

I am a specialist literacy teacher in an urban secondary school. I am concerned about the negative impact of the NAPLAN testing, both on individual students and on schools, because of their narrow focus and the undue emphasis placed on them as a measure of literacy. My concerns about NAPLAN and literacy relate to the following issues:

The diversion of funds from remediation to testing. In many Tasmanian state secondary schools there is little or no specialist literacy support. Our school has made sacrifices to offer this support to students for 8 years now, and is constantly approached by other schools trying to set up some support for their students on a shoestring budget. The chances of most students getting one to one or small-group assistance in a state secondary school are between Buckley's and none unless an infrequent three-year program happens to be in place. Unfortunately, our school is now forced to divert some resources from actually supporting students to running NAPLAN tests. The person who used to be able to provide some numeracy tuition was diverted to setting up and running NAPLAN effectively. In a large high school, this is a huge job if done properly. The alternative is to compromise the tests - which are already badly compromised by their design and timing - and compromise our students chances in the tests.

The diversion of teaching time from real literacy and numeracy to test preparation. Because of their impact on individuals and our school, we must prepare students for these extraordinary literacy tests. This means training them to write timed answers and training them to read and respond to multiple-choice questions. This takes time away from actually teaching the literacy skills the students have a right to learn and authentic reading and writing skills that will stand them in good stead in their future literate lives. Even so, state schools are unlikely to go to the lengths some of our independent school colleagues are forced to go to prepare their students when their school's livelihood depends on good results on the test. In one Grade 7 class at an independent school I know of, the students started doing NAPLAN preparation almost as soon as they started the year, and kept up weekly practice writing tests right until May, all of the same kind, all of the same genre. This is far from an appropriate or adequate writing program, but it may boost their results on the test.

The marketing of the test as being more accurate and powerful than it actually is. It is a low-cost, broad-brush, rough assessment guide, not a fine-grained diagnostic tool. Even senior members of our own education department have been guilty of describing it as diagnostic. When we compare our students' NAPLAN results with their results on other more rigorous tests, or with actual samples of their work, the results may match up, but frequently they do not. The reading component is, like all low-cost reading assessment tools, more a test of prior knowledge than of reading. The writing component is poorly timed (too short for Grade 7 and 9 students) and totally unrelated to the conditions under which most of us write (no preparation or prior knowledge of topic, too little time to plan or proofread, no time delay between finishing writing and final proofreading). Although the marking has internal consistency, in that markers are trained to assess samples in the same way and according to the same criteria, the set of writing criteria themselves do not add up to a tool that accurately predicts a student's ability as a writer. Looking at our students' test writing confirms that there are anomalies. In some cases, you can see why one student got a better result than another did on the test according to the criteria, but it's obvious to a number of teachers comparing the two writing samples, that the student with the poorer 'result' is actually a better writer, and looking at the student's writing at school across a number of subjects confirms this. In Tasmania, our pre-tertiary students' writing is assessed by folio in years 11 and 12. This comprehensive approach is obviously a more expensive option, but so much more reliable.

When the test results are reported on, the tests are described as being tests of Reading, Writing, and Spelling, Grammar and Conventions. They are no such thing. They are tests of small subsets of all these things, tested in totally inauthentic conditions. To make broader claims is like using band aid sales as the major measure of accidents in the community.

The undue emphasis placed on the test for individuals. Unfortunately, despite the small-print disclaimer on the parent brochure, parents tend to invest their confidence in a large, glossy colour result sheet from the Australian Government that tells them their child has 'failed' writing, for example. It takes time and effort for teachers to then alleviate the parents' concerns by describing the test and test circumstances to them. Once they realise that their child completed this test in 30 minutes, without any preparation on the topic and only 5 minutes to plan and 5 minutes to proofread, and once they know what the prompt was like, they frequently become quite angry at the judgement that has been made of their child, and the impact that this has had on the family.

Some of our students have become quite anxious about doing the tests after doing several of them. Students do compare their results on the tests, and invest them with more importance than is appropriate. As teachers, we prepare our students as best we can, and do all we can to keep the tests as low-key as possible. Unfortunately the media attention on NAPLAN and the MySchool website only served to give the tests a much higher profile than is warranted, and this has added to student anxiety. In Grade 7, most state school students are already coping with the challenge of changing school: they do not need further anxiety thrown into the mix.

The lack of security for these high-stakes tests. NAPLAN testing relies totally on school goodwill for its security. I was surprised to find that the school my daughter attends did their numeracy test on the afternoon of the day before it was scheduled, and therefore the day before it was done at the school I teach at. When I talked about this at school, other teachers had similar examples of schedule-breaking to share. Add this to the ease with which information is shared on Facebook, and there are no guarantees of test security. (There are unconfirmed reports that the poor-quality prompt for the writing test this year was due to a last-minute change of topic necessitated by a leak.) Security breaches are much more likely to occur when undue emphasis is placed on the testing, and when the tests are used to compare schools.

Lack of comparability in test conditions. Generally, students in primary schools do their tests in their own classrooms with their own literacy and numeracy teachers, around the time they would normally be doing literacy or numeracy activities. In a large high school, which is complying with the NAPLAN schedule, this is not possible. Students do the tests in unfamiliar rooms, supervised by teachers they do not associate with that subject. Timetables are changed to accommodate the varying test-lengths and specified break times. The entire school is disrupted and naturally this has an impact on the students. Even the students not doing the tests can become unsettled and anxious. Yet primary and secondary school results are compared for Year 7, where students in some schools are still in primary school in familiar conditions, while students in others have just started high school and are doing the test in very unfamiliar conditions. This was of particular note for our school: many of the 'similar' schools with which we were compared turned out to be primary schools.

Students in Tasmania do the test towards the end of their longest term, while students in every other state do the test towards the beginning of another term. This is hardly comparable.