

# Australian Journal of Middle Schooling



Australian Journal of Middle Schooling

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# Editorial

By Sue Webb & Rebecca Seward

*“I wouldn’t say homework is life threatening. It’s just like.. disappointing.”  
- Year 7 Student*



Same with like...marking. Or leaving editorials until the night before the deadline! Teachers of middle schoolers get it. Life gets in the way sometimes, but Rhiannon O’Hara sums it up beautifully in *Middle School Musings*; “the thing about teaching middle years is that there is magic. Their energy allows us to experience a small flicker of what it is like to be a kid again.” Elise Cheneen from Redlands College names everything teenager—the testosterone and estrogen, the mascara and the Frank Greens, the streaks, Be Real, Tik Tok and Hey Siri. We enjoyed these musings so much that we are hoping to publish more. *Middle School Musings* would be a wonderful PD starter, and a way to share the magic. So, get writing middle years teachers and share your stories – the triumphs, the challenges, new innovations or old tricks – we would love to hear from you.

Magicians aside, understanding the teenage brain is a science in itself, explored by Amy Berry in *Reimagining Student Engagement*; from *Disrupting to Driving*. Through a window of practical application, Berry looks at the psychology of student engagement and comments that, “With all the talk of ‘hooking students in,’ and ‘getting

students engaged,’ we might be forgiven for thinking that a student’s only role in engagement is to be pushed or pulled by the teacher in the direction the teacher wants them to go, like a pawn in a game rather than a valued teammate.” It’s our pick for this edition’s professional reading.

Michael Lawrence, author of *Testing 3, 2, 1*, and founder of Teacher Trust, provides further insight into the value of both student and teacher agency in his article *Will Australian Education Change?* Having visited Finland to learn from its world-leading education system, Michael observes that Australian teachers are “world-class standard” but questions the current educational climate which has seen teacher agency fall and standardisation rise. He feels that current trends in Australian education are “almost assured to encourage pushback from teenagers who are infamous for their reluctance to follow any kind of mandate or order.” Michael’s article proposes ways in which the successful practices of the Finnish model might be applied in Australian education, particularly in the middle years.

Teacher wellbeing remains front and centre of education debate, due to staff shortages particularly in regional schools. We all felt the disruptions to traditional teaching

practices caused by the pandemic, which highlighted the importance of supporting teacher wellbeing. Research in this area is leading to a growing recognition of the links between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes. Stuart Ryan, Director of Wellbeing and Community Service at Arndell Anglican College shares how schools can conduct a wellbeing audit, and in doing so, provide teachers with a voice in establishing wellbeing initiatives. He looks at six domains of wellbeing and poses three simple questions for teachers to consider.

Schools looking at the use of standardised testing data will find interesting reading in the report *The Use of NAPLAN Data and Support for It: Perceptions of Practising Teachers*. This deep dive into the use of NAPLAN data in an independent Catholic girls’ college in Queensland brings surprising results.

And finally, please enjoy *Adolescent Success’* study tour report and photographs from the six schools who kindly opened their doors to delegates. We hope that the *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling* can remain a resource for teachers to share their practice and lend their voices in shaping middle years’ education across Australia and New Zealand.

Happy reading!

**Sue and Rebecca.**

*The Australian Journal of Middle Schooling*

## Image Acknowledgements:

*Debra Evans, Michael Lawrence, Elise Cheneen and Rhiannon O’Hara*

# Information for Contributors

Adolescent Success welcomes submissions for journal inclusion that reflect the aims of the association and address issues relevant to the middle years of schooling.

You are encouraged to view the Adolescent Success Position Paper on our website and align your contribution to the paper themes and topics. For example (not limited to):

- **Adolescents:** the developmental needs and interests of young adolescents.
- **Pedagogy:** approaches to teaching and learning; authentic assessment.
- **Educators:** school leadership and organisational structures in the middle years; research findings and future developments in the middle years.
- **Place:** information and communication technologies and resources in the middle years; middle years learning environments.

## Contributions

Contributions may take the form of:

- educator success stories from the middle years e.g., middle years programs/strategies from your context;
- academic and research papers that make an original contribution of an empirical or theoretical nature;
- literature review;
- reports;
- viewpoints;
- book reviews.

The journal has two levels of acceptance of papers for publication: refereed and non refereed. Refereed papers will have two referees selected from relevant fields of study by the editor. Papers must clearly indicate if they wish to be considered for refereed status. Refereed articles will be included in a specific section of the journal.

Contributions shall be submitted electronically via email to the Adolescent Success Journal Editor email address, as a Microsoft Word document. Articles must be double spaced, without the use of styles, 12 point font Times New Roman. The submitted article becomes the property of Adolescent Success.

- All contributors need to complete an Author's agreement form to be submitted with the article.
- Papers should be between 700 and 5000 words in length.
- Each article should have a separate title page that contains, the names of all authors, their contact addresses, email addresses and telephone numbers. The names of the authors should not appear on the rest of the paper.
- An abstract of no more than 200 words must accompany each referred article.
- All references should be placed at the end of text using APA (7<sup>th</sup> edition) for example:

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*Rumble, P., & Aspland, T. (2010). The four tributes model of the middle school teacher. Australian Journal of Middle Schooling, 10(1), 4–15.*

### Book

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- Footnotes are not to be used.
- Figures and diagrams should be professionally prepared and submitted in a form suitable for reproduction, indicating preferred placement.

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### Email: Journal Editor

journal@adolescentsuccess.org.au or

### Executive Officer

executiveofficer@adolescentsuccess.org.au

### Website:

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# A Snapshot of our Brisbane Study Tour -

March 2023

By Debra Evans, President of Adolescent Success  
& Liz Benson, Executive Officer of Adolescent Success

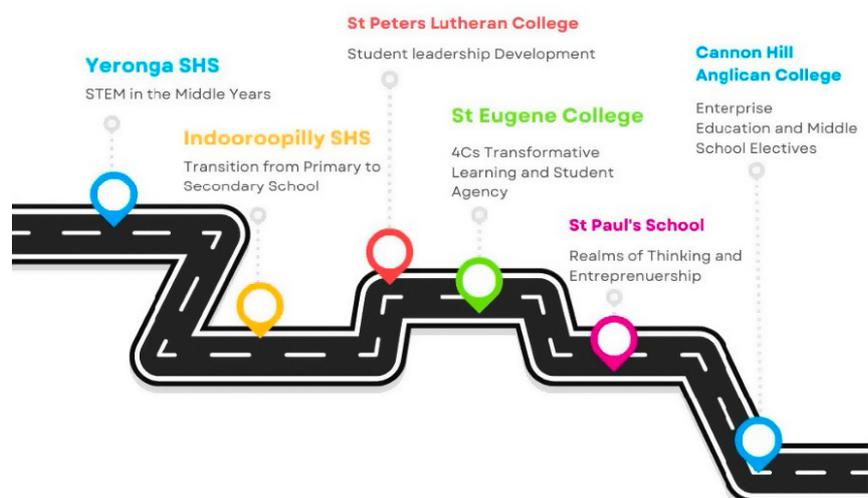
Study tours provide educators with an opportunity to immerse themselves into a variety of middle years' contexts. They provide a moment for teachers to step out of their own world, consider innovative ideas, reflect on their own approaches, affirm, and inspire them to move forward.

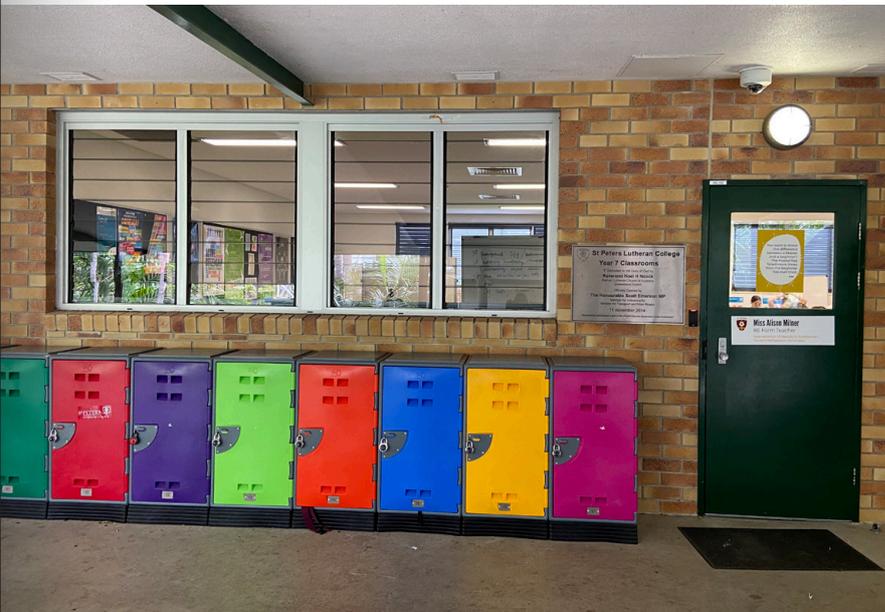
Our two-day experience in Brisbane during Term 1 brought together leaders from four states: South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland to explore how six different schools approach learning and teaching in the middle years.

## Day 1

After meeting at our central point in Brisbane city, we headed out for Day 1. Our first stop was Yeronga State High School, where we gained great insight into their STEM program for Years 7 – 9. We heard from teachers and students, as to how they ideate, create, and make their product in partnership with several businesses and organisations. We got a deep sense of how Science, Maths and Design Technology is integrated and connected for, with, and by their students. We witnessed first-hand, how they use

## Adolescent Success Brisbane Study Tour 2023





their purpose-built workshop to bring their designs to fruition. The current project has seen students design a caravan, then pitch their designs to a local business. One design was chosen and is being produced by Year 12 students. For now, students are building the caravan on site.

Our next stop was Indooroopilly State High where the focus was on transition from primary to secondary education. Over the past few years, much has been established to ensure their Year 7s move into secondary

program. This robust program is founded upon Luke Mckenna's Authentic Student Leadership Selection Process. It allows students to experience leadership opportunities throughout the middle years (their junior school), and to develop the important skills of communication and collaboration, enhancing the students' confidence to lead. With many purpose-built facilities, playgrounds and leafy walkways, St Peter's was an excellent place to wrap up Day 1.

## Day 2

St Eugene College at Burpengary was our first stop on Day 2. It was wonderful to see students leading teachers in a workshop using the learning and teaching approaches that the college has been implementing over the last four years. The 4 Cs Transformative Learning and Student Agency are key foci at St Eugene's and the benefits across the school were evident. It was inspiring to hear and experience how teachers are empowering their students to know, understand and authentically use the language and processes in their learning (and life).

*"What is an education worth having?"* has always been the mantra at St Paul's School and we were privileged to be able to get a taste of what is on offer with their Realms of Thinking program. With a focus on learning for 'their' students' futures, and to bring a whole school approach to fruition, the program focuses on sixteen key learner dispositions.



education as smoothly and as effectively as possible. Based on extensive research and with leaders and teachers working collaboratively, it was clear how the focus on the transition processes is positively impacting student learning and wellbeing. There are many facets to their transition strategy, and this year, they changed the school's middle and senior leadership structure to strengthen the connection between learning and wellbeing.

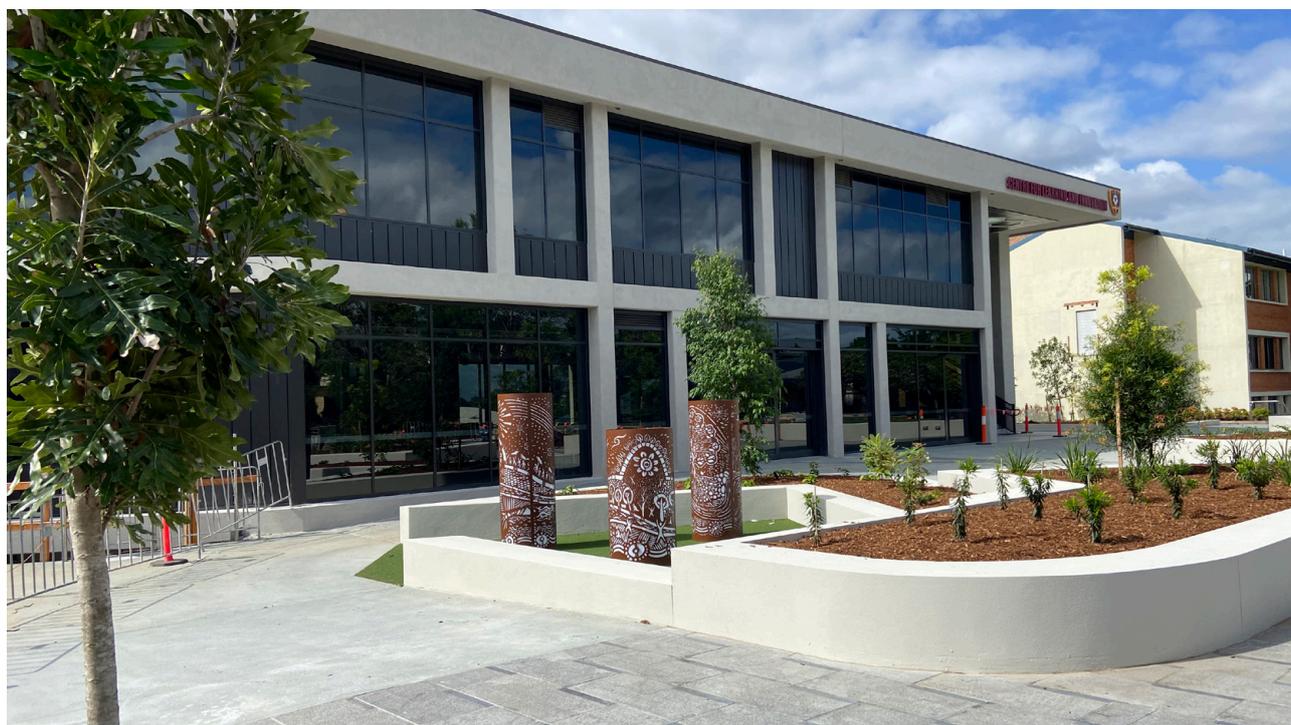
Onto St Peter's Lutheran College, a Preparatory to Year 12 school, where we heard about their student leadership development



Disciplinary, interdisciplinary, entrepreneurial, and academic approaches underpin the way of working at St Pauls. “It’s a teaching and learning model that helps learners ask better questions, navigate failure, develop empathy and spark their imaginations” (Realms of Thinking, 2023). Their newest purpose-built facility to encourage and grow ideation, learning and thinking processes

## Thank you to the following people for welcoming us into your schools:

- Timothy Barraud, Principal Yeronga SHS
- Jennifer Knowles, Deputy Principal, Indooroopilly SHS
- Patricia Aishford, Head of Junior High, St Peters Lutheran College
- Mitch Ulacco, Deputy Principal, St Eugene College
- Paul Browning, Principal, St Paul’s School
- Barb Mossman, Head of Gifted and Enterprise Education, Cannon Hill Anglican College



for both students and teachers was a brilliant experience. For more information see: <https://realmsofthinking.com.au/>

Our last stop, Cannon Hill Anglican College, was worth the wait. Listening to their story of creating a meaningful enterprise education program for students in the middle years provoked thoughtful reflections from our educators. Whilst purpose-built buildings might look great, Cannon Hill, lives by the belief that it is what happens inside the walls of those buildings that is most important. From passion

projects to a unique middle school elective program, Cannon Hill, has placed student choice squarely at the centre of their curriculum.

At Adolescent Success we aim to promote collegiality through relevant, purposeful, and practical experiences. We also seek to build and grow our network of middle years educators. As such we will follow up with an online reflection session, giving delegates time to digest and reflect on their experiences. We hope a community of practice is in the initial stages of blooming.



# Sustaining Teacher Wellbeing

*By Stuart Ryan, Director of Wellbeing & Community Service, Arndell Anglican College, NSW*

Teaching is a vocation that requires passion, dedication, and immense commitment, yet many teachers are struggling to find a sense of reward and satisfaction in their profession. This struggle is due to factors such as lack of respect, increased staffing challenges, and the focus on outcomes and data (Heffernan, Bright, Longmuir, & Magyar, 2021). School leaders, however, have an opportunity to make teaching a more positive experience for teachers and students alike by prioritising teacher wellbeing. In recent years, there have been many changes to the work and workload of teachers due to the teacher shortage, the competitive labour market conditions and the 'war for talent'. Leaders can adopt innovative strategies to dynamically recruit and retain excellent teachers while making sure that every teacher feels valued and supported.



Recently, schools have focused more strategically on student wellbeing, predominantly in response to the significant increase in mental health issues that Australia has experienced over the last decade. Issues such as technology use, social media, lack of sleep, lack of exercise, poor diets, a decline in resilience, and ‘over parenting’ have all contributed to declines in mental and physical health. Addressing issues of teacher workload and burnout means a prioritisation of teacher wellbeing, or in other words, care for the carers. Teaching is a relational vocation and a key reason for becoming a teacher is to make a difference in the lives of students. Like the health profession, teachers tend to be people who give of themselves, and they need to be given permission to care for themselves first; to ‘put on their own oxygen mask’ to then enable them to help others. While teachers must be responsible for their own physical health and wellbeing (personal wellbeing) school leaders play a significant role in creating a positive working environment (workplace wellbeing), enabling staff to be able to perform at their best.

Personal wellbeing is a combination of a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and social health, with more and more research describing the interdependence of these elements. However, many teachers put others before themselves and don’t always prioritise time or make wise choices around their own wellbeing. They care for their students and educate them in the importance of sleep, nutrition and exercise but often don’t look after themselves, feeling exhausted at the end of another gruelling day.

Teachers need to receive ongoing education around these elements of wellbeing and be encouraged to make small changes to improve their sleep, diet, and exercise to enable them to be able to perform at their best.

A positive, safe, work environment results in greater productivity. Social researchers Mark McCrindle and Ashley Fell (2020) point out in their book *Work Wellbeing*, “*Work plays too big a role in our lives for us to view it as merely a means to an end... When work is our vocation... that’s when we will have a greater chance of thriving.*” So much of life is taken up at work. Work and especially work in a school should give us great joy and a sense of purpose. Teachers get ‘meaning’ from work and see the impact of their work on the lives of those whom they teach. Simon Sinek (2011) states,

*“Working hard for something we don’t care about is called stress; working hard for something we love is called passion.”*

With so many external factors impacting education systems and teacher workload, what can leaders do to restore the passion within teachers?

Firstly, school leaders need to be able to reflect on the following questions that their staff will have about the workplace:

- What is the vision for the school and what are the values

that underpin the school ethos and philosophy?

- Do these values align with my own personal beliefs?
- What is my place in the school and how am I able to contribute?
- Do I feel valued?
- Am I part of a positive work culture?
- Is there the ability for me to grow and develop?
- Are there systems and structures in place that allow me to focus on the core responsibilities of teaching?

The second thing school leaders can do is to ask their staff these questions. Schools see great importance in student voice, but teacher voice can sometimes be neglected. A simple way to facilitate teacher sharing is to conduct a “wellbeing audit” of the workplace. This is not just about finding out what is going wrong or what staff are struggling with. It is also about finding out the things that are going well; being able to build on these things; and being reminded of the many positive things about work and the workplace.

**A simple method is to consider key domains of wellbeing and ask staff three questions for each domain:**

- What are we doing well?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?
- What ideas or initiatives do you have to enhance wellbeing within the school?

The Australian Psychological Society (2015) provides six domains of wellbeing, which are useful for a school to assess its competency in addressing each area of wellbeing. These domains are:

Physical Wellbeing	The ability to carry out daily tasks with vigour
Social Wellbeing	The ability to have satisfying relationships and interactions with others
Emotional Wellbeing	The ability to control emotions and express them appropriately and comfortably
Spiritual Wellbeing	A guiding sense of meaning or value in life
Intellectual Wellbeing	The ability to learn, grow from experience, and utilise intellectual capabilities
Vocational Wellbeing	Having interests, employment, volunteer work or other activities that provide personal satisfaction and enrichment in daily life

A further domain could be ‘Systems and Structures’. This incorporates all of the processes and procedures that occur within a school. More and more has been added to the workload of teachers, yet it is rare for schools to pause and ask, what can we change, modify, or stop doing? All schools can be made simpler. Teachers and students can be given room to breathe by emptying the marginal and concentrating on the most important things. All schools can find ways of doing less and discover more time to do a better job. Justin Reich (2022) argues, “We need to look closely at our schools and figure out everything that we don’t need to be doing anymore. We need to find as many things as possible that we can take off the plates of overworked educators” (p. 1).

What is most important in this process is that teachers are heard, that the feedback is made visible, and that cultural strengths are celebrated while areas for improvement are identified and actioned. In conducting an audit

such as this, common themes are often presented, particularly around systems and structures. A few simple adjustments to workplace structures can make a world of difference and boost staff morale as they feel heard, appreciated, and supported. Some suggestions include:

- Enforcing a simple policy of not sending emails outside of normal business hours. This will allow staff to be able to switch off from work when they are at home, and this must be modelled by school leaders.
- Educating staff around elements of wellbeing such as sleep, nutrition, exercise, and mental health. It is important to remind staff of resources like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and how they can access them. Opportunities for staff to work on their own personal wellbeing should be considered with staff. They could also be provided access to and encouraged to utilise school gyms, personal trainers or form their own exercise groups.

- Encouraging a strong sense of community and belonging. Staff will be able to perform better and be more productive in environments that have a strong sense of community and sense of belonging for all – teaching and non-teaching staff. Often, non-teaching staff feel as though they are not as valued, appreciated or as important as teachers.

School leaders have an important role to play in creating a positive work environment for their staff. By taking the time to listen to their staff, understand their needs, and working together to develop strategies to provide better support, school leaders can help teachers to feel more valued, supported, and resourced to provide the best possible education for their students. This way, teachers can be better equipped to bring their passion and enthusiasm to the classroom and maintain a sense of reward and satisfaction in their profession.

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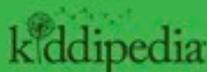


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# The Use of NAPLAN Data and Support for It: Perceptions of Practising Teachers

*By Debra Evans, Vesife Hatisaru and John Williamson  
Republished with permission*

## Introduction

This article presents the findings of a master research project, which investigated teacher attitudes and perceived competence in using data to inform classroom practices. The case study research was conducted in an independent Catholic Girls' College in Queensland. Teachers identified that external assessment data, in particular the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] were of low usefulness for informing their classroom practice. Additionally, there was a significant number of teachers who believed they were not confident or competent in using these data effectively, therefore suggesting leadership within the College needed to provide greater opportunity and support to improve teachers' data literacy skills.



## Background

The use of data is recognised as a fundamental component of effective teaching and learning (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014; Gonski et al., 2018). Teachers are being asked to demonstrate a level of expertise and to use more and diverse data to support practices that can improve student learning outcomes (Mandanich et al., 2006; Wayman et al., 2017).

In Australia, and increasingly internationally, standardised test data are seen as a key form of data to guide instructional practices. With literacy and numeracy a high priority in many Australian schools, and standardised test rankings such as NAPLAN being open to public scrutiny, many schools and sectors have an explicit focus on teachers using standardised test data, such as NAPLAN to identify areas for student improvement or to enhance the performance of cohorts in general (Goss et al., 2015; Goss et al., 2017; Renshaw et al., 2013).

Consequently, in this policy and practical context, it is important to know if and how teachers are using

standardised test data, their levels of competency and confidence in the use of these data, and whether (or not) teachers are being supported to become more data literate.

## Methodology

This study was undertaken by the first author in a Years 7 – 12, Independent Catholic Girls' College (the College) in metropolitan Queensland, during Semester 2 of 2019. As a case study, it utilised both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to gain perspectives from the teachers and middle leaders and employed a descriptive and interpretive approach to analysing and triangulating the study data (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

The teaching staff in the college were invited to complete an anonymous online survey. A total of 49 teacher responded to the survey, which represented 76.5% of the teaching staff. The teachers recorded their responses on a mixture of a four- and five-point Likert scale. Semistructured interviews were also conducted with 4 teachers and 6 middle leaders to explore specific details around competence and confidence

and actual data use within the College.

In addition, unstructured observations were made during four workshops facilitated by the researcher and three middle leaders during the final term of 2019. These were designed to address some of the data use issues identified through the case study, and more specifically to upskill teaching staff in the use of the newly introduced online Learning Analytics Suite (LAS) which provided a broad view of student progress. The LAS enabled teachers to access individual student profiles, class, subject, and cohort assessment data, as well as individual and cohort NAPLAN data.

Whilst the case study explored much broader teacher perceptions of data use, this article presents findings around their perceptions of the use of NAPLAN data, its usefulness and frequency, and support for the use of data (see Table 1) and where relevant, interview responses and unstructured observations from workshops investigating the participants' perceptions of NAPLAN data.

**Table 1**  
*Research Questions*

FOCUS	QUESTION
Use of data	Q1. How often do you use the following assessments?
Attitudes towards usefulness of data	Q2. How useful are the following forms of student data?
Frequency of using standardised tests	Q3. What is the frequency of, and for what purpose do you use NAPLAN, PAT, and other assessments?
Support for the use of data	Q4. What supports are in place for data use?

## Results

The participants' responses to the relevant survey questions (see Table 1) presented in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide insight into teachers' use of, attitudes to, and frequency of use of data, including NAPLAN data, for informing classroom practice.

**Table 2**

*Participants' Responses to Q1: How often do you use the following assessment data? (n=49)*

	Do not use	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Weekly or Almost	Few times a week	No response
NAPLAN	13(27%)	30(61%)	5(10%)	1(2%)	-	-
PAT, QCS	14(29%)	29(60%)	5(11%)	-	-	1(2%)
Teacher-designed (formative)	6(12%)	11(22.5%)	16(32%)	11(22.5%)	5(10%)	-
Teacher-designed (summative)	9(19%)	17(35%)	11(23%)	9(18%)	2(4%)	1(2%)
Other 2	(4%)	3(6%)	7(14%)	4(8%)	2(4%)	31(63%)

Table 2 outlines the regularity of use by teachers of various data sources available within the College. A total of 13 teachers (27%) reported that they do not use NAPLAN at all, and an additional 30 teachers (61%) stated they use these data less than once per month. These numbers are reinforced through Table 3, where a significant percentage of teachers reported that NAPLAN data was of little value for informing their classroom practice, with 24 teachers (49%) believing that it is only somewhat useful and 8 teachers (16%) saying it is not useful at all. It is noteworthy that 8 of the teachers (16%) did not respond to the NAPLAN option, and in combination with those who believed it was not useful at all, represents 32% of respondents. A typical comment made by teachers in the survey further reinforced the perceived value (and use) of NAPLAN: "It is confusing to access NAPLAN data... Our Learning Enhancement department caters for most of this data... it is only a snapshot of students on a day – not a true reflection of their abilities."

Further comments such as: "it could be useful, but is outdated", and "it is not often used in planning" reinforced that many teachers believe these data are of little use in informing their classroom practices.

**Table 3**

*Participants' Responses to Q2: How useful are the following forms of student assessment data? (n=49)*

	Not useful	Somewhat useful	Useful	Very useful	No response
NAPLAN	8(16%)	24(49%)	8(16%)	1(2%)	8(16%)
PAT, QCS	6(12%)	21(43%)	8(16%)	4(8%)	10(20%)
Teacher-designed (formative)	1(2%)	5(12%)	16(32.5%)	20(48%)	6(12%)
Teacher-designed (summative)	-	6(12%)	16(32.5%)	19(39%)	1(2%)
Other	1(2%)	3(6%)	4(8%)	6(12%)	28(57%)

Table 4 summarises responses to the question asking teachers to report their frequency of use of NAPLAN and other assessment data to inform practices, or to engage in conversations with various stakeholders. These findings reinforce the high percentage of teachers who report that they use NAPLAN, PAT or other standardised tests only once or twice per year, or a few times per year, to inform aspects of their pedagogy or for discussions with students. In the whole sample, only a few teachers reported that they use the NAPLAN or other forms of data frequently (monthly or weekly) to inform their professional activities.

**Table 4**

*Participants Responses to Q3: For what purpose do you use NAPLAN, PAT and other standardised test data and in what frequency? (n=49)*

Use of NAPLAN, PAT, OTHER to:	1 or 2 times per year	A few times per year	Monthly	Weekly	No Response
Identify instructional content	30(64%)	12(26%)	5(10.5%)	-	2(4%)
Tailor instruction to student needs	23(47%)	16(33%)	(12%)	- 4	(8%)
Develop recommendations for additional support	22(44%)	14(29%)	8(16%)	2(4%)	3(6%)
Form groups of targeted instruction	23(47%)	15(31%)	4(8%)	2(4%)	5(10.5%)
Discuss with parent or guardian	29(59%)	13(27%)	2(4%)	-	5(10.5%)
Discuss with student	30(64%)	12(24%)	-	-	7(14%)
Meet with a colleague – in or outside college	22(45%)	13(27%)	2(4%)	1(2%)	10(20.5%)
Meet with another teacher	28(57%)	13(27%)	2(4%)	-	6(12%)

Teacher responses to the question of support types in place for effective use of data are shown in Table 5, highlighting the significant disparities across the College. Thirty-six (74%) agreed or strongly agreed that there is someone who answers their questions about using data, and 30 (61%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the college provides enough professional learning about using data. Furthermore, Item g highlights that 14 (44%) teachers reported that their middle leader did not model

the effective use of data. Comments provided within the surveys corroborated these findings.

An important issue raised with respect to leadership and supports was around collaboration. When asked how often teachers met in teams to use data, 40-50% of respondents Strongly Disagreed or Disagreed that they met to do the variety of activities as outlined: indicating that data are not regularly being used collaboratively to inform classroom practices at the College. Interviewees have

reiterated this in a variety of ways, with one teacher stating:

It would be beneficial to discuss student data like NAPLAN and PAT at meetings more regularly so that we can work together to improve our student results, for example: have we all got 1/5 of the class not doing well in this particular area, so could we do some targeted remediation of gaps, and/or extension to support our classes? rather than only discuss the content of what we are teaching.

**Table 5**

*Participants Responses to Q4 What supports are in place for data use? (n=49)*

Support in place for data use	SD	D	A	SA	No Response
<b>A.</b> You are adequately supported in the effective use of data.	8(16%)	17(35%)	21(43%)	2(4%)	1(2%)
<b>B.</b> You are adequately prepared to use data	7(14%)	17(35%)	21(43%)	3(6%) 1	(2%)
<b>C.</b> There is someone who answers your questions about using data.	3(6%)	10(20%)	32(66%)	4(8%) -	
<b>D.</b> There is someone who helps you change your practice (e.g. your teaching) based on data.	3(6%)	18(37%)	22(45%)	3(6%)	3(6%)
<b>E.</b> The College provides you enough professional development about data use.	6(12%)	24(49%)	14(29%)	3(6%)	-
<b>F.</b> The College's professional development for teachers is useful for learning about data use.	8(16%) 2	0(42%)	18(37%)	1(2%)	2(4%)
<b>G.</b> Your middle leader/s model the use of data to inform practices, effectively. Teacher responses only (n=32)	2(6%)	12(37.5%)	12(37.5%)	2(6%)	4(12%)

*NB Item g was a question for teachers only (not middle leaders), which accounts for n=32.*

## Discussion

A key finding of this study was that teachers reported external testing data such as NAPLAN were of low value in supporting their classroom teaching practice, with eight teachers (16%) indicating that NAPLAN data were not used at all with another eight teachers (16%) not responding to this item (Table 2). Total of twenty-four teachers (49%) responded that it is somewhat useful, with 'somewhat' being the second least favourable response. In summary, most teachers felt NAPLAN data was of minimal use in informing their practice. Comments by some

teachers such as "it is confusing to access NAPLAN data" and "it is not a true reflection of students' abilities" reinforced this belief and are consistent with the other research (Dulfer, et al., 2012; Matters, 2006). This may arise from the continued conjecture and lack of 'trust' as to the value of NAPLAN, or from a lack of access and understanding of the data available for classroom instruction. Whilst it is argued by Goss and Sonnemann (2019) that NAPLAN is an important component of the data ecosystem for schools and teachers, the findings in this study challenges this notion, with sixteen of the teachers (32%) reporting no benefit of NAPLAN data and

a further thirteen teachers (27%) reporting not using it at all.

Renshaw et al., (2013) pointed to the evolving professional skills of teachers when they stated: "... considering competency levels with the use of standardised test data, a benefit of the NAPLAN movement is possibly that the capacity of teachers to interpret quantitative data has increased following its introduction" (p. 41). Although the participant teachers reported engaging with NAPLAN data in some capacity, as literature suggests, the dissemination of these test data and accountability measures has not led to improved capacity to understand and interpret the

data, and more importantly, to changes in teacher classroom practices (Lasater et al., 2019; Matters, 2006). Statements made by teachers in surveys, such as "... because these tests are yearly, we only look at them once, and with no allocated time to go back and analyse the data, we don't", and "NAPLAN is not as important as what we do in class" tend to support this latter view.

This lack of value that many of the teachers assigned to NAPLAN data was further noted as a key topic of conversation during the LAS workshops. Several teachers stated that "NAPLAN was not relevant to their subject area" but they did express some interest in learning how to use it more effectively in their context. Some expressed surprise and interest with respect to how NAPLAN data could be accessed through the LAS, then used to inform practice for class and cohort support, but many commented that they were not convinced that the data provided was reliable.

## Perceived Supports for Using Data

Statements from teachers and middle leaders in the survey and interviews, that they believed they lacked the ability to analyse the data and were unsure how to connect that analysis to improving classroom practice were common. Interviewees reported that they saw data analysis and interpretation as two separate skill sets and their confidence levels in both were low. This finding is consistent with international studies (Dunn et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2018), where it is also reported that teachers perceive the ability to connect data to classroom

instructional decision-making is a separate activity from the ability to analyse and interpret data.

The overall data theme, therefore, argued that if teachers are to develop greater capacity to collect, analyse and use data effectively, then the school leadership must provide opportunities for collaboration, training, and ongoing support. Datnow et al. (2013), Mandinach and Jimerson (2016) and this study suggest that teachers are not often provided the training and support to effectively use the data available to them to inform their practice. In this regard, the implementation of the workshops by the school leadership during the duration of this study was significant in providing teachers and middle leaders some opportunity for collaboration and professional learning in the use of data in general. It was evident, however, that whilst some may have already accessed the data through the LAS, many were not utilising the system to its full potential, with most navigating basic actions, demonstrating minimal understanding as to how NAPLAN data could inform classroom practices.

This study supports the literature in arguing that school leaders should model and lead the culture of data use to facilitate professional learning opportunities (Jimerson & Wayman 2011; Timperley et al., 2007). It is essential that school leaders are skilled and willing to 'lead' initiatives for professional learning that support teachers to develop their confidence and competence in data use for instructional purposes. They should also make available school time for teachers to collaborate and focus on the use of data to improve practice.

## Conclusion

Overall, teachers at the College had a strong view that the use of external assessment data, such as NAPLAN, were of low value for instructional purposes, and in their daily classroom practice these standardised tests were rarely utilised to inform their pedagogy. This under-utilisation of standardised test data, specifically NAPLAN, to inform practice is an area that warrants further attention, particularly as improved student outcomes continue to be a strategic focus of both external agencies such as AITSL and internal school leaders.

If teachers and leaders are to utilise NAPLAN data for instructional purpose, they need to be provided opportunity for professional learning, for collaboration and to be guided effectively in its use. It cannot be assumed that teachers have the skills to analyse, interpret and then utilise the data effectively to impact student learning.

## Publishing Statement

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## Middle School Musings

By Rhiannon O'Hara

*'I wouldn't say homework is life threatening, it's just like... disappointing'*

- Year 7 Student, 2019

Six years ago, I stepped into my first ever Year 7 classroom. Twenty-five faces staring back at me. Eager. Waiting. I've been doing this for two years already; how hard can it be I thought? But despite the readiness of my lesson, nothing could prepare me for what came next:

*Miss O'Hara...*

*What font do I use?*

*What font size do I use?*

*What colour font do I use?*

*What's the title? There has to be a title.*

*Will this be for homework?*

*Do we start now?*

*Do I handwrite it or do it on my laptop?*

*Can we leave our books here?*

*Should I take my drink bottle with me?*

*Can we listen to music?*

*Do you know my aunty's cousin's friend's dog?*

*Have you taught them?*

Oh my god, I thought. 20 minutes have passed and all I have done is answer questions! It was here I had a lightbulb moment. A moment that changed the course of my pedagogy in every single lesson thereafter. I am teaching kids, not teenagers.

The thing about teaching middle years is that there is magic. Magic that goes somewhere to die after about Year 9. Middle school students are truly students the world simply hasn't hurt yet. No soul crushing exposure to peer pressure or failure. No real-life altering tragedy (i.e., your crush not liking you back). No desire to fit the mould society has carved for them. Middle school students say what they think and though, at times, this will often be ridiculous, borderline inappropriate or flat out absurd, it will also be the most memorable part of your day. Middle school students bring a love of learning that is infectious, and,

like sponges, they want to soak up everything you as the educator can bring to the classroom. Their energy, if matched by the teacher, will allow you to experience even just a small flicker of what it is like to be a kid again. For me, personally, it changed my entire classroom approach and above all, gave me a new lease on teaching.

I've always reasoned that middle school teaching lays the foundational seeds of a person's life. In such a fundamental time of transition, not only in a schooling environment, but also in identity, it is imperative these kids have role models in every corner of their world. As an educator in a classroom, everything from what we do, what we say, what we wear and even what we eat is scrutinised by this age group. Whether we realise it or not, everything about how we present ourselves is under a microscope of judgment. In saying this, it gives us the opportunity to put our best foot forward and ultimately appreciate what an honour it is to be so impactful on a young person's life.

My current site teaches their middle school classes in a single sex environment. Despite having

taught middle years for some time, 2023 has seen me land my first experience with Year 7 boys. I spent most of the summer holidays stressed. How can I teach anything of merit to twenty-seven 12-year-old boys? It was imperative that I got the curriculum right and relevant for this group. As such I developed a brand-new unit of work on communication, whereby after 8-years in the game, had me feeling like a graduate teacher again. The boys were asked to develop a board game that an external leadership party within the school could easily play. Group work, competition, problem solving and games. What could go wrong! But also, a real 'throw something at the wall and hope it sticks' moment. In the lead up to the assessment we completed a range of formative tasks that required the group to build their communication skills. One afternoon a boy said to me that he was having lots of trouble at home communicating with his mum, explaining she frequently worked away for work. He said that everything we had been discussing in class had really resonated with him and caused him to do something he had never done - call his mum! She had been away for work, and he wanted to

communicate properly that their arguments were causing him a great deal of pain. He explained that he wouldn't have ever thought to do this prior to this unit of work but now felt he had the tools to convey the message effectively. As I fought to hold back tears, (God forbid I cry in front of a 12-year-old boy!) I realised that what I was doing matters. Even on the hardest days, it really matters.

To conclude, if I could wish for anything for the future of middle year's education, it would simply be that all educators experience teaching this age group. Irrespective of whether you are trained in Early Childhood or Year 12 Specialist Maths, I promise a willingness to step into a middle school classroom and bathe in their contagious energy will ignite your career, regardless of what stage it is in. And maybe, they might just teach you as much as you teach them.



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# Why I teach in the Middle Years

*By Elise Cheneen, Redlands College, Queensland*

## Introduction

“Every teenager is a walking bundle of questions” (Powell & Griffin, 2021). Children are inquisitive and push boundaries from a young age. From a toddler having tantrums because they can’t verbalise their feelings, to a Grade 3 child asking their parents about the birds and the bees. Add testosterone or estrogen, mascara and a Frank Green; then you have yourself a teenager – a person who is simultaneously trying to understand the world; discover where they fit in; and work out who they want to become. Fun times! Teaching middle years is an overwhelmingly tough gig as we teachers pour blood, sweat and tears into not just the curriculum but in shaping and modelling teenagers on how to be active and informed young people in an uncertain, technology driven, competitive and popularity focussed world. Yet the rewards of working with teenagers are so great that these difficulties pale into insignificance.

## What makes my work enjoyable?

Teaching should be enjoyable for both you and your students as “[s]tudents will get excited about what you are excited about” (Alzheimer,

2020, p. 46). I personally find joy in teaching and engaging meaningfully with my students. And that joy starts from the moment the students line up at the door and are greeted as they enter the room. This simple act is where learning begins. I have

established the consistency of respectfully inviting the students into the room where students stand behind their chairs and wait to be seated. Teaching valuable life skills within an everyday English lesson is a critical part of what makes teaching enjoyable for me.

When students show respect for who I am as a teacher and what I find valuable and important, teaching the curriculum then becomes a whole lot easier. One of the toughest struggles faced by teachers, which detracts from the enjoyment of teaching, is dealing with problematic behaviour, such as a lack of respect. “Over half the teachers leave the profession due to behavioural issues in the first 4 years” of teaching due to burn out (Greene, 2008, p. 10). I feel teachers need to be explicit with what their expectations are and then help students rise to meet that challenge. This is the building block for developing a strong rapport with students. Come in tough to start with, until an understanding of expectations and trust is formed. After that, the teaching and learning process becomes less onerous and more fulfilling.

One inspirational story for me, is from my Year 8 English class of two years ago. I had a student that was constantly misbehaving and pushing the boundaries. I initiated multiple conversations with his mum about how we can work together to help refocus him in the classroom. I taught him again the following year and his behaviour and attitude in class had dramatically improved. While he still received consequences for his negative behaviour at times, he could smile and accept the punishment with grace, knowing he simply hadn't followed my expectations. This year he is not in my class, but he told his younger brother, who I now have the privilege of teaching, to behave because ‘Mrs Cheneen is a cool teacher’. Enjoyment for me is seeing the hard yards I have exerted paying off. To know that I am part of the puzzle in helping to shape

my students' character. Knowing that what I do matters and that I make a difference.

## What makes my work important?

Teenagers have a whole world of struggles to navigate through. They have just moved from primary school where learning was cheerful, easy-going and playful to middle school where they need to think deeply, maintain high grades, multitask, self-correct, contribute to discussions (Tobias & Acuna, 2014) and that is just in their physical world. Teenagers also have to manage the technological world too of Tik Tok, Snapchat, Instagram, followers, Snap score, streaks and Be Real. I personally can't keep up with the world of social media for teenagers. One major life problem to a 13-year-old, is that they need to give their account details to a friend or family member to keep their ‘snap score’ at its peak while they head to camp, or else they will lose their streak. I personally miss the 90s version of Tik Tok, which was Shelley Craft's funniest home videos. Now that was entertainment.

I am still young (mid 30s) but I grew up in a time of dial up internet and gaining world knowledge from the Encyclopedia Britannica series my dad bought for the family. But today, knowledge is at the click of a button or for the lazy, a two-word command ‘Hey Siri’. Our minds are all being overloaded with information in one day that use to be gained over the course of one month. How does this impact the growing teenager? Why are teenagers so ‘poorly understood’ (Greene, 2008)? Because we don't

live in their world and they don't know how to navigate through the stampede of change and information bombarding them on a daily basis. And we wonder why teenagers are moody and cannot regulate their emotions or consider outcomes before they act (Greene, 2008). I believe wholeheartedly that what I do each day matters in the lives of these teenagers. I am there to listen. I am there to hear what they have to say. I am there to help them understand their feelings. I am there as a role model to guide them through this tough and uncertain phase of their youth. It isn't easy. But I am deeply passionate to help my students be successful in and outside the classroom, in the physical and digital world. To give their best efforts in all areas of their life. I agree with Johnson when he says: “When students believe that success is possible, they will try” (Johnson, 2011, p. 14). That is all I am asking of my students, to simply TRY.

## My hopes for the future of middle years education?

So, what are my hopes for the future in Middle Years Education? Normalisation, transformation and aspiration. Firstly, to normalise the struggles, pressures and change occurring for our teenagers. I would love to see psychology and mental health classes implemented in schools. To open avenues to ‘check in’ with individual students and teach them how the brain works. To make normal the daily struggles of bodily changes, peer pressure, beliefs, values and saying ‘no’. Secondly, transforming students from a young kid to a competent,

capable, caring teenager. To guide them in seeing the importance of friends, family and community. To build their character and think of how to help others over themselves, to stand up for what is right and build a strong school culture of respect, trust and acceptance. Finally, to know the aspirations that teenagers have for the present and the future. They don't need to know at the age of twelve what career path is ahead of them. But I want them to be proud of their skills, hobbies and sports they take part in and showcase their achievements. I want them to be able to teach others what they know in their

field of expertise like boxing, origami, music, photography and more. For educators, I want to see connection, encouragement and regular check-ins. It is easy to get caught up in our own busyness that we miss supporting our colleagues. As we say to students, a kind word or action goes a long way. Let's build each other up as we navigate the middle years. "Teachers are a team. We are in this together" (Alzheimer, 2020, p.59). So let's continue to make a difference for the young people in our care. Always remember that teachers are valuable and teachers make a difference.

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## Middle Years Learning

Someone put it to me in a recent online discussion, that transplanting education systems is too complicated and difficult to do. It turned out that this person had not observed the Finnish system and had simply heard this statement somewhere. Whilst I would never advocate such a thing, I will always advocate for best practice and the removal of poor practice. And this is the big difference between our system and Finland: the teacher is encouraged to innovate and update to best practice wherever they see a possibility to do so. As a teacher who has spent time in many Finnish classrooms, talked extensively with Finnish educators and read dozens of papers on the Finnish system, I find this dismissive attitude frustrating and damaging. Why do we demand such a high standard from a potential change yet happily leave the bar so low with regards to our own methods?

On first visiting Finland's schools, I was aware of this above-mentioned common myth, and I made it my mission to find out exactly which aspects of the system were creating such amazing outcomes, and which of these were the impossible to transfer practices behind the myth.

What I wasn't prepared for was the grilling I received about my own country's education practices: "Are your students all the same?" was an often-asked question, followed by, "Well why do you use standardised curriculum and tests?" after I answered "no" to the first question. That Finnish teachers were even aware of my practices was a shock. But why would Australian teachers take the time to investigate research and neuroscience when they are

likely to be discouraged should they try and include it in their practice?

"Why are we still doing what we do when all evidence indicates that it does not work?" This question was often put to me. In a country where teachers are encouraged to try new ideas and continuing with anything that was proven to not be effective would be considered unprofessional. Why are we so determined to inject 'rigour' into our students' learning, yet so reluctant to apply it to the analysis of our own education practice?

In September, speaking to a group of school leaders, OECD's education director Andreas Schleicher warned Australia of the perils of the wrong way, saying we may end up training our youth to become second class robots instead of educating them to be first class humans. Finnish educators looked at me like I was a child molester when I told them we gave major examinations in NAPLAN to 8-year-olds. "Why does the teacher allow this to happen?" they said.

"Does it work?"

"No" was the only possible answer.

"Well why do you keep doing it?"

"Oh, I see..." observed one Finnish teacher who had been listening intently, "The test shows which schools and students have weaknesses so that they can direct extra help and funding to them."

Soon after returning from my first visit to Finland, I discovered the exact reason for their dislike of standardised tests. During a Year 8 class discussion about growth mindset, a girl told how she could remember the exact moment that she decided she was terrible at maths. It was during the

Year 3 NAPLAN test. I noticed several other students nodding in agreement and found that nine of the girls in the class recalled a similar experience. When they were eight years old, they were keen to please parents and teachers who they trusted implicitly. This trust meant that they did not believe teachers would give them math problems which were beyond their abilities. When they could not complete many of the problems on the test, they took it as a personal failure and decided that they were not good at maths and would avoid letting people down by avoiding challenging mathematics as often as possible.

On hearing this, I wondered how many students across the country had been through the same thing, and had their lives changed as a result. How often had this also occurred in English and Science (maybe there is a positive to other subjects not being on the NAPLAN tests)? Once again, if the imposition of tests such as this on students as young as eight does not destroy any remaining trust the students have, our failure to take any real action on the problems they reveal will surely do so. Our insistence on



micro-managing our teachers and students with things like NAPLAN and standardised curriculum has seen both (teachers and students) lose the motivation and enthusiasm that autonomy and trust bring. And it is this that is at the heart of the success of the Finnish system.<sup>1</sup> The Finnish teacher is a trusted professional, and to be conducting frequent performance evaluations would be undermining this trust. This is one of the reasons why the teaching profession attracts excellent candidates. The Finnish teacher's assessments are trusted. As one Finnish educator said to me during a discussion about NAPLAN, "Why don't they just ask the teachers?"

I was recently asked by an international education company if I thought Australian teachers were of a world-class standard. My response – and I have been to dozens of schools this year – was that they are definitely so, however, like many Australian students, they often feel like they are delivering a prefabricated, standardised product and assessments. Their judgements and skills are not trusted, innovation is not wanted, and they adjust their teaching accordingly.

Finnish teachers develop the curriculum as they see fit, same for assessment. There is no evaluation of teachers; they are asked how they can be supported. They are trusted professionals.

Over a decade back, worldwide authority on educational reform, Michael Fullan, advised

Australians by saying there is no way that ambitious and admirable nationwide goals, set out in the Melbourne Declaration, will be met with the strategies being used then. "No successful system in the world has ever led with these drivers," Fullan (2011) wrote.

Returning to my opening question about Finnish methods being applied here. The students I observed were very similar to Australian students, with the same concerns (the latest music, computer games, sports, etc) and mannerisms, but with one major difference. As one teenage exchange student to Finland (from the USA) told education writer Amanda Ripley, Finnish teenagers still rebelled against the adult society around them, but neglecting education did not appear to be among their choices in doing so (Ripley, 2013).

At one school, my host left me to wait in the corridor, saying the teacher would be there in a few minutes. Twenty minutes later the teacher arrived, and we went straight into the room which was full of teenage students. I immediately expressed my surprise, as I thought I'd been waiting outside an empty classroom. He responded quizzically, "What are your students going to be doing when you are not there to look over their shoulders?" Indeed, within 12 months COVID struck and we saw exactly what happened when our students lacked a teacher looking over their shoulder.

When I asked a Finnish colleague how their students had managed through the period of remote learning, the response was, "They have tried to not let it impact their studies". Here in Australia, many students saw it as an opportunity to disengage. Such is the difference between having ownership over something and having it thrust upon you. Intrinsic motivation. I was starting to understand what it meant for an education system to be decades ahead (one Finnish teacher who taught in Australia estimated the difference to be 30-40 years and wrote a piece in the Finnish education professional practice journal which described Australia as such). Like the Finns, we want the students to work hard at their learning activities, but we look at how we can compel, coerce, even force, students to complete the learning tasks while the Finns look at how they can create a desire to enjoy and want to do the learning tasks. Essentially, our method is almost assured to encourage pushback from teenagers, who are infamous for their reluctance to follow any kind of mandate or order. And sadly, we are also engendering a dislike of learning in many.

In a recent discussion with Pasi Sahlberg<sup>2</sup> I asked him why there was such a resistance to change here. He suggested that he felt many leaders want to change but simply do not know how to go about it. Australian education has fallen into a mode of taking

<sup>1</sup> Finnish Teachers have reported that their autonomy more than anything else determines much of their continued job satisfaction, and without it many would likely choose a career change. (Sahlberg, 2012) Indeed there has been research lately suggesting strong links between autonomy and job satisfaction, and even general happiness. The implications of this on Australian education in light of the 'teacher shortage' are enormous.

<sup>2</sup> Pasi Sahlberg is Finnish educator and scholar. He is former Director General at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki and former visiting professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Pasi is experienced in classroom teaching, training teachers and leaders, coaching schools to change and advising education policy-makers in their education reforms. He is an international speaker and writer on educational change. Pasi's many awards include the 2011 Upton Sinclair Award in the US, the 2012 Education Award in Finland, the 2013 Grawemeyer Award in the US, the 2014 Robert Owen Award in Scotland and the 2016 Lego Prize in Denmark. He was the Rockefeller Foundation's Resident at the Bellagio Center in 2017.



nstruction from above and rarely implementing anything contrary. Many of us have seen little change in the last few decades so we are not adept at implementing it. Sahlberg mentioned that he often has leaders ask him, “How do I go about doing this? Who do I ask?” His response is usually, “Just do it, you are the principal, and it is the right thing to do.”

More of this type of leadership is needed. If educators don't speak out (and act!) about their own profession and the best interests of students, someone else will and their interests may be elsewhere. This is one of the primary strengths of the Finnish system. Schools such as the various Indie Schools and a few others around the country are leading the way. While most of these schools tend to cater to students who have been less than satisfied with the mainstream system, their success and that of countries like Finland and

Estonia (who have found great success with many of Finland's practices) shows what can be done in the mainstream arena.

I asked a school administrator here which education writers they read. The answer, “I read business leadership books,” was a revealing insight into where our education system has gone. A business environment is designed to have winners and losers. Is this what we want for our children? Perhaps our students are afraid to make mistakes because our teachers are afraid to take risks because our schools are afraid that they might lose some ‘competitive advantage’?

*Standardisation is not educational rigor. It is educational rigour-mortis.*

Too often our response to dwindling results has been to

double down on the very problems that got us here: tighten our standardised curriculum (maybe one teacher changed a question on an assignment and ruined it for everyone!); eliminate any material that is not on the test or going to be assessed; and increase revision of material that will be assessed. One state recommended exactly the above on their website. I am now asking how long we should continue with such practices when it is clear that they are not bringing any significant change.

When I asked Finnish educators about the school they taught at and how it compared, the response was always, “In Finland, every school is a good school.” It is understood (the research and neuroscience are indisputable) that competition is poor practice in nearly every aspect of education, and fostering intrinsic motivation is a key goal. As Professor Alfe Kohn observed, “Why would we want to turn learning into a competitive sport?”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the 2015 PISA tests, Finnish students reported close to the highest level of life satisfaction out of the participating countries, and the lowest level of school-work related anxiety.

## *How can we seek intrinsic motivation when our goal as teachers is as extrinsic as it gets: grades?*

One of the keys to intrinsic motivation is student and teacher autonomy. I was surprised to see children as young as seven or eight walking through the streets of Helsinki with their school bags, on their own. American teacher Tom Walker recalls in his first week of teaching in Finland (he married a Finn and moved there) being surprised when his 8-year-old students were walking out of class at the end of the day. Tom ran next door to ask the other teacher about this, telling him that in America students could not leave the room until a guardian was there to pick them up. Tom was told that giving students responsibility for things like this is an important part of Finland's education system.

“How are we going to create responsible citizens if we don't give them some responsibility?” is a common mantra in Finland. Students are allowed choices in as much of their studies as possible in a manner which creates ownership of their school studies. That we remove almost all autonomy from our students makes it very clear that they are not trusted, and that what is going on here does not require their input apart from

doing exactly what we tell them. If there is a secret to Finland's success it is that the students are sharing the workload with the teachers and the school. All the new practices, teaching methods, computer programs etc are not going to make much of a difference if they do not gain the enthusiasm of the student. Yet, we constantly ignore this.

### **Some things I saw that could easily be applied to Australian schools include:**

Finnish schools take a break approximately every 45 minutes. The neuroscience is clear that students will learn more in a 90-minute session with a 15-minute break in the middle than in the same session with no break. It is particularly powerful if, after the break you can revisit the skills being taught in the session before the break.<sup>4</sup> I have used this technique with Year 8 students doing double periods of English (approximately 100 minutes) and the improvements in outcomes such as concentration, positive classroom energy and the amount of material covered are considerably improved compared to the 100 minutes without the break. This goes against our idea that more is always more, but it is easily tested. Finnish educators take it for granted that all teachers do this and were shocked when I told them that it is not done in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

We ran the Teacher Trust<sup>6</sup> program with several schools around Orange in New South Wales. The schools that made this timetable change reported immediate success with both students and teachers reporting improvements in all areas. One school told me that some pushback they had from a small group of parents was withdrawn within a month when they noticed the positive difference in their children.

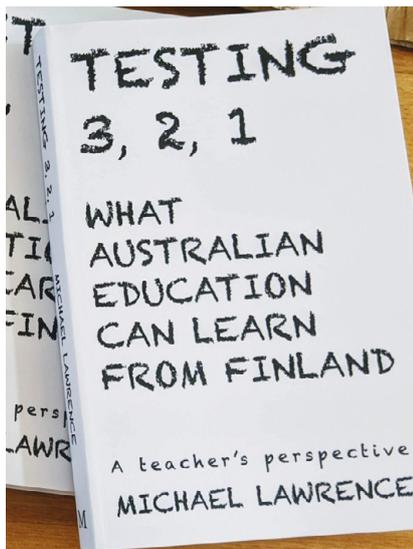
When I used the 15-minute break in my own school during 100-minute English sessions, an unexpected improvement came from the students understanding that they had a break coming up very soon and they would be able to chat with friends, run-around and burn off excess energy, have a bathroom break etc, removing the need to relieve any of these needs during the learning part of the session. The respect for a teacher who recognises that they are not machines is also obvious.

This is one of the many neuroscience/research based practices common in Finnish schools. There is nothing unusual to the casual observer in a Finnish school. Noise levels are very low, and teaching methods vary from class to class and teacher to teacher. Finnish teachers are famous for not assigning homework, but Finnish students regularly study at home. Because they want to. It is not 'work'; it is what they

<sup>4</sup> This is looked at in some detail in neuroscientist Dr. Jarod Cooney Horvath's 2019 book, *Stop Talking Start Influencing* and is paraphrased in my book *Testing 3,2,1, What Australian Education Can Learn from Finland* (p.144) To summarize: if you stop training a skill right after you've acquired it, the brain stays in its ready-to-learn state. If you learn a second, similar task while the brain is still in this plastic state, it overwrites the first skill. If you return to the first skill following a break, then the learning is solidified.

<sup>5</sup> Children spend more time in primary school in Australia than their peers in Finland, Estonia, or South Korea spend in primary and lower secondary education combined. (Sahlberg, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> Teacher Trust is a program designed specifically for Australian schools in collaboration with Tampere (Finland's second largest city) University of Applied Sciences, Educational Sciences faculty. Combining video interviews, speakers and a real time link to a panel from the university, it provides access to the knowledge behind Finland's enormously successful education system.



are studying at school. The levels of school satisfaction and mental health of students (and teachers!) are immensely bettered in this environment where students are not being forced to comply and teachers are not faux police officers, enforcing these behaviours.

From my own observations of Australian schools, the more conservative schools (one would have thought such schools would be looking at Finnish education for the improved academic and wellbeing outcomes) are the most likely to observe immediate success from the application of the latest methods. In several ways, they are closer to the model of school one sees in Finland, and often the high priority placed on learning is present to some extent, as is a respect for teachers and educators.

These schools also have the resources to ensure that staff can access the required training, with visits to Finland and study at Finnish universities all possibilities

for the future. There are many schools displaying the leadership required to use innovation and the latest research/neuroscience-based practices (and I don't mean the 'evidence-based practice' popular in many CVs and school websites which helped create the current problems!<sup>7</sup> I always ask which education systems have found success with these practices?).

After Australia, there are only four other OECD countries in which a larger proportion of disadvantaged students are studying in schools where the majority of students are disadvantaged. In Australia, based on OECD data, that figure is 52 per cent. The four other countries include Mexico, Chile and Brazil (cited in Sahlberg, 2022). We have successfully created educational ghettos. The future implications for a country with such an educational disparity are not healthy and there is a wealth of research telling us that the costs of getting the education system right are far less than the costs on society of an under-educated underclass.<sup>8</sup>

I have watched my own sons graduate from university recently and enter the workforce. One left his first marketing job after 6 months to move to another which offered him the opportunity to work from home with great autonomy in how he went about the role. The other chose his first cyber-security position, after being head-hunted by a number of companies, because he could work from home three or four days per week. Education is unlikely to ever be able to offer such flexibility,

but the profession needs to make itself competitive if we ever want to attract the best young people. The Finnish teacher is trained as a professional and given autonomy accordingly. We either trust our teachers and do the same or accept that as a profession, we cannot compete.

While we continue to treat our teachers like clerical workers completing compliance tasks, delivering standardised curriculum, and teaching towards standardised tests with little or no autonomy, we have little chance of attracting the best young people to the teaching profession.

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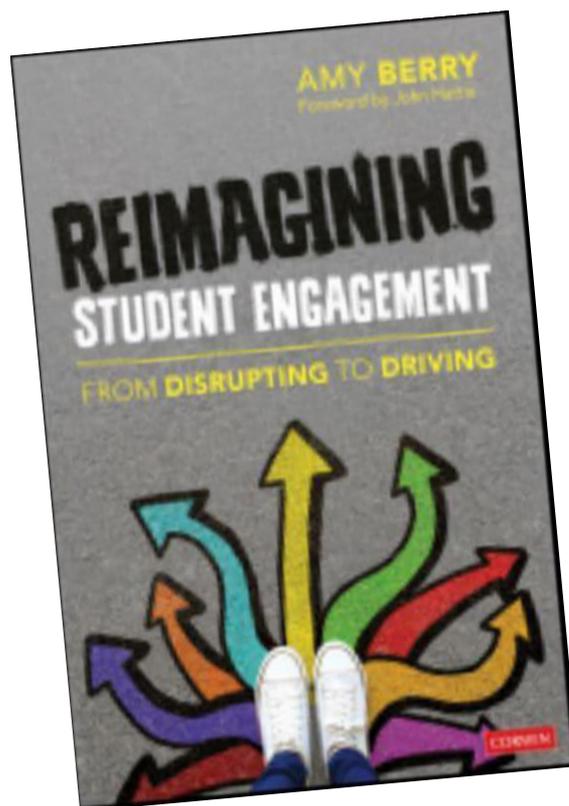
<sup>7</sup> Over a decade back, worldwide authority on educational reform Michael Fullan observed that there is no way that ambitious and admirable nationwide goals, set out in the Melbourne Declaration, will be met with the strategies being used then. "No successful system in the world has ever led with these drivers."

<sup>8</sup> Finland spends less per student in its education budget than Australia.

# Book Review

Amy Berry

## Reimagining Student Engagement— from Disrupting to Driving



*Reviewed by Sue Webb*

What do we really mean when we talk about student engagement? In *Reimagining Student Engagement—from Disrupting to Driving*, Berry asserts that reaching a consensus in defining student engagement is problematic since there are behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions to consider. Whilst understanding what is meant by student engagement has become a form of assumed knowledge for anyone working in schools, Berry believes that educators have the ‘illusion of consensus’, the premise of which is explored in the opening chapter. Through a series of reflection prompts the reader is invited to consider their own understanding of engagement.

In the foreword, self-proclaimed critic, listener, and prompter, John Hattie, summarises the

conundrum thus: For some teachers, being *engaged* is akin to how we use the term before marriage—a formal arrangement to do something. For some students, being engaged in lessons is akin to how the armed forces use the word *engagement*—a battle to be fought. Similar observations suggest that the challenge of trying to get all students actively engaged in every lesson is so great that teachers might opt to settle for a more realistic goal of passive compliance. A truce as it were. *Defining* student engagement is one thing. *Achieving* it is another. How can teachers measure student engagement?

Berry’s research attempts to answer this. Her *Continuum of Engagement* model assists classroom teachers to identify the extent to which students are engaging in learning and describes associated behaviours.

In short, it is a tool which helps to make learner engagement visible so that teachers can more successfully shape learning and teaching goals.

The model identifies six forms of engagement: disrupting, avoiding, withdrawing, participating, investing, and driving. The most active forms of engagement/disengagement sit at either end of the continuum, while the most passive forms are in the middle. Behaviour descriptions range from students disrupting, refusing to participate, and arguing with the teacher at one end of the continuum, to seeking out challenges, evaluating progress and challenging each other to drive improvement at the other.

The focus on student engagement in the modern classroom is well justified. The Jenkins Curve

cited in the first chapter shows a steady decline in students' love of school from 95 percent in kindergarten down to 37 percent by Year 9. Berry points out the concept of student engagement is often considered through a deficit lens, stating that, "It is difficult to discuss the concept of engagement without also thinking about what it means to be disengaged" (Berry, 2022, p.8).

Evident throughout the book is the high level of teacher consultation. By sharing classroom scenarios, teacher interviews, reflection prompts, and snapshots of practice, the voices of teachers are incorporated throughout the professional narrative. Some sections are devoted to 'taking it into the classroom.' This reader found herself immersed in the reflections, recalling a specific class,

and bringing certain students to mind, contemplating how I might answer one of the myriad questions posed, such as how do I equip students not merely to participate in their learning, but to drive and invest in it?

Here the educator is reminded of the importance of planning for student agency. When students are driving their own learning, they are operating at a level of engagement where they feel in control of their learning, and 'know what to do when they do not know what to do.' Building students' confidence to take action in pursuit of the goals they have set for themselves, sits nicely alongside the concept of student-centred learning, effectively de-centralising the teacher. Visual reference points like a motivation tank help students to reflect on their own motivation levels and

assist teachers to track changes to motivation over time and across different contexts.

Reimagining Student Engagement encourages the middle years' teacher to develop a culture of engagement. By using a common language, establishing agreed rules, and sharing responsibility for engagement, we can build self-motivated learners who value learning and thinking. In the words of the author, "Let's get engaged, let's get participating, and let's get invested!" (Berry, 2022, p. 57).

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# Middle School Musings

In our next edition of the Australian Journal of Middle Schooling, we would love to publish stories and reflections from middle years' teachers.

- **Do you have an interesting program or story to share?**
- **What do you love about teaching in the middle years?**
- **What stories of success as a middle years' teacher can you share?**
- **What are your hopes for the future of middle years' education?**

If you would like to contribute a piece to our next edition, start drafting now! Submissions for this section should be written in the first person. They must be formatted in Microsoft Word or Google documents. Please use Times New Roman size 12 font. Submissions can be emailed to [journal@adolescentsuccess.org.au](mailto:journal@adolescentsuccess.org.au)

*We look forward to hearing from you and sharing your stories!*





## MIDDLE YEARS DIAGNOSTIC TOOL



**The Adolescent Success Middle Years School Improvement Diagnostic Tool is a strategic audit tool school leaders and teams can use to gauge the effectiveness of middle years practices in their school. The Middle Years School Improvement Diagnostic Tool encourages recognition of strengths and identification of areas of improvement.**

The Diagnostic Tool is compilation of effective middle schooling practices as outlined in the [Adolescent Success Position Paper](#). The Position Paper is founded upon an analysis and synthesis of current research and evidence about middle schooling (10-15 year olds).

The tool is designed to encourage reflective, evidence based conversations about current practice in the school; prioritise opportunities for improvement; and devise an action plan to implement change.



Option	What You Get	Member	Non-member
Option ONE: School Diagnostic Tool and Facilitation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitation of the three phases.</li> <li>Flexible timing of each phase according to school needs.</li> <li>The tool in electronic and paper form.</li> </ul>	\$1,500	\$1,800
Option TWO: School Diagnostic Tool, Facilitation and Implementation Support	<p>Option ONE <b>PLUS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 hours of support (over a calendar year) to implement your action plan.</li> <li>Institutional Membership to Adolescent Success</li> </ul>	\$3,300	\$3,800
Professional learning	2 hours Whole day	\$500 \$1000	\$500 \$1,000
Additional Support	e.g. leadership coaching, additional hours	\$200 per hour	\$250 per hour

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