

## Pity the poor parent: In defence of NAPLAN

Recent media has focussed on criticisms of the NAPLAN tests. These criticisms include:

- too much teaching to the tests
- too much pressure on the students
- the tests only provide information on a narrow range of learning
- the curriculum is being distorted by the focus on literacy and numeracy
- the results over time show little if any improvement for a huge cost
- teachers are rejecting the results as indicators of future teaching
- different conditions (handwritten and computer input) distort results

to name but a few.

Well, if these are the criticisms why do we still have these tests. The answer is that they provide the only Australian wide indicators of student performance over time and the politicians and educational bureaucrats want to know: Are the students doing better today than yesterday? Without NAPLAN, answers are anecdotal and that's not good enough for these stakeholders.

The problem is that any significant change in student performance over time for such a huge cohort can only be marginal. Before NAPLAN, the NSW Basic Skills tests demonstrated just how hard it was to get significant improvement in average scores with a large cohort. Some schools improved, but others went backwards. Depending on the abilities of different year cohorts, results in the same school varied from year to year, but good teaching always had an impact. Smart schools used the information to diagnose areas of teaching weakness and worked on these matters with students to raise performance.

Contributing to this lack of improvement is the construct of the tests themselves. They are not standardised tests as this term is used with IQ tests and the United States grade point average and associated tests. NAPLAN are standard-referenced tests in which questions are trialled and put onto an achievement scale, according to how hard students found them. So, the standards are founded in the students work and these standards are applied to the construction of the tests and the resulting performance. Students should be able to display improvement but there is a normative factor in the way the tests are constructed pulling results towards the long-term average (norm). Getting year by year improvement is difficult and a frustration for politicians and bureaucrats. But to do it differently would lead to all kinds of manipulation and results that would not be comparable. So, these stakeholders are stuck with the current system.

Politicians and educational bureaucrats are not the only stakeholders. Parents ought to be interested in school results and in particular the value-added data. This data shows how a cohort of students has progressed from Year 3 to Year 5 and from Year 7 to Year 9. It compares the school's position in Years 3 and 7 with Years 5 and 9 against the national average, schools with a similar starting score and schools with a similar mix of students. Parents can tell how much the school has added value to the cohort and how that added value compares with the national average, schools

starting on the same scores and schools of a similar student mix. At least parents can tell how much their school is improving student learning and compare that with other schools.

In city areas and large country towns, parents have some flexibility in choosing a school or moving their children to a different school. This data provides some, but obviously not all, the information a parent might want in choosing a school.

Much of the push for the scrapping of NAPLAN has come from within the education community, from teachers, principals, tertiary educators and the bureaucracy. While many parents don't like the tests, removing them will fuel the division between public and private schools as claims and counter claims are made, it will leave parents in the dark about school comparability and allow poor performance to be hidden. As Christians we should be concerned about these matters. Accountability is important, (just ask the banks) and while NAPLAN tests are neither comprehensive nor conclusive, they are important indicators for all stakeholders.

As outlined in "[Going backwards: 20+ years of a literacy and numeracy focus](#)", the tests may be only a small part of the reason why Australian results on international tests are getting comparatively worse. There are other causes and the tests just show up the scale of the problem. They are a messenger, don't shoot them.

John Gore

## How to teach the NSW English Syllabus with Shakespeare and without the Bible.

Obviously, you can, and many do, but for Christian teachers of English there are far more opportunities to discuss a perspective that can only add to the students' understanding and appreciation of the text being discussed. A way to present what God has to say about our world and our place in it; about what God might have to say to us through literature.

As a Christian teacher of English in NSW public high schools, and in two Canadian provincial schools for 30 years before I retired, I found opportunities to discuss God and his world, many times. It was no secret I ran the ISCF (Inter School Christian Fellowship) in the school with another colleague and didn't mind answering questions about my faith. I always asked first if these high school kids wanted this discussion and then told them what my perspective would be. They often asked if I was religious, and I explained the difference between being a Christian and being religious, where the latter meant I cleaned my teeth regularly (religiously).

In our staff room at my final school I was sometimes asked to go into a colleague's classroom and give a Christian perspective to an incident being discussed in their class: *What is the prodigal son all about? What is the story of David and Goliath? What was the origin of the phrase 'written in stone'? A road to Damascus situation is .... Moses did what to the Red Sea? Who was the original Jezebel? Why do we mean a long time has passed when we talk about 'years in the desert'?* English literature is littered with these references. (A class set of easy to read Bibles is a Godsend.)

A Sunday School upbringing isn't the norm these days, so we cannot assume younger teachers grasp the nuances of scripture references, particularly in the canon of English literature in the later years of high school. Shakespeare knew about history and read his Bible, and as was his wont, pinched many good ideas from both - you only have to look at the consequences of the sin of jealousy in 'Othello', or the hubris of Macbeth to recognise a biblical perspective.

We regularly divided up the HSC English course, so that teachers taught to their strengths, therefore it was no surprise I often taught a poetry component which featured John Donne and Gerald Manley Hopkins to name a few who frequently wrote specifically about God. How can you

teach Hopkins' God's Grandeur and not mention how the Creation 'wears man's smudge and shares man's smell'?

I had a Principal who received a complaint about a scripture verse printed at the top of my (the) blackboard, which was changed weekly, and often provoked discussion with different individuals or whole classes, especially if they thought it took away from 'real' learning in the classroom! I told him I wasn't proselytising but only spoke to the verse if asked a question. Sometimes the quote was ignored entirely, and I never mentioned it. My Christianity was no secret within the school. I told him I couldn't teach the curriculum properly without the help of my copy of the complete work of William Shakespeare - who is always being quoted by writers, poets, playwrights and screen writers - and my Bible, which is also often quoted by the same people, and invited him to audit my classroom later that day when I taught poetry to my Year 12 boys, Gerald Manley Hopkins to be specific.

He came, he listened and took part in the discussion, and when the boys had left he told me that he had never been in such an active and enthusiastic senior English classroom, and had never been taught poetry like that, and left. I would have to say he didn't spend much time in the English block, and only expected us to produce good results for our school, but he also never spoke to me on the subject again.

Of course, you can teach English in NSW state schools without being a Christian and knowing where many ideas and references come from in novels, plays, poems and films studied, but it can make a difference when your knowledge of God's Holy Bible can lead you and your students into a richer world of experience. It matters not that the writers doing the referencing may themselves know nothing of the source of their ideas!

Karen Davies  
(Retired)

(Non-denominational Christianity is the legal definition of general religious education (*Benjamin v Downs [1976]*) and, although teachers in public schools may get some resistance from some colleagues and parents, such teaching related to the curriculum is not illegal. Ed.)

## **Ambiguity of Christmas in a post-Christian society**

(Reprinted from *TCFNews* December 2002)

As 2018 draws to a close, I find myself once again caught in the duality of Christmas created by the tension between the celebration of our faith and a secular celebration of a holiday.

There are still plenty of signs of Christmas in the world, carols in the mall, carols by candlelight and the activities of many churches as they try to get the real message of Christmas to a community many of whom have long given up on a religious celebration in favour of family reunion, holidays and fun.

Hey, wait a minute, that sounds like me. Yes, the problem for Christians, especially Christian teachers with the end of school this year so close to Christmas Day, is that the world's celebration sounds so much like our celebration. Yes, we will go to church on Christmas Day, we will say grace at Christmas dinner, we might even sing happy birthday to Jesus and have a cake so that the children understand Jesus' birthday but its still - family reunion, holidays and fun that will fill our time.

How should we react to this criticism of our celebration of Christmas?

Three possible reactions are:

### **Do nothing**

As Christians we have been freed from the legalism and expectations of the society we live in. Our

whole life needs to be a celebration of the faith we have in Christ and what he has done for us in coming into the world and sacrificing his life for us so that we might know God. Christians ought to celebrate with all joy and excitement and especially at Christmas time. Live, enjoy Christmas, the holidays and the fun, secure in the knowledge that Christ is Lord and that your real home is with God.

### **Keeping the traditions**

The desire of many Christians to continue to have an impact on the world will encourage them to keep the traditions. They will look to remind a society, drifting further and further from its creator, that Christ is still the issue that challenges their life. They will support carol by candlelight, look for Christmas cards with Christian symbols and messages (an ever decreasing commodity in secular stores), be involved in school, church and social functions celebrating Christmas, recognise Christ on Christmas Day by attending church, praying at Christmas dinner, putting a cross and angels on the Christmas tree, exchanging presents as recognition of what God has given us and in generally looking to maintain all the symbols and traditions.

### **Reaching out**

For many Christians, Christmas is a time to reach out to others. It's a time to invite others, who may not have somewhere else to go, to your home for Christmas lunch. It's about giving time and money to the charities that bring a Christian message of hope and encouragement with practical giving to those who fear Christmas as a time of loneliness, poverty and depression. It's about being active in supporting your church and reaching out to others, about giving generously because of what God has given to us.

I pray that this Christmas might be one that captures all three of these approaches and gives the world the message that Christ is alive and well this Christmas.

John Gore

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