

**NAPLAN (The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) is a feature of education in all Australian Primary schools. What is NAPLAN, and why is it so controversial?**

This essay begins by describing The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and its introduction into Australian primary schools. NAPLAN has been very controversial, and this essay will identify some of the arguments relating to NAPLAN including: the lack of clarity about the objectives of NAPLAN; the impact of NAPLAN on teaching practices; the problems related to using NAPLAN as a formative assessment tool for teachers and schools; the cultural bias of the tests themselves; and the way that the data is used to produce 'league' tables.

NAPLAN is a standardised national assessment program introduced in Australia in 2008 for Years Three, Five, Seven, and Nine. All students in these year levels are expected to participate in tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and Numeracy in May each year. NAPLAN is not designed to test content, but to test skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time through the school curriculum. The NAPLAN results are made available four months later, and since 2010 have been published on the *My School* website at an individual school level (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013).

The NAPLAN website ([www.nap.edu.au](http://www.nap.edu.au)) states that NAPLAN is designed to “give a snapshot picture of students literacy and numeracy skills. It is designed to give government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents information about the literacy and numeracy levels of students”. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) provides an expanded version of the primary objectives of NAPLAN:

To provide the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents can determine whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community.

The tests provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests. They also provide schools, states and territories with information about how education programs are working and which areas need to be prioritised for improvement (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013, pp5-6).

While it can be argued that NAPLAN's objectives relating to driving improvements in student outcomes, and providing increased accountability to the community are clear, others, for example Angelo (2013), and Latham (2013) argue that the objectives are too general. Furthermore they assert that how the information can be used is not clear. The stakeholders such as the government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents, have different and sometimes conflicting views on the objectives of NAPLAN, and the use of its data. For example, state systems might use NAPLAN data to justify widespread curriculum changes; regional systems to allocate resources to improve NAPLAN results; school principals to target individual teacher performance; parents to choose schools; and real estate agents to promote particular housing localities. Angelo (p 30) claims that for NAPLAN to be effective the Government must begin by clarifying “the purposes for which NAPLAN is to be used, and what it is not to be used for”.

One of the major criticisms of NAPLAN by teachers and schools is that the NAPLAN testing regime has an adverse impact on teaching and learning practices, with a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers teach to the tests. Teachers claim that the focus on NAPLAN preparation has resulted in limiting creative learning within classrooms

(Harris et al., 2013; Hamilton-Smith et al 2010; Reid 2010). These criticisms are backed up with international literature from the United Kingdom and the United States that has found that testing can have:

...distorting influences on the way in which teachers teach, changing teachers' pedagogy but also changing the way in which schools assign value to different parts of the curriculum. For example, the research has found that things like the arts, drama and music are given less prominence in the curriculum because they are regarded as being further away from the main focus of the testing which is literacy (Senate Interim Report, 2013, p 8).

One of the objectives of NAPLAN is to provide schools with information about how individual students are performing, with the understanding that the information can then be used by schools to develop instruction that will improve the individual student's literacy and numeracy learning. Apart from the fact that NAPLAN is not a diagnostic test (Harris et al., 2013), and teachers have much more refined strategies for formative assessment of their students' abilities and needs, the timing of NAPLAN mitigates against its use for this purpose. Testing is done in May, and results are not available for four months. During that period students' needs and abilities will have shifted considerably (Harris et al., 2013; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013).

NAPLAN claims that it will improve school performance by identifying under-performing schools and teachers. This notion seems to be based on the premise that if students are under-achieving, it is because of poor teaching, and once individual teachers have been identified, measures can be taken to improve their teaching, thus resulting in higher student achievement in NAPLAN tests. This is problematic because research has shown that many factors influence student learning, for example: socio-economic conditions and poverty; health issues; sociocultural and linguistic factors; student aspirations and learning needs; out-of-school learning experiences; and peer, family and community factors (Harris et al., 2013; Ladwig, 2010). Schools do not start with a 'level playing field' which negates the validity of standardised national testing as a measure of school performance. Similar arguments are made for the use of NAPLAN data to judge teacher effectiveness. Harris et al (2013), and Wu and Hornsby (2012), assert that the use of NAPLAN for this purpose is not valid or reliable.

As NAPLAN tests are designed to test first language learner's mastery of academic and written aspects of their first language, they are problematic when used with students for whom English is a second or third language (Dooley & May, 2013; Freeman, 2013; Harris et al., 2013). The language and literacy demands of the tests have been found to be too high for students with first languages other than English, who often struggle to access the questions and complete the tests. This is particularly pertinent in the Northern Territory where 40% of the school-age children are Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Freeman, an experienced teacher with nine years working in remote NT, maintains that in remote Indigenous communities:

Most students sitting the Year 3 and 5 NAPLAN tests are unable to access the tests as they do not yet have a sufficient grasp of Standard Australian English or of the cultural/social knowledge the tests assume. Whether the student is progressing well at school (i.e. developing English oracy, demonstrating literacy skills through their first language, developing numeracy concepts) or whether the student is a poor school attender who is not progressing well at school, the NAPLAN results are likely to be similar in either case (Freeman, 2013, p 75).

To summarise Freeman's concerns, students who work hard at school, with families who support their learning and ensure good school attendance, are categorised as failures based on the NAPLAN results.

In addition to the language issues raised by Freeman, the cultural bias of the NAPLAN tests provide a further barrier to Indigenous students achieving successful NAPLAN test results. Any test's content is culturally laden and NAPLAN is no exception, with a bias towards non-indigenous urban dwelling students (Dooley et al., 2013; Freeman, 2013; Harris et al., 2013). For Indigenous students living in remote communities, this means content and concepts are not

always accessible or relevant to them; for example, such as questions focussing on newsagency shops or cinemas that are not present in remote communities. The cultural bias in NAPLAN has been described by Hipwell and Klenowsk (cited in Harris et al., 2013, p 36) as the 'silent assessors'. They use the term 'silent assessors' to reveal the way that the literacy demands of the assessment itself and the identity work that is implicit within the assessment, are value laden but unacknowledged.

Not only does the cultural bias of the tests result in Indigenous student failure in NAPLAN, Wigglesworth et al (cited in Harris et al., 2013, p36) assert that "For many Indigenous students living in linguistically complex communities, NAPLAN actually masks their linguistic, cultural and literate competencies". From this standpoint, NAPLAN is actually detrimental to the education of Indigenous students in remote communities, because it not only brands them as failures, but does not recognise the strengths they bring into the school based on their multi linguistic literacy abilities.

Few would question the rights of parents to be informed of their children's educational progress as part of the school's accountability, but the use of NAPLAN school results on the *My School* website can have unintended consequences. Many educators and academics for example, argue that the way that the NAPLAN test results appear on the *My School* website gives a very narrow picture of the school, with no information about the quality of the school in relation to important aspects of education such as social and cultural outcomes (Harris et al., 2013; Hickey, 2013; Reid, 2010; Snartt, 2012). Although the *My School* website has tried to avoid the dangers of simple league tables by listing schools in groups of 60 'like schools', simple league tables do appear in newspapers and social media. This is unfortunate because "many school communities are being publicly labelled and stigmatised through comparisons with other schools made on the basis of such limited information" (Reid, 2010, p 12).

It is now six years since NAPLAN was first introduced into Australian schools by the Commonwealth Government as a way to give a snapshot picture of students' literacy and numeracy skills and to give government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents information about the literacy and numeracy levels of students. During this period, it has been highly controversial, and this essay has discussed some of the issues related to its use, including the lack of clarity about the objectives of NAPLAN; the impact of NAPLAN on teaching practices; the problems related to using NAPLAN as a formative assessment tool for teachers and schools; the cultural bias of the tests themselves; how NAPLAN does not acknowledge the strengths of Indigenous students; and the way that the data is used to produce league tables. In conclusion, the issues discussed in this essay have been raised by academics and the popular press since the inception of NAPLAN. In 2013, the Commonwealth Government of Australia mandated the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to review the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. It will be interesting to read the results of this committee's findings, and see which, if any, of these issues raised in this essay are addressed when Committee releases its final report.

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