



**Richard Gill has directed the finest Australian Operas. He looks back on his time as a teacher and considers NAPLAN's place in education today...**

It might be expected that I will write about the efficacy of Music Education in the lives of children. I have written thousands and thousands of words on this subject and am always happy to do so.

However, I am now at that stage of my life where I think we have to see things as they really are.

### ***Getting real***

*Quality Schools*, the title of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, or, "Gonski 2.0", contains a sentence which says:

Australia has an excellent education system but our plateauing or declining results highlight that while strong levels of investment are important, it's more important to ensure that funding is being used on evidence-based initiatives that are proven to boost student results.

First, we do not have an excellent education system. If we did, we would not be plateauing (such a politically correct euphemism for failing).

Why do we need to boost results? Is schooling about results? It is hard to believe that in 2018, in a world so rich with wonderful things, all we can think about in a school is results.

How insulting this is to teachers. Is that why you teach? To get results which can be measured by others?

### ***We cannot love what we do not know***

As I work to improve our music education system, I am only too well aware of forces that seemingly conspire at every turn to frustrate the creative teacher and reward narrow 'results'.

I was drawn to teaching because I loved reading novels, poetry and plays and loved music. I still do love all these things. I am also aware that I owe debts to people who helped me directly or indirectly.

We cannot care about those things we do not love or know, and so we need, in this country, to let our teachers know that there are some of us out there who do care about you, who do share the concept of



a love of learning for its own sake, who don't give a damn about a NAPLAN score, and who will go to the barricades for you and fight for the right for you to teach children properly.

### **Section 582, 1958**

Allow me to introduce Mrs. Holder...

Mrs. Holder, a Lecturer in English, stood at the front of our section, Section 582 at the then Alexander Mackie Teachers' College on a frosty September morning in 1958 and uttered the immortal words which I have never forgotten:

Plan, teach, test.

Section 582, listen to me very carefully. If you don't plan you can't teach and if you can't teach you can't test and if you can't test you have no idea what the children know. Remember – plan, teach test.

I hope Mrs. Holder will be canonised. In my mind she is a saint.

### ***Plan, teach, test***

At the age of sixteen, I was the youngest member of my section, having passed the Leaving Certificate in 1957 with Bs in English, Ancient History and Modern History and an A in French. Notice the lack of Maths and Science!

I had applied to go to the then New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music to train as a High School Music Teacher, but my complete lack of Theory and Harmony led the examining panel to suggest to me that were I to complete Sixth Grade Theory and Sixth Grade piano in that year I would be awarded a scholarship in 1959. They were as good as their word and in 1959 I made it to The Con.

In between times I had accepted a Teachers' College Scholarship to Mackie as one couldn't be certain of anything, and failure at tertiary level was real. No appeals, no show cause, no "I had a nose-bleed in the exam"; just fail!

So it was that as the appointments to primary schools for practise teaching period were posted, I was sent to Eastwood Primary School.

It was decided that I should be given a very difficult class of all boys, a 5D, and from day one with this class and their brilliant teacher, Mr. Peter Black, my life changed. Mrs. Holder was my supervisor so I planned, taught and tested to insanity.



I still have my three exercise books of lesson preparations with a comment given to me by Mr. Black on every lesson.

I could hardly wait to get to school each day and every day was a joy.

## ***NAPLAN? ... Anyone? ... No?***

So what has all of this to do with the iniquitous NAPLAN?

Even as a very young student teacher it was patently clear to me that the individual classroom teachers had an amazingly detailed knowledge of their pupils.

Morning teas and lunches in the staff room, apart from the usual banter, were often detailed discussions about children and their progress, or lack of it, indicating to me that a classroom teacher was, in fact, constantly assessing and evaluating her or his students indirectly without having to write reams of pointless information.

If a parent wanted to know something about a child, an interview was arranged with the teacher.

While there were often fireworks, some parents believing that their children were direct descendants of Einstein and the Virgin Mary, with all the attendant virtues, most parents were content with the reports which the classroom teacher could provide orally with an astonishing level of detail and depth of knowledge of the child in question.

## ***Know thy students***

On the matter of syllabus and curriculum, there were documents available for teachers to use which most of the teachers with whom I worked chose to consult rarely or chiefly ignore.

I think this was because they knew what levels their children were attaining in all areas and had realistic expectations of what they could do. In short, they created their own curricula.

The bright classes were well above average in every discipline, and a class such as mine, the fabulous 5D, was working at its own level. There was no point in doing activities or teaching concepts out of reach of the children.

On one memorable afternoon, I was given a spectacular lesson in over-reach by Mr Black.



I had spent the entire one-hour lunch break creating a solar system on the blackboard, labelling the planets, tables of figures and the like. It was a visual triumph. There was more coloured chalk in this masterpiece than Leonardo had ever dreamed of.

I gave the lesson during which I had the feeling that the kids couldn't have cared less. At the end of the lesson Mr. Black asked me to wait behind after school to discuss what I had done.

During the discussion he said:

"These kids don't have a concept of 10, let alone a concept of millions. The figures you gave them were meaningless to them. They have nothing to relate to and you gave them no real insights.

The use of coloured chalk, however, was very effective. See you tomorrow."

I was shattered but knew that I had given a really dud lesson. At the same time, I was really grateful for the frank advice. Mrs. Holder, who had also sat in on the lesson, agreed and rammed home the point:

"You planned nicely but irrelevantly. You taught nothing, they learned nothing and therefore you couldn't test them. Better luck next time."

I still have those comments in my practice teaching exercise book lesson plans.

## ***What worked about these times?***

So, the question still stands: what does any of this have to do with NAPLAN?

The points I am making are:

- i. these teachers were fundamentally autonomous;
- ii. they devised their own curricula and syllabuses to suit their classes;
- iii. they collaborated with each other and shared ideas;
- iv. teaching was not competitive and there was no Federal interference;
- v. they enjoyed their work, in the main, and the word 'stress' was unknown;
- vi. they knew the strengths, weaknesses and potentials of their charges;
- vii. they tested officially only twice a year;
- viii. a school report was a short one-page affair;
- ix. no one, and in some cases not even parents, knew their charges better than the teacher.

While many of these points would still apply today, NAPLAN has destroyed collegiality, created competition, created stressed-out parents, teachers, Principals and students and, above all, has promoted a continually sliding scale of under-achievement nationally.



NAPLAN is not diagnostic. Never has been and never will be.

If the robots are permitted to take over marking students' writing, the next idea will probably be to hire a robot to teach our children too. Creepy!

## *Looking to our future*

No one, but no one, knows Primary school children better than the classroom teachers. Parents who think that a NAPLAN result is an indicator of a child's abilities, capacities or potential are seriously deluded. All a parent has to do is make an appointment to see a teacher, who can give the best diagnostic information about the child.

As I travel the country teaching classes and doing workshops, I always ask teachers and Principals what they think of NAPLAN. I haven't yet met a Primary school teacher who has a good word to say about NAPLAN. Some Principals tell me they are frightened to speak about NAPLAN because they feel they have to toe a party line.

Recently, I was giving a workshop in which my ten minute attack on NAPLAN was greeted with enthusiastic applause from the assembled teachers. At the end of the workshop a very timid teacher came up to me, looked around the room several times before whispering "Thank you for that. We are not allowed say anything about NAPLAN to anyone or we will get into trouble."

She looked once more around the room and then fled.

I hadn't realised until that moment that we were living in a totalitarian state.

## *NAPLAN is not good enough for us*

Surely teachers should be encouraged to have all sorts of views about all sorts of subjects without imposing any views on their students, but encouraging them also to have views and ideas and to have all of these views without fear.

It seems to me we go to school for two reasons and two reasons only; to learn how to learn together and to learn how to think for ourselves. NAPLAN encourages neither of those precepts. The stranglehold of literacy and numeracy has hijacked all serious learning and enquiry.

Literacy and numeracy are NOT disciplines or subjects. They are states or conditions at which one arrives as a result of being well educated.



Schools which abandon their Arts disciplines in favour of more time given to literacy and numeracy are betraying their children, insulting their teachers, depriving their children's minds of genuine creative growth, limiting their imaginations and training them to be all the same.

Music, Art, Dance, Drama and so on are essential in the life of a child. It is through endless hours of play, fantasy, imaginative games, songs, dances, painting and the like that children begin to make sense of the world. Stories, nursery rhymes, nonsense rhymes, acting out little scenes, together with the other activities already mentioned, are the stuff and lifeblood of education. Children engaged in these activities learn to love learning.

This attitude to education is recognised in countries which seem to perform consistently well in all areas of learning. Have we anything to learn from them? Or are we too busy testing First Grade children?

Why are we so obsessed with assessment? Why the absence of commensurate treatment following this relentless 'diagnosis'?

Why aren't we as a nation totally devoted in our education programs to those disciplines which promote creative and imaginative thinking, and lead children down the genuine path to literacy and numeracy?

## Hope

I've seen in this country some brilliant creative teaching which fired up the minds of the children in an extraordinary way. It was inspiring at every level and something every teacher could do.

Teachers need to stand up and be counted and we need to rid this country of an iniquitous and destructive assessment system. I am not suggesting for one minute that children shouldn't be tested; remember Mrs. Holder's wise advice: *plan, teach, test*. Simply that, in very early education testing is the job of the teacher, not some outside authority who has no real idea of your classroom.

Recently, I attended a Kindergarten assembly at which each child had a specific sentence to read. What was brilliant was that the teacher had devised the sentences according to each child's ability so that each child was successful in the eyes of the school community.

Why is this brilliant? Because it meant that the teacher was very well aware of what his children could do and he didn't need an outside authority to help him.

Let's all aim for a NAPLAN-free future and a return to teacher autonomy accompanied by appropriate fiscal remuneration for all good teachers.



Life is short and art is long. The minds, souls, hearts and imaginations of our children are immeasurable, priceless, invaluable and bursting with ideas. I want to hear those ideas so I can learn something too.

*Richard Gill AO, founding Music Director and Conductor Emeritus of Victorian Opera, is one of Australia's most admired conductors and music educators. He has been Artistic Director of the Education Program for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director of OzOpera, Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, and Artistic Advisor for the Musica Viva Education program. He is the Founder and Director of the National Music Teacher Mentoring Program, Music Director of the Sydney Chamber Choir and the inaugural King & Wood Mallesons Conservatorium Chair in Music Education, at the Conservatorium High School, Sydney.*

*“Perhaps it’s just as well that Leonard Bernstein is dead. Otherwise he’d probably have to relinquish his great reputation as a musical educator - or at least share it with Sydney’s Richard Gill.”*

*John Carmody, The Sun Herald*