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Assessment for Learning in the Accountability Era: Queensland, Australia

Val Klenowski

Developments in school education in Australia over the past decade have witnessed the rise of national efforts to reform curriculum, assessment and reporting. Constitutionally the power to decide on curriculum matters still resides with the States. Higher stakes in assessment, brought about by national testing and international comparative analyses of student achievement data, have challenged State efforts to maintain the emphasis on assessment to promote learning while fulfilling accountability demands. In this article lessons from the Queensland experience indicate that it is important to build teachers' assessment capacity and their assessment literacy for the promotion of student learning. It is argued that teacher assessment can be a source of dependable results through moderation practice. The Queensland Studies Authority has recognised and supported the development of teacher assessment and moderation practice in the context of standards-driven, national reform. Recent research findings explain how the focus on learning can be maintained by avoiding an over-interpretation of test results in terms of innate ability and limitations and by encouraging teachers to adopt more tailored diagnosis of assessment data to address equity through a focus on achievement for all. Such efforts are challenged as political pressures related to the Australian government's implementation of national testing and national partnership funding arrangements tied to the performance of students at or below minimum standards become increasingly apparent.

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Introduction

This article begins by outlining global trends in curriculum and assessment reform that relate to the impact of international comparisons of achievement data on national policy. In Australia the development of a national curriculum and national achievement standards by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) have raised tensions and challenges for teachers' assessment practice. In an accountability era the argument for sustaining confidence in teacher-based assessment is developed with reference to research evidence pertaining to the use of teacher judgement, achievement standards and moderation practices for the purposes of improving learning, fulfilling accountability demands and achieving equity. The case against the sole reliance on large-scale, nationally comparative testing (National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy or NAPLAN) is developed by arguing for inclusion of school-based assessment that can be both valid and reliable if appropriately supported. The widespread belief of policy officers, administrators and politicians in Australia that such an approach is not reliable and dependable is challenged.

Evidence is drawn from studies of teacher judgement practice in Queensland to demonstrate the complex issues of engaging the demands of national policy developments while sustaining confidence in school-based assessment. A sociocultural perspective of assessment and learning has provided the lens through which teachers' use of standards, judgement and moderation practice have been analysed to identify and explain the context and the practices that support greater consistency, comparability and equity in school-based assessment.

Global Drivers for Curriculum Change

Governments have used the results from international comparisons to justify the introduction of curriculum and assessment change that includes the use of standards. Examples include developments such as the national curriculum in Germany (Köller, 2009) or the introduction of numeracy and literacy standards in New Zealand (Crooks, Darr, Gilmore, Hall, Hattie, Smith & Smith, 2009). Global drivers for curriculum and assessment reform are also apparent in Australia from policy makers' responses to international measures of educational attainment such as the results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

Neoliberal policies that value the marketisation of education, with the establishment of quasi-markets that rely on diversity and choice (Ball, 2003) are driving the curriculum and assessment reforms in Australia. The change in policy direction and analysis of these trends relate to a 'realist' conception of democracy. The assumption is "that democracy flourishes best in an individualistic society with a competitive market economy, minimal state intervention, a politically passive citizenry and active elite political leadership." (Reid, 2002, p. 572). This view of democracy sees education as a positional good rather than a public good. Individual freedom of choice is valued over equity in this view. A market approach asserts that competition will provide benefits such as responsiveness, increased productivity, efficiency and accountability. Financial responsibility and accountability are devolved to individual schools and the competition that does arise from the establishment of quasi-markets encourages schools to differentiate themselves from one another. An outcome of such policies of choice does result in diversity but such differentiation is organised around socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and race (Reid, 2002). Ironically, this problem of equity that is fostered by such neoliberal policies has been identified as an issue for attention from the international comparative analyses of achievement data.

International studies of educational achievement have now highlighted equity issues for countries such as England (Whitty, 2010) and Australia (Klenowski, 2009). In Australia, schools do not appear to be adequately addressing equity issues, for when compared with other developed countries Indigenous children in Australia have scored significantly lower than non-Indigenous children. The use of international comparative data, such as TIMSS, has also identified significant State and Territory differences in Australia.

The new Labor Government in 2008 in its reform efforts responded to the lack of consistency across jurisdictions in Australia with plans for the introduction of a National Curriculum in Mathematics, Science, History and English in primary and secondary schools by 2011 to be extended to include languages, geography and the arts at a later date. The three elements of the planned national curriculum framework comprise: curriculum content, achievement standards and a reporting framework. The national testing or NAPLAN has not been aligned with these national developments in curriculum. Critical issues related to these reforms and this lack of alignment will be discussed next following a description of the intended curriculum changes.

Recent Changes in the Australian Context

In Australia the development of national student assessment, a national curriculum and reporting of school education outcomes marks a major educational reform. Benchmark testing began in 1999 when the first annual literacy tests (reading and writing) for Year 3 and Year 5 students were conducted. In 2008 the National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was introduced, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit the same national tests in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy. The nationally agreed literacy and numeracy benchmarks for Years 3, 5 and 7 represent minimum standards of performance. National Assessment Programme assessments that take place also involve triennial sample assessments in science at Year 6, in civics and citizenship at Years 6 and 10 and in ICT literacy at Years 6 and 10 (Harrington, 2008). Despite these

developments in national testing there has been no direct link to a national curriculum.

In 2007 the six states and two territories of Australia developed individual approaches to the use of standards in the implementation of curriculum, assessment and reporting. In February 2008 the interim National Curriculum Board was established to set the *core content* and *achievement standards* in Mathematics, Science, History and English from Kindergarten to Year 12. In May 2009, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) assumed responsibility for the work of the National Curriculum Board (April 2008 - May 2009). In addition to the national curriculum ACARA is now responsible for a national assessment program that incorporates the use of achievement standards aligned to the curriculum to measure students' progress, and a national data collection and reporting program. The latter is intended to support analysis, evaluation, research, resource allocation, accountability and reporting on schools and broader national achievement.

The performance of individual schools is published on the *My School* website (www.myschool.edu.au) which the federal government claims provides transparency for parents to evaluate schools' performance, and to target schools that are underperforming. It also claims that statistically similar schools across Australia can now compare the performance of students in the NAPLAN tests. On each school's profile page a summary table of the school's NAPLAN results is colour coded to indicate substantial differences between the results from the school compared with the Australian average and the results of statistically similar schools (ACARA, 2009).

Recently a prominent statistician, Professor Harvey Goldstein, critiqued the *MySchool* website when he stated: "in comparing the performance of schools, it is important to take into account differences in their student intakes" ... "comparisons of schools that are not statistically similar can lead to misleading conclusions about their performance" (Goldstein, 2010). The approach to identify "a set of variables that best predicted student performance on the combined

NAPLAN tests on reading and numeracy, and then use these to create an index for grouping ‘similar’ schools” was problematic because this approach means that “if it is a good predictor then ‘similar’ schools are those with similar mean test scores – so schools are compared just with those having similar performance!” (Goldstein, 2010). Professor Goldstein also raised concerns about the current ‘prediction’ formula that combines: parental background information, occupation and education, post code. That is a derived socioeconomic variable. The reliability of the measures for cross-school comparisons were questioned and so public confidence regarding the certainty of the published results and what they represent could not be assured. As an example, parents and the wider community find the identification of ‘like schools’ that are located in regions or even in different states to be irrelevant if indeed the intention is to inform choice of school and the quality of performance.

Professor Goldstein’s recent critique is a warning that such accountability measures have the potential for major unintended consequences. There is a need to ensure that there is a balanced approach that makes use of measures that are not only technically and scientifically sound but that will result in the intended outcomes of improved teaching and learning for all students. As has so often been reported high-stakes testing can have deleterious and unintended consequences on teaching, the curriculum and student learning (Stobart, 2008).

ACARA maintains that the Australian Curriculum has a futures orientation and identifies the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that all young Australians are entitled to learn. The ten general capabilities that will be specifically covered in the curriculum include: literacy, numeracy, information and communication technologies (ICT), thinking skills, creativity, intercultural understanding, ethical behaviour, teamwork, self-management and social competence. There are also cross-curriculum dimensions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, sustainable patterns of living, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia.

There are plans for the curriculum to be a web-based document in that web technologies will be used to embed links and enable multiple views and access. The curriculum content element of the Australian Curriculum will provide teachers with the expectations of what should be taught and what students are expected to learn, that is, knowledge, skills and understanding. Curriculum content will be described for a particular learning area at a particular year level such as, Mathematics, Year 5 (ACARA, 2009).

The achievement standards aim to provide an expectation of the quality of learning that students should typically demonstrate by a particular point in their schooling, that is, the depth of their understanding, the extent of their knowledge and the sophistication of their skills. (ACARA, 2009). The aim is to provide achievement standards for each year of schooling across K-10 using a descriptor of the quality of learning that draws together the knowledge, skills and understanding typically expected for that year. The representation of the standards for every year will include a statement of expected learning, a set of generic grade descriptors and a set of work samples that illustrate typical learning (ACARA, 2009).

Course specific standards are to be developed for Years 11-12 with a range of levels of achievement expected of students studying the particular course. The standards aim to assist in reporting to students and parents, to aid consistency of assessment and reporting across Australia and to fulfil the purpose of selection required of assessment for post-school pathways. It is intended that the Year 11-12 standards will be designed to be applicable in jurisdictions with external examinations and with school-based assessment.

Finally the reporting framework aims to provide consistency in nomenclature to describe the quality of achievement associated with each A-E grade for use across K-10. It is intended that the use of the five-point scale will indicate the extent to which a student has met the achievement standard for a particular year of school. To illustrate, students who achieve a grade of C or above will have met the standard for that year/stage. The grade C would indicate a satisfactory level

of achievement while an A grade would indicate an outstanding level of achievement. Conversely a grade of D or E would suggest that follow-up is required and further investigation by teachers, students and parents might be needed (ACARA, 2009). These achievement standards have recently been critiqued with education chiefs from New South Wales rejecting them (Patty, 2010).

It is intended that annotated student work samples will be used to demonstrate the different standards. This collection of work samples will build on the work that is currently established in the Australian states and territories. It is anticipated that this collection will provide a common and national reference point for greater consistency in teacher judgement within and between classrooms, schools, states and territories.

Clarity about the relationship between curriculum, assessment and standards is missing. Alignment of these is fundamental to quality schooling and public confidence in educational standards. While the country's first national curriculum will include information about the required learning and achievement standards at level C, absent from the documentation is information to systems and the teaching workforce about the nature and extent of assessment evidence to collect, and the application of standards in relation to the judgement of the quality of student work. These issues are compounded by the lack of defined standards at A, B, D, and E levels. Teachers will face critical issues related to assessment and the use of standards, particularly for informing how they develop valid assessment tasks and arrive at reliable judgements of student achievement. Public confidence in the Australian Curriculum needs to be secured through addressing these issues and identified gaps in the national curriculum and assessment design.

These changes to curriculum and assessment and identified issues make considerable demands on teachers who need to be informed, prepared and resourced to implement this level of change. It is most important that teachers are aware of the literacy demands of national curriculum and assessment, for the

implementation of a national curriculum requires the development of teachers' capacity to use the learning power of assessment to improve the outcomes for all students.

Accountability Demands

Reid (2009) has argued that in Australia the federal government's accountability agenda is based on failed overseas models. Similar policies in England (Stobart, 2008; Broadfoot, 2007) and in the US such as the No Child Left Behind policy led to reductionist approaches to the interpretation of large-scale assessment scores. The problems that have emerged include teaching to the test, a culture of fear of job losses, school closures and in the US a reduction in Native language and culture responsive teaching (McCarty, 2009; Patrick, 2008). With the emphasis on national testing and the introduction of standards for reporting and accountability it is possible that the unintended, negative effects of testing will emerge and the trust in teacher professionalism will be lost. The closer the alignment between standards and assessment, between standards and teaching, between standards and curriculum and between teaching and assessments the better students achieve (Zepke et. al, 2005). Misaligned assessments and curriculum pose a threat to teaching and learning (Boss et al, 2001) and poor alignment between what is taught and the way it is assessed or between content and what is tested also affects student achievement (Supovitz, 2001).

With these pressures of increased accountability it is important for authorities to build and maintain teachers' assessment capacity and their assessment literacy. The teacher is best placed to improve student learning and to determine the quality of student achievement over time (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn, 2010). Teachers therefore need to develop their skills and understanding of assessment practice.

It is to teachers that this paper now turns, as they are fundamental to such reform efforts. Recent research evidence illustrates how with the introduction of curriculum and assessment reform, that involves the use of achievement

standards for accountability, there are important conditions and understanding that education systems need to observe (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2010). Teachers themselves need to be aware of the accountability context within which they work and appreciate how the practices that they engage in are mediated by structures beyond their control such as national policy about what they are supposed to assess and how that is to be recorded and reported. In such a context an important emergent issue is for teachers to maintain a strong sense of responsibility by developing their professionalism through building their assessment literacy and practices.

The use of achievement standards to assess student learning, as planned for in the Australian Curriculum, is a new phenomena for teachers in Australia. Standards-driven reform in the Australian context involves the use of achievement standards as the basis for judgements of student learning (depth of understanding, extent of knowledge and the level of sophistication of skills) with the intended aims of informing the teaching and learning process and of reporting and tracking student progress.

Assessment literacy is a fundamental issue for teachers and is defined, not from a traditional view of skills, knowledges and cognitions that reside within an individual, but rather a view of literacy as a visible social practice with language, text and discourse (Gee, 2003). To raise the assessment literacy of teachers there is a need to understand, and practice, the fundamental principles of assessment design. These include: 'fitness for purpose' and the mode of assessment should impact positively on teaching and learning (Gipps, 1994).

The use of achievement standards for assessment and reporting will further require the development of teachers' assessment literacy and assessment practices. This will be illustrated by referring to the particular case of the Australian state of Queensland where extensive research has been conducted to study the standards-driven reform in the middle years of schooling (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2008; Wyatt-Smith and Klenowski, 2008; Klenowski and Adie, 2009; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski and Gunn, 2010).

The Queensland Experience

Queensland has a tradition of respecting and trusting teacher judgement through the practice of and policy commitment to moderation practice. School based assessment has been a feature of Queensland schools since 1972 and there is a 40-year history of school-based curriculum and externally moderated standards-based assessment in the senior phase of schooling (Years 11 and 12). Externally moderated school-based assessment at the level of senior schooling has therefore been established for some time. The lineage to moderated assessment then extends back to the 1970s and through the Year 2 Diagnostic Net (<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/policy/assessment/y2dn/>) and the New Basics curriculum reforms (<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics/>) that became influential in lower school.

Social moderation involves teachers meeting to discuss and negotiate assigned grading of student work to reach valid and reliable judgements. These judgements through moderation are negotiated so that they are comparable with one another and consistent with achievement standards. In Queensland, social moderation has helped to attain coherence between classroom assessment and system-level accountability that includes system interests in transparency of schooling outcomes. Recently the Queensland Studies Authority has attempted standards-referenced moderation in Years 1-9. The Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework was developed from 2005, implementation began in 2008 and a review of the extended trial was conducted prior to full implementation in 2009. The framework (www.qcar.qsa.qld.edu.au) comprises the Essential Learnings (ELs) that identify what students should know, understand and be able to do; standards that articulate the quality of student achievements described on a five point scale from A to E; the assessment bank provides a collection of online assessments and resources that relate to the ELs and standards; the Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks (QCATs) that are authentic, performance-based assessment tasks and guidelines for reporting, that outline how schools might provide information about students' learning

(Queensland Studies Authority, 2010). The QCATs are designed to assess a selection of ELs in English, Mathematics and Science in Years 4, 6 and 9.

Queensland has conceptualised the framework from the view that assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning. While the QCAR framework promotes the practice of embedding assessment into classroom practice the report on the 2008 extended trial of the QCATs found that teachers needed greater familiarity with the standards and the suggested approach to making judgements (QSA, 2010). The implication is that with the move to a national curriculum and the related use of achievement standards there will be a need for all teachers in Australia to familiarise themselves with the standards and develop their understanding of how to use them when making judgements about student work. For although at the national level the intention is to help teachers interpret the standards by providing annotated samples of work indicative of the standard, the research indicates that the judgement process involved for the teacher is more complex than this. In these studies, (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2008; Wyatt-Smith and Klenowski, 2008) with the Queensland Studies Authority, it was found that: 1) written descriptors plus annotated work samples were insufficient for teachers to understand and apply the use of achievement standards; 2) the particular approach to judgement (analytic, holistic, trade-offs) needs to be understood by teachers to inform the decision-making process (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn, 2010) and 3) teachers' participation in moderation for validity and reliability purposes to negotiate interpretation and understanding of standards in relation to student work is vital.

In Queensland the use of the QCATs is intended to allow students to demonstrate their best work and “[a]s much as possible ... avoid the flavour of point-in-time tests.” (DETA, 2005:9). The information collected from the QCATs is considered to be low-stakes data and it is not intended that it be used for measuring school or teacher effectiveness (QSA, 2010). Rather the intention is to build teachers' assessment capacity and assessment literacy by demonstrating the nature of quality assured assessment tasks that are designed

to be authentic and performance-based. Teachers are also provided with resources, such as the assessment bank, guides to assist teachers in making judgements about the quality of the students' responses, model answers and a range of annotated samples of student responses reflective of each standard. This level of resourcing is intended to support the development of shared understanding about the interpretation and application of standards (QSA, 2010).

Teachers have indicated the value of meeting as a community of learners at moderation meetings to share their understanding and use of the standards (Klenowski & Adie, 2009). It is through the processes of discussion, critique and analysis of student responses that teachers have the opportunity to validate or adjust their interpretations of the standards in relation to the judgements they have made. Providing teachers with a common discourse in terms of the criteria (assessable elements) and the standards (task specific descriptors) facilitates teachers' understanding of how well students have completed the QCAT.

To help teachers understand the value of the assessment data and how it can be used to modify teaching and learning the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) provides a report to schools on the implementation of the QCATs, based on the analysis of all the data collected. QSA collects a random sample from Queensland schools of teacher judgements representative of standards A to E for analysis. The resultant report provides teachers with insights into the way students typically responded. The teacher uses this information for teaching and learning purposes. The intent is that the report will contribute to a better understanding by teachers of student strengths, development of consistency of teacher judgement and comparability of reported results of student achievement and progress. Moderation processes have been found to support consistency of teacher judgements and a large number of Queensland Years 1-9 teachers have gained practical experience of this practice (QSA, 2010).

These approaches attend to equity issues by making assessment fairer by reducing the dependence on performance to a single terminal examination as the only determinant of student achievement and by giving individuals the opportunity to demonstrate attainment over time and in a variety of contexts. This type of assessment is more accurate, and reflective of an individual's learning and development, by identifying the skills and abilities being examined. This helps to encompass a wider range of abilities and facilitates the recording of achievement.

Challenges for Teachers at the National Level

Where there is a growing international trend for using standards not just for accountability but also for the purpose of improving learning it is important to understand their different purposes (goals) and functions (roles). In Australia standards are currently being used in different contexts to fulfil different functions. To illustrate, in the context of the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) the standards fulfil a particular role.

For each year level a national minimum standard is located on the scale. For Year 3 Band 2 is the national minimum standard, for Year 5 Band 4 is the national minimum standard, for Year 7 Band 5 is the national minimum standard and for Year 9 Band 6 is the national minimum standard. The skills that students are typically required to demonstrate for the minimum standard at each year level are described on the back page of the student report.

These standards represent increasingly challenging skills and require higher scores on the national scale. (NAPLAN, 2009)

League tables have emerged to represent these results for the Australian states. In Queensland, the state government is keen to raise standards as represented by the results of NAPLAN testing and in 2009 the premier advised schools to sit

practice NAPLAN tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 as she was disappointed by the overall results of the 2008 tests which she indicated were designed to assess if students were meeting “national standards in numeracy, reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar” (Bligh, 2009). At the national level there are no statements about the expected learning of literacy and numeracy and no standards to inform them about the expectations of quality. There are only summary statements of skills assessed to inform parents about their child’s report. Here the term is used in reference to national minimum standards and the Queensland’s premier’s response to the NAPLAN testing program highlights how the meaning of the term standard differs in that it is used as a level of attainment or point of reference as measured by a yardstick or as in this case band levels on a scale.

The concern for teachers is that by emphasising that the NAPLAN test is the measure or reference point the consequent action by teachers will be to narrow their focus to that which is tested or measured. In other words the curriculum too will be narrowed and teachers will emphasise in their teaching that which has been specified in the test. What becomes evident is that in this context of accountability when the stakes are high not only will there be an impact on teaching, there will be consequences at the level of the school, the system and the nation. It is possible that high stakes accountability testing can have benefits such as raising expectations, providing a clearer focus for teaching and learning, motivating achievement, challenging patterns of school performance and providing useful information to stakeholders for governing and allocating resources. There are also some costs such as the detrimental impact of setting targets that distort the system by encouraging teachers to teach to the test, with excessive time allocated to drill and practice, booster tests and the like. Inexorable pressures emerge to pervert the system such as the manipulation of the drop out or retention rates of students for the purposes of achieving targets, result or grade inflation and entry selection to maintain one’s position on the league table (Stobart, 2008). The No Child Left Behind legislation in the United

States is an example where the push to raise standards has led to enormous pressure on teachers and distortions in the teaching of a holistic curriculum with the reduction in authentic and challenging learning experiences for students (Marsh, 2009).

The Queensland premier's response to the NAPLAN results demonstrates how governments are becoming increasingly anxious about education standards particularly as reflected in such national or international comparisons of student achievement. This is because of the expected critical contribution of raising standards in education to economic growth and competitiveness. There is also increasing individual (particularly parental) anxieties because of the growing importance of formal qualifications in determining success in terms of life chances.

In Queensland, standards for improvement of student learning, provide a generic description of the expected quality of student work and offer a common language for teachers to use in discussing student work (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007). The aim is to improve learning by indicating the quality of achievement that is expected and in so doing provide the basis for judgements about the quality of students' work. Research indicates that standards are useful for the purpose of informing teachers' work and in contributing to quality teaching and learning experiences (Klenowski, 2006, 2007; Sadler, 2005; Wyatt-Smith & Castleton, 2004). In the context of the QCATs the achievement standards function by monitoring the growth in student learning and by providing information about the quality of student achievement for improvement purposes. The intended purpose of these standards is to assist teachers in identifying areas for improvement in teaching, curriculum design or development. The provision of these standards make explicit for teachers what to teach and the level of performance expected for a particular age group and in this way they contribute to the demand for public accountability at the local professional level of the teacher (Harlen, 2005; Wilson, 2004).

As suggested earlier these standards are also intended to promote teachers' professional learning, focused on good assessment practices and judgement of the quality of student achievement against system level benchmarks or referents. In addition it is expected that teachers using the standards will present more meaningful reports and engagement with assessment as a learning process.

Future Challenges

These are changing times for Australian teachers in terms of the changing curriculum and assessment demands. There are lessons that can be learnt from the research conducted in other countries, like those of the United Kingdom, where there have been years of experience of national curriculum and testing systems.

In a time of economic uncertainty it is important for governments to be accountable and to develop policy that will maintain high standards for all. The use of national tests and examinations as the basis for school, local government, state and national accountability is on the increase in Australia, and such trends globally have given rise to standards-driven reforms. The policy rationale for such change, that includes testing, is that it will improve standards of teaching and learning regardless of the student's religion, race, gender, socio economic or socio cultural background. However, the cost-benefits of using testing in this way is not always economical or successful. There are alternative approaches for schools and teachers to demonstrate accountability that places less emphasis on test results. Important questions need to be considered and mistakes that other national systems have encountered need to be avoided in Australia.

While both large-scale standardised tests and authentic, teacher assessment can contribute to improved learning and accountability the question of balance remains. There are important ethical questions to consider in assessment

change efforts. The social impact of changes to education systems is not something to be taken lightly when the impact on students' results in them being turned off learning or labelled as failures. Unhealthy competition between schools, teaching to the test, increased stress levels for children, parents, teachers and huge costs are just some of the reactions to testing that is high stakes.

There is also evidence that internationally the gap between children with and without access to high-quality education is growing. In assessment terms this raises the important equity issue which is not simply a technical consideration of the test or assessment itself. Whether testing systems take into consideration socio cultural representations of achievement, the limitations of current assessment practices and the consequences of how the assessment evidence is used are further significant considerations in this time of assessment change in Australia.

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