



**ASSESSMENT**

into

**PRACTICE**

Understanding assessment practice to improve students' literacy learning



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Published 2017  
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ISBN: 978-1-925132-33-5 (Printed edn)  
ISBN: 978-1-925132-34-2 (ePub edn)

Cataloguing in Publication data  
Creator: Fehring, Heather, author.

Title: Assessment into practice : understanding assessment practice to  
improve student learning / Heather Fehring.

ISBN: 9781925132335 (paperback)

Notes: Includes bibliographical references.

Subjects: Educational tests and measurements--Australia.  
Educational evaluation--Australia.  
Effective teaching--Australia.

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Cover and internal design by Nice Stuff  
Edited and project managed by Rema Gnanadickam, Zodiac Publishing Services  
Printed by [to come]

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level

macro

level

meso

level

micro

# Foreword

## Heather Fehring

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) ran, in 2016, a series of four forums in Queensland, NSW and Victoria. They were both innovative and a first in Australia. The theme of the forums was 'Assessment into practice: Understanding assessment practice to improve student learning'. This book is a collection of the presentations across all four forums.

Assessment, which supports learning, is one of the most challenging practices that teachers address daily in their demanding classrooms. Not only do teachers have to cater for the individual learning needs of students, but they also have to implement educational system requirements such as the Australian Curriculum F–10. Furthermore, teachers have to abide by Commonwealth government policy expectation such as participation in NAPLAN and PISA testing programmes. These are complex and demanding expectations.

Each forum, in this series of three, was constructed to address the many challenges facing teachers by integrating a plenary address with practical workshop presentations. The scope of the forums covered pertinent topics from Geoff Masters questioning 'Is there another way to think about schooling?' to Lenore Adie's 'Working in a system of standards-referenced assessment: Traversing the intersection', and to Kaye Lowe's 'Literacy learning: Assessing what, for whom, and why?' Linked to these plenary addresses was a myriad of workshop presenters who provided a rich array of creative practices demonstrating how such practices can be incorporated into curriculum planning in Australian classrooms.

This book is presented in three sections, which groups the presentations at the conferences. Each section reflects different levels of influence related to literacy assessment on teachers and schooling in Australia. From the macro-level of policy to the meso-level of education system requirements and how teachers incorporate such expectations into their teaching and curriculum planning, and to the micro-level of daily literacy assessment practices catering for the individual needs of students and parents in schools.

## About the authors

**Prof Geoff Masters** is Chief Executive Officer and a member of the Board of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). He is also head of ACER's Centre for Assessment Reform and Innovation. Professor Masters' contributions to education have been recognised through the award of the Australian College of Educators' Medal in 2009 and his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2014.

**Dr Lenore Adie** is a Senior Research Fellow with the Assessment, Evaluation and Student Learning Research Program in the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, at the Australian Catholic University. Her research focuses on assessment and moderation processes as these contribute to supporting teachers' pedagogical practices and student learning.

**Prof Peter Freebody** is an Honorary Professor at The University of Sydney. Previous positions include Deputy-Dean for Research, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education, Singapore. He has served on state and national governmental advisory groups and is a member of the Literacy Advisory Network, International Bureau of Education, UNESCO, Geneva Office.

**Dr Phil Lambert** is the former General Manager, Australian Curriculum (ACARA), Adjunct Professor, University of Sydney and Adjunct Professor, Nanjing Normal University. He has extensive experience in education as a principal, inspector, Executive Director, Assistant Director-General, Regional Director and General Manager Australian Curriculum.

**Caroline Hollis** has 20 years of experience in teaching across primary and secondary schools in Queensland. She has worked in consultation with Queensland schools to develop advice, assessment resources and professional development materials for implementing the Australian Curriculum.

**Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young** has a long history of working with teachers in improving assessment. Most recently she was Director of ACER's Reforming Educational Assessment project, among her other roles at ACER.

**Dr Hilary Hollingsworth** is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research. Her main areas of interest are teacher professional learning and the assessment of student learning.

**Dr Janelle Wills** is currently the director of Marzano Institute Australia. Janelle has more than 30 years teaching experience and has taught in Catholic, State and Independent schools throughout Queensland. Janelle is also a former PETAA Board member.

**Joanne Rossbridge** is an independent literacy consultant working in both primary and secondary schools, and in classrooms with teachers across NSW. Joanne is also a PETAA Board Director.

**Dr Jon Callow** is a senior lecturer and the coordinator of the Master of Teaching program at the University of Sydney. He is an experienced academic and literacy educator, having worked in schools, universities and in professional development for teachers in Australia and internationally.

**Professor Joy Cumming** is Director of the Assessment, Evaluation and Student Learning Research Program in the Learning Sciences Institute Australia at ACU. Joy has been involved in educational research for 40 years, including state and federally funded research projects.

**Dr Fabienne van der Kleij** is a Research Fellow in the Assessment, Evaluation and Student Learning Research Program. Her main focus is assessment and how it can contribute to student learning.

**Dr Kaye Lowe** is Associate Professor (Adjunct) at the University of Canberra and Director of 'Read4Success'. She has had a life-long passion for literacy learning and supporting struggling readers.

**Dr Prue Anderson** has worked at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) managing international and national system-level school assessments of literacy for sixteen years. She has developed assessments of literacy for students in the early years of school including extensive diagnostic assessments.

**Dr Rod Campbell** is a significant leader in literacy education in Australia, with extensive experience in publishing, workshop presentation, and in-school mentoring of classroom teachers and curriculum leaders.

**Dr Jane Mitchell** works in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst. Her teaching and research are focused on classroom pedagogy and professional learning.

**Dr Sara Murray** lectures in child and adolescent psychology in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University.

Jane and Sara have worked with a number of schools in the central west of New South Wales to develop and evaluate teaching practices that assist students to build a growth mindset.

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# Assessment into practice: Understanding assessment practice to improve students' literacy learning

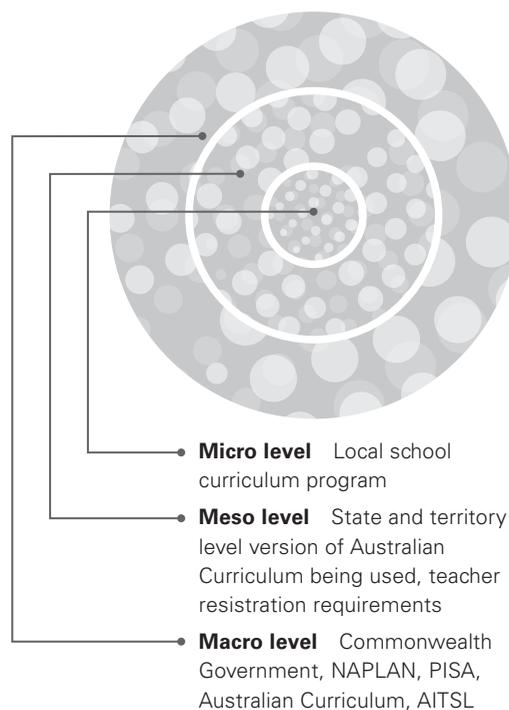
Heather Fehring and Peter Freebody

Improving the assessment of students' language and literacy learning is an ongoing challenge for all Australian teachers, regardless of the jurisdiction in which they work and the year levels or curriculum areas in which they teach. Accommodating a diverse range of learners, sharing assessment data and ideas for practice, drawing on reliable and informative evidence about their learners, and communicating these practices and their outcomes to students, colleagues, parents, and school leaders – all add up to a demanding, ongoing set of responsibilities. Assessing the effects of different classroom activities on students' learning calls for teachers' regular reflection on, and refinement of assessment practices.

To reflect on assessment in schools, we need to consider the various factors influencing the activities and perceptions of Australian teachers, students, parents, and the community more broadly. We can consider these factors across three levels. At the *micro level* we see the expectations on daily classroom activities. At the *meso level* educational systems requirements, such as the adaptation of the Australian Curriculum F–10 in each State and Territory are at work; and at the *macro level* involvement in Commonwealth and international policies – NAPLAN, PISA, MySchool, and an acknowledgement of such initiatives as the AITSL teacher registration requirements. All of these have a direct bearing on educational practice and how it is viewed beyond the classroom and the school. These levels – micro, meso, and macro – are used to organise the content of this book as shown in Figure 1.

This chapter outlines some key ideas and questions that we hope readers will keep in mind as they engage with the chapters that follow. We start with basic questions about the nature of literacy: Is literacy a single dimension or a collection of dimensions? If it is a collection of dimensions, what are they?

**Figure 1**  
Influences  
on literacy  
assessment  
practices: Micro,  
meso and macro  
levels



The US National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) set out to answer these questions. The Panel collected research on reading that showed positive effects on learning under five headings: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These headings effectively constitute a high-level theory of the components of reading, and thus they direct attention to how we should assess reading.

The Panel's conclusions have had major consequences in the US and elsewhere, spawning initiatives in policy, practice, and research. For instance, Dennis (2012) set out to examine the usefulness of the NRP's five-component model in understanding the patterns of abilities evident among struggling adolescent readers in the US. She found that the five components formed three statistically verifiable factors in a sample of 94 adolescents, factors she described as comprehension, word knowledge, and fluency. She explored the patterns of performance on these three factors among her struggling readers and discovered four clusters with statistically related profiles. She then asked if these clusters contained roughly equal numbers of students with recognised disabilities, from low socio-economic backgrounds, and from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Dennis (2012) concluded that there is more than one way to become a struggling adolescent reader. Some students were well above the mean on comprehension, but below the mean on word knowledge, and average on fluency. Some students had designated disabilities, many students were from low SES (socioeconomic status) backgrounds but all of whom had English as their first and home language. The 94 students in Dennis's analysis needed *different kinds* of learning support, not more of one kind of support. So one relevant point concerning assessment is that, if an overall, single measure of 'reading' was used, instead of Dennis's three factors, these 94 students would all score poorly, pretty much equally, and we would have no evidence-based guidance on how they might be supported – we would know only that they need support. Education Ministers who react to what they take to be disappointing results of testing programs by advocating 'more phonics', or 'more comprehension teaching' may be right for about one-quarter of the struggling students in our schools. Assessing literacy matters, but only if there is a supportable theory about the key elements of literacy – its 'moving parts'.

The *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy in Australia* (Australian Government, DEST, December, 2005) also drew similar conclusions as the US National Reading Panel report. 'Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension' (DEST, December, 2005, p. 11). What often follows on from large-scale investigations into the literacy achievement of students, however, is an investigation of teacher capabilities, which we have seen in Australia with the *Top of the class: Report on the inquiry into teacher education* (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) and the more recent *Action now: Classroom ready teachers*, Tertiary Education and Ministerial Group inquiry (TEMAG, December 2014). It is important to keep in mind that research on students' literacy achievement shows us that many factors are related to success, not solely the quality of the teacher workforce, however that may be defined and addressed.

In contrast to the *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy in Australia* (Australia Government, DEST, December, 2005), the NRP factors, and to Dennis's reworking of them, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), aimed at 15-year-olds, found a three-component model more useful for students from the 34 countries and numerous partner economies that participated in the 2009 major reading-related survey. These components were: accessing and retrieving information, integrating and interpreting information, and reflecting and evaluating information.

Therefore, a second key question is: 'What can we learn from assessment programs?' Nations and international bodies spend millions of dollars and work hours on large standardised assessment programs in literacy and other areas. Key examples of international assessments are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). These are worldwide studies by the OECD, which include measures of the literacy capabilities of secondary school students and adults respectively. The PISA and PIAAC reports present rankings of OECD countries and other 'partner' countries and 'economies' on literacy and numeracy skills, and a range of other assessments. National governments pay for these results and for the most part, the outcomes have high public visibility.

In Australia the outcomes of these programs are media events, and Australia's ranking on each occasion is generally accompanied by reactions that range from 'relief' to 'anxiety' (see excerpt from ABC News, 2012 in Figure 2).

### Aussie schools flatline in global education tests

Updated 12 Dec 2012, 2:33pm

Australian school children are well behind a host of other countries when it comes to reading, mathematics and science, according to a new report.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study has revealed that a quarter of Australia's year 4 students failed to meet the minimum standard in reading for their age.

Australia ranked 27th out of 48 countries in reading, with its mean score similar to that recorded by New Zealand, Poland and Lithuania.

Another analysis, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), revealed results have not improved for Australian students since 1995.

### Figure 2

Media coverage of 2012 testing results for Australia

While some educators have doubts about the relevance or validity of these programs, the media, the community, and policy bureaus are generally oriented to the performance of the nation. But the OECD itself, less so:

... differences between countries represent, however, only a fraction of overall variation in student performance. Addressing the educational needs of such diverse populations and narrowing the gaps in student performance that have been observed remains a formidable challenge for all countries.

OECD, 2010, p. 6

So if the nation has statistically proven itself not to be the best unit of analysis, what are the dimensions that are statistically associated with 15-year-old students' reading

performance over this massive multinational sample? The PISA 2009 results (OECD, 2010) indicate a predictable set of dimensions that are related to students' scores. For example, the dimensions of the per-student expenditure of a country on education, the percentage of adults in a country with post-secondary education, the percentage of students in a sample who are immigrants, and the percentage of students in the sample who live below that country's designated poverty line. All of these correlate with students' scores across all participating nations, but they are themselves inter-correlated (per-student expenditure of a country on education correlates with the percentage of adults in a country with post-secondary education, and so on). Do some relate to substantial variation in scores even after the others in this set have been accounted for? That is, do some dimensions contribute 'unique' variations? From this list only the percentage of adults in a country with post-secondary education and the percentage of students in the sample who live below that country's designated poverty line account for unique contributions to students' scores. The effects of funding and immigration effectively vanish when the other factors are in play.

So, statistically speaking, nation does not matter as much, but there are indeed dimensions that relate very substantially to students' performance on these tests across all the participating nations. Immediate questions that arise are: Why is the ranking of nations pretty much the only thing that appears in Australian media reports of PISA? Why are teachers criticised if the nation drops in rankings when, for instance, the poverty levels of students in their schools, or the education levels of the parents of those students, are not caused by, or fixable by, teachers? We can focus on the technical aspects of assessment, and the scientific status or otherwise of a particular assessment program, but we must acknowledge that many of the valid and useful findings of tax-payer-funded assessment programs such as PISA are distorted, ignored or embargoed in much public discourse.

A further question we can ask concerns the stability of students' language and literacy learning. How stable and durable are these patterns over time and over learners' life-courses? Again, we can explore OECD's programs to get a sense of this. In all of its reports, OECD compares the assessment performance of females and males; gender is a key policy priority of OECD and thus a central dimension for analysis at both the school (PISA) and post-school adult (PIAAC) levels. Here are five of OECD's durable findings on reading and writing:

- PISA 2012: 'While girls outperform boys in reading in every participating country and economy, the gap is much wider in some countries than in others' (OECD, 2012, p. 199ff).
- 'In the PISA 2009 reading assessment, girls outperform boys in every participating country by an average, among OECD countries, of 39 PISA score points – equivalent to more than half a proficiency level or one year of schooling' (OECD, 2010, p. 14).
- 'Females showed significantly higher average reading performance than males in every country in PISA 2003' (OECD, 2003, p. 35).
- In PIAAC 2013, for adults 16–65 years, in every participating country except Slovakia, men scored significantly higher than women on all of the literacy measures.

- Globally, 780 million adults cannot read or write at all, and about two-thirds of them are women (UNESCO, 2014).

The contrast is dramatic, and in most cases, statistically significant. Good research pushes us to better explanations, so we should ask: How does this dramatic contrast in the relationship between literacy and gender among school students and post-school adults help us theorise this relationship, and its changing features in light of changing forms and contents of assessment? What is 'literacy' here – a stable personal attribute? How do we expect the learnings from one level of schooling to remain durable to the next, or beyond, into workplaces and the various domains of public life of the citizens that emerge from our schools?

In the recommendations concerning assessment from OECD's most recent 'country report' on Australia the national literacy and numeracy assessment program is endorsed, but with significant cautions. Here is the entire list concerning assessment:

- Establish national strategies for strengthening the linkages to classroom practice within the overall evaluation and assessment framework.
- Promote greater national consistency while giving room for local diversity.
- Reinforce the assessment validity of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy and establish safeguards against an overemphasis on it.
- Strengthen teachers' capacity to assess student performance against the Australian Curriculum and use student assessment data.
- Maintain the centrality of teacher-based assessment while ensuring the diversity of assessment formats.
- Clearly establish the fundamental purpose of external school evaluation – either 'can bring about general improvement across all schools or, more narrowly, it can focus on "failing schools"' (p. 156) (OECD Country Report Australia, 2011, pp. 152ff)

The message is clear that OECD is concerned about the separation of assessment practices from the daily work of teachers and students, from the curriculum, and from the control of professionals in local settings who can most effectively count for diversity among their students. There is also a concern that there is an overemphasis on the national standardised data, evident in the recommendation that somehow National governments 'establish safeguards against' such an overemphasis.

The emphasis on the teacher in the local setting is itself based on evidence, in fact, the evidence base that formed the starting point for the US National Reading Panel (2000). Harvard professor Catherine Snow and her colleagues had previously concluded from their 1998 review of the experimental and field-trial research literature on reading instruction in this way:

If we have learned anything from this effort, it is that effective teachers are able to craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child they work with. But it does not mean that here is a common menu of materials, strategies, and environments from which effective teachers make choices.

Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, Executive Summary, pp. 2–3

The ‘special mix’ is locally determined, by the teachers’ understanding of the needs of their students, then and there; the standardised assessments of those students’ literacy capabilities may or may not help teachers in making the mix both relevant and rich. The common factors, detected across thousands of students, hundreds of classrooms, and perhaps dozens of nations, might be precisely not the ones that determine the qualities of learning and the diversities that teachers need to be made responsive to make their ‘special mix’, if they want to make a difference.

So as we read the diverse and thoughtful collection of chapters that follow, we can ask ‘Assessing literacy across the years and the curriculum for what purposes, and also for *whom*?’ Assessment of students’ achievement must fulfil many purposes. A standardised test-based approach may well not meet the needs of all the relevant stakeholders, and maybe never will. Are the PISA or NAPLAN results, widely publicised in the popular media for governments; for policy-makers; for parents; for teachers; for students; and for the communities in which they live, and will live in the future? Are various formative assessment techniques, generally taken to be essential in planning for the day-to-day literacy learning of students in schools and thus structured to identify individual needs, relevant to system-wide policy makers?

For many Australian students, and their communities, the current arrangements are not working to prepare them for changing worksites, changing roles as citizens, or richer, more interconnected domestic and community lives (Wyn, 2009). There are many talented Australian youngsters from a variety of backgrounds who are not well served by the way schools are funded and organised, including the way students’ capabilities are assessed – and we’ve known that for generations. If we believe that, then we might believe that one motivation for assessing rigorously is to discover ways in which genuine improvements in learning can be achieved for *those* students, that is, assessing the efficacy of innovations in pedagogy, in curriculum materials, and in the form of assessment itself. As Teese (2006) put it,

... we would choose as our engines of innovation not high-end schools, but disadvantaged schools. We would make them laboratories of teaching and learning reform. We would relate to them as sources of systemic renovation aimed at fundamental improvements in quality of learning on behalf of the system as a whole ... for that to happen, we ... would have to abandon all the practices that we employ to keep them isolated, which cut them off from the mainstream, which expose them to constant failure, to public slander, to low expectations. We could not keep taking their teachers and their most able students. We would have to fund them for durable improvement.

Teese, 2006, paragraphs 40–41

Innovating, and publicly legitimating and disseminating innovations, are crucially matters of assessment – in new as well as in more traditional forms. If assessment programs announce themselves as being purpose-built to innovate, then those programs would be in the service of bringing schooling ‘closer’ to lives of the students not currently well-served, to the work of their teachers, and to the interests of their communities.

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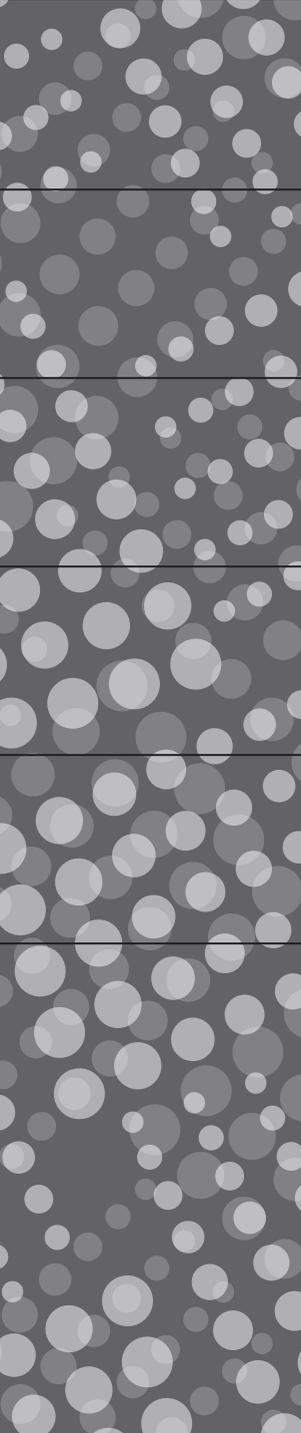


# Assessment into practice

level

Macro level influences on literacy assessment policies. This refers to the Australian government directives that all schools must abide by, for example, participation in NAPLAN or PISA testing and Year 11 and 12 assessment requirements related to the production of ATAR scores.

3  
2  
1  
0



Is there another way to think about schooling?

*Geoff N Masters*

**1**

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Working in a system of standards-referenced assessment:  
Traversing the intersections

*Lenore Adie*

**2**

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Literacy learning: Assessing what, for whom, and why?

*Kaye Lowe*

**3**

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Assessment into practice: Inside and outside Australia

*Phil Lambert*

**4**

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Diving deeper with assessment

*Hilary Hollingsworth*

**5**

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# Is there another way to think about schooling?

1

Geoff N Masters

There is a well-established way of thinking about schooling. It goes something like this.

What students are expected to learn at school is spelled out in the school curriculum. For each year of school the curriculum makes explicit what teachers are to teach and students are to learn. Each year-level curriculum identifies a body of content to be taught and the knowledge, skills, understandings (and possibly attitudes and values) that students are expected to develop. Because almost all students in Australia are grouped and progress through school with their age peers, year-level curricula are also essentially age-based curricula.

The role of teachers is to teach the relevant year-level curriculum. Teachers are responsible for bringing the curriculum to life – interpreting, contextualising and delivering the specified curriculum in ways that engage and encourage students in their learning and mastery of the intended outcomes.

The role of students is to learn what teachers teach. It is accepted that not all students will learn equally well and that some students are naturally better learners (more ‘academically inclined’) than others. Bright students and those who make the necessary effort will learn most of what teachers teach; less able students and those who do not make the effort will learn less.

The role of assessment is to determine how much of what has been taught students have successfully learnt. This question can be asked while a course is underway (How much of what I have taught so far have students learnt?) – information that can be used to identify learning gaps and to intervene or re-teach as appropriate. Such assessments are sometimes called ‘formative’ or assessments *for* teaching and learning. The question also can be asked at the end of a course (How much of the course content did students master?). Such assessments are sometimes called ‘summative’ or assessments *of* learning.

Students are then graded on how well they have learnt what teachers have taught. Those who demonstrate most of what has been taught receive high grades and those who demonstrate relatively little, receive low grades. At present in Australia there is a government requirement that teachers grade students (using A to E or equivalent) on how well they have mastered the curriculum for their age/year level.

Report cards are then provided to parents conveying how students have performed against year-level expectations. A wide variety of formats are used for this purpose. School reports also often include reports on matters such as student effort, behaviour, attendance and participation in co-curricular activities. Reports may be provided two or three times a year and are generally complemented by opportunities for face-to-face meetings.

This conception of schooling is almost certainly the prevailing view among parents and most of the community. It is consistent with the schooling experiences of most adult Australians. It is also no doubt the way that most students and many teachers think about school.

## So is there an issue?

This traditional way of thinking about schooling is sometimes referred to as an 'industrial' or 'assembly line' model. Students move with their age peers from one school year to the next. At each station on this 'assembly line' a teacher stands ready to deliver the relevant year-level curriculum. All students are judged and graded on how well they perform on the delivered curriculum before moving to the next station/year. The grading of performance is a familiar part of production processes, as for example, the products of industrial and agricultural processes are routinely graded for their quality.

All of this may be unproblematic if students in the same year of school were more or less equally ready for the same year-level curriculum. However, this is far from the case. In learning areas for which we have good measures (in particular, reading and mathematics) the most advanced ten per cent of students begin each school year five to six years ahead of the least advanced ten per cent of students. If schooling were a running race, all students would be judged against the same finish line (year-level expectations), but would begin the race widely spread out along the running track.

The result is predictable. Students at the back of the pack who begin the school year two or three years behind average for their age group, and two or three years behind year-level expectations, struggle. They begin the school year on track to achieve low grades and, given that the best predictor of performance in the later years of school is performance in the earlier years, many of these students receive low grades year after year.

When a student receives the same low grade (for example, a grade of 'D') year after year, they are given little sense of the learning progress they are actually making. They could be excused for concluding that they are making no progress at all. Worse, they may be sent a message that there is something stable about their ability to learn (they are a 'D' student). Little wonder that so many less advanced students become disenchanted with school and eventually disengage.

Currently, the OECD estimates that 40 000 Australian 15-year-olds have reading levels below the minimum standard required to participate adequately in the workforce and to contribute as productive citizens in the 21st century. In mathematics, 57 000 Australian 15-year-olds (one in five) are judged by the OECD to be below this standard. Most of these students probably have performed below

year-level expectations for much, if not all, of their schooling. In the past, many of these students would have found employment in relatively low-skilled occupations. In today's world, we cannot afford to write-off large numbers of students as low achievers and inherently poor learners.

At the front of the pack there is a different problem. These students begin the school year on track to receive high grades. Some of them do this without a great deal of effort. Some cruise. In fact, there is research evidence to suggest that least year-on-year progress is made by some of our most advanced students. Teachers also report feeling least well prepared to stretch and challenge these students. But in one sense, this is not a problem; these students achieve high grades on year-level expectations and parents, teachers and students themselves are generally satisfied with this result.

However, we also know from the OECD's PISA studies that there are now fewer Australian 15-year-olds performing at the highest international levels than there were at the turn of the millennium – an observation sometimes attributed to an increased focus in recent years on ensuring that all students meet minimum standards. We cannot afford a continuing decline in the performances of our most advanced students. They too need to be given challenges beyond their comfort zone – in what Vygotsky called the 'zone of proximal development' – and stretched and extended rather than being held only to year-level expectations.

So there is an issue: traditional ways of organising and delivering school education are sometimes failing students at both ends of the achievement spectrum.

## Is there an alternative?

The alternative is to think differently about the nature of learning; the characteristics of learners; the school curriculum; what it means to 'teach'; the role of assessment; and the nature of 'reporting' – in short, to think differently about schooling itself.

### Learning

An alternative to defining successful learning with reference to a body of taught curriculum content deemed appropriate for all students of a particular age or year level is to define learning 'success' in terms of the *progress* that individuals make, regardless of their starting points. Learning progress usually involves the development of deeper understandings, more extensive knowledge and/or more sophisticated skills.

This alternative view of learning requires a shift in focus from a common body of taught content to an understanding and description of the nature of long-term learning progress. In most school subjects, progress occurs over extended periods of time, usually over many years of schooling. Under this view, successful learning is conceptualised and measured as the progress a learner makes over time. And, rather than expecting all students to master the same curriculum content and be at the same point in their learning at the same time, excellent learning *progress* (or growth) is an expectation of every learner – even those who begin the school year at more advanced levels of attainment.

## Learners

An alternative to accepting that there are inherently better and worse learners is to recognise that, for a variety of reasons, students are at different points in their learning and may be progressing at different rates, but to see every student as capable of making further progress if they can be engaged, motivated to make the necessary effort and provided with appropriate learning opportunities. This is a much more positive and optimistic view of learners' capacities for learning than past views that individuals differed markedly in their ability to learn and that part of the role of schools was to identify these differences and to sort students accordingly.

This alternative view of learners is also more consistent with modern understandings of brain plasticity and human learning. We are now much less inclined to put limits on what individuals are capable of learning. The implication for schools is that almost all students can be considered capable of achieving high standards given sufficient time and personalised (well targeted) ongoing support.

## The curriculum

An alternative to viewing the curriculum as a specification of what teachers are to teach and all students are to learn in each year of school (that is, an identified body of content) is to view the curriculum as a *road map* – a picture of what long-term progress in an area of learning looks like. When the curriculum is viewed from this perspective, continuity and progression become important. Learning progressions, typically extending over a number of years of learning, describe typical sequences and paths of learning and make explicit what it means to develop deeper understandings and more advanced skills in an area of learning. The curriculum as roadmap thus has both a horizontal structure identifying different topics and sub-areas of learning and a vertical structure describing the nature of increasing proficiency. It is this vertical description of learning progress that can be missing when the curriculum is viewed merely as a body of content to be taught and learnt in a particular year of school.

An advantage of viewing the curriculum as a long-term road map is that it invites a greater focus on forms of learning that occur over time – for example, the development of deeper understandings of key concepts, principles and big ideas in a learning area and the development of increasingly complex skills. Many personal attributes also develop only over many years. When the curriculum is viewed as a defined body of content to be taught and learnt in each year of school, there is a risk of focusing on more superficial forms of learning.

And when the school curriculum is viewed as a road map it also becomes important that this road map reflects learning as experienced by learners. In other words, the curriculum is developed not simply as a top-down specification of what somebody believes students in a particular year of school should be learning, but as a description and picture of how long-term progress in an area of learning typically occurs in practice.

## Teaching

An alternative to viewing teaching primarily as the delivery of a common year-level curriculum is to view teaching as a process of establishing where students are in

their long-term progress and then targeting teaching and learning opportunities to meet students at their points of need. The differentiation of teaching and learning in this way is sometimes referred to as ‘clinical practice’. It involves diagnosing where individuals are in their learning and then designing interventions and targeting teaching to maximise the probability of successful further learning.

Professional teaching of this kind requires more than expert subject matter knowledge. It also requires expert *pedagogical content knowledge* – a deep understanding of how students learn subjects, including an understanding of common learning progressions and sequences; an understanding of how learning builds on to prior learning and lays the foundations for future learning; the role of prerequisites; and an understanding of common student errors and the misunderstandings that underpin them. As such, professional teaching is much more complex than the mere delivery of pre-specified content.

## Assessment

An alternative to viewing assessment as the process of determining how well students have learnt what has been taught is to view assessment as the process of establishing and understanding where students are in their long-term progress in an area of learning at the time of assessment. Rather than holding all students accountable for achieving the same age/year-level expectations, assessments are undertaken to *understand* the points students have reached in their learning. This can be done at a broad level of generality (for example, to establish a student’s overall level of proficiency in a subject) or in greater diagnostic detail (for example, to explore how a student is thinking and to identify specific misconceptions).

The distinction here is more than the traditional distinction between ‘formative’ and ‘summative’ assessment, or between assessments ‘of’ learning and assessments ‘for’ learning. Those assessments typically are made against year-level expectations – summative assessments to judge and grade students on how well they have learnt the curriculum deemed appropriate for their year level, formative assessments to monitor how well students are mastering that same body of content during instruction to inform teaching and learning.

Under the alternative described here, the fundamental purpose of assessment is to establish and understand where students are in their learning. This information can be used to identify starting points for action (for example, what students are ready to learn next), to monitor learning progress over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions and initiatives.

## Reporting

An alternative to reporting how students have performed against year-level expectations only is to provide meaningful information about the points individuals have reached in their learning together with guidance on what can be done to support further learning.

The traditional ‘school report’ is a one-way document summarising for parents how well students have met year-level expectations – often as percentages or A to E grades. Scores and letter grades are not always accompanied by descriptive explanations of where students are in their learning and, in some cases, may simply indicate how a

student has performed relative to others in the class. Scores and grades usually reflect the difficulties of the particular assessment activities on which they are based and generally are not directly comparable across teachers or schools.

An alternative is to provide information about where students are in their learning (for example, the kinds of knowledge and skills they are ready to learn next); what parents might do to assist further learning; and, possibly, information about the progress individuals have made over time. This information might be supplemented by details of how individuals have performed against year-level expectations and/or other students. In place of a 'school report' that judges and reports student performance two or three times each year, this information might be provided on a more ongoing basis – perhaps with the assistance of technology – and form the basis of two-way (or three-way) conversations about student progress.

## Conclusion

It is likely that most schools have adopted elements of these ways of thinking about learning, learners, the curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting. However, few schools are likely to have adopted all elements. In some schools, this may result in inconsistencies – for example, a commitment to a 'growth' mindset at the same time as grading all students against the same year-level expectations, thereby identifying some students as consistently 'better' or 'worse' learners than others; a school commitment to differentiated teaching at the same time as most teachers are simply 'delivering' the year-level curriculum to all students; or a commitment to using assessment to inform teaching and learning at the same time as the school's assessment policy prioritises a significant volume of 'summative' assessment for the purposes of grading.

The implementation of alternative ways of thinking about schooling is made difficult by deeply entrenched and widely-held conceptions of teaching, learning, assessing and reporting; parental expectations; government requirements; and relatively few examples of schools that have attempted radical change in how schooling is organised and student 'success' is defined, assessed and reported. A consequence of not challenging the current model is likely to be that large numbers of less advanced students will continue to fall behind in their learning as each year-level curriculum becomes increasingly far ahead of them. We cannot afford to have so many students being judged as inherently poor learners and becoming increasingly disengaged from school. A second consequence is that more advanced students are unlikely to achieve the levels that they could achieve if their learning needs were better identified and met.

As a profession, we face the challenge of finding ways to improve the performances of Australian students by making excellent annual learning progress an expectation of *every* student. Meeting this challenge will require experimentation with alternative ways of thinking about teaching, learning, assessing and reporting and improved mechanisms for the profession-wide sharing of what is learnt.

'Is there another way to think about schooling?' was first published in the *Occasional Essays* series of the Australian Council for Educational Research <[www.acer.edu.au/occasional-essays/is-there-another-way-to-think-about-schooling](http://www.acer.edu.au/occasional-essays/is-there-another-way-to-think-about-schooling)> © 2016 Australian Council for Educational Research.