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CPL Podcast: Teacher's Voice in educational Assessment

Host: Kate Ambrose

With: Jim Tognolini

INTRODUCTION:

The Centre for Professional Learning acknowledges and pays respect to traditional custodians and their ancestors across our broad country. We acknowledge the past, present and emerging Elders on whose land we have been privileged to live and work. This podcast was produced on Gadigal land. We recognise First Nations peoples continuing connection to lands, waters and culture around the world.

Kate Ambrose:

Welcome to the CPL podcast. Today's episode is being hosted by me, Kate Ambrose. I'm the Director of the Centre for Professional Learning here at the New South Wales Teachers Federation and today I'm speaking with Professor Jim Tognolini. Jim is the Director of the Centre for Educational Measurement and Assessment at the University of Sydney. Jim, welcome.

Jim Tognolini:

Thank you very much. Great to be here.

Kate Ambrose:

Lovely to have you here, Jim, your online profile, there's a way of introduction, says "that your specialist research and educational evaluation work focuses primarily on educational assessment and the application and appropriateness of measurement models and theoretical perspectives to education and learning in both local and international contexts". So, I think we could probably spend many hours of podcasts just unpacking that. So perhaps we won't, however, I think it does signal why we've asked you to come and speak to us today about educational assessment and, more specifically, the teacher's voice in assessment. We, you, and I have had many conversations around assessment, data, and evidence over the past couple of years, which has been fantastic. You've also delivered two courses for the CPL: one on *Empowering Teachers through the Meaningful Use of Data and Evidence* and the other on *Modern Assessment Theory and High Order Thinking Strategies* and in all of those conversations, and during the courses, I've noticed that you take a philosophical approach to the concepts of data, evidence, and assessment. Can you start by talking to us a bit about your philosophical approach?

Jim Tognolini:

Thank you, Kate. Yes, very happy to, and I think it's a good place to start because I always go back to that point when anybody asks me any questions about measurement or assessment, I go back to the



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basic belief, or my philosophical stance, as you say, on what assessment is. So maybe I'll start there, and it took Gordon Stanley and myself about 20 years to come up with this definition over time, because we're always worried about the sort of sterile definitions of assessment per se, and the real lack of attachment to what we think teachers actually do. And we think teachers do assess and generally they assess very well. So, the definition we eventually came up with "assessment is the professional judgment, based on an image of what students can and can't do, and the monitoring of that image along a developmental continuum, which is over time" and we felt that's what teachers do.

Now, if you start with that as your definition - collection of information, building an image of what students know and can do. If you start with that image, then you get the idea that teachers do this constantly, and they use a range of ways to do it. And those ranges extend from getting evidence from, or information from, examinations, standardised tests et cetera; getting information from classroom tests; from observation [which] is a real critical view of collecting information about student performance, because you're observing all the time, whether in the playground or whatever. And all the time you're taking that information, or data (as I might call it in a minute) into this image and weighing it up with what you know about the student. That's how we work. Always have, always will. It's not based on an exam score per se, that's just part of the image.

So, you have that sort of view about what assessment is, and how we do it, and it's always involving professional judgment because you take that information in and compare it to the image. Now, then it moves on to the data because all the things you observed, things that people say to you, the student says, other students say, is collected by you. They're data. Included in data, of course, are things like NAPLAN scores, HSC scores, et cetera. They're just one little bit of data and they've got to be treated like that, like all bits of data. And so, you take that information, it becomes data, and data's going on around teachers all the time. What they then have to do really is to, or like looking at this data, and then something makes you stop and say - "well, that's a bit unusual. Why did the student do that?"

Now as soon as you stop, you know, and, and think about some bit of data or that's coming in, then it becomes information really. Then you take that bit of information, and you really action it by comparing that information to the image. And when you compare the information and the data to an image, then it starts to be contextualised. "Is this strange, this bit of information here is that strange and why is that happening?"

And that drives the whole teaching and learning process and you'll see, you know, whenever I ask questions about this, I come back to that basic idea. There's data going on all the time, you collect data (you don't try and collect every bit of data, it's bits that come to your attention because you know the



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students) and you fit that into the image. Then you can make a judgment about, - "Hey, this is unusual. Am I right with my image? And is this challenging what I want? why?"

And that's a teaching decision and you might go and collect more information. And so what you do is you get more confidence in the image or less confidence and so you work around it. That's my philosophical base, a number of things there. It's all based on professional judgment, as I think most assessments should be or data coming from any form of assessment and then fitting into the image of what students do is professional judgment. I think that's forgotten in a lot of cases, you know, here's the exams, everything else goes out the door. It shouldn't be that way. So, there's my philosophical base and the point I have to start at.

Kate Ambrose:

That's fantastic. Thanks, Jim, and thanks for sharing that. With that, you've talked about information becoming data (and I'm guessing that's because it's then contextualised). Tell me if I'm wrong there, and then when does that become evidence?

Jim Tognolini:

The data becomes information because data is on all the time. And again, a lot of people have difficulty of that concept. People equate data to NAPLAN basically, or test scores. No! Data is things you observe. It's qualitative, it's quantitative et cetera.

Kate Ambrose:

Might be when a student's away sick.

Jim Tognolini:

That's all data. And, and so it enables you, you take that bit of information and you fit it to the image. So, I start with data because that's going on and then when you actually stop and say "that that bit of data I've got there is really interesting. I've got to take that into, and compare that with, my image and then I've got some evidence really. When after I compare it to the image, if it says, hey, this confirms what I've already know, then that's evidence. With a bit more evidence I'm more confident about it."

So, when I talk about evidence, I'm really talking about levels of confidence. If I find a bit of information which challenges what I believe, then I've got some evidence. But if it just says my level of confidence is down in what I thought was the case. Then I've got to go and collect some more evidence information to see whether the student has moved on or they've gone backwards a bit. Why? This is really just modelling what I think is good teaching.



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Kate Ambrose:

So yeah, look, absolutely and I think many teachers would absolutely agree with you. And just to sort of, I guess this is probably a simplistic way of looking at it, but you know, you've talked about, you know, the teacher's professional judgment and that that's usually very good. And so, just as an example (and you've given us some examples there of evidence, data, and information). So, if we have a teacher who they know their students, they've been working with them for a while, they've spoken to other teachers about them, they know that the student is, is very high achieving and meets the outcomes very quickly and easily based on the curriculum and syllabuses. But they've noticed that every time they have an in-class test, for example, the student doesn't meet those outcomes as well as they usually do. And is that the sort of that kind of thing you're talking about evidence? Okay, well, why? So, we know this student is capable of it, but it turns out that maybe the student has anxiety about in class tests.

Jim Tognolini:

It's exactly, that's a very good example. Whenever you do say a more formal test, whether it's an in-class test or a NAPLAN, you actually have an expectation of how that student's going to go, right, based on all the other data you've collected, et cetera, that's the image. Then the result comes back. Now, most teachers, when the results come back from NAPLAN say – “but I already knew this. What's it telling me?” Isn't that great. There's more evidence about the image you've got. You can be more confident there because another bit of evidence, which you didn't have before. So, you use that, and that builds up the level of confidence. When you find – “hey, this person's done worse than what I would've anticipated.” That isn't something to worry about. Your image is probably still right, but you've got to understand why did they do worse than what I anticipate?

Because I take it in, fit it into the image. So, I've got a bit of evidence here, it says – “hey, maybe you're not, you know, there's something wrong here, something's going wrong” and then you use that to say – “I need to collect some more evidence to see whether this is a real thing or not.”

If the child has an assessment anxiety, a test anxiety, again what you've got to do, you've got to address that because you can't say “they're never going to have a test”. So that's all part of teaching, learning. And again, I think teachers do it either subconsciously, or consciously. They do work off their image. When I give my first assessment out to students, I already know, (if its classroom tests the first one) I know how they're going to go.

And when you give it back to the child, say – “what was wrong with you? Were you sick? Or, you know, your girlfriend leaves” Whatever. Because you know. And that's what we really mean about this



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notion of *voice*. We know it's right. And so we've got to understand, when contradictory bits of information come in - why is this contradictory? It could be, you know, they've done a lot better. Great. Had they moved on and do I change that image or not? So, both sides, it's not just, I've done worse, it's, I'm collecting evidence all the time.

Kate Ambrose:

Fantastic and I guess that leads us on to what you said earlier. So, assessments in all, its glorious forms, as you've mentioned (it could be observations, could be formal tests, et cetera, examinations) but assessment provides teachers with data and evidence in relation to their students, as you've just said. Taking that into account, why is the voice of teachers so important in wider discussions (like whether in school communities or out there in the big wide world) so important in wider discussions and decisions around assessment, I guess, and data and evidence in education?

Jim Tognolini:

Again, I think this is a very, very important question because most people have come through (most parents et cetera, have come through) a system where everything's based on exams and marks et cetera. So, whenever something, a mark, comes out of an exam, people think "that's it!" That's suddenly the new norm."

Okay. They don't understand the student has an anxiety et cetera. So, therefore, it's really, really important that our understanding of assessment and measure et cetera is given a voice. Now it's no good me coming on a podcast and telling everybody about this. I can't do it. But teachers know. and we've got to be confident enough to be able to bring our communities, you know, our leaders know. We've got to bring our communities along with us so that they understand evidence and data. And it's not – "hey, we're doing NAPLAN. Oh, here's the result. Oh, look, my students now are hopeless, yesterday they were great, now they're hopeless!"

But that's what happens. People forget everything and just go for the mark. But in that philosophical view I've got, it's just one more bit of data. And I have to explain, and I want to know, why this student has done poorly relative to what I think, et cetera.

Kate Ambrose:

And is there an ongoing pattern?



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Jim Tognolini:

That's exactly right. Because that's what you want to address. That's the teaching and learning bit. But the voice means we've got to be able to get up and have conviction about what we do; without being rude. We tend to run away when people criticise NAPLAN, we, you know, we just don't criticise, they say "NAPLAN is the result" kind of thing we tend to hide. I think we should be out there saying "no NAPLAN is this and this is how it works!" together. And that's, I mean, we've got to have confidence in assessment and our ability to do assessment. Well, it's got to be the teachers and they can do it.

Kate Ambrose:

Well that leads us onto a number of things. So, if we, I wanted to talk to you about the best way for teachers to talk to parents, or caregivers or the school community, about assessment. But maybe before we go into that, you've raised some issues there. So, if we consider the relationship between an assessment and reporting, which is often those conversations also, whether it's written or verbal or however it is. What are the consequences (using your example) of NAPLAN results being provided in writing to parents as a separate and special set of data, isolated from established and familiar school processes? And (sort of linking that back to what I've just said about) how do we talk to parents and caregivers about assessment? I know they're two big concepts.

Jim Tognolini:

I think that's a really important point. The way I think about it, it goes back to the notion of voice. We tend to think assessments over there, we've done some we talk about it. When the results come in, we talk to our communities about NAPLAN, or whatever.

We've got to educate our communities. I mean, they have to understand that NAPLAN is just one more bit of information. So, when they get it, it's got to be in the context – "you've got this information here; you've got this here. Let's work out why they're different. " Not - "everything's wrong!"

Now you've got to bring the community with you. That's what I mean about a voice. So, assessment is a really, really critical part of schooling, of teaching et cetera. And it can't just be, you know, that when people come and criticise test results is the only time that we talk about assessment. We have to educate our community.

Our community have to know how we think about it, how this bit of information fits together. So, it requires a lot of interaction. And that's why I keep going back to the notion of voice. Our schools have to interact, so if they get information from elsewhere, they should know how this all fits together. And



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if they've got questions – “come, and talk about the evidence, come, and look at the work we're doing and see what the student is producing, what this result says.”

It should make sense, in one way or another, and what we're going to do about it. So that's where I come from, rather than, you know, just a result comes out, you get this and suddenly parents just go off with it. And you say “but I've been training you for three years before they get to Year Three” whatever and hopefully they start to understand. I go further and say the same thing about Ministers at cetera. They just focus on the latest bit of data and evidence rather than understanding how that is contextualised and what a teacher does. And so, we run off, “let's change everything this week, because we did poorly on a test!” I have a real problem with that.

Kate Ambrose:

As a parent, Jim, I recently received my final (my final!) NAPLAN results - had a child going through Year Nine. And, and I note that on the NAPLAN results (on the. you know, papers that the parents receive) it says “This is just a snapshot in time. Your child's classroom teacher is the best person to talk to about your child's educational progress.”

So that's a really important message to put on there because it is suddenly very separate. We just get sent those NAPLAN results as a family, they appear in the mailbox and there's not a lot of other context around it. And, I guess also, some parents and some caregivers might not have the confidence to approach the teacher or the school. So, it's also about, I guess, educating the community about what it is and explaining to come and speak, to speak to the teacher.

Jim Tognolini:

You know, the whole focus now really in schools is evidence, understanding and you know what we're doing. Assessment has to be one of the top things there. Okay. You always tell people how we teach the children to read et cetera. How often do we get out and say - “This is what assessment means, this is how NAPLAN fits into that? So, when you come, let's come, but let's look at the evidence we've got rather than just the last number you've got.”

And that's good advice on the NAPLAN report, it has to be taken. But the parents should know beforehand how that fits in. It shouldn't be – “it's the first time I read it!”

The school and the teachers have to say – “this is our assessment plan. This is what we do. This is how NAPLAN fits in.” There shouldn't be anything atypical here. If it is, it's probably atypical because something happened with that child on the day, rather than everything we've seen about him, for three years, goes out the door. And it's that that's the negotiation I think is really important, but it does



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require effort. It does require people to say, as a school community, we have to let people understand the meaning of assessment and how all these bits fit together.

Kate Ambrose:

And I, I think that's really important about the school community because school communities are extremely contextualised. We have, we have public schools across the entire state in, you know, remote regionally areas, you know, hundreds and hundreds of metropolitan areas, but they are, they are contextualised, and the school leaders and teachers know their school community best and about best how to have those conversations and how to approach that I guess too.

Jim Tognolini:

The power of teacher assessment. Really everybody thinks the HSC is sort of the give me. But the only reason the HSC has the credibility is that it aligns with what teachers expect. If the exam results came back entirely different than what the expectation of teachers were; the lack of credibility is in the exam. We'd have all sorts of problems. And this happened in New Zealand a number of years ago, where they moved to a standards reference type system. They didn't put any checks and balances in place and all the results were skew-whiff, to what the schools thought and historically we thought, et cetera. And two Ministers lost their jobs. So, we had to go and do a review of it and rethink the whole notion of assessment again, because the exam is just one bit of evidence and not *the* criteria. You've got 12 years of data here and you get one exam to go over, you got to understand it.

It's very important. I'm trying to take out the idea that, you know, this is an outlier that we report, etcetera, by saying even in research, it's an outlier based on expectation, but I don't just throw it out. I've got to understand why it's an outlier because all the other evidence just says, in any research, "this is what the norm is doing" but most of the information is in the outliers.

"Why? Why is this school here when we expect it to be there?" And yet you don't say – "well, you know, I'm just going to report that."

You've got to understand it. We report, we talk about what we understand and it's looking at those data and, and taking into that evidential base, which is a bit different than the way (I think again) people kind of use research evidence as a cliché these days – "this is all based on research evidence." Well, so much research and so contradictory, you found a bit that agrees with you.

We've got to have a way to actually think about it in a contextualised way - our school, our results. People understand the language of assessment because we've built them into our, confidence by showing how we do all this, and we can interpret it properly.



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The teachers should have confidence, and if they haven't, find out about it! And then bring the community with you. So, when we get PISA results et cetera, people know how it fits in, what does it mean? It's not a surprise. And when the press get it and the Ministers get it, and say, you know, - "it's time to start again." That's just not true. I mean, it's just one more bit of information. I've got to understand it.

Kate Ambrose:

It's interesting you say that Jim, so I'm talking about teacher voice. Do you think it's possible to draw together teacher voice with state and national assessment demands? You've just mentioned NAPLAN, HSC and PISA as an example. So, can we, I guess as teachers or an education system, can we take what is imposed by the state and national assessment demands and make it more relevant and controlled by local school contexts and the profession?

Jim Tognolini:

I believe we do, but we do it the way we've talked about. We know it's function, we know it's purpose and we make sure those results are interpreted in a way that says they're fit for purpose. So, when the PISA results come out, rather than, you know - "we're hopeless, we're behind Kazakhstan and everybody else in the world!" it's one bit of information where 15% of the students do something on a day, which they're not really motivated to do anyway and it's just one bit of information. We want to understand why that's going down, where we have other information that says the students are actually doing quite well before we run off and start to try and change the whole system and redo everything - "we're all failing!" But we have to educate beforehand, not respond to it post hoc.

Kate Ambrose:

Taking PISA as an example, it's interesting, you just said, so 15% of students will undertake it. It's an international test, but that means it's going to be very, very contextualised. So, Australia's approach to PISA is going to be very different to another country's approach to PISA, I assume.

Jim Tognolini:

Yeah. I do work in Taiwan, Singapore, wherever. In China, when the students go in to sit the PISA test, they go in with a National Anthem and the rest of the school clapping them. This is their chance to show how good they are. And to be honest, (I might be wrong here because I've never had one of my children [do it]), but our children say - "why are you picking on me? What do I got to do this test for? What do you mean it's not going home to my parents? What do you mean it's just a . . ."



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And we don't have that sort of drive. (Maybe we should. I don't know, but let's talk about that as an option) But I don't think it's the be all and end all, and we have to contextualise. A lot of those you know – “we are going down a little bit, we don't want that!” We want to understand why so that's got to be important question. But the fact that we're going down relative to other countries, doesn't worry me very much at all. I mean everybody wants to come here and study. There's lots of indicators around. We haven't got a bad system, I mean, I have delegations coming all the time asking us to how we're going, what we do. Again, each of those has a role, but each of them, by themselves, can't be the driver to say - “we've now got to change because we be going down.” I've got to say – “well, we've got other data here!”

I've done this with the HSC. When we look across our standards referencing, most our subjects are going quite well on the Band Five/ Six cut off right down. And so, we've going to understand “why this says this, and this says this?”. The teachers, and the community understanding – “this is what PISA is. This is what it's going to tell you. It says we're not done well in science or whatever!”

Actually, I think we're doing a bit better, but you've got to understand there's not much motivation for these students to go and do a test just because they're picked out from their mates, do it 25 kids in the school picked out, given a test.

Kate Ambrose:

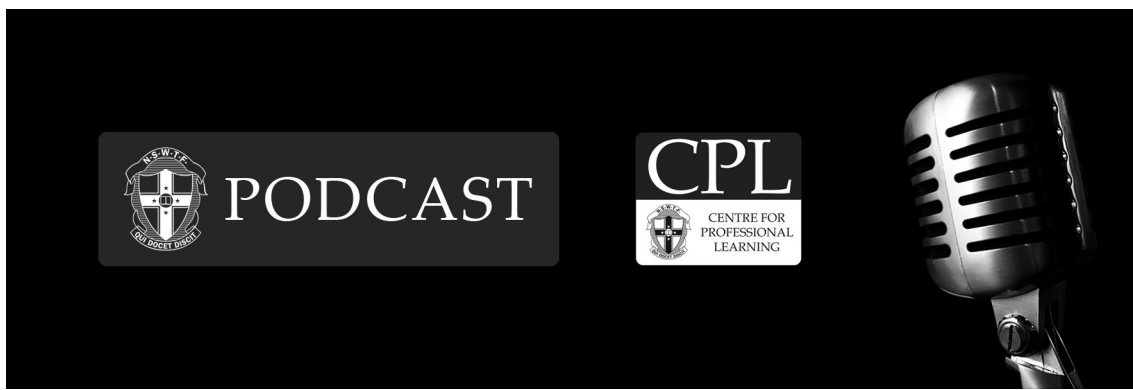
And by giving the teachers that voice, it also empowers the teacher to be the educational expert in the in the school community, or the teachers in their school community, which is very important because the school community can be the hub of some communities.

Jim Tognolini:

Exactly. It's got to be, you know. I don't think we've really, (over all the years I've been working in this, and I know I've talked to some mates of mine) we don't think we've really penetrated this assessment space with regard to our communities as well as we could have. In fact, you could say we've failed because we haven't been able to get people to do this sort of things. But it's, now's the time, evidence is critical - people misusing evidence is, you know, is really disastrous actually, because it pushes off all over the place. So as communities, as first in your school, as the teachers, the leaders in the school, how are you going to bring in the community? How are we going to educate the community and how to really understand and use evidence, data, and assessment?

Kate Ambrose:

One of the issues teachers may experience with assessment is bringing summative and formative



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assessment together - and that's discussed often, I think, in the teaching world. Bringing formative and summative assessment together often involves measuring the same thing on different occasions, I think you'd say. What would you say to teachers about their approach in that space?

Jim Tognolini:

I think this is the question I'm asked most about -, how do you, how do you bring your formative and summative together? And again, I don't put those, (I mean, I talk about formatives and summative and all the other types, you know, assessment for learning, of learning, is learning, what learning, whatever). To me, assessment's just assessment and I go back to the definition, right? So, I have this image and, and I get a NAPLAN result, you know, so, it just fits into the image all the time. And it gives you confidence about your result or you want to challenge it. So, I call assessment, it's just assessment. It's what you do with the data that's important and, and how you use those data to help improve learning as, as the driver. So, it should just naturally fit in and it's what we've been talking about. "I get this NAPLAN result, it's different than what I expect. I've got to understand why, and then work out what I'm going to do about it one way or another. If the students moved on, I've got to give them more enrichment work, you know, they're obviously there. So the next time I walk around a classroom, I'll ask this."

So, it just fits in as another bit of evidence. It's not summative as – 'this is now where you are up to.'" No! the image is where you're up to. You understand how this latest bit of evidence, whether it be summative or formative, how it fits in with the image and that's my philosophical starting point.

Kate Ambrose:

I think maybe we've spent too much time, not you and me, but as a system, trying to define summative and formative, et cetera rather than, and just as you've just said, just seeing it all as assessment and just understand what we want out of each assessment and whether or not that is observing somebody in the playground or giving them a test.

Jim Tognolini:

And you know, I talk about levels of confidence in assessment. Yeah, NAPLAN, where it's done externally. It such as a higher, higher level of confidence because the items are checked, it goes in the paper, everybody checks the items, they're all pretty good by themselves. Okay, so that that's one bit, but watching the child do something in the playground is also adds to the evidence. You might have as much confidence because it's just one thing that you just go write down, but it's still adding to the



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evidence and it's all exactly the same. So, I add the data or information to my understanding of where the student is based on the evidence I've got. This says I'm more confident, less confident. What do I do about it? How does that affect my teaching? is the whole process.

Kate Ambrose:

Jim, thank you so much for coming and talking to us today about the teacher voice and assessment. I think it's really, really important and you've been very generous in sharing your philosophical approach to it.

CONCLUSION:

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