

SEASON 2 EPISODE 9 TRANSCRIPT

TALKING TEACHING WITH MAXINE McKEW, DAVID DE CARVALHO AND MARCIA LANGTON

0:00 **Maxine McKew** **I'm Maxine McKew and this is Talking Teaching**

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0:12 David de Carvalho Unfortunately the way some media organisations portray NAPLAN results, it's as if NAPLAN is the be all and end all and is the ultimate quality test of the school. This is clearly ridiculous

- music -

0:32 **Maxine McKew** **Hi there, and welcome to our last Talking Teaching podcast for 2019. Ahead, a discussion with Professor Marcia Langton about a terrific new set of resources for secondary and primary teachers, the aim being to boost student knowledge about the breadth and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultures. But first, what is NAPLAN really telling us and does it remain a relevant and useful measure? The national annual testing of all students in the area of literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 has rarely been free of controversy since its inception in 2008. It's been said to add to stress levels of both staff and students. The fact that the data is published raises questions about school shaming, and it's also seen by many as a very narrow snapshot of achievement. But on the plus side, it's the only consistent data available to all Government jurisdictions, and it's been encouraging and useful to see the ways schools themselves are using the data to drive whole school improvement, often in schools in the most disadvantaged areas that have used NAPLAN to spur significant achievement. So how are we doing overall? Some mainstream media reports of NAPLAN suggest student achievement is going to hell in a hand-basket. That is simply not the case. Nonetheless, there is concern about particular issues and the three east coast states have ordered reviews of NAPLAN. I've been joined today by David de Carvalho. He is the CEO of ACARA, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting**

Authority, the body charged with oversight of NAPLAN assessment. David, welcome to Talking Teaching

- 2:19 David de Carvalho Thanks very much Maxine, nice to be with you.
- 2:22 **Maxine McKew** **Now after eleven years of national testing, what's the big picture on what the data is telling us about student achievement from NAPLAN?**
- 2:29 David de Carvalho So after eleven years of national testing as you say, what we can say is that there has been an improvement in a number of the two domains. So for example, compared with the base year in 2008, the performance of Australian students in Year 5 numeracy is three and five reading, is three and five spelling, and Year 3 grammar was above where we were ten years (?3:01). What's not so good is that in terms of the seven and Year 9 achievement in writing, that was below where we started in 2011, and we started writing a few years later and the other domains. Nevertheless, there are some very interesting more recent developments in writing. As you may be aware, there has been some concern for some time about the trajectory of writing performance on NAPLAN, but this year in 2019, what the preliminary data is showing is that across all jurisdictions and all year levels, the writing performance ticked up this year. Now I don't want to speculate on what's happening, it's probably quite different in each jurisdiction, but I would suggest that the focus that NAPLAN has brought to achievement in literacy and numeracy which has highlighted the issues with writing, is helping teachers and principals and system authorities to focus on the area of need that needs to be addressed, and certainly that uptick this year is encouraging. It's evidence to me of the benefits of a national comprehensive standardised testing regime in being able to pinpoint where we've got issues and enable system authorities and schools to start systematically addressing those issues.
- 4:33 **Maxine McKew** **David, what about the picture for indigenous students?**
- 4:37 David de Carvalho Yes, so it's a very interesting picture there Maxine. If we look at the data over the last ten years, certainly in indigenous students

there's a hole across the country. They're still quite a bit behind in terms of overall levels of achievement compared to non-indigenous students. However, what is interesting is that the rate of improvement across each of the year levels is almost doubled underrated improvement in a non-indigenous population. So for example, compared to the 2008, the rate of growth achieved by indigenous students over the last ten years has been about 7.4% in Year 3, compared to only 4.2% growth by non-indigenous students, and when we get to Year 5, the rates of growth in both indigenous and non-indigenous are a little bit less, but the relationship is the same. So Year 5 growth across the various NAPLAN domains for indigenous kids, 5% over the last ten years, only 2.2% for non-indigenous students over that period. So again, I think the focus that NAPLAN has been able to bring on just how sizeable that literacy and numeracy gap is between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students has helped drive I think greater investment in those areas and a greater focus on bringing indigenous students up to speed. However, again we can't be complacent in this area. The rate at which the literacy and numeracy gap is closing is still too slow and we really nationally need to think about how we go about really improving the educational outcomes in these foundation schools of literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

6:39 **Maxine McKew**

David, as students move through the school system, what seems to be happening after Year 5 and particularly after Year 7 because we do hear from many schools that notwithstanding those figures you've given, too many students are still starting high school where their reading levels have stalled?

0:00 David de Carvalho

Yes, so this is a really interesting phenomenon, and in fact Peter Goss from the Grattan Institute wrote a very interesting piece in Conversation this week where he highlighted that something odd is going on with reading as students move from Year 5 to Year 7. Now it's not what you might you know naturally think – oh it's having something to do with moving from primary school to senior school because if that was the only explanation you'd expect to see the same issue with reading play out across

numeracy for example. What seems to be happening is that the rate of growth between Year 5 and Year 7 is much lower than in later growth between say Year 3 and Year 5 or between Year 7 and nine, particularly in reading. Now it's not clear at this stage what is going on there. People can possibly speculate as to what that might be, for example additional screen time, kids are reading less. But if that's the case, you perhaps might see that reflected you know in the rates of growth between seven and nine as well where you would anticipate that more and more students, the older they get, are taking on more screen time on their devices and are less engaged in reading. But the other thing that's really interesting to say that that slower growth seems to be even slower again in the more advantaged segment of the population. So children coming from more advantaged backgrounds. Again somewhat of a mystery and I think some further research needs to go into the data to try and find out what's going on there.

- 8:46 **Maxine McKew** **Well of course one theory is that we're pretty good at the foundational stuff, but we're not stretching our students around more sophisticated work.**
- 8:55 David de Carvalho So that is certainly I think a reasonable point to make, and when you look at our PISA results, again the drop off in our results in PISA, which is the OECD example test that is conducted every three years in literacy and numeracy, the drop off in our performance there over the last fifteen years or so is more because the students in the more advanced segments of the sample or the higher performing students, they're not performing as well. We're getting less student in that top performing band and more students in the lower performing band.
- 9:38 **Maxine McKew** **Now why would this be?**
- 9:38 David de Carvalho Well this is a very good question and I think it's something that those I think advantaged you know call for greater investigation. I think the issue of are we really stretching our top performing students is a good question that we should all be asking, and particularly in my view I think what is happening with reading in the classroom but also outside the classroom? How many

students these days when you hop on a tram or a train or a bus do you see with a book in their hands? Very few. A lot of them are on their devices communicating with their friends in all sorts of positive ways, but the habit of reading outside school, the habit of reading for pleasure at home or on the way to school seems to be declining a great deal, and I suspect that there may be something to do with that society-wide change frankly that may be playing out here.

10:37 **Maxine McKew**

So we're still in the speculative realm here, but it is interesting to look at those states... for instance I know here in Victoria they've very concerned about diminished writing skills and a lot of effort is going onto that. Equally we've got reviews into NAPLAN by three states. Is it a concern to you that we're kind of seizing on the tested self because perhaps we don't like what it's telling us?

11:00 **David de Carvalho**

I know there's this view that has been put by some people in relation to the review that is being conducted by New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and the ACT. But Minister Tehan himself has said that he's quite open to having a broad review in a couple of years time where everybody is online. So I don't think there's any objection generally to NAPLAN being reviewed. At the moment it just seems to be a debate about what is the appropriate time to do that. Certainly when you have a nation-wide standardised testing regime of literacy and numeracy that has been going for as long as it has, it's appropriate at the right juncture to take stock. So there are certainly ways in which we think that the NAPLAN could be improved and we're now looking closely at what's happening with writing. Are we testing writing in the right way? There are some views that we're taking seriously that because we only test narrative writing and persuasive writing, maybe we're not testing the full range of text types and writing styles that are taught in the curriculum. So we're going to be looking into these issues. We're going to be looking into whether the way the writing is marked is appropriate. So we as an organisation that's about education, we're very much open to learning and continual improvement ourselves in what we do.

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- 12:31 **Maxine McKew** **So are we likely to see more granular testing?**
- 12:33 David de Carvalho
- What I can say is that the online version of NAPLAN does allow more precise results to be reported back to students and parents and schools, and this is because the online version of NAPLAN is, as they say, adaptive. So the test is structured in such a way that you know students will start on a first set of questions, five or six questions, and depending on how they answer those, if they get them all right for example, they'll go onto the next set of questions will be a little bit harder. If they get them all wrong, their next set of questions will be a little bit easier and you proceed through the test on that basis. Now what they means is by the time you get to the end of the test, you've experienced questions in this area that are able to really closely present what you can do, and that is very valuable information. It's particularly important for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds and the students who perhaps are not doing as well as we'd like, because on the pen and paper test they might encounter repeatedly a range of questions that they just find too hard, and they start engaging as they go through the pen and paper test. But if you can then tailor testing in such a way that the questions are pitched at or about their level of current competency they stay engaged. And the same happens at the upper end of performance as well where students are a bit better in their abilities are challenged more and are pushed more. And so you get a result for them that is also a more accurate depiction of what their abilities are.
- 14:21 **Maxine McKew** **And David, just finally, do you feel in a way NAPLAN has been asked to do too much over the years? I mean do we need more and better assessment tools?**
- 14:32 David de Carvalho
- Well I think this is a very good point Maxine. NAPLAN should only ever be seen as part of an integrated and comprehensive suite of assessments. But at the moment it is I think, as you say, being asked to bear too much. Unfortunately, the way some media organisations portray NAPLAN results, it's as if NAPLAN is the be all and end all and is the ultimate quality test of the school. This is clearly ridiculous. NAPLAN focuses on a very small but important aspect of school performance and

student capability. But to pretend that the NAPLAN results are a measure of overall school quality is clearly wrong, and I think we do need to take a step back help put NAPLAN in perspective and take some of that out of the debate.

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- 15:35 **Maxine McKew** **Here’s a question – what does instruction about indigenous Australia look like in your school? Is it limited to some discussion viewing celebratory events such as NAIDOC Week? A bit of dot painting for the young ones? Maybe an occasional visit from a local elder? Perhaps it’s a bit more comprehensive than that, but many schools struggle with access to credible resource material that can give all students a breadth of knowledge about a way of life which in some areas of this country date back sixty-five thousand years. Well an important new project commissioned by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is designed to address this deficit. Professor Marcia Langton has been pivotal in the co-ordination of material that could be used as units of study for both primary and secondary students, and with work completed by a diverse range of discipline experts. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricular Project will have a dedicated website hosted here at the University of Melbourne, and the focus is on three main areas – astronomy, fire and water. Marcia Langton holds the Foundation Chair in Australian Indigenous Studies as well being a leading figure in discussions around realising the ambitions in the Uluru Statement of the Heart. She joins me in the studio now. Professor Marcia Langton welcome to Talking Teaching.**
- 16:59 Marcia Langton Thank you Maxine.
- 17:00 **Maxine McKew** **I imagine there is a dual benefit here, I mean for students obviously who’ve not had access to this material, but for really a whole generation of teachers as well who probably were not schooled in any of this material?**

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- 17:12 Marcia Langton That's right. This is all completely new. Look, it's not completely new because it's in the journals...
- 17:20 **Maxine McKew** **But as you say there's fresh scholarship about this isn't there?**
- 17:22 Marcia Langton It's in PhDs, it's in Masters theses, it's in scholarly books, it's on scholarly websites, but we shaped it with a team of about thirty people to make these curriculum resources that enable teachers to teach rigorously researched indigenous knowledge topics that are also supported by the subject areas and the expert materials for each learning area, achievement, standard and year level.
- 17:58 **Maxine McKew** **So there's a wonderful relevance to all of this now. I mean it's not just at a time when fire is once again ravaging across several states, but there's never been a greater discussion and certainly amongst school children around things like land management and climate. So there is such richness now to draw on from the material you've made available.**
- 18:17 Marcia Langton That's right. Well I deliberately used these three indigenous knowledge topics or themes because I know how keen young people are to learn about our environments. So astronomy – they can look in the sky every night. They can turn the lights off or get out of the city a little bit, and even if they don't, you can still see stars, you can still see the moon.
- 18:44 **Maxine McKew** **And it's not a field of study one associates with indigenous Australia.**
- 18:48 Marcia Langton Well most people didn't know that there's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander astronomers and there's a lot to know. I'll just give you an example of astronomy... astronomy mathematics Year 8. This resource is called Mathematics Moon Phases and Tides, and the summary of this says Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long observed the phases of the moon and used it to understand the tides and the effect on the environment around them. And there's you know a large number of astronomy resources, in fact fourteen in astronomy. So it takes

a while to get the right experts together and to summarise you know scientific and anthropological material, maps, design activities, run it past the teachers, run it past a good curriculum writer, and in any case there are forty-two resources.

- 19:47 **Maxine McKew** **And I gather all of this is enhanced as well, the online material, with what Hardy Grant has published in book form, is that right?**
- 19:54 Marcia Langton I was concerned that this website, as wonderful as it is and as rich as it is with materials, was not going to be found easily by teachers. So I thought I'll write a book as well. So I'd already published Welcome to Country – a Travel Guide to Indigenous Australia with Hardy Grant, and like anybody who sees this curriculum project, they loved it, so we came up with the idea of a book. And this is more a general introduction to what we know about the First Peoples. So of course it starts with an introduction and pre-history, indigenous languages and so on, so each chapter covers an area that could be used to support teachers' work, but I meant to write it specifically for young Australians from say Grade 7 to Grade 10. I want them to have a good book to read that brings them completely up-to-date with what we know. For example that Clarkson and his colleagues found a site that shows evidence of human occupation starting at sixty-five thousand years ago. So you know people say that Aboriginal people have been here for sixty-five thousand years, that's based on that research.
- 21:17 **Maxine McKew** **Which is just staggering to think about isn't it, because that means, as you've said in this material, you had indigenous Australians surviving an Ice Age, unbelievable changes and adaptations to a changing landscape. Extraordinary to think about isn't it?**
- 21:32 Marcia Langton That's right. And over those...
- 21:35 **Maxine McKew** **A bit of collective knowledge there**
- 21:36 Marcia Langton Well that's right. So over those millennia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies developed knowledge systems to

enable them to live in particular environments, and these knowledge systems ... you know they're bodies of integrated knowledge. So in this book what I do cover, which is not covered in the online material on the University of Melbourne website, is for instance a bit about medicinal knowledge... indigenous medicinal knowledge. So I try to mention just about everything in the book, so there's a lot more work to do, but yes, the book is designed for young Australians. Teachers can read it, teachers can find more material and you know just get a general overview in order to use the more specific materials. But along with the book there are teacher's notes, a hundred and twenty-five pages of teachers' notes written by Linda Sawyer who is a very experienced teacher here in Melbourne, and they're free and downloadable on the Hardy Grant website page for this book Welcome to Country – An Introduction to our First Peoples for Young Australians

22:48 **Maxine McKew**

And we will certainly put all of those reference links on our website as well. But Marcia tell me this, what's your wider hope here? I mean if schools embrace this work, is it your hope that we can perhaps change the national story to one that is much broader and much more interesting than the one we tell ourselves now?

23:06 Marcia Langton

Yeah. Well what Aboriginal people want is for the truth to be told, and you'll remember that the truth telling is one of the three main messages of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Now it's very difficult to change the minds of older adults who grew up believing that you know Aborigines are a primitive race, believed in the doomed race theory... you know it was inevitable that Aboriginal people would die out, and would find it incomprehensible that there are encyclopaedic indigenous knowledge systems, they simply don't believe it. I find that there are many academics who are here at the university that don't believe it.

23:51 **Maxine McKew**

So what do you do? You leap a generation or two?

23:53 Marcia Langton

That's it, leap a couple of generations... maybe three. Anyway that's why I'm pitching to the youngsters. Their minds are open

to knowledge, they're curious. Children, as you know are wonderful observers, and one of my colleagues from the philanthropic sector said that one of his little mates had been taken to a museum in a country town in Victoria, and they were shown the museum and there was one glass box with one Aboriginal object in it. And the kid said, well where's the rest of it? It's such a good question. There's a big story to tell there, which is why I wrote a section in here to explain how it came to be that people think of Aboriginal people as primitive. So as Bruce Pascoe shows, if you read the very early...

24:49 **Maxine McKew**

This is in Dark Emu?

24:50 Marcia Langton

Who wrote Dark Emu and there was a children's version of that too – Young Dark Emu. If you read the very earliest colonial records where the colonists were coming in contact with indigenous people for the first time, there's a lot of detail and they're seeing a new world and it's a very different view from what you find later. So when you get to the 20th Century and in the meantime there have been frontier wars, pandemics, starvation and a population disaster - we lost possibly nearly a million people in a hundred and fifty years, it was a disaster, and you're old enough to remember the culture wars and Windschuttle nailing Henry Reynolds and Lindall Ryan to a wall over a couple of footnotes. And so nobody was game to teach anything about Aboriginal history for a long time.

25:55 **Maxine McKew**

Was that the effect of that?

25:56 Marcia Langton

Yes it was.

25:58 **Maxine McKew**

It was a dark chapter wasn't it?

25:58 Marcia Langton

Yeah it was a very dark chapter in our history. So children don't learn about Aboriginal history. And if you talk to anybody even in our generation or younger, they say I didn't learn anything about Aboriginal history, and people are now shocked to be reading the new books that are coming out and say why didn't we know this? In fact Henry Reynolds later wrote a book, you'll

remember, entitled Why Weren't We Told? And so I explain that...

- 26:25 **Maxine McKew** **And in fact to bring this back to teachers Marcia, one can understand perhaps their reluctance because they may want to teach but they think well what if we get it wrong?**
- 26:31 Marcia Langton Exactly right which is why we're doing these materials to make it easy for them, and it's why I chose these three environmental themes so that teachers don't have to wrangle the difficult problems of historiography, the nasty aftertaste of Windschuttle's culture wars. Did the Stolen Generations take place? Well the evidence says yes. Windschuttle and a few others say no it didn't happen. Well there's a mountain of evidence, and I think most Australians accept now that it did.
- 27:07 **Maxine McKew** **I think so too.**
- 27:08 Marcia Langton Yeah
- 27:08 **Maxine McKew** **Marcia, I have to ask you, what did you grow up hearing from your teachers about your culture and the cultures around you?**
- 27:16 Marcia Langton Well, I wrote about that again in this book because I'd written about it earlier in the book I did with Rachel Perkins – First Australians, which was the companion book to her eight episode documentary on the history of indigenous Australia. And I wrote that when I was growing up, the teachers recited dreadful racist poetry and you know cited documents that called us savages and thieves and murderers, and for a long time I didn't know who these Aborigines were until I'd got a little bit older, I must have been in about Grade 5 or 6 or something, I realised they were talking about my people. And none of these descriptions were anything like the people I knew, and you know it was a major shock.
- 28:07 **Maxine McKew** **Did that hurt you?**

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- 28:10 Marcia Langton Well I think for a while I wondered – are there Aborigines like that? Maybe they're talking about some other Aborigines that I don't know. You know I had a childish view of the world, but later then I realised it was just this you know wall of racism in the school textbooks. There was nothing good to be said about any Aboriginal person except for Jackey Jackey who escorted I think it was Leichhardt to Cape York.
- 28:41 **Maxine McKew** **I think that's about the only story I got and I grew up in Queensland as well just like you.**
- 28:45 Marcia Langton So there was a book written about Leichhardt and Jackey Jackey after the fact, and then the airport at the tip of Cape York is called the Jackey Jackey Airport. It's about one Aboriginal character in Australian history, but you know we didn't hear about Bennelong until much, much later. You know we didn't know about David Unaipon until much, much later... decades later. So why weren't these histories told? Because it was the end of the frontier wars and most Australians had already, even in the colonial times, been suppressing any knowledge, any evidence of what they'd done to Aboriginal people and it was a totally taboo subject. So they allowed a few myths to be told. And so you'll remember some of the ridiculous mythologies, and when you look at those, they're taken from Aboriginal religion, but they're nasty, tedious, childish versions of much grander ideas, much grander narratives. And so our culture was trivialised and infantilised, and that is what most adult Australians think of Aboriginal culture, and you can see the evidence of it on Facebook pages. So what these curriculum materials, the University of Melbourne materials, the forty-two resources under astronomy, fire and water and the Welcome to Country book do and the teachers' notes is bring children entirely up-to-date with what we know about indigenous Australia from all of the experts, and it's all made very simple for teachers to be able to teach it. And they can trust me or not, but I can guarantee you that I've had the most well informed experts helping me do this.

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30:47 **Maxine McKew**

And a postscript – the reference by Marcia Langton to the culture wars in that interview was about the distress and acrimony that resulted from the writings of Keith Windschuttle in the 1990s. Keith Windschuttle accused a number of historians of exaggerating the degree of violence against indigenous Australians. Well Marcia Langton's Welcome to Country books are available in most bookstores and they make a great Christmas gift. We'll also have links to the other websites that were mentioned in that interview. Well that's Talking Teaching for this episode and indeed for 2019. To all of Talking Teaching's listeners, thanks for your support and all the best as you finish a busy year. My thanks to sound engineer Gavin Nebauer who's always done such a great job on the recording and post production and is a lot of fun to work with. Thanks as well. Thanks as well to Genevieve Costigan and the social media team here at the university for all they do to get the message out, and to the many colleagues who've helped with story suggestions and ideas. Finally, a special thanks to the Ramsay Foundation. Their generous backing has made this podcast possible. Bye for now.

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