

“Left behind” and invalid comparisons

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Keywords: Authenticity, comparisons, entitlement, evaluation, NAPLAN, PISA, testing, and validity

Hardly a month or two go by without some ‘informed’ commentator admonishing Australians that they are in danger of being “left behind.” It is as though the country’s inhabitants are being scripted as actors in a religious, dispensationalist, prophetic drama of sorts. Seemingly, we constantly are being analysed and compared to one or another nation — whether South-east Asian, Scandinavian, or some other group on the globe.

This is *not* to say that we can’t learn from the decisions, undertakings, experiences and programs of others. However, comparisons can be inappropriate, ill-judged, misinformed, or disturbing; the latter as in the case when Captain James Cook’s 1770 voyage up the eastern coast of this country was recently analogised to Covid19 (Towell & Colangelo, 2020).

Nowhere, it appears, are comparisons more ubiquitous than in the area of education and schooling. Educational methods, programs, outcomes, as well as teachers are often the target of media criticism and commentator pity parties (Baker, 2019). At best, the glass is presented as half empty; at worst there is an obsession in today’s media with the bad and the ugly (de Botton, 2014). Rarely do media reports praise the work of people in the education sector in general, and teachers in particular. Although, given the 2020 Covid19 epoch, many parents may have acquired a new realisation and appreciation of the challenging and valuable work that is being done in classrooms (and hospitals) every normal day — not merely in this country, but worldwide.

What is the basis of many misplaced and badly chosen comparisons? Essentially it comes down to assuming an equivalence, or at least considerable similarity, between A and B that permits a transfer between the two sets. In the real world it implies that solutions which appear to work in one country can be ‘exported’ to or ‘appropriated’ by another. All one needs, so to speak, is an array of 3D printers and a

conveyer belt to go into production. This may function effectively for a range of industrial, household or medical products (the latter after rigorous tests and scrutiny by the Therapeutic Goods Administration), but it is ineffective and an unacceptable ‘quick-fix’ for addressing and remedying complex situations; educating children being one of them. No, we shouldn’t have to re-invent the wheel, *and* neither should we expect that ‘one size fits all’.

Comparisons and transfers make least sense in cases where ‘pairs’ are widely distanced on a number of measures or categories such as:

- population size, density, or distribution;
- extent of industrialisation;
- cultural norms, diversity or absence of;
- GDP/ prosperity level,
- type of political system and stability of government;
- geography and climate;
- size of disadvantaged population;
- social structures, laws, taxation, etc.

There are often too many intervening variables to make simplistic comparisons. After all, that’s the reason why medical researchers trialling drugs use placebos, so they don’t end up with distorted comparisons.

The initial intention for the implementation of the National Assessment Program – Literacy & Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia was simply to provide parents and schools with information about students’ individual performances regarding core skills necessary to progress through school and life. Moreover, NAPLAN actually provides teachers with a valuable tool for diagnosing pupils’ strengths and weaknesses; a tool that can be applied across a whole school. It didn’t take long, unfortunately, for the test to be misused for comparisons and taking on various pejorative forms — league tables, boasting badges and put-downs — with the media aiding and abetting willing contenders to stake out a claim in the field of academic accomplishment for some to profit from the prestige that comes with it. One wonders whether state education jurisdictions were

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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

(un)willingly complicit in a process that turned out to be a distortion of purpose; a ‘shame and blame’ exercise for many disadvantaged, struggling schools. Comparisons that subvert the purpose of assessment and testing processes end up devaluing schools and individuals, tearing down rather than building up.

The *misuse* of items, programs, or ideas may clearly lead to some unintended, adverse consequences. Using an electric drill as a kitchen whisk, or a shopping trolley as a mobility scooter is a case in point. Similarly, when a test is misused to establish ‘league ladders’, one should not be surprised if deleterious outcomes occur, resulting in misplaced comparisons that in turn may influence or distort both curricula and pedagogy. ‘Teaching to tests’ is not an unheard of phenomenon (Patty, 2010, para. 5), a practice where enormous pressure is put on teachers and students alike to conform to test expectations and requirements above other priorities.

The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is another well-known testing instrument. It assesses the extent to which 15-year-olds have learned knowledge and skills for adult participation in society, in the areas of science, maths and reading. It is ‘NAPLAN on an Olympic scale’. With 79 nations participating in the most recent 2018 PISA tests, the exercise has morphed into a juggernaut that, similarly to NAPLAN, compares and ranks ‘contestants’ according to performance in selected knowledge areas. PISA has patently developed into a competition for prestige; a comparison of countries’ student academic prowess, resulting in some unhealthy rivalry.

The upshot of extreme test pressures at the upper secondary school level in some top performing PISA nations, has historically led to students suffering from high rates of depression and suicide (Berry & Anderson, 2011). In comparing, we value and simultaneously devalue. Claiming superiority, also assigns or implies inferiority. Prestige, power and economic rationalism end up in trumping human well-being.

Why all this concern regarding Australia’s latest downward-trending PISA results? Australia was ranked 21, with an overall score of 499 (Facts Maps, 2018). Is it indicative of a sense of loss of confidence and an increasing national inadequacy in the field education, or perhaps an externalised inferiority complex—a fear that our education achievements stand in the shadow of our sporting accomplishments? Is it a triumphalist yearning for being able to punch above our weight in both spheres, while simultaneously pointing to a feeling of personal and collective insecurity?

National comparisons are often a recipe for unhappiness and anxiety that is being other-driven.

Philosopher Alain de Botton (2014) may be getting to the heart of the matter when he asserts, “We are the inheritors of an idea, endorsed by the right and left wings of the political spectrum, that the most fundamental reality of nations is their financial and economic state” (p.127). If he is correct, then countries’ PISA results are perhaps no more than proxy listings on international stock markets!

Because of the work of detractors, the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth refers to comparison issues in which he was personally caught up. Speaking disapprovingly of the practice, he says, “in all this comparing and grading and competing, *they quite miss the point*” (2 Cor. 10:12, The Message, emphasis supplied). The apostle makes it quite clear that he won’t be distracted by comparisons because he is single-mindedly committed to purpose — the sharing of the Gospel. In an earlier letter to the same church he uses the illustration of the different roles of individual body parts and the varied gifts of believers which should contribute to the well-being of the whole—“the purpose of all these things should be to help the church to grow...” (1 Cor. 1:26, NCV). Paul’s enunciated principle, I believe, can also find application in the secular sphere; i.e., benefitting the good and welfare of the community and society at large.

Comparing typically engenders a feeling of ‘better than’, ‘a cut above’ others. In times of crises, such as pandemics, it may even signal entitlement. For instance, are workers in health, education, and transport deserving of, or entitled to ‘needed’ pay rises, whereas those employed in other areas are not? Does Ms Kylie Ward, ACN chief executive, have a compelling case in claiming, “... the timing is right to revalue essential workers, so their newfound status translates financially ...” (Daniel, 2020, para. 42)? This assertion raises a series of questions. Should that list also include workers in sewage treatment, electricity generation, food production and distribution? And where is the border between “essential” and non-essential? Do we then relegate personnel in the arts, ministry, counselling, law etc. to the dispensable category? If the latter, aren’t we then living in such a reward-based, transactional world that a job well done is no longer truly its own reward? And if Ms Ward’s claim has *gravitas* and legitimacy, we then become involved in a race to the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. As part of such a society’s *modus operandi*, expertise and skills will therefore focus on aspects of survival, on tools which will be most highly prized and rewarded—a regression to a pre-modern, decivilized social order.

In comparing, we tend to think highly of ourselves. The apostle’s counsel is then also for us/me. “Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your

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importance but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities ...” (Romans 12:3, Phillips). Comparisons have a habit of killing such qualities as peace, joy, generosity, love, kindness, patience, well-being, creativity — members that belong to the set of the fruit of the Spirit. Rather than comparing that limits, let’s appreciate that which liberates, valuing what is unique, good and noteworthy about one’s country, region, town, or school, freeing people individually or collectively to strive and do better on their own terms.

Dixil Rodriguez (2020), a medical centre chaplain, has a distinct ‘take’ on the practice of comparing and evaluating on a personal as well as a spiritual level. She muses on the subject:

All of us have different abilities and spiritual gifts that transcend borders of evaluation. At the end of the day, we are evaluated by no rubric, but through Jesus Christ. Having accepted Him as my Savior, my defective self is replaced by perfection that’s not mine, but motivates me to excel in my self-development, my desire to serve Him. *I’m motivated to care for others, and my reward is fulfilling a mission of service for Christ.*

(p. 55, emphasis supplied)

Her reality is an authentic life in which comparisons have been left behind and are not merely invalid but have become obsolete.

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