

# Show caution when implementing change

Change for change's sake

In my travels I chat to school leaders and teachers in schools and early childhood education centres (ECECs) and ask about the challenges and common concerns as well as the best practice and things that are working well.

Since I graduated in 1977 I have seen many changes come and go. Even though I am an enormous optimist I am now wary about 'change' and how it can become so quickly adopted in schools – often too quickly. Sometimes the downside or negative consequences of that change take a few years to appear and even more years before those concerns are addressed. Then another change takes place.

In Australia, the introduction of NAPLAN was initially seen as great step forward for education as previously there had been no national testing of consequence and it was a way to gain valuable data to improve school performance and hopefully the educational outcomes of students.

This change was one that was largely politically driven as very little consultation took place within educational circles of influence (i.e. teachers and academics) and over time this largely statistically invalid test – meaning it doesn't really test what it purports to test – has had some serious negative impacts of students, teachers and even parents.

The My School site that shares these results has created a whole new dynamic where schools are compared based on only this one parameter, which can be misleading and unhelpful.

There is no doubt that NAPLAN has given a lot of schools an opportunity to address significant poor results and it does provide valuable data. Unfortunately, while it can identify the need for improvement, it provides no insight as to what are the best

ways to improve a school's performance.

And in a way this has led to an increase in innovations and fads that can be seen as possible solutions to low benchmarks. Over 100 Australian educational academics have signed a document stating that NAPLAN will not improve the educational outcomes of students and schools and that the funding could be better spent addressing key areas of inadequacy more directly. However, it will continue because it is now a massive ugly giant that is difficult to change.

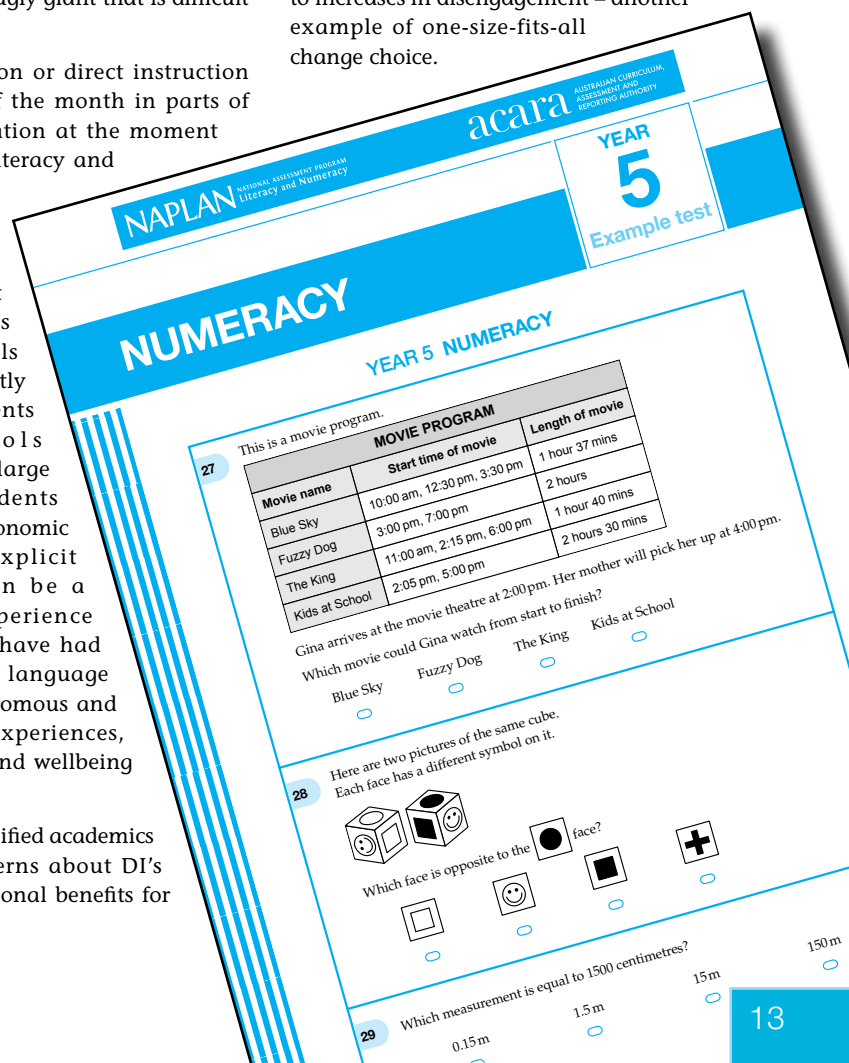
Explicit instruction or direct instruction (DI) is flavour of the month in parts of Australian education at the moment as a way to lift literacy and numeracy results.

While there are some statistically significant positive impacts in remote schools with predominantly Aboriginal students and in schools where there are large numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, explicit instruction can be a challenging experience to students who have had healthy levels of language saturation, autonomous and engaging play experiences, and few health and wellbeing challenges.

Even our best qualified academics have valid concerns about DI's long-term educational benefits for students.

I hear from ECE teachers all the time about how boring and repetitious it is and how it can turn brighter students off learning. When DI is combined with a push back from play-based learning in our ECECs we need to be very concerned as many children are arriving at school with more delays than previous generations and this includes poorer emotional and social competence.

Indeed I have many primary principals tell me they have found DI quite damaging due to increases in disengagement – another example of one-size-fits-all change choice.





These supposed innovations can become fads if schools follow them without due consideration and consultation with their staff.

No 'one-size-fits-all' in terms of the implementation of programmes and imposing a new innovation without the possibility of assessing, reviewing and making additional changes can make for more problems.

Every teacher knows that each student is a unique individual and meeting individual learning needs is what we are trained to do, however this professional autonomy is often seriously compromised when a whole school innovation is introduced without allowing for flexibility and respect for teacher experience.

Many ECEs, for example, with years of excellent results have been told to adopt a more formalised learning approach that encompasses DI-like instruction. The saying: 'if it ain't broke why fix it?' comes to mind!

Fads come and go in our schools. A lack of movement has been identified as a contributor to poor attention and concentration for many students particularly boys. Standing desks can make an enormous difference and many schools are moving to full classrooms of standing desks. For kinaesthetic learners they can be wonderful to keep them engaged and focused, however for visual or auditory learners they can be the opposite – exhausting and distracting.

Having a choice of learning opportunities for the students who need movement is probably preferable as this allows students to choose to stand, sit or use a desk with visual barriers to help reduce distraction and support concentration.

Managed learning environments (MLEs) or open classrooms and having multiple learning spaces is another new trend that is being explored to improve student engagement.

The 'blended learning model' sees students learning with a project-based rather than traditional 'chalk and talk' model of learning. While students have massive freedom on the 'how' they learn, they also have advisory teachers who keep tabs on how students are progressing and to ensure they meet their deadlines.

*“ We must be cautious of change, innovations or fads in education: They may not be all they seem to be.”*

Often what happens is that while the environment changes the process to help students change from teacher-directed to self-directed responsible learners is *assumed to happen* by itself.

Karen Boyes has written an excellent blog that explores the steps needed to ensure a successful transition to MLEs, which would be worth checking out online if you're interested in this area.

Birdwood High School in the Adelaide Hills has been trialling this new approach and have found they have a 97% reduction in behaviour management. The approach aims to address student wellbeing, as well as improved academic outcomes, and this means that respectful relationships are valued and seen as an important part of the new shift in direction.

Flexibility is important when creating learning environments that help all students succeed however so often having highly competent passionate teachers, an engaging and relevant curriculum, and positive parental involvement are still the main drivers for excellence in student outcomes at any age level.

Embracing change for change's sake without considering each school's unique set of circumstances and staffing or allowing for a significant change in pedagogy, can mean some change can be less successful than intended.

Too much change can quite simply create chaos which in turn creates stress and fear – not conducive to excellent school culture or outstanding results!

There is one particularly hopeful new trend that sees a shift of direction around student wellbeing, which has seen an excellent move from a total reliance on punitive measures to improve student behaviour.

Schools increasingly are dropping the 'behaviour management' term along with automatic detentions, time outs and exclusions to punish students for poor behaviour.

Rather they are using increased counselling and the intention to build positive relationships that can help address the underlying issues that are often driven by low emotional and social capacity, learning disabilities, adolescent angst, mental illness issues including anxiety and self-regulation concerns.

This is one wide sweeping change that I am confident will make a positive difference for many students however again the positive psychology beneath it needs to be understood.


Being mindful of exploring the challenges and benefits of bringing change into our schools is the key to enabling successful change.

Recognising that some people thrive on change and the possibility of 'new' to keep them motivated and that some people like to avoid change due to its sense of uncertainty and unpredictability is really helpful.

Enforced change, especially from afar can create much dissonance as it can be seen to be disrespectful to the educators at the coalface.

I began as a passionate teacher always on the search for new things that would enhance my ability to support my students' learning outcomes and my style of teaching was suited to cooperative learning.

Back in the 'old' days in secondary schools we could teach by units that allowed students to pursue a topic across the curriculum which increased autonomy and relevance.

Interestingly, both of these approaches seem to be a part of the new trends of education with MLEs. So after almost 40 years are we back to where we were or have we simply re-discovered what we already knew? 



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