avoid mistakes to get a letter grade (A-E standard). This style of learning assessment does not necessarily equate to identifying individual excellence. Black & William (1998) suggest the giving of marks and letter grades are overemphasised, while the giving of useful advice on learning is underemphasised. Further, *“When the classroom culture focuses on rewards... then pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning”* (Black & William, 1998, p.142). A culture of didactic pedagogical style and pitching curriculum to meet externally agreed outcomes based on standardised assumptions determined to meet the needs of *‘most of the children, most of the time’* has resulted in a model that depersonalises and seeks to identify and address perceived deficits. *If the aim of education is to address the needs of the student, why do we continue to look at the performance of cohorts?*

If we acknowledge almost every element of our society has evolved, then surely our provision of education should also evolve to meet the direct needs of the student, where they can be guided, as owners of their personalised learning journey. Griffin et al., (2013) have articulated this precept well,

“...the aim is to move a student’s learning forward along a path of increasingly complex knowledge, skills and abilities.... and can be viewed in opposition to a deficit approach to assessment and intervention, which focuses on describing, then attempting to remediate, the things a student cannot do” (p.2)

A *‘one size fits all’* approach to education is fundamentally flawed and if we are truly committed to meeting the needs of every student, then a personalised approach to learning must be considered.

Concern 2: Assessment Misuse

Arguably, an array of differing concepts in relation to assessment and its purpose both within the teaching community and associated external stakeholders has had a significant impact on our learners, and how schools operate. Currently, it can be argued there is an emphasis on how schools and cohorts perform in assessments as opposed to the learning progression of individual students. As an example, tests such as NAPLAN focus on and assess a very small facet of identified curriculum areas, and yet are being touted by the misinformed as a measure of school effectiveness. In *‘Reforming Educational Assessment’* (AER57, 2013) Masters has acknowledged the global trend for assessment being used as a decision-making tool to understand school performance at a national and international level. This has arguably led to negative outcomes, such as inherent depersonalisation and schools preparing students with practice tests and presenting *‘clone’* test items to ensure their cohort, or school does well on *‘high stakes’* assessments (Popham, 2001). Since these tests are very specific to limited aspects of a curriculum body, they should not be used as a reference to overall achievement, nor should they be used as diagnostic tools to make assumptions about the effectiveness of schools or leave school staff open to unjust public scrutiny and blame. Bousfield & Ragusa (2014), have recognised an expanding NAPLAN industry marketing to anxious parents and inflicting pressure on students to practice and get better marks. This has

translated into anxiety being expressed upon schools and teachers to ensure they do what it takes to achieve better results on these tests.

I argue, anxiety placed on school's around doing well on various external assessments, such as NAPLAN, which currently have no real purpose as a measure of overall individual student achievement or teacher capacity, or even school leadership, is a mistake requiring rectification. Raising test scores on NAPLAN is not the purpose of education and schools should maintain control of their educational agenda in the face of pressures to do otherwise. Conversation needs to occur to ensure there is a clear understanding of such assessment, what is being measured and the purpose to which these measures can be applied. With this precept in mind, '*Assessment Literacy*' as recognised by Masters (2013) should be a prioritised starting point to ensure any assessments used to inform decision making are both necessary and sufficient.

Concern 3: Labelling Students

Education relies on accountability through assessment to determine a child's capacity for learning. '*Labels*' such as those provided through a A-E achievement scales, or standardised testing, whilst conveying information about some aspects of learning, do not capture the whole story. Masters (2013) articulates the importance of understanding how learners progress at different rates, but every individual, if motivated and provided with the appropriate opportunities, is capable of further learning. In an educational setting, labelling refers to categorisation based on ability in identified areas; when these labels interact with social values they can be perceived as benevolent/desirable, or toxic /undesirable (Owen Lo, 2014). As such, the effects of labelling, despite a logical purpose, can have affects beyond school years. This precept is reiterated in Masters (2013) call for educational reform, suggesting traditional practices lock students into streams and place ceilings on progression. Therefore important, is understanding the precept that unlocking different pathways and streams for learning can in fact result in potentially higher achievement. Thompson (2012) suggests labelling of students is frequently associated with stigmatising, isolating and stereotyping various learning, physical and behavioural differences and often appear unreliable and unrelated to instructional practices.

This precept is profound in an educational setting where students strive to attain a label, such as an 'A' grade, rather than extend their learning meaningfully. Or, where teachers' judgements of students impact their pedagogy, based on perceptions and characteristics of labels assigned. Masters (2013) reinforces that once it is recognised the fundamental purpose of assessment is to establish where a student is in their learning, many traditional assessment distinctions are both unnecessary and unhelpful. Recognising the importance of the individual and the provision of equitable education to all students should underpin all educational programs and pedagogical practices. By valuing the individual and conveying a consistent message of acceptance and challenging each student we are arguably more in tune with our social needs and can reward direction, as opposed to perfection. This is consistent with Masters (2013) identification of successful learners as those who have a strong belief in themselves and the relationship between success and effort.

Solutions for Contemporary Education

Solution 1: Personalise Learning

According to a survey of educators, collated by Patrick, Kennedy, and Powell (2013) personalisation can transform learning, and is premised on the understanding that integrating the unique interests, individual styles and specific needs of a learner, can make work and learning meaningful and authentic. Masters (2013) acknowledges this premise, suggesting learners develop along idiosyncratic learning paths and "*Research in cognitive psychology and education continues to reveal that learning is a personal, active, constructive rational process*" (p.17). I believe, as a

professional educator, our traditional model of schooling is designed to impart a specific body of knowledge (*curriculum*) to a specific cohort of students (*year level*) and generally fails to do more than ensure students are able to regurgitate information deemed necessary to know.

Future educators need to ensure their focus is on the learner as an individual and personalise the learning journey. Black & William (1998) identify that most assessment utilised by teachers encourages rote and superficial learning, and this itself is contradictory to the development of deep understanding. This deficit in traditional practices is recognised by Masters (2013) who argues strongly for reform, recognising how such elements as technology have enhanced where and when learning takes place, and can enable more personalised forms of learning and assessment.

Ideally, personalised learning will enable student progress to be a dominant factor of student assessment, as learning can be conceptualised as a process of increasing sophistication with progressive continuity and coherence. For example, adaptive assessment through technology may be able to measure higher order cognitive skills through the application of knowledge in particular and differing scenarios, individually and/or collaboratively. If our focus transcends *'traditional think'* and moves away from standardised testing regimes, which value any learning that can be quantified and measured and devalues any learning that cannot (e.g. *curiosity, creativity, resilience, collaboration, perspective*) we may be able to address our students as individuals, as opposed to underestimating their potential to develop.

Solution 2: Be involved a learning culture that fosters teacher development through collaborative discourse and challenge

Masters (2013) has identified a learning culture to be one underpinned by a deep belief in the possibility of continuous improvement. Inherent in this precept are key elements for teacher success to this end, such as intrinsic motivation and the confidence to take risks through an improvement agenda. This is in itself a significant culture shift from an environment where teachers have been respected as the keepers of their own kingdoms and breaking down the barriers between classrooms, staffrooms, and even schools, is a major change management hurdle. Teachers of the future need to treat our profession as a collaborative journey and be prepared for constructive feedback and challenge. A recent study (Poulas, Culbertson, Piazza & D'Entremont, 2014, p. 28) identified teachers remain uncomfortable with being critical of one another at the level needed, and maintain a culture of *'nice'*. Add to this, the external demands of government policy implementation, administrivia and other demands detracting from core teaching, which lead to the assertion that we need to eliminate many of these external obligations and to promote collaborative discourse, enabling our teachers to work exclusively with students. William (2011) argues, *"Within a typical classroom there is clearly not enough time for a teacher to treat each student as an individual..."* this impost on time through various pressures has led to serious concerns around an acknowledged attrition of teachers *"...researchers estimating 30-50% of teachers leaving in the first five years"* ("Teachers are leaving the profession", 2016) and the capacity of teachers to fulfill their core responsibilities with some modicum of home and work balance. Lieberman & Miller (2016) have reiterated the importance of collaboration through learning communities, and their potential to re-energise a larger agenda specifically, school reform, improvements to teaching, and advancing learning for all students.

Further studies, (Griffin et al., 2013, p.10) identify the importance of teachers being able to work collaboratively to engage in interpreting data, linking this information to their own teaching, and testing these links using the discourse of evidence and accountability amongst peers. Clearly, teachers working in isolation of peers has evolved and teachers need to understand their own professional practice through collaboration and challenge. It is incumbent of education systems to enable critical and collaborative discussions, where teachers test their ideas about these links, and are an important vehicle for achieving improved outcomes for students, as teachers collaborative

reflections have been linked to improved student achievement (Phillips, 2003) and directly changed teacher perceptions (Timperley & Alton –Lee, 2008). When teachers can move beyond just sharing information by exposing themselves to challenge and critique, through engagement with high quality collaboration, they perceive as intrinsic and beneficial, there will be both an individual and collective benefit.

Solution 3: Assessment Informed Learning

Arguably, many current assessment practices encourage rote and superficial learning, as opposed to a desirable depth and breadth of learning. Assessment for learning can be described as the process of seeking and interpreting evidence to analyse and determine where a learner is in their learning, where they need to go, and the process by which to get there (Laveault & Allall, 2006, p.3).

As a school leader and former educational psychologist/counsellor, I believe the future of education should hold the promise of assessment broadening its focus from a narrow range of cognitive skills, to accommodate a greater range of achievement, attitudes and higher order abilities. The utilisation of contemporary research and technologies to demonstrate thinking and reasoning skills as opposed to examining the retention of knowledge, can serve to reinvigorate modern education and engage learners with their self-directed learning goals, as opposed to those goals deemed necessary through a top down approach to curriculum design. This starting point for teaching should be based on what learners bring to the classroom, not on the external beliefs about what students of a particular age should be learning (Masters, 2013, p.15). This precept is further supported by Shepard (2000), who suggests that not only do assessments need to be more informative, and insightfully tied to learning progression, but at the same time we need to change the social meaning of evaluation. Masters (2013) suggestions for reform discuss the importance of conversations between students, teachers and parents about their learning however, for this to be most effective, a common understanding of purpose is required. At present, it can be argued assessment promotes a performance culture as opposed to a learning culture. Pitching curriculum content to all students by their 'year-level', regardless of their achievement and then assessing their capacity to demonstrate the expectations of mastery or retention of this content, is not conducive to meaningful learning.

Introducing formative assessment techniques, such as self assessment, negotiated learning goals, and individualised feedback, offers the basis for improving the quality of learning outcomes for students. What we assess currently, needs to be different and form part of an ongoing learning profile to enable quality guidance, negotiation and the inculcation of responsibility for one's own learning. Empowering students with responsibility for their own learning journey is a key element in successful change.

Clearly, the rapid evolution of how our society functions presents challenges and how we, as educators keep up with this evolution represents new and exciting opportunities to learn from past mistakes and ensure they don't become outmoded practices. Our educational journey relies heavily on the relationships between the school, teacher, parents and the student; this is the essential foundation underpinning everything else. Our students are gifted with a wider perspective of themselves, what they appreciate, understand, and enjoy. If we harness this energy, I am sure we can achieve higher outcomes and engagement in the future. In the absence of a unifying theory of assessment, the field remains fractured, divided into camps, and limited in its ability to respond to the opportunities and challenges it now faces (Masters, 2013, p.2). This whole concept of transforming how we educate and assess learners is long overdue and as a school leader, I believe it is incumbent on me to be amongst the catalysts for this change.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Vandermolen
Principal, Canberra Montessori School

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