



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: Academic person or institution, other (Researcher into
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Summary

Key points

1. Increasing numbers of parents are seeking out an education for their children that avoids assessment in any form.
2. More families are choosing home education and tailoring data collection to child/ren's needs and interests.
3. Waldorf/Steiner schools, the fastest growing educational movement in the world, openly state they do not assess in the early and early middle years.
4. Democratic schools also do not use assessments as they claim they are antithetical to their movement.
5. Thus, growth is being experienced in education settings that avoid assessments, either in school or standardised.

Main submission

Key points

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3. Waldorf/Steiner schools, the fastest growing educational movement in the world, openly state they do not assess in the early and early middle years.
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Introduction

I am writing this submission as an academic whose work is concerned with why parents choose alternative education settings. My work focuses on the reasons parents choose to home educate (cf. English, 2013; 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; Gribble & English, 2016), satisfaction among Steiner graduates and reasons for choosing democratic and other, unaligned, alternative schools (unpublished research English, 2014; 2015; 2016).

My responses are in relation to my research work with parents who've opted out of mainstream schools. For many, the competitiveness and emphasis on 'academic success' led them to eschew formalised, mainstream schooling and instead, opt for alternatives (cf. English, 2015a; 2016). By alternatives, I am referring to those schools that are not following a competitive and test-driven philosophical approach. As such, my submission is focused on:

- Home education
- Steiner schools
- Democratic schools
- Neo-humanist schools
- Montessori schools
- Unaligned alternative schools

Significantly, these settings represent the breadth of educational options available to parents but are rarely discussed in debates about funding, success and choices. Failure to consider these settings is problematic in a climate where these education choices are increasingly popular among parents. Home-education is gaining in popularity (cf. figures from the Victorian State Government, 2017; and figures from the Queensland Department of Education, 2017), as are Steiner/Waldorf (henceforth Steiner) schools, the fastest growing educational movement in the world (Pearce, 2015). Montessori schools, democratic schools (such as Pine Community School, Currumbina School, Kinma School, Fitzroy Community School), neo-humanist schools (such as Ananda-Marga River School, Vistara school), and other alternative education settings that are not aligned with a specific educational philosophy (such as Brisbane Independent School, Silkwood Independent School) are also heavily subscribed.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

Researchers (cf. Morton, 2010; Ray, 2014) have found there is a growing disaffection with schools and institutionalised education. For many parents, the competitiveness and emphasis on high levels of academic achievement, NAPLAN scores or competitive outcomes (Wagner, 2014; Ravitch, 2016) are problematic and alienating for many students. For example, standardised test scores, such as those collected by

NAPLAN testing, are likely to be less important to parents (cf. English, 2014) who choose alternative education. However, at least in the home education community, there is evidence that children perform significantly better on NAPLAN testing than mainstream school children and this effect continues if children attend mainstream schools after a period of home education (cf. Smith, 2016). However, as noted in the Smith (2016) article, this finding is based on a small, self-selected sample.

What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

For many families, particularly those who home educate for ideological reasons (cf. Beck, 2006; 2008; 2010; 2012; Morton, 2010; English 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; Ray, 2014), and parents who choose democratic (Apple, 2014), Steiner (Dahlin, 2017) or other alternative schools, the mainstream school system's approach is incompatible with the capabilities and skills and the philosophy implicit in their family structures (English, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016) or with the individual learning needs of children (Ray, 2014). Similarly, these alternatives are also chosen because of children's special needs (Parsons, Guldberg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty & Balfe; 2011; Payne, ND; Ray, 2014; McDonald & Lopes, 2014). These studies suggest many students' needs are not met in mainstream school settings that focus on traditional measures of success.

For some, the emphasis on rewards and punishments and the zero-sum nature of competition in schools is anachronistic and unable to be reconciled with the parenting approach of these families (Paine, ND; English 2013; 2014, Ray, 2014). Rather, an educational system that values fairness, cooperation, equity and individual interest is favoured (Morton, 2010; English 2013; 2014, Ray, 2014).

This preference for schooling that does not value competitiveness, rewards and punishments is seen in the skills and affective learning present in Steiner educational settings (cf. Woods, Ashley & Woods, 2005). It may be, parents who choose alternative education prefer children to learn affective capabilities such as fairness, cooperation and respect; and the skills of non-violent communication and conflict resolution, as well as the ability to research, which overrides a mainstream emphasis on learning facts (cf. Hallam, Egan & Kirkham, 2016).

Steiner Education Australia publishes the primary school curriculum on their webpage. Up to Class 3, they state explicitly there is no assessment or competitive sports. For Class 4-6, assessment is not indicated. While activities are listed that students would undertake to cement knowledge and demonstrate developing skills, no statement of how these are assessed is given. Parents who choose this type of education are made aware assessment of skills and knowledge, as it is traditionally understood in the mainstream school system, is not undertaken in Steiner schools. However, the level of discussion and the care taken with recording learning suggest

discipline, love of learning, an ability to think carefully and to create knowledge from prior learning are privileged in these schools.

Similarly, when reviewing the ways home education families are demonstrating their children's successful acquisition of knowledge, skills and capabilities, the 'school' approach to tests and assessments, competition and standardized measures are not evident. Again, it may be that parents who choose this approach are not interested in traditional approaches to measurement and assessment (cf. English, 2014; Gribble & English, 2016).

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Alternative education settings, due to the different capabilities, skills and knowledge valued in these contexts, do not measure success in the same ways as mainstream schools. For example, Steiner schools do not consider 'testing' an effective or accurate measure of success. Citing the work of Davey and Neill (1991), Steiner Education Australia (2013) argue "testing does not improve education" (p. 5). Instead, in relation to NAPLAN testing specifically, it:

is both limited and problematic ... not effective and does not reach its intended objectives to improve student learning outcomes, to provide accountability, transparency, social inclusion, wide ranging knowledge and skills, creative and confident individuals and support to schools and teachers. (Steiner Education Australia, 2013, p. 5)

Rather, Steiner schools rely on teacher observation (cf. Drummond & Jenkins, 2009) and celebrate individual differences between children. For Steiner teachers, their work as educators is necessarily involved with the collection of data, as opposed to assessment, which is intimately tied to Steiner teachers' belief that children should be prepared for a life of learning and thus learn the skills to learn rather than be required to quote facts (Drummond & Jenkins, 2009).

In democratic school settings, the organising philosophy holds equal status between teachers and students. These schools argue that to see teachers and students as equal removes the availability of assessments as measures of success. One school's website (Pine Community School, 2017), problematises assessment because of:

- the view that testing "diminishes the significant contribution that democratic schools make to free education choice because the measures do not recognise democratic educational approaches",
- the harm to wellbeing posed by "competitive, irrelevant and destructive" testing that risks test driven learning, undermine teacher professionalism because "test results are used to inform student progress rather than the relationship between each teacher and pupil",

- the reduction in the scope of education, and that testing is out of step with best pedagogical practice, affect market impressions by forming league tables risking the viability of schools deemed to be ‘unsuccessful’,
- the way testing “deploys scant teacher resources away from democratic schooling (their core business) and towards bureaucracy and test management”,
- the way testing contravenes the constitutions of schools who work with parent and community groups to develop an overarching vision that “explicitly state that competitive measurement of learning outcomes is incompatible with student-centred learning” (Pine Community School, 2017, 11).

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

School/student improvement is generally couched in terms of PISA scores, academic success, entry into university and vocational courses. Home education is often associated with better outcomes, even in terms of those favoured by governments (including university entrance, standardised test scores and satisfaction) (cf. Ray, 2014; Smith, 2016), as have Montessori schools (cf. Mallett & Schroeder, 2015) and Steiner schools (Steiner Education Australia, 2011). However, parents who choose alternative models of education may be looking for other, affective, measures of success (cf. Fischer, Binting, Bockelbrink, Heusser, Hueck, Keil & Witt, 2013).

What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

The research into alternative education suggests a belief in teacher professionalism, an acceptance of the uneven nature of children’s development, a levelling of the relationship between teachers and children and a focus on what children can do is important to parents who choose alternative education settings. The parents who choose these settings are unlikely to value, or solely value, “targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions ... monitoring, reporting and application of investment”.

Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

What are they and how could they be further developed?

As noted in the previous sections of my submission, we need to ask what it is these alternative philosophies are offering that are attractive to increasing numbers of parents.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

As with all initiatives in education, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. To illustrate, research (cf. Beck, 2012) suggests there are four parent typologies who choose home education. Beck (2012) identified these groups as structured home educators who were middle class, religious, well-educated conservatives. The unschoolers who were "well educated middle class parents, anti-establishment, with radical political and cultural views" (Beck, 2012, p. 74). There were the pragmatics who were usually rural, working class families for whom the home education environment and the family's work environment were linked. Finally, there was the unknown who were not registered and could not be accessed. To these groups, I would add the accidental home educators who choose home education when schools fail to meet the needs of children. Beck's (2012) work suggests, as I stated in a paper (English, 2013), home education may be chosen for two reasons. First, it may allow "middle-class parents to activate their cultural capital (cf. Lareau, 2008) as these parents were able to accommodate their children's individual needs" (p. 7). Concomitantly, it may help parents "manage risk when problems with the school, or in some cases, issues with miscommunication arise" (p. 7).

The existence of home education, its growth in the last 10 years and its popularity especially among middle-class, aspirational parents suggests there is dissatisfaction with education in Australia. Similarly, the demonstrable popularity and growth of Steiner, Montessori and democratic schooling, among a suite of alternative choices, suggests parents are unhappy with the current models of schooling that privilege assessment over the needs of the individual child in a classroom. It may be the emphasis on instituting a priori improvements en masse, on testing and assessing through a narrow range of instruments and measures and a focus on knowledge, and a narrow range of knowledge, rather than skills, is not working for a large and growing group of Australia's young people. In response, parents are making choices that challenge the normative, narrow definitions of success measured through traditional assessment instruments and standards and are eschewing these for alternatives. This eschewing surely gives us pause for thought.

My point in this submission is to ask ministers, bureaucrats in education departments at state and federal level, university academics engaged in pre-service

teacher training, school authorities, principals, teachers and the wider community to ponder more on the role of assessment and whether our current focus on assessment is in the best interest of children by looking at alternative education models.

Does success in standardized measures of assessment, or in high stakes assessment, or even assessment as it is currently conducted correlate with receiving a good education? And, why is there a small, but growing, group of parents who are perfectly content to choose school, and non-school settings, that do not assess?