Indigenous early school leavers: Failure, risk and high-stakes testing

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Abstract: Indigenous early school leavers in Australia’s major cities comprise a significantly larger proportion of students than their non-Indigenous peers. Drawing on recent findings from the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Australian Census, this paper examines what those data may or may not tell us about those young Indigenous people and their engagement (or lack of engagement) with education. The paper explores the notions of educational failure and risk as they apply to this cohort of young people and then lays out a critique of the application of high-stakes tests, such as the NAPLAN, with particular reference to the educational disengagement of Indigenous youth. The paper concludes with some alternative policy options derived from evidence-based research in Australia and principles underlying education policy in what are often cited as some of the best educational systems in the world.

In virtually any educational setting in Australia one can find: people busily doing this or that but almost always doing one fateful thing: determining who is the most successful. Sometimes the emphasis on relative success is intense, and the competition for grades or other rewards is ubiquitous. Elsewhere, particularly in settings where many have had a long history of designated failure, the search for relative success may be muted or hidden. In either case, there are always students worried about how they are doing relative to others. There are always parents and teachers worrying about students worrying. And there are always professional educators and researchers worried about the adequacy of the testing and its effects on everyone. Worriers worrying about the worries of others. There have been easier worlds in which to be either a student or an educator (Varenne and McDermott 1999:xii).

A personal preface

This paper is intended to be provocative and, to be fair, I want to situate myself with a few brief contextual comments. I am one of those professional worriers Varenne and McDermott refer to. For the past 25 or so years I’ve spent a significant amount of my time thinking, writing, reading, puzzling, researching and worrying about Indigenous education in some form. In early 1999 I was commissioned by the Office of Indigenous Policy in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to undertake a study on factors and issues influencing Indigenous retention to Year 12. That study was published later that year under the title Why Only One in Three? The complex reasons for low Indigenous school retention (Schwab 1999). Along the way
I gave a work-in-progress seminar at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at The Australian National University. At the seminar were the usual mix of students and academics but also a number of policy officers from the Prime Minister’s Department and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), providing useful comments and clarifications and taking copious notes for briefings should embarrassing findings require damage control by their Secretaries or Ministers.

In attendance was a visiting academic from the University of Oregon in the United States, Professor Harry Wolcott, one of the cohort of anthropologists from Stanford University in the 1960s, who, under George and Louise Spindler, gave form and substance to the vibrant subdiscipline of anthropology in the United States melding anthropology and education. Of all the discussion that day, his comment is the one I recall most clearly: he said that while there was certainly value in trying to understand why (at that time) two-thirds of Indigenous students left school before reaching Year 12, the more interesting question was what determined the actions of the ‘deviants’? I scratched my head, shifted uncomfortably, and tried to understand what he was asking and who he was referring to. He continued, ‘the one-third who stay in school. Perhaps you should try to understand what’s “wrong” with them that they stay when the majority leave.’ That was actually a very good idea, which I borrowed and used when I applied for and was awarded a DETYA Research Fellowship the following year. As part of that fellowship, I explored schools and programs across the country and interviewed many young ‘deviants’ — Indigenous people who stayed on to Year 12 when so many others left. That research drew on case studies to identify a range of factors, strategies and approaches that appeared to succeed in maximising educational engagement among Indigenous young people (Schwab 2001b). While there is still interest in ‘what works’, and I still believe there is real value in that approach, even a cursory reading of the newspapers shows quite clearly that in the Indigenous arena ‘what works’ has not captured the imagination of many policy makers. The overwhelming focus of attention is on what doesn’t work and how educational reforms can fix that.

In this paper I come around again, more than ten years later, to those early school leavers. In particular, I’m ‘worrying’ today about Indigenous early school leavers, focusing this time on young people in urban contexts. Drawing on findings from the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the most recent (2006) Australian Census, my aim is first to explore what those findings may or may not tell us about those young Indigenous people — particularly those who struggle with or disengage from education. Second, I want to use these findings as a platform from which to critically explore what I believe are some deep problems inherent both in how policy makers tend to view those young people and the standardised assessments and high-stakes testing policies they have deployed that affect their lives and futures. Finally, I wish to make some suggestions for other options that are derived from evidence-based research.

**Indigenous education in an urban context**

Much of the anxiety about the purported ‘crisis’ in Indigenous education is focused on ‘education gaps’ found in remote Australian schools and communities where attendance is low and educational engagement is limited. Indigenous education in urban centres, on the other hand, is often ignored or simply assumed to be non-problematic, in part because there is a belief that young people in the cities have a greater degree of opportunity simply as a result of geography. Indeed, there is a widely held view that Indigenous young people from remote areas would benefit from boarding in cities and attending the more ‘functional’ schools in capital cities. Data show that nearly a third (31.8 percent) of the Indigenous population lives in major cities and significant numbers of Indigenous young people in the cities struggle with education. I focus on a small number of statistical indicators that are commonly assumed to portray educational capacity and engagement among Indigenous young people living in major cities today. First, I explore the performance of Indigenous Year 9 students in the nationally benchmarked NAPLAN test of reading. Next, I use Census data to provide a glimpse of Indigenous early school leavers, a group who are at worst demonised and stigmatised as failures or at best labelled as ‘at risk’ and in need of rescue.
Reading achievement

NAPLAN testing commenced in Australian schools in 2008. Under this program all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed using standardised tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. Every student, school and state/territory is assessed against a series of national benchmarks and results are reported annually by a range of variables, including Indigenous status, gender, geolocation (metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote), language background, parental occupation, and parental education for each year level and for each domain of the test. Beginning in 2010, school-level NAPLAN data are now also reported on the national ‘My School’ database, enabling what many have referred to as ‘leagues table’ comparisons of individual schools.

There is an important debate — to which I will return — about how meaningful NAPLAN assessments are, especially in relation to individual students and schools, but aggregate assessments do reveal some patterns worth exploring. In particular, the Year 9 assessments, the last in the series of literacy and numeracy assessments each Australian student will undergo, provide a glimpse of young Indigenous people in metropolitan areas who may or may not end up — in a relatively short time — leaving school. For this analysis I focus only on the reading assessment because it is the domain that gets the most attention from the media and government. For simplicity, I argue that reading skill is thus the most significant of the various capacities NAPLAN purports to measure and can be considered a shorthand measure for all the others.

Figure 1 depicts the assessed NAPLAN reading scores of Year 9 Metropolitan students across Australia in 2011. It also compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of the national minimum standard. While about 94 percent of non-Indigenous students are at or above that national minimum standard, only about 78 percent of the Indigenous students attained this level. In addition, Indigenous students were nearly 3.5 times more likely to be below the national minimum standard than the non-Indigenous students. Yet a closer look at these scores suggests even more.

The NAPLAN reading assessment comprises a series of bands. Those scoring at band 6 have reached the national minimum standard. Figure 2 shows the distribution of students in bands above the minimum. Note that the percentage of Indigenous students above the national minimum declines rapidly across the higher bands. The 16 percentage point relative gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at or above the mini-
mum standard as portrayed in the previous figure reveals only part of the story: Indigenous students clump at or just above the minimum, while non-Indigenous students are far more likely to be reading at the higher levels. Indeed, non-Indigenous students are nearly four times more likely to appear in Band 9 than their Indigenous peers and nearly nine times more likely to reach Band 10.

It appears that by Year 9 Indigenous young people in major cities are significantly underrepresented at the upper end of the assessment. In other words, while most Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people at this year level are meeting or exceeding the benchmark, far more non-Indigenous students are exceeding the benchmark and by a greater degree.

**Early school leavers**

The 2006 Census provides some insight into educational attainment among Indigenous people in major cities. Again, there is a tendency for people to assume the differences are enormous in remote areas and relatively smaller in the urban context. But the latter is not true. In Figure 3 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in major cities, aged 15 and older, are compared in terms of highest year of school completed. While only 15 percent of non-Indigenous people in major cities left school having completed only Year 9, a quarter of Indigenous people did so. Non-Indigenous people are nearly twice as likely to have completed Year 12 as Indigenous people. Another perspective is provided by exploring the qualifications held by people aged 15 years and older in major cities (Figure 4). According to the 2006 Census, Indigenous people are far more likely to have no qualification (74 versus 56 percent), less likely to have a certificate or diploma, and only one-third as likely to have a degree or higher.

While the previous two figures portrayed all people 15 years and older, the next series of figures focuses specifically on 16 year olds. I’ve selected this set of individuals for two reasons. Until recently, 16 years of age was the age at which young people in most states and territories could leave school legally. Given the fact that most states and territories have now introduced requirements that young people remain in school until at least 17 years of age, one can safely assume that as a society there is a common belief that 16 year olds should be in school. Second, it is also an age, legal or otherwise, by which a young person who is intent on leaving school prior to completion has typically done so.

Drawing on unpublished data from the 2006 Census, Figure 5 compares educational institution attendance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous 16 year olds in major cities. More than a quarter of

![Figure 2: NAPLAN achievement in reading by Metropolitan Year 9 students at or above national minimum standard, 2011 (ACARA 2011)](image-url)
16-year-old Indigenous students are not attending an educational institution. Further, they are three times more likely to not be attending any educational institution than are their non-Indigenous peers (27 versus 9 percent).

The specific link between early school leaving among Indigenous young people and low NAPLAN reading scores, to my knowledge, has not been statistically demonstrated, but the association of generally low academic achievement with early school leaving among Indigenous and other students has long been known (Curtis and McMillan 2008; Gray and Hackling 2009; Lamb 1996; McMillan and Marks 2003). Though the NAPLAN scores are hugely problematic in some respects, one can assume that those individuals...
who scored below the national minimum standard benchmarks in reading are far more likely to become early school leavers than their colleagues who scored higher.

Returning to the data on 16 year olds, it is interesting to look more closely at those who are not attending education or training. The obvious assumption would be that significant portions of non-attenders are employed; that those young people who are not in school have left school to take up jobs. Figure 6 portrays those ‘non-attenders’ in terms of employment. Individuals fall into one of two categories: employed and unemployed/or not in the labour force. It appears that Indigenous 16 year olds living in major cities who are not attending school are unlikely to be employed (only 32 percent are), whereas slightly more than half (55 percent) of the non-Indigenous 16 year olds are. Thus it appears that the assumption that young people tend to leave school early and find employment is true for a large number of non-Indigenous 16 year olds, but certainly untrue for Indigenous ones.

Unpublished 2006 Census data (Figure 7) show that while 82 percent of Indigenous 16 year olds in major cities are attending education, training programs or institutions or are employed, the remaining 18 percent are not attending and are not in the labour force. These individuals might be considered ‘not fully engaged’; that is, not only are they not attending any educational programs, they are not employed and many are not looking for employment. By comparison, only 4 percent of non-Indigenous 16 year olds are similarly unengaged. In other words, Indigenous 16 year olds in major cities are more than four times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be unengaged with education and training and most typically not even looking for work.

While this analysis has focused on a select and relatively small number of young people — 16-year-old ‘early school leavers’ — it is worth keeping in mind that there are many, many more Indigenous young people under and above the age of 16 who are also not attending school, not employed and not in the labour force. In addition, the relative proportion of young people who leave school early increases with geographic remoteness, so while 82 percent may not seem particularly alarming, the percentage drops the further one moves away from capital cities. Finally, one should also remember that even when Indigenous young people complete secondary studies, they are less likely to gain tertiary qualifications than their non-Indigenous peers and when they do gain qualifications they are far more likely to be at a certificate or similarly lower level. There is a very real cost to individuals, families, communities
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Perhaps the easiest way to get a handle on this is to play failure off against the notion of success (‘success’ in this context referring to students who complete high school or secondary studies). Some features of a successful school career would include:

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**Early school leavers, failure and risk**

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![Figure 6: Labour force status for those not attending educational institution, age 16, major cities, 2006 (ABS 2008)](image6)

![Figure 7: Participation in education or employment, by Indigenous status, age 16, major cities, 2006 (ABS 2008)](image7)
skills and aptitudes such as literacy/numeracy, ‘workplace readiness’, reliability and the ability to compete and engage with the job market.

- **Completion** of a standardised program of study signalling mastery of a prescribed body of knowledge. The most basic program of study is to proceed from primary through secondary school. The preferred mode — the ‘normal’ path — is to enter education at kindergarten (called ‘pre 1 Year’ by the ABS) and attend for 13 or so years and graduate with some form of qualification signalling successful completion of secondary studies.

- **Attainment** on completion of study of a credential facilitating access to further study or work (e.g. a Higher School Certificate or a certificate of vocational qualification). In the case of academic credentials, these are often ranked (e.g. Tertiary Entrance Rank or University Admissions Index score) in a way that determines which courses of study a student might undertake at university. These credentials are literally ‘credits’, coins of the realm in tertiary education or the workplace, that have widely recognised value in the larger economy.

- **Economic participation and productivity.** This is the key marker of educational success. If a student stays to the end, completes the program of study, acquires the desirable skills and attains a credential, he or she is ready for the workplace and one step away from ultimate ‘success’.

The urban Indigenous early school leavers are unlikely to fare well according to these criteria. As seen earlier, metropolitan Indigenous Year 9 students are about 3.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous students to fail to reach the NAPLAN reading score minimum national standard; they comprise about one-third of all metropolitan Indigenous Year 9 students. This is probably a signal that they have not acquired essential literacy skills, that they are most likely struggling in school and that they are far more likely to leave school early. To miss the benchmark or withdraw at any point along this educational pathway is, from a policy perspective, to fail.8 For Indigenous early school leavers, this failure is particularly costly. The early school leavers have by definition not completed their programs of study and as a result they would not have attained the credential most students gain at the end of secondary school. And clearly few of these young people are engaging productively as workers in the larger economy.

In a recent report to the Victorian Department of Education titled *Every Child, Every Opportunity: Effective strategies to increase school completion report*, Stephen Lamb and Suzanne Rice emphasise the ‘serious consequences for young people’ of not completing school. They write:

> Not completing school and failing to gain equivalent education and training qualifications is associated with poorer labour market outcomes and greater insecurity in building careers. Consistently research in Australia and overseas shows that early leavers are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the life-course accumulate less wealth...they also more often experience poorer physical and mental health, higher rates of crime, and less often engage in active citizenship (Lamb and Rice 2008:6).

Other studies both in Australia and abroad suggest that not completing school also results in significant welfare and other social costs (Hankivsky 2008; Owens 2004). Several studies of the ‘returns to education’ — the long-term economic benefits to individuals and society of investing in education — show those benefits are real for Indigenous Australians (Biddle 2010; Daly and Liu 1993; Jununkar and Liu 1996). Yet on virtually every measure of educational engagement, Indigenous students lag significantly behind their non-Indigenous peers.

Early school leavers are, from these perspectives, failures, so it is not surprising that considerable energy is expended in attempting to identify those ‘at risk of failing’ so as to keep them in school. As Lamb and Rice (2008:3) write in relation to ‘at risk students’:

> Disengagement from school and early leaving tend to be concentrated among particular groups of young people. These include students from Indigenous backgrounds, those with integration needs, low achievers, those from low socio-economic status backgrounds, children in families under stress and young people living in high poverty or remote locations.
Though there are no available data to test the proposition, it seems possible and perhaps even likely that the disengaged Indigenous 16 year olds described in the Census data presented earlier fit most, if not all, of the various characteristics (with the exception of residence in remote locations) Lamb and Rice refer to.

Indigenous education policy has long been focused on identifying ‘at risk’ students. Nationally, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs has agreed through the Indigenous Education Action Plan that all Australian education providers will employ entry-level assessments to assist in identifying Indigenous students ‘at educational risk’ (MCEECDY 2010:11). Though all states and territories have signed onto the plan, individual states and territories have undertaken their own strategies to address at-risk Indigenous students. For example, Victorian Government schools, under their Wannik Education Strategy for Indigenous students, have committed to the deployment of a ‘students-at-risk mapping tool’ (State of Victorian 2008).

The phrase is everywhere but there appear to be two significantly different connotations. On one hand, ‘at risk’ seems to refer to the potential danger young people face of falling through the cracks, of not reaching the benchmark, of withdrawing or missing out on the education they are promised and the majority receive. These young people are portrayed as in need of assistance, remediation or rescue. This is the typical notion held by policy makers and government officers. On the other hand, ‘at risk’ refers to trouble makers, young people on the edge, those who don’t participate, don’t appreciate and don’t play by the rules. They are demonised, dismissed or stigmatised as failures. This view is more common among conservative columnists, ‘shock jock’ talk radio hosts and some politicians. These different, though not always mutually exclusive, portrayals are at the heart of the problem of where individuals, families, schools, communities and policy makers should focus their attention and resources: increased support or increased discipline? Or somewhere in between?

There is a vast literature that warns of the dangers of attributing to individuals various deficits, deficiencies and susceptibilities to ‘risk behaviours’ that can be more readily explained as contextual features of poverty, marginality and powerlessness (Fine 1990; Hull et al. 2009; Smyth and Hattam 2004). To paraphrase Ray McDermott’s argument in a seminal paper published in 1974, the key question is not why individuals are ‘at risk’ or why they fail at school, but how they achieve school failure, how they are acquired by the category ‘failure’ (see also Varenne and McDermott 1999). In this sense one might ask to what degree notions of youth at risk are driven not by qualities inherent in young people themselves, by their innate abilities and capacities, but rather by something else: by their lack of access to resources and opportunities and their fit with the values and needs of the educational and political systems within which they find themselves.

Accountability and high-stakes testing

In Australia today students are subjected to mandated systems of standardised assessment and high-stakes testing that many believe further marginalise the already marginalised; Indigenous early school leavers, I would argue, certainly fit into this category. High-stakes testing refers to typically annual, standardised, mandatory educational assessments of students, determining whether or not individuals do or do not meet some benchmark or standard. The ‘stakes’ are high in the sense that the results of such assessments or tests are then available as ‘evidence’ that can be used to make dramatic decisions affecting students, families, teachers, schools and communities.

As Shepard (2000) has demonstrated, Western education’s emphasis on assessment and testing has a long history that can be traced back to notions of social efficiency (derived in part from American industrial efficiency guru FW Taylor’s famous assembly line ‘time and motion studies’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), scientific management of curricula and behaviourist learning theories. This history has shaped the peculiar notions of learning that underpin much of what is increasingly demanded and valued in classroom teaching today. Most significantly, learning is conceived of as a blend of theories of motivation and cognitive development, a sequenced and hierarchical process involving the
accumulation of bits of knowledge, where ‘motivation is external and based on positive reinforcement of many small steps’ and where testing is itself seen as learning (Shepard 2000:5).

This conception of learning underpins Australia’s growing emphasis on standardised assessment and high-stakes testing, part of what is commonly referred to as the accountability movement — a politically conservative, economistic position on education that has emerged as formerly dominant Western economies have begun to struggle to compete in world markets. Internationally, this movement has involved a political critique of education and calls for conservative reforms that will increase the productivity of workers (typically accused of being ill-prepared by educational systems to take on the challenges of the knowledge economy) and promote economic growth. This is commonly framed as ‘the skills question’: policy worries driven by globalisation, economic uncertainty, unpredictability and concerns over the kinds of skills young people do and do not have to compete for jobs in global markets (Hull et al. 2009:123).

The accountability reforms are based on ‘centrally prescribed curricular, learning and assessment standards monitored through intensive assessment and testing and on increased competition between schools’ (Sahlberg 2006:260–1). These reforms are driven not by professional educators, but by business councils, corporate leaders and politicians; for all of these, in an era of economic downturn and struggle, education has been found wanting and market-based assumptions the guide (Apple 2001; Cuban 2005; Peters and Oliver 2009; Salinas and Reidel 2007). In addition, a troubling trend both overseas and in Australia is for conservative advocacy ‘think tanks’ and ‘policy institutes’ to conduct ‘research’ and publish a predictable sheaf of policy recommendations calling for governments to ‘get tough’, enforce greater accountability, implement a national curriculum, increase discipline, return to ‘basics’, allow ‘no excuses’ and return to the quality education of old. Typically, these policy papers are published in glossy, ‘reader friendly’ formats without normal peer review quality controls; untested recommendations are then directed at the media and channelled to policy makers who must respond immediately to this ‘evidence’ of ‘crisis’.

Within the accountability movement, education is continually portrayed as ‘in crisis’ and in need of wholesale, systemic reform. Accordingly, reform is propelled through a mix of standardised testing and teacher and school accountability. Paradoxically, as Cuban (2008) has pointed out, teachers are simultaneously blamed for the apparent deficiencies in the educational system and heralded as the instruments by which education will be reformed (and economic competitiveness regained). Within this frame standardised testing is used not so much to diagnose and assist individual students as to document ‘student performance’, to identify ‘bad teachers’ and inept administrators, and to make teachers, principals and individual schools accountable. The ‘stakes’ are high in the sense that the outcomes of mandatory annual standardised tests can be used by parents, communities and politicians to make significant decisions about the future for students, teachers and schools.

The problem is that the peer-reviewed research does not support this approach. In the United States, for example, Amrein and Berliner (2002b) analysed the impact of high-stakes testing on student academic performance in 27 (of 50) states. They found that while increased academic achievement was the desired and expected outcome of the introduction of high-stakes testing, there was in fact no discernible effect: ‘The data presented in this study suggest that after the implementation of high-stakes testing, nothing much happens. That is, no consistent effects across states were noted. Scores seemed to go up or down in random pattern’ (Amrein and Berliner 2002b:57).

Similarly, Madaus and Clarke (2001) analysed one hundred years of testing data in the United States to assess the impact of high-stakes testing. They conclude that high-stakes, high-standards tests do not have a markedly positive effect on teaching and learning, do not motivate the unmotivated, are not an equitable way to assess students who differ by race, culture, native language or gender, and in fact increase early school leaving, particularly among minority students.

The problem with high-stakes testing is not only that it does not work, but it confuses prob-
problem with symptom. Closing the literacy achievement and school completion gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in cities and elsewhere cannot be accomplished through high-stakes testing. As Berliner (2009:1) points out, there are a number of common out-of-school factors that ‘play a powerful role in generating existing achievement gaps’ and severely limit what schools can achieve on their own. The out-of-school factors Berliner describes are ‘poverty induced’ and not randomly distributed; rather, they are concentrated in particular communities and schools and include:

- low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children
- inadequate medical, dental and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance
- food insecurity
- environmental pollutants
- family relations and family stress
- neighbourhood characteristics.

Ironically, the Australian Government’s own ‘Closing the Gap’ targets and building blocks appear to acknowledge the complex interplay among these factors and are working to mitigate them, but there seems to have been neither an understanding of the burden these out-of-school factors place on particular students and schools nor an awareness of the destructive potential of assessments like NAPLAN and its companion online ‘Our School’ database.9

It is worrying that Australia is embarking on the road to standardised testing and high-stakes accountability when several other nations, such as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, have dismantled such regimes and when recognised international leaders in education, such as Finland, have consistently resisted them (Sahlberg 2011; West 2010). The international educational policy literature is teeming with academic papers critical of the various policies laying the foundations for standardised and high-stakes testing, and there have also been sharp critiques from government-commissioned reviewers in the United Kingdom (Alexander 2009, 2010; Rose 2009), as well as a public rebuke of the United Kingdom’s approach to assessment and testing by a Government Committee (House of Commons 2008). In the United States, one of the most prominent education policy architects of the Regan era push for the expansion of high-stakes testing and accountability, Diane Ravitch, has seen the fall out of high-stakes testing and has reversed course to become one of its most vociferous critics and one of the most ardent and surprising champions of public education (Ravitch 2010).10

Perhaps most troubling in the context of Indigenous early school leavers in Australia, there is a growing body of evidence highlighting the negative impact of standardised assessment and high-stakes testing on Indigenous and minority students. Research by McNeil (2005) shows adverse impacts on minority Latino students in Texas, while McCarty (2009) found high-stakes testing adversely affected Native American students.11 A major long-term research project has demonstrated clear links between punitive high-stakes testing and zero tolerance school discipline and the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ in the United States (Advancement Project 2010).12 While much of this research is based in the United States, we should not take much comfort that these effects have not been or will not be felt in Australia. The United States has had high-stakes testing for nearly 30 years and only in the past ten have significant numbers of citizens begun to wonder what is wrong.

High-stakes tests are dull tools of assessment. Certainly, testing is an integral tool for assisting and supporting learning but tests should be used as one of many strategies professional educators employ to diagnose and address student strengths and weaknesses. The risks inherent in high-stakes tests are numerous and the potential consequences (sometimes unintended) — whereby diversity is crushed by standardisation, autonomy replaced by prescription and trust by suspicion — are grave. It is important that education targets are shaped by professional educators in the classroom and community, not by politicians.

Where to from here?

As I have argued, there is strong evidence from overseas that high-stakes tests such as the NAPLAN have questionable validity and can in fact be detrimental, particularly where minority and Indigenous students are concerned. Clearly, testing is not in itself problematic, but the NAPLAN should be recast as a locally controlled,
formative assessment instrument for assisting teachers and families to assist individual students; the results of such tests only should be used locally and not made accessible for the development of ‘league tables’.

There are also many lessons on how to improve education outcomes (which are applicable to Indigenous students) that can be derived from the principles that underpin some of the best educational systems in the world. Hargreaves and Shirley (2008), drawing lessons from a diverse range of education policy and program developments in Finland, Canada, England and the United States, identify some common principles for improvement:

• a compelling, inclusive, and inspirational vision for economic, social and educational development
• a more enriching and engaging curriculum for all, not to replace the basics, but to bolster and move beyond them
• the inspiration, support and professional discretion that will attract and retain the very best teachers and accord them the high status their responsibilities deserve
• a national strategy to develop and renew educational leaders who can build and constantly improve strong professional learning communities
• intelligent accountability strategies that monitor standards and improve every child’s instruction and which do not allow the publication of crude data to rank and shame struggling schools
• ambitious, professionally developed and shared educational targets rather than politically arbitrary ones
• support for school networks where good practices can be exchanged and the strong can help the weak
• recasting parents and communities as actively engaged partners rather than as consumers, recipients or targets of external interventions or government strategies and services (Hargreaves and Shirley 2008).

Running through this cluster of principles is a commitment to equity and the enhancement of the quality of public education, a valuing of diversity over standardisation, a respect for and desire to sustain and enhance the professional standing of educators, a belief in local autonomy, and a recognition that schools and educators cannot by themselves achieve the changes and gains needed to ensure all children are given the education and subsequent opportunities they deserve. This is particularly important in this age of accountability and national standards in education and where there is a pervasive moral panic about the degree to which students, schools and states, and even nations, perform against one another.

The national policy focus on ‘failure’ and ‘risk’ remains problematic. Certainly, it is important to understand the factors that derail young people and lead to their disengagement from school, families and communities. Similarly, it is vital that programs and policies recognise and support them in all their various engagements with learning. Some of what is seen as failure and risk is in fact the agency of youth in expressions of resistance and identity (Bottrell 2007) or ‘self-sabotage’ resulting from the experience of discrimination and racism (Andrews et al. 2008). Together these account for much of what might be observed not so much as ‘failure’ but rather as a ‘retreat from aspiration’ among young people (Bottrell 2007:610).

In attempting to make sense of why Indigenous young people in urban settings leave school early or stay, it is important to explore the degree to which their schooling experience maps the cultural realities of their lives. For example, powerful insights also can be gained about young people by simply listening to them. In their comprehensive and illuminating study of early school leavers in Australia, John Smyth and Robert Hattam found that among these young people, post-compulsory schooling:

• was irrelevant in terms of navigating a transition from school to economic independence, in a youth market that has almost collapsed;
• endorsed forms of assessment and a credential that was about going to university, and hence not inclusive of their needs; and
• perpetrated a school culture that actively contributed to and produced early school leaving (Smyth and Hattam 2004:191).

Smyth and Hattam (2004:193) argue convincingly (not least because their insights are grounded
in the insights and statements of young people) that if we want young people to remain engaged with school (and learning, I would add) we need to listen more carefully to those ‘most disgruntled clients’ and begin reshaping culture, policy and practice in our schools.

Finally, I would argue that policy makers too often confuse schooling with learning and we need to press for a deeper policy orientation towards the latter. School is a limited institution, both temporally and socially, but learning is a fundamental feature of human life. While we certainly need to reconsider the way we ‘school’ Indigenous youth, we need to pay much more attention to learning that goes on outside school. As John Singleton (1999:457) wrote:

schools are complex social institutions, not general models of education and learning. If anything, they are extreme — and unlikely — models of enculturation. From the early acquisition of language to the later induction into occupation and social roles, we learn by observing and enacting social roles in everyday social contexts. Learning is situated in communities of practice, and schools are very limited as such communities. We do learn to be students in school, but we learn to be adults in adult society.

In terms of those 16-year-old early school leavers, I suspect most have not drifted out or fallen prey to factors of risk, but rather they feel marginalised and alienated from school and have found it to be largely irrelevant to their daily lives. Perhaps we should think less about how to legislate them back into the classroom and worry more about how to support their engagement with learning and their transition as young adults into adult society.

NOTES
1. Though the original quote refers to education in the United States, it is equally applicable to Australia.
2. Noel Pearson is a strong proponent of what he refers to as ‘orbits’, whereby students from remote communities are sent to study in capital cities where supposedly they receive a higher quality education than is available in their local schools; they then return to their home communities. The Commonwealth Government has provided financial support for this model with a foundation grant in 2010 of $20 million to support the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), which funds scholarships to remote area students. Of course, these scholarships are not for study in typical capital city government schools; rather, the Indigenous students who participate in the AIEF program attend selected and exclusive non-government boarding schools in places like Potts Point and Rose Bay. The government schools the majority of urban Indigenous young people attend provide very different experiences.
3. The classification ‘Metropolitan’ is derived from the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Schools Geographic Location Classification System, which allows NAPLAN data to be analysed according to geolocation, including Metropolitan, Provincial, Remote and Very Remote zones. ‘Metropolitan’ includes mainland State Capital City regions (Statistical Divisions) and Major Urban Statistical Districts (100 000 or more in population). In contrast, the Australian Bureau of Statistics uses the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) as a tool for geographic location. ARIA does not include a category ‘metropolitan’; rather, it refers to ‘major cities’, which includes most capital cities and major urban areas such as Newcastle, Geelong and the Gold Coast. While there are obviously some differences between ‘metropolitan’ and ‘major cities’, for the purposes of this paper they are treated as roughly equivalent.
4. ‘Educational Institution’ is an ABS category that includes pre-school through tertiary institutions. According to the 2006 Census there were 3464 Indigenous 16 year olds resident in major cities, compared to 171 190 non-Indigenous such young people (ABS 2008).
5. Specific definitions are important here. A person who is ‘unemployed’ is seeking employment but has not found it yet, while a person ‘not in the labour force’ has given up or has no intention of seeking a job.
6. The figures for ‘attending education or employed’ also include individuals who are unemployed but who are attending education or training programs or institutions. The figures for ‘not attending education and not in the labour force’ include those who are unemployed but not attending education or training programs or institutions.
7. The notion of ‘not fully engaged’ was passed on to me by my colleague Mandy Yap, who guided me through the process of preparing and analysing the unpublished Census data used in this paper.
9. See, for example, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs ‘Closing the Gaps’ webpage at <www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/ctg/Pages/targets.aspx>.
10. See also Nichols and Berliner’s influential 2007 book, *Collateral Damage: How high-stakes testing corrupts America’s schools*.

11. Academic discussions of the cross-cultural complexities and questionable validity of standardised assessment of American Indian and Native Alaskan students have a long history (see, for example, Estrin and Nelson-Barber 1995).

12. See also Amrein and Berliner 2002a for a discussion of the unintended and negative consequences of high-stakes testing, including student grade retention, increased student expulsions, increased classification of low achieving or poor and minority students as ‘learning disabled’ so they will be exempt from testing, teaching to the test, a narrowing of the curriculum, etc.

13. It is interesting that while Finland is often referred to as having one of the best, if not the best, educational systems in the world, only about 2 percent of school children in Finland attend private schools (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2010). This clearly signals a pervasive social and governmental commitment to government schools and public education, a commitment Australia would do well to emulate.

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