

# Say NO to NAPLAN

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*NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. The body responsible for the development and administration of NAPLAN is the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA). NAPLAN is administered nationally, every May, to students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The results are not available until October. They are used in the MySchool website.*

“This second set of papers continues the call to action against NAPLAN. We know that NAPLAN can not achieve what politicians want. In the end, history will remember us by the way we treat our children, not by results on NAPLAN tests.

We urge you to take action! Distribute and read the two sets of papers in order to inform discussion amongst parents, school council members, teachers, principals and the wider community.”

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The papers have been compiled by the “Say NO to NAPLAN” group  
– Jacinta Cashen, David Hornsby, Meryl Hyde, Gloria Latham, Cheryl Semple and Lorraine Wilson. Both sets of papers are available at  
[www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan](http://www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan)

## **Set 1**

(Published in April 2012. Available at: [www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan](http://www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan))

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3. Teaching to the test (Lorraine Wilson & David Hornsby)
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Both sets of papers, and additional information, are available at:

[www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan](http://www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan)

We encourage you to copy and distribute the papers.

## 11. NAPLAN: a primary school council perspective

Written by members of Spensley St Primary School Council

Spensley St Primary School is a proud and dynamic inner city state school in Melbourne, Victoria. The school has 350 students, who learn in multi-age class groupings through a child-centred, holistic and developmentally appropriate curriculum. We see ourselves as a community of learners – students, teachers, parents and carers. We are very proud of the long tradition of open communication between families and teaching staff at our school.

### **Informing the school community about assessment and NAPLAN**

As a school council we support and respect the teaching staff in their assessments of the children's learning. We believe that families need to know about assessment methods used at the school, as well as the content, purpose and use of NAPLAN. We hold well attended annual information sessions offering comprehensive information on all the forms of testing and assessment currently carried out at Spensley St as well as NAPLAN. The sessions outline the differences between teacher-based judgements informed by rigorous testing and assessment tools, and the "one-off", narrowly-based external testing in NAPLAN.

Our School Council also endorses regular written information that is sent

to families, outlining the purposes of NAPLAN. After considering this information, many families choose to opt out of NAPLAN testing.

### **School Council and NAPLAN**

We dispute the validity and reliability of the NAPLAN test results, and we do not believe that one test can provide adequate measurements of students' growth and achievements.

Publication of NAPLAN data has resulted in a "high stakes" approach to the test, meaning that this one assessment tool has taken on a significance it does not deserve.

A one-size-fits-all approach, such as NAPLAN, does not take into account the different learning rates and styles of individual children. With standardised results, success for some is based upon failure for others. By definition, 50% of the children taking NAPLAN will receive information telling them that they are "below average" in their performance. This is not helpful in building strong, confident, resilient children who are motivated to learn and who take a pride in their work. While the results may have some validity at the aggregated level (e.g. how Australia benchmarks against Korea) they are not valid at the level of the individual child.

As a school council we believe that the way that NAPLAN results are currently used is clearly having a damaging effect on our education system, with narrowing of the curriculum and the educational experiences for our children. We recognise that it is teaching, not testing, that makes a difference to student learning. We value the thoughtful, child-centred approach to teaching and learning at Spensley St Primary School, and we believe that by equipping our children with critical problem-solving skills we prepare them for life as adults.

**Testing and reporting at Spensley St**

The School Council endorses the need for rigorous assessment that is meaningful to the children's learning activities and provides clear and immediate feedback to teachers and parents about student progress.

All assessment and testing methods at Spensley St Primary School are communicated to School Council, and to parents and carers through regular information sessions. There are also avenues for parent and community feedback.

As a School Council we have been very impressed with the thoughtful use and exploration of different testing instruments by the teaching staff, as well as qualitative ongoing informal assessment.

The whole school philosophy is about meeting the individual learning needs of every child, and our observations as a School Council are that the teachers are using both formal and informal assessment in an ongoing manner, in order to achieve this. NAPLAN on the other hand provides no useful information to teachers with regard to assisting the learning of individual children. Testing takes place in May, but schools do not receive results until late September or early October. Assessment of a child six months ago (even if it was valid, which it is not) is of little or no value in guiding the learning of that child months later!

We strongly believe that the testing, assessment and reporting done by the school's teaching staff reflect the breadth of the education provided for our children. We are confident that the assessments carried out by the teaching staff at Spensley St Primary School support the teaching of our children to provide them with the best learning outcomes for the rapidly changing world that they will move into as adults.

We are convinced that standardised, external, one-off testing of a narrow band of skills does not give adequate feedback for informed teaching and learning. On the other hand, such testing has numerous negative side effects, to which we are strongly opposed.

## 12. The teacher, the student and NAPLAN

Barry Carozzi, Warrandyte High School (2012)

I have a student called Tony (not his real name) in my Year 9 class. At the start of this year, he could barely write; he had trouble getting down more than a couple of sentences. When he did, the spelling was ... well, atrocious. He is a very likable boy, but he struggles in school. He struggles with the work. He struggles to fit in socially.

“What are you like at reading?” I asked him. “I’ve never read a book in my life!” he told me.

In term one, Year 9s started work on the verse novel, *Love, Ghosts and Nosehair*. Tony was okay in class as I read the novel to the class and we talked about each poem. When I told them that they had to write their own verse novel – composed of 25 poems – Tony dug his heels in.

“No way,” he told me. “There’s no way I can write TWENTY FIVE poems. It’s impossible. I can’t write that much.”

He wasn’t alone of course. Many of my Year 9s thought the expectation excessive. Many took the bush lawyer path, attempting to negotiate their way to a lesser sentence.

“What about ten, I reckon I could manage five or ten,” one of them told me.

In the end Tony wrote 25 poems. His mum helped him. I helped him. They are not great literature – but nobody expected or even imagined that they could or would be. But they were the result of good, honest effort.

Then in third term we worked on writing a long story. Tony put up less of a fight this time. His story, 750+ words, was well written. He’d composed it on the computer.

“Did you help him?” I asked his mum.

“No,” she told me. “I was surprised. He did it all himself.”

This term he read his first book, cover-to-cover.

The danger with test results is that people can take them too seriously. More dangerously, test results may limit a teacher’s perceptions of a student’s ability. Tony’s NAPLAN results place him in the lowest percentiles for reading and writing.

As a teacher, I am deeply suspicious of attempts to use NAPLAN as a “diagnostic tool”. Conducting a comprehensive and accurate diagnosis sounds very impressive; it suggests that we know exactly what we are doing. Can a student’s NAPLAN performance be used to diagnose and assess not only literacy skills, but the underlying causes of a child’s poor performance?

Did Tony perform so badly on the NAPLAN tests because of specific weaknesses in the structure of his mental (in this case, literacy) abilities? Or was his poor performance a result of the way he sees himself as a learner and as a person? Did he do poorly on literacy tasks because he sees himself as a poor

learner, as someone who “can’t” do these things? Is it even possible that, once having been told he was “well below average”, he gave up, stopped trying, and took on the persona of “a non learner”?

I began my teaching career in Victorian Technical schools in the mid-1960s, at a time when around 25% of children entering Technical schools had literacy difficulties. The ACER Reading Tests at that time indicated that these Year 7 students were reading at Grade 3 level or below. In the jargon of the day, they were three or more years “behind” or “retarded” in their reading.

Like the NAPLAN results, data of that kind is, frankly, of little practical use to a classroom teacher. It throws no light on key pedagogical issues such as, “How do we best teach these children?”

The “easy” assumption is that it has something to do with the “mental abilities” of the child: the kids who do well early are brighter/smarter/more capable; the kids who do poorly aren’t as smart.

An equally plausible hypothesis, though, focuses on self-esteem, self-confidence, and the child’s self-definition as the key factors.

Teachers used to distinguish between “formative assessment”, assessment of how learning is progressing, and “summative assessment”, the assessment of the final result. The creation of descriptions or rubrics for various learning tasks has helped us recognise how complex many of the learning tasks are, and what a mixture of skills is involved.

When Tony was working on his poems, I would sometimes help him to get started. He plays guitar, and one of his favourite pieces of music is *Stairway to Heaven*.

“Why don’t you use *Stairway to Heaven* as a model,” I suggested. He liked the idea. He came up with:

*There’s a teacher I know, and he makes us write poems ...*

And so his poetry writing would progress. He’d have a go, and then show me. I’d watch, make some suggestions and coach him.

“That’s working well. Why don’t you try this?”

NAPLAN results might tell me, as Tony’s teacher, that he is in the lowest 5% of the population in literacy. However, that gives no insight, no help with what I might do or what he might do to change his standing – or, more importantly, improve his skills.

When Tony and his mum came to parent-teacher night, we talked about his changing attitudes and the pride he felt when he handed in his 25<sup>th</sup> poem. “It’s one of the first times he felt like he’d achieved as well as the other kids,” his mum said.

What a tragedy it is that we have a national testing system, NAPLAN, that has no ability to help us recognise and value such extraordinary student achievement.

### 13. Misleading information provided about NAPLAN spelling

Diane Snowball (2012)

In the article *Exploring NAPLAN spelling data* (2012), Jane Buchanan and Brendan Bartlett explain why the spelling items in the NAPLAN Language Conventions tests are not a suitable way to assess students' spelling. In this article I wish to address the misleading information that is provided with the results of these tests.

To learn about students' spelling we need to be able to assess not only the words they know how to spell correctly but also the strategies they use to attempt unknown words. So the results of any spelling assessment should provide teachers with accurate information about the strategies and

knowledge required to correctly complete the tasks in the assessment. Unfortunately, the results provided for teachers about the spelling items in NAPLAN mislead teachers about the learning that their students require to become more competent at spelling.

When the results of NAPLAN are eventually sent to schools they include an item analysis stating which "skill" is being assessed for each word. The table below is an example of what is provided, with the second column showing how each word was presented in the test and the last column stating the knowledge the student would need to spell the word correctly.

#### Year 3 Language Conventions

Question number	Short description	Correct answer	Skill assessed
1	beek	beak	Correctly spells a short word containing two letters that make one sound.
7	insecs	insects	Correctly spells a two-syllable word with an unusual ending.

The description given in the "skill assessed" column should enable teachers to know how to help each student to learn more about spelling. By analysing each student's results, a teacher is supposed to note which words each student does not know the correct spelling for, according to the test, and then use the information in the "skill assessed" column to plan appropriate teaching for individuals, or for groups with the same needs and perhaps for the whole class if a particular mistake is common across the class. However, the information in the "skill assessed" column is frequently incorrect or does not properly explain

what is actually being assessed. If teachers use this incorrect information they will not be addressing their students' needs.

Let's look at the items in the chart above.

Word: *beak*  
 Misspelling presented in test: *beek*  
 Stated skill assessed: Correctly spells a short word containing two letters that make one sound  
 Skill actually being assessed: Knowledge that the /ee/ sound can be represented in several ways; experience with this vocabulary and remembering that the /ee/ sound in this word is represented

by 'ea'. (Note that students could know that "two letters make the one sound" but if they have not seen this word before they will not be able to recall exactly which representation of the /ee/ sound to use. The students' greatest need may be to experience a wider vocabulary through extensive reading.)

Word: *insects*

Misspelling presented in test: *insecs*  
Stated skill assessed: Correctly spells a two-syllable word with an unusual ending

Skill actually being assessed: Correctly pronounces the word, representing every phoneme (sound) in the word; experience with this vocabulary and remembering what the word looks like.  
Note: this is NOT an unusual ending, e.g. projects, protects, objects, expects, rejects, respects, inspects....

Other examples of such misleading information can be found throughout the different year levels:

Word (Year 3): *driving*

Misspelling presented in test: *driveing*  
Stated skill assessed: Identifies an error, then correctly spells a two-syllable word with a long vowel sound  
Skill actually being assessed: Knowledge of the generalisations for adding the suffix 'ing' to base words.

Word (Year 5 and Year 7): *finally*

Misspelling presented in test: *finaly*  
Stated skill assessed: Correctly spells a multi-syllable word ending with 'ly'.  
Skill actually being assessed: Knowledge of the generalisation for adding the suffix 'ly' to base words.

Word (Year 5): *field*

Misspelling presented in test: *feild*  
Stated skill assessed: Identifies an error, then correctly spells a short word containing the long vowel 'ie'.

Skill actually being assessed:

Understanding of the generalisation that in words with an /ee/ sound the letter 'i' comes before the letter 'e', except if the previous letter is 'c' (exceptions include *seize, seized, seizing*). Note: It is not helpful to students to purposefully present words which are commonly misspelt already by many people. The more often we see the misspelling of such words the more confused we become about the correct letter order. Many of these types of words are used in all levels of NAPLAN.

Word (Year 9): *persistent*

Misspelling presented in test: *persistant*  
Stated skill assessed: Identifies an error, then correctly spells a multi-syllable word ending with 'ent'

Skill actually being assessed: Knowledge that when writing 'ent' or 'ant' words, a resource such as a dictionary should be used to check the spelling because there is no rule or generalisation about which of these endings to use.

Note: Unfortunately such resources are not allowed in NAPLAN, even though one of the habits of competent spellers is to use a resource to check words such as those ending with 'ent/ant' or 'able/ible', 'ence/ance' and to check the usage of homophones.

A major purpose of any assessment should be to learn what students are doing well and what they need more help with to continue to improve. When teachers are given misleading information about their students' spelling "skills" the resulting teaching is not appropriate. **It is bad enough that the NAPLAN tests are such poor measures of students' ability to spell, but the information distributed with the results also shows a lack of knowledge about English orthography and the strategies used by competent spellers.**

## 14. NAPLAN tests of language conventions are problematic

Fiona Mueller (2012)

In 2010, a colleague and I wrote a series of articles in which we expressed our concerns about the NAPLAN tests of language conventions. We examined the sections relating to grammar and punctuation and concluded that:

The controversy over the testing of Australian students' literacy and numeracy skills has included little or no focus on the most critical issue of all – the quality of the tests themselves.

According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the NAPLAN testing regime “enables teachers to focus their teaching and learning on learning programs in the future” (*Education Review*, May 2010). However, an analysis of the 2008-2010 tests reveals that they do not provide an appropriate platform on which teachers and their students can build a sophisticated understanding of English grammar and punctuation.

Many items are unclear as to their purpose, or test meaning rather than grammar, punctuation or spelling. ... Some questions are written in ways that rely on native speaker intuition, or common sense and logic, rather than a solid grasp of how the English language works (Grant & Mueller, 2010).

### Two years later

The tests continue to be, as one Head of English put it, “a random collection of questions on grammar, punctuation, meaning, idiom and instinctive understanding.”

The lack of structure makes it difficult to see how the tests can provide real guidance for teachers, parents or students. The Australian Curriculum puts a very strong emphasis on teaching children to proofread and edit their own work. Not only do young learners need to master a range of vocabulary to express their ideas, they must also develop a deep understanding of how all of the words are made to work together.

Children are encouraged to build their understanding of language from word to sentence level and then to move into the construction of paragraphs and extended pieces. Organisation is a key part of this. A much more helpful test would present the students with sustained texts that resemble something they would typically work on

during the course of a regular school day.

The current NAPLAN tests of language conventions consist of items that bear little or no relationship to each other. They require students to make dramatic shifts in tone and topic, often without clear guidance as to what is being tested and how the item is part of a holistic focus on language usage. For example, Year 9 students attempting the 2012 paper were expected to move from an item dealing with definite and indefinite articles (#39) to the conditional perfect (#40) to prepositions (#41). In each case, they were simply asked *Which word or words correctly completes this sentence?* In Item 40, students were given the sentence *That is the bike I \_\_\_\_\_ bought if I'd kept saving.* The choices were *would have, would of, having* and *have*. English speakers of all ages often confuse the first two options, in part because they sound so alike. This is an extremely common error and needs careful instruction by the teacher to ensure that the use of the conditional with an “if” clause is understood. One

short item presented in this way in the middle of a test paper does not allow the student to demonstrate sound understanding of this important aspect of grammar.

### **Multiple-choice design reduces validity**

Apart from the absence of any recognisable structure in these tests, the multiple-choice design makes them virtually invalid as diagnostic or teaching tools. One of the most serious failings of the papers is that there is no opportunity for the students to show how they have arrived at a solution. The limitations of this approach are particularly evident in the way that items give students clues to the correct answer by pointing to the possible corrections (e.g. Year 3/48; Year 5/27, 44; Year 7/51; Year 9/43) and by showing where words belong in sentences. For example, Item 27 in the Year 5 paper asks students, *Where should the missing comma go in this sentence?* The sentence reads *I love picture books about horses dolphins and other animals.* In this case, the student is told which item of punctuation is required and four arrows point to the possible location of the answer. This hardly encourages competent proofreading.

### **Language terminology is rarely used**

A further weakness of the tests is that so little English language terminology is used. In 2012, only four of the 26 items in the Year 3 test used the relevant metalanguage. This rose to six items for Year 5 students and eight for Year 7. The Year 9 students saw nine references to the terminology among 27 items. Instead of requiring students to select the appropriate conjunction or to match the subject with the correct form of the verb, most items simply asked, *Which word correctly completes this sentence?* or *Which option is punctuated correctly?*

Native speakers will have an advantage in many items because they can use their intuition. On the other hand, students who learn English as a Second Language and use textbooks with a strong focus on grammar and punctuation will be less able to draw on what they have studied. In the Year 5 paper, for example, Item 27 asked *Which word is an action verb?* and only one of the options was a verb (*girls, ran, steep, keen*). How is this useful for students or teachers?

### **Matching the language conventions with the writing task**

It is not good enough for ACARA to claim that the Language Conventions test “particularly complements the Writing tests where spelling, grammar and punctuation are explicitly assessed in context.” The expectations outlined in the marking criteria are not reflected in the design of the tests of Language Conventions. One of the best examples of the failure of the NAPLAN test to address a common, critical grammatical error in a meaningful way is demonstrated by the cursory attention given to the run-on sentence. Not only is the wrong definition of this grammar point provided to markers and teachers in the marking criteria, but one key manifestation of the error, the comma splice, is only mentioned as a footnote.

***Australian education authorities have decided to administer a stand-alone test of grammar and punctuation. The students' knowledge is tested through the use of multiple-choice items, obviously because it is cheaper and easier to use optical mark recognition software to process the test papers. Consequently, learners are not required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding by actually identifying, explaining and addressing errors.***

## 15. NAPLAN language assessments for Indigenous children in remote communities: issues and problems

Gillian Wigglesworth, Jane Simpson & Debbie Loakes (2012)

Summary Version of 2011 paper published in *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 34, issue 3, pp.320-343. See the full version for more detail and all references.

**Introduction:** Indigenous children being raised in remote communities usually grow up in complex language environments where they hear and learn various languages: traditional languages (Indigenous languages), non-standard varieties of English (such as various English-based creoles) or Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English.

In remote areas some Indigenous Australian children still grow up speaking traditional languages. In many areas they will learn an English-based creole at home. There are many varieties with different names, the best known of which is called "Kriol". However, people are often not aware of the differences between creoles and standard languages, and creoles are often wrongly perceived as "broken English" or "bad English".

In many Australian schools, there is little or no recognition of the fact that many Indigenous children speak English as a *second* language. There is also little awareness of the fact that the everyday practice and cultural knowledge of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children can be very different (important because these are tied to "general" knowledge). This becomes problematic in testing contexts, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children are assumed to have the same starting points with respect to Standard Australian English, and the cultural knowledge associated with it. No matter which language they learn at home, when they enter the formal school system in Australia, Indigenous children will be assessed on tests of literacy and numeracy standardised for native English speakers. A summary of results from the first NAPLAN tests was released in September 2008, and the scores for

Indigenous children in remote communities were so alarming that politicians were galvanised into taking quick decisions. In the Northern Territory this led to a snap decision that the first four hours of schooling should be taught in English. A consequence was the dismantling of the last remaining mother tongue medium instruction programs, without replacing them with a coherent plan to improve the children's acquisition/knowledge of Standard Australian English.

Apart from policy decisions, one of the side effects of NAPLAN testing is that it is used to judge the quality of the curriculum and quality of teaching and of schools, rather than in a more positive way to identify the needs of particular populations of children in different school environments. Thus, NAPLAN results carry major implications for the future of education of Indigenous Australian children.

While NAPLAN is being promoted as a diagnostic tool, we argue that it actually masks what Indigenous children know about the English language, English literacy and numeracy, with a major problem being that the test does not measure achievement relative to starting point. Mastery of a sentence such as *She likes cats* is trivial for a first language speaker of English, but it is an achievement for a child whose first

language is Kriol, because they will have had to learn the difference between *he/she*, the subject-verb agreement of *likes*, and the plural of *cat*. These language features are not present in Kriol.

**Analysis:** We analysed a small portion of publicly available sample NAPLAN tests – the reading and language convention modules and additional sample questions for years 3, 5, 7 and 9. We investigated how the questions that are asked in the NAPLAN test may not be fully appropriate for Indigenous children. Following are some of the issues we identified.

*Differences in practice and cultural knowledge.* Often the concepts raised in the NAPLAN test, and the terminology surrounding them, are foreign to Indigenous children. For example, a text in the NAPLAN reading test Year 3 in 2008 mentions “newspapers, letterbox, paper boy, newsagency” – all foreign concepts to children in remote communities. The test assumes a large amount of shared cultural knowledge, which is a disadvantage for Indigenous children, and especially those in remote communities where day-to-day life is fundamentally different from that of children growing up in cities and speaking Standard Australian English.

*Colloquialisms and use of uncommon phrases.* Children are expected to be able to make inferences from the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases they come across in these tasks. However this is much harder if the cultural context is not familiar.

*Unfamiliar grammatical/spelling constructions.* Some of the examples we discuss in the longer version of our paper are: the transitive verb *like* in English is actually *likim* in Kriol; passive

constructions are not used in Kriol; past tense is marked differently in Kriol (i.e. *bin jump* vs. *jumped*); plural is not marked; Kriol has one preposition (the word *langa*) as opposed to the numerous prepositions that occur in English (*on, under, in*, etc.) – and there are many more differences to which we draw attention. Identifying the Standard Australian English forms becomes problematic for Kriol speakers, who often first encounter such rules when entering the formal school system, and do not have reinforcement of grammatical rules in their home environment, unlike their peers who have Standard Australian English as a first language. The NAPLAN grammar testing is not based on information on the stages that children go through in learning the grammar of a different language, and so the results cannot be used to show children’s progress.

**Discussion and conclusion:** NAPLAN tests are testing both first language speakers (Standard Australian English speakers) and second language learners (speakers of traditional languages and speakers of new Indigenous languages such as Kriol, as well as students from migrant backgrounds), and do not provide good information about the proficiency of these second language learners. Our analysis of the NAPLAN test has indicated a range of areas in which texts used are culturally and linguistically problematic for Indigenous children. All of these areas are likely contributors to the children’s poor performance on the test.

It is clear that action needs to be taken so that any assessments can be used to show how the students are progressing in mastering the English language. Indigenous students should not simply be seen as having poor English literacy and numeracy skills.

## 16. NAPLAN: A principal speaks out

Lorraine Wilson & Jacinta Cashen with Kevin Pope (2012)

Kevin Pope is the Principal of Meadow Heights Primary School, Melbourne.

### ***Kevin, tell us about your school.***

Our school is welcoming, outward looking, inclusive and a school of excellence. We have over 600 students. 80% of our children live in poverty, 75% are from non-English speaking backgrounds and 75% are of the Islamic faith. We have 80 refugee families. These aspects of our school population give us rich diversity.

### ***Tell us about your school program.***

Our school values diversity, curiosity and imagination. To this end, we offer mother tongue maintenance in Prep and Year 1 by employing multi-cultural aides. The mother tongue languages are Turkish, Arabic, Vietnamese and Hmong. Our LOTE (Language other than English) is Turkish and begins in Year 2.

Over 450 children are absent on the day of celebration of the Muslim Eid festival, so we hold a curriculum day for staff on that day. The families are very positive about this arrangement.

We have a community hub at the school where the parents come to learn English, where they can mix with people from their own cultures, and where we run a play group for preschool children.

Our school is a gold mine that requires specialised techniques and support. We need more human resources to help us refine our treasures. All our students deserve to shine!

### ***How important is assessment when planning for student learning?***

Classroom assessment is for finding out

what the children know, evaluating teaching, and planning future teaching. We have 300 children on the ESL Companion Program, 40 PSD students (Programs for Students with Disabilities) and other students for whom we design individual learning plans. Assessment is ongoing as teachers observe the children at work, listen to them read, evaluate and respond to the work they produce, read their learning journals, develop their digital portfolios, and so on.

We have three parent-teacher interviews a year and the children are included. Twenty-five interpreters attend, so the interviews are very effective for reporting student progress. Meaningful conversations occur and I judge a school by the quality of its conversations.

### ***Does NAPLAN contribute positively to education?***

No. It dumbs down learning and narrows the curriculum. It only focuses on literacy and numeracy. What about thinking, curiosity, music? It's narrow 'Anglo' focus also means it's not inclusive.

NAPLAN is not diagnostic, but in any case, when the data reaches schools many months later, it has passed its 'use by' date.

In my 20 years as a principal in disadvantaged schools, I have never received one cent more based on the results of testing. We have been wasting

time based on the myth that test results get deserving schools extra money.

***Tell us about NAPLAN and the Meadow Heights children.***

We used to hand out the official Test Exemption forms at parent-teacher interviews and interpreters could help parents understand their rights. The Regional Office told us that we were being too political and we had to stop doing it. We now discuss NAPLAN orally during the interviews.

For conscientious reasons, a small number of parents withdraw their students and significant numbers of students with disabilities do not take the tests either. Some of the children from our 80 refugee families have had no schooling (or minimal schooling) before coming to Australia. However, once they have been here for two years, they are told they must do NAPLAN. (In comparison, Australian children have had nearly 3½ years of schooling before taking the tests.) Why can't the school determine whether or not it's appropriate for the refugee children to take the test?

Test items are often ambiguous. Several years ago one test item was about a brumby in the bush. At that time John Brumby was our local member and State premier. This caused our students great confusion.

If people ask questions about the MySchool website and the Meadow Heights results, we have to speak from a position of defence. We have to explain why "we are in pink". Why can't the Government honour the journey these children have made and acknowledge the work of the teachers? We work so hard to understand the children's life experiences and to gather deep, rich

information about them so that we are better able to assist their learning and to support their families – but these efforts are not recognised.

***Might the federal Government use money spent on NAPLAN in other ways?***

Every child has the right to the best resources. Why waste money on useless testing? NAPLAN is an obscene waste of public funds. We desperately need the money to provide children with experiences their families can't afford. It costs us \$1000 just to take one bus load of kids into the city. We try to subsidise these trips, but we just don't have enough money. The NAPLAN budget could also be spent on getting more human resources into schools.

***As a principal with a long career in education, how do you see your role?***

Principals should be shaping change in education – not responding to it. Several decades ago principals were the educational leaders in schools. They were trusted to develop curriculum best suited to their community and their students. Now, younger principals are simply business managers, but research tells us that the most effective schools are led by educational leaders, not managers.

Sadly, many schools now feel vulnerable because they are misrepresented by weak NAPLAN data and misleading information on MySchool. They face close scrutiny from regional office staff and education department officers who use the invalid NAPLAN data for a school's triennial review. There is no professional trust any more – just useless tests that are meaningless in the life of a school.

***Educators must reclaim education.***

## 17. NAPLAN results linked to parents' incomes

Jude Ocean (2012)

In my role as a teacher educator, I asked pre-service teachers to analyse NAPLAN results and compare them to the wealth of the school's parents, and then explain any connections they found. The teachers were checking Richard Teese's claim that "It's not an even playing field in which talent can blossom from whatever location – it's people excelling through social advantage" (Weekend Australian, 7 April 2012). In this article, entitled *Rich Kids Do Better at School*, it was reported that the country's top 100 primary and secondary schools have students from well-to-do suburbs.

The pre-service teachers compared primary schools in poorer areas of Melbourne with schools in wealthier suburbs. They looked at the MySchool website to find each school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). This is primarily a measure of the wealth of the school's parents. On this site, the "average income level" for parents in Australia is scored as 1000. The ICSEA score for Deer Park North is 934, for Broadmeadows PS it's 936, and for Dandenong PS it's 987. All these schools score significantly below 1000. In contrast, Brighton PS scores 1064, Richmond PS scores 1171, and Lloyd Street PS in Malvern East scores 1179. All these schools score significantly above 1000.

The pre-service teachers then examined the results of the NAPLAN tests for these schools. On the MySchool website, the "average" score for Year 5 reading is 488. At Deer Park North it's 461, at Broadmeadows it's 451, and at Dandenong it's 450. The teachers were surprised that all these schools scored significantly below 488. In contrast, Brighton PS scored 552, Richmond PS scored 537, and Lloyd Street PS scored 534. In other words, these wealthier schools scored significantly above the average reading score of 488. I asked the pre-service

teachers to plot these figures on a bar graph so that they would get a visual representation of the story. Looking at their graphs, the teachers started to notice a correlation. The correlation was between parents' wealth and test results – schools in poorer areas had lower results and schools in wealthier areas had higher results.

However, many of the teachers were still not convinced. Therefore I asked them to find the data for schools they had been to for professional practice. They found some surprising results. While not all schools fitted the pattern, very few schools in wealthy areas had low results.

The pre-service teachers had been in schools where:

- Much more time and energy was spent on reading and maths than on other subjects. The pre-service teachers saw that students' learning in those other subjects suffered as a result.
- Teachers did a lot of test practice, so children were likely to become skilled at answering test questions. Pre-service teachers noticed that this happened a lot, and were worried about the consequences of children spending time on practising tests instead on more meaningful learning.

- There were very few students in a school. For example, one regional school had only 47 students in the entire school, and a very high reading score at Year 3. I showed the teachers how a small sample like this will generate unreliable data.
- The school asked some students to stay home on the day of the NAPLAN test, so the lowest achieving students weren't counted in the test results.

On the other side of the coin, pre-service teachers noticed that, even with good teachers, some schools had poor results. They could see that this may have been linked to a number of factors:

- There were a high number of students who struggled with English, as it was not their first language, and couldn't understand the test questions. This affected literacy and numeracy results. The maths tests often ended up being literacy tests because students couldn't read the questions – their English was not good enough yet.
- Many children came to school hungry and couldn't concentrate for long.
- Some parents appeared not to value education and many didn't support their children with homework or reading.
- There was a highly transient population, so the teachers only worked with each child for a year or so before students moved schools. Therefore the NAPLAN test results largely reflected the work of other teachers, not the ones at the school in which the tests were conducted.

All of these factors had an impact on student learning, and couldn't be

attributed to any lack of teacher competence. Consequently, the data being reported did not fairly represent student capability and achievement. The results might have reflected any of the above factors.

Schools might have achieved higher results because they practised for tests a lot, or because they asked less able children to stay home on test day, or because they spent nearly all their time on literacy and numeracy at the expense of other areas of curriculum.

It may be that schools received lower results because many of the parents were stressed by poverty. Putting food on the table and paying the rent can be more urgent than helping with homework. If they have to choose, and many poorer parents do *have* to choose, they choose to feed and house their kids before anything else.

In short, the pre-service teachers learnt that NAPLAN test results don't give parents the full story. They learnt that there are many reasons to explain why the results tell a story that does not reflect reality.

The most important thing the pre-service teachers learnt was that, in general, children living in wealthier areas get better test results.

**The pre-service teachers were greatly concerned that NAPLAN is not doing justice to many students. They were surprised to realise the truth of Teese's claim that there is "not an even playing field" and shocked to discover how NAPLAN compounds the lack of fairness. Policy makers need to acknowledge that wealth and poverty are making such a key difference to school achievement.**

## 18. Who are the stakeholders in NAPLAN ?

Barry Carozzi & Meryl Hyde (2012)

The push for national testing comes largely from governments, who – understandably – want to know how effectively the educational dollar is being spent. Some believe that the data is useful for a number of reasons; others see testing like NAPLAN as dangerously skewing teaching away from broader educational goals, and towards a narrow focus on preparation-for-the-test. Who are the stakeholders in this issue? And what information do they need?

### **Governments**

Governments spend a large proportion of taxpayers' money on education and they are accountable to the electorate for their use of these taxes. Therefore they need to have ways of answering such questions as:

- Is the money being spent effectively? Are schools doing what they are expected to do?
- Are there grounds for providing differential funding to schools? For example, do schools in areas of poverty require additional funding to support the development of suitable programs for learning?
- Are there any “patterns” in the outcomes of education?

### **Educational bureaucracies and educational planners**

Managers and educational leaders who work in state bureaucracies have a different set of constraints and requirements. They must be responsive to the demands and expectations of government. In an ideal world their focus would be:

- What is working in schools? What approaches to literacy and numeracy teaching are effective? How well are existing programs achieving results?
- What system initiatives might be introduced to further improve educational outcomes?
- What does local and overseas research have to say on these issues?

### **Parents**

Parents have similar questions, although their focus tends to be more specific. They expect to receive information from their schools on issues like:

- Are their children developing the kind of skills they will need as they grow up to become independent adults?
- Is their learning in key areas such as literacy, numeracy, ICT skills, science, music, and art progressing? Are they improving and developing increasingly complex cognitive skills? Are there any weaknesses parents could address?
- Are they confident and capable in the classroom? Are they enthusiastic learners or resistant learners?
- Many parents also want to know where their children “stand” in the scheme of things. Are their children well ahead? Keeping up? Falling behind? Are they above the average? Are they below the average?

### **Teachers**

For teachers, of course, information about a child's abilities in literacy and numeracy is very important. But, as teachers – and parents too – know, ability isn't everything.

Teachers want to know:

- What is the students' existing knowledge?
- How can I build upon this existing knowledge?

- Do the students understand what they are learning?
- Are they improving?
- How can I cater for a range of abilities and interests in the class?
- Are the students enjoying learning?
- What more can I do to assist all the students in my classes?

### **The students themselves**

Students are remarkably insightful about how well they are performing in school. In 2010 when we talked to Year 8, 9 and 10 students about their learning in school, they were very articulate about what “worked” and what “didn’t work” for them. What they disliked most was a classroom where they had to copy notes from a whiteboard, or where they were given a set of questions to answer which they “answered” by copying notes out of a textbook into their notebooks. Students can also lose heart if they complete assignment after assignment and receive no feedback from their teachers.

Students want to know:

- What are my main strengths and weaknesses?
- Do I understand what is being taught?
- Am I actively involved in learning?
- Do I work better by myself or in groups?
- Am I improving?
- How can I get help with the things I don’t understand?

It may be that some form of testing is required by governments and senior bureaucrats, but does that mean that EVERY CHILD in the country must undergo testing in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9?

Politicians know, perhaps better than any other group in the nation, how effective statistical sampling is in

developing a pretty accurate picture of how the land lies. In the lead up to federal elections, the opinion polls achieve reasonably accurate predictions about the likely election outcomes on the basis of samples of around 2000 people Australia wide. Random samples are a cheap and effective means of tracing trends in voting. Why not use a similar technique to assess trends in literacy and numeracy?

This solution has at least two significant advantages:

1. It would be much cheaper to conduct, and the savings could be used to support the development of new materials or Professional Development for teachers.
2. It would not have a direct impact – as NAPLAN is having – on how teachers conduct their day-to-day programs. There is abundant evidence that national testing programs have a damaging effect on the breadth and depth of teaching and learning. What is tested becomes the focus for what is taught and learned in the classroom.

Parents, teachers and students need different information from the type of information governments need. What teachers need is already collected and used at the school level through portfolios and different forms of assessment tasks.

Don’t forget that another major stakeholder is the organisation that creates and administers the tests and assesses the results. What vested interests do they have?

**Stakeholders have different agendas and needs and one test like NAPLAN cannot fulfil all these. Nor is it helping our students.**

### Authors of Set 2 Papers

- Paper 11: NAPLAN: A school council's perspective  
Spensley Street School Council.
- Paper 12: NAPLAN: A principal's perspective  
Kevin Pope, Principal of Meadow Heights Primary School, Melbourne.
- Paper 13: Misleading information provided about NAPLAN spelling  
Diane Snowball, Education Consultant.
- Paper 14: NAPLAN tests of language conventions are problematic  
Dr Fiona Mueller, Coordinator Academic English, Australian Studies, ANU College.
- Paper 15: NAPLAN language assessments for Indigenous children in remote communities: issues and problems. Prof Gillian Wigglesworth, School of Languages & Linguistics, University of Melbourne. Prof Jane Simpson, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University. Dr Debbie Loakes, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne.
- Paper 16: The teacher, the student and NAPLAN  
Barry Carozzi, Teacher, Warrandyte High School, Melbourne.
- Paper 17: Who are the stakeholders in NAPLAN?  
Barry Carozzi, Teacher, Warrandyte High School, Melbourne.  
Meryl Hyde, Education Consultant.
- Paper 18: NAPLAN results linked to parents' incomes  
Dr Jude Ocean, RMIT University.

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#### Paper 15

The full version of the paper, with references, is published in *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 34, issue 3, pp.320-343.

#### Paper 18

Teese, Richard (7 April 2012) 'Rich Kids Do Better at School', *The Weekend Australian*.

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