Say NO to NAPLAN

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These papers have been compiled by a group of concerned educators who are speaking out for the many teachers, principals, parents and administrators who are constrained from speaking publicly. Our aim is to present factual information about NAPLAN that is not always reported or understood. We are keen to publicise the fact that the NAPLAN tests are not compulsory and that there are many more beneficial ways of finding out what children know. NAPLAN has political not educational purposes.

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.

These papers were compiled by –
Jacinta Cashen, David Hornsby, Meryl Hyde, Gloria Latham, Cheryl Semple and Lorraine Wilson. We gratefully acknowledge the other authors who wrote papers to include in this set.

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We encourage you to copy
and distribute the papers.

From Tuesday 1 May 2012, the papers will also be available on the new, redesigned website for the Literacy Educators Coalition:
www.literacyeducators.com.au

1. Inappropriate uses of NAPLAN results

Margaret Wu & David Hornsby (2012)

NAPLAN tests are done once a year, using only around 40 questions per test. As a consequence, NAPLAN tests are limited in their coverage of the wide range of skills in literacy and numeracy, and in their capability to measure the achievement levels of individual students. Yet this very limited assessment system is being used as if it is capable of much more. The following summarises specific issues regarding the NAPLAN tests.

1. Content coverage of NAPLAN tests

With around 40 test questions per test, NAPLAN only measures fragments of student achievement. Testing a small bit of a curriculum does not indicate a student's learning in the whole curriculum area. Students' results on NAPLAN tests show the percentages of questions they can answer on those tests, but the results do not necessarily reflect students' achievement in the whole numeracy domain and literacy domain.

Bureaucrats may refer to an achievement gap between students (and between schools) but what they mean is a test score gap. Since the test assesses very limited aspects of learning, the results can not be used to make claims about overall achievement.

Further, student achievement should not be narrowly confined to achievement in numeracy and literacy only. Achievement should include creativity, critical thinking, ability to follow an inquiry, compassion, motivation and resilience - important skills, strategies and behaviours that are not assessed with NAPLAN pencil and paper tests. In contrast, teachers do know about students' wider abilities beyond numeracy and literacy.

2. Accuracy in identifying students' overall levels in numeracy and literacy

A test instrument with only 40 questions cannot accurately separate students into finely graded levels of achievement. This is because a student's results on short tests can vary quite widely. If we know nothing about a student, a NAPLAN test can give us a rough idea of whether a student is struggling, on target, or achieving well above the expected level, but no finer grading than that. However, teachers do know their students well, so NAPLAN rarely provides information that a teacher does not already know. In order to locate student levels more accurately through testing, we would need many tests and longer tests, which would not be in the best interests of students – or the taxpayers!

3. Matching assessment with curriculum

For assessments to be relevant to teaching and learning, what is being assessed should match what is being taught. What curriculum is NAPLAN testing? ACARA claims the test items are "informed by" the National Standards of Learning for English, but that document is unknown in most schools. It is inappropriate to base NAPLAN on the new Australian Curriculum, as some States have not yet adopted it, and even after adoption it will take years for the new curriculum to be fully implemented in schools. Since student learning is cumulative, it will take a long time before students' learning completely reflects the new curriculum. It will be a long time before NAPLAN truly matches what is taught.

4. Providing diagnostic information for teaching and learning

The NAPLAN tests are not diagnostic tests. They are standardised tests which are designed to assess and compare the overall achievement of very large groups, not individual students or schools. Because there are very few questions testing very few areas of literacy or numeracy, NAPLAN tests do not provide sufficient diagnostic information to identify areas of weakness or strength to support classroom learning. Despite this, schools are being required to use the results as if they are diagnostic and to identify "weaknesses" to be "fixed". (Even if the NAPLAN tests were diagnostic, the 5-month delay in providing the results would make them useless for informing teaching.)

Good diagnostic tests are generally constructed for focused curriculum units or particular areas of learning with questions specifically written to identify common misconceptions and errors. NAPLAN questions are not designed to uncover particular learning problems.

Further, evaluation is a continuous process, not an event. A single event, once a year, will miss many of the strengths or weaknesses individual students may have.

5. Making inferences about school effectiveness

NAPLAN tests are tests for students. Using students' test results to judge teachers and schools requires making an inference. Such an inference is not valid. Test scores can not tell us whether a teacher or a school is good or bad because many other factors influence test scores (such as poverty, parental support, personality, interests, aspiration, motivation and peer pressure). Attributing low school performance to poor teaching is not only invalid but insulting since this implies that teachers are not doing their job. Given the nature of the comparisons in NAPLAN where schools are compared with each other, half of the schools will always be described as below average or under-achieving. There is an assumption that the staff in below-average schools are not doing the best they can. We know this assumption can not be made, but the government applies pressure to make these schools meet certain targets of improvement. Such target setting is often unrealistic, to the point of being ludicrous.

6. Monitoring trends

The current NAPLAN test format has severe limitations for monitoring trends. This is because each NAPLAN test is short and there is an insufficient number of test items to provide robust links between tests from one year to another.

At the system level, NAPLAN data can be used to provide useful information for comparing large groups. For example, the results can help us make generalisations about the performance of girls and boys, about rural and urban students, and about students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Even so, it should be noted that tracking large groups of students over time can be done just as effectively by testing a sample of students every three or so years. It is unnecessary, and a waste of public money, to test every student every year for the purpose of monitoring trends.

2. Misleading everyone with statistics

David Hornsby & Margaret Wu (2012)

There are many problems with the ways the NAPLAN statistics are used and interpreted. In this paper, we discuss three of those problems.

1. **The Margins of Error are large**

The score a student gets on a test is only an estimate of his or her ability. There is always an expected error of measurement. The error of measurement arises because students are only given a single short test to demonstrate what they know. In the 2008 Reading test, the 95% confidence interval of a student's ability estimate is a huge ±54. If David's score is 488 ±54 on the NAPLAN scale (see Figure 1) it means that his score, on another similar test, could be 54 points less or 54 points more than the score obtained on the test day. This range covers the average scores of several year levels – at least Years 4 to 6. Clearly, the results are inaccurate and cannot be used to make inferences about students' achievement levels.

If these results are being sent to parents, the margin of error should be plainly marked on the report and it should be explained. At the moment, the student report suggests an accuracy which is not supported by the tests, since they are not that precise.

Schools, teachers and students are being misled by the perceived accuracies of NAPLAN scores. As a consequence, NAPLAN results are being used to draw invalid conclusions, such as for tracking student progress, for re-structuring teaching, or even for evaluating teachers.

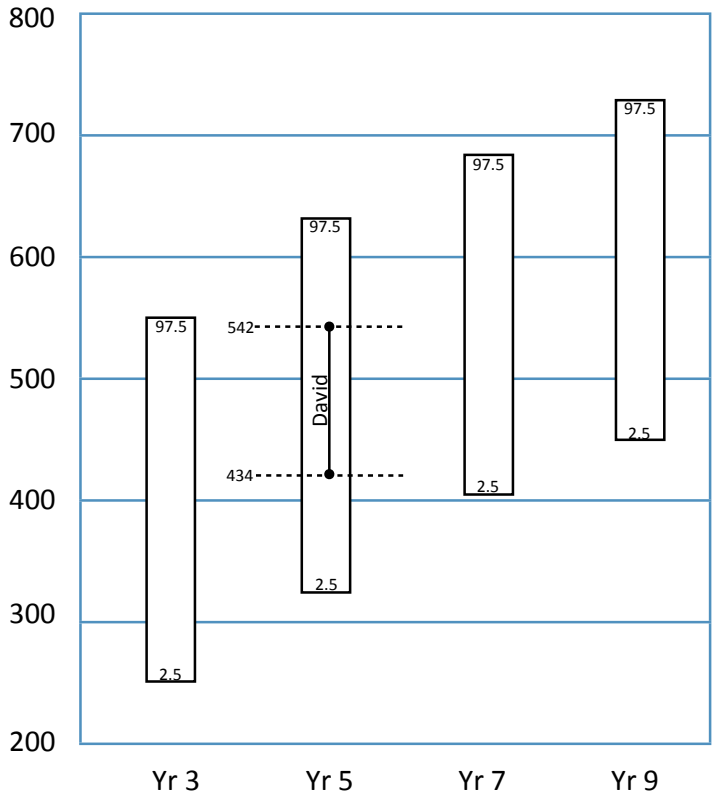

Figure 1

2. The tests are not diagnostic tests and they cannot inform teaching

Teachers across Australia are being instructed to use the NAPLAN data to plan their programs and inform their teaching. NAPLAN data can do neither. Sadly, teachers have followed instructions and wasted countless hours going through the data for these purposes.

The tests are ***not*** diagnostic tests. They do not provide the kind of information required to inform teaching programs. (Even if the tests *were* diagnostic, the results are not available until many months after the tests are taken – far too late to use the information even if it were useful.)

It should always be remembered that NAPLAN is a single test on a single day. As such, it does not provide much information at individual student or individual school level. It cannot be used to make accurate decisions about student achievement or school performance.

3. NAPLAN data cannot be used to track student progress

When NAPLAN data are used to track the progress of individual students, it has sometimes been noted that a number of students seem to "go backwards" from one test year to another.

Given the magnitude of the measurement error, it is not surprising that some students *appear* to perform worse than they did in the previous test year. For example, if we track Year 5 students and record their test scores when they get to Year 7, it is expected that 2.5% of the students would appear to “go backwards" when they have actually made two years of progress (see Figure 2). This happens because each test (the Year 5 test and the Year 7 test) has a margin of error. The difference between *two* inaccurately measured test scores is even more imprecise. It is therefore totally inappropriate to ask teachers and schools to use the NAPLAN data to track students.

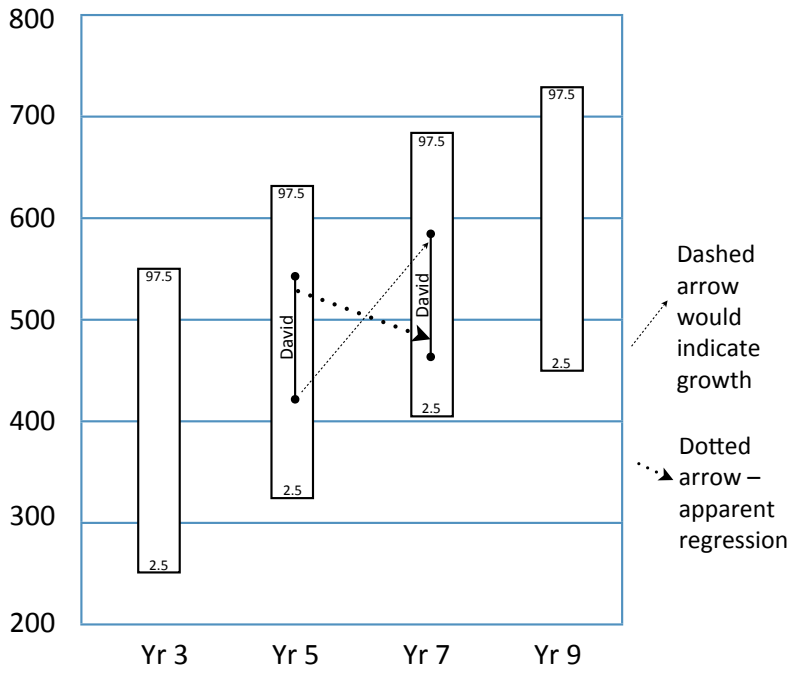

Figure 2

3. Teaching to the test

Lorraine Wilson & David Hornsby (2012)

In the 2011 NAPLAN writing test, students will write a persuasive text. …The same task is used for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. (www.naplan.edu.au/writing_2011_-_domains.html)

In Australian schools from January until May in 2011 everyone "did" persuasive writing because it was to be tested by NAPLAN. Teachers were frantic, spending huge amounts of time having students write persuasive texts. (The same thing is happening in 2012 while we write this.) Professional development on persuasive writing has been in high demand. Like other education consultants around Australia, we have been inundated with requests to lead such sessions.

Australian teachers have a proud history of planning curriculum that is relevant to the diverse needs of the students they teach. Now, because they are pressured to teach to the NAPLAN test, most are focusing on one narrow form of writing for several months, whether or not this is the most relevant learning for their students.

In 2011, lengthy searches of Education Department websites across Australia revealed something very disturbing. They advertised persuasive writing professional learning workshops, but we could find no evidence that Education Departments or Regions were providing professional development in science, the arts (including drama and music), social education, physical education, and other areas of curriculum. It is clear that budgets, time and energy are being directed towards yearly testing.

Just as schools across the country feel pressured by comparisons of individual school results on the My School website, is it possible that Education Regions now fear similar comparisons? Educational administrators are fostering a climate of competition now, instead of a climate of cooperation. It's all based on invalid and inappropriate data (see Papers 1 and 2).

Education Departments used to employ curriculum consultants in all areas of the curriculum: drama, visual arts, science, physical education, and so on. Teachers could request professional development in any curriculum area – not just literacy and numeracy – and specialist consultants in these areas were there to help. The demise of consultants representative of a broad range of curriculum areas is strong evidence of the very narrow curriculum focus of today's politicians and bureaucrats.

Many respected educators have highlighted the dangers of a narrowed curriculum. Alexander (2009, 2010) has said that the narrowing of the curriculum may have actually reduced overall standards and robbed children of their right to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Victorian Opera's Richard Gill (2011) has decried the loss of the arts in our schools and the narrow focus of NAPLAN testing. "I want to make my stance very clear: NAPLAN tests and My School have nothing to do with the education of a child. This abhorrent and insidious method of assessing children, teachers and their schools needs to stop now. Principals, teachers and

parents need to stand up and be counted and resist this unnatural activity."

Most teachers of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are required to give practice test items to their students for many weeks prior to the tests. If primary teachers have composite classes such as Year 3/4 or 5/6, the Year 4 and 6 children may well be left doing busy work while the other children in the room practise test items with the teacher. Schools are buying practice test items. They are also photocopying tests from previous years and blowing their photocopying budgets apart just to have students do the old tests.

We are NOT opposed to teaching persuasive writing. However, it should be taught in context and when a purpose is clear. For example:

(1) A group of Year 2 children is disappointed that the older students "take over" the playground equipment every recess break. Initially the issue is discussed, with the language of persuasion being used orally. The teacher helps the children list the arguments supporting their view. Then, during shared writing, the teacher helps them to compose a persuasive text to send to the Junior School Council regarding use of the playground equipment.
(2) After an accident at the school crossing, a Year 6 class decides to become active about traffic management in front of the school. They want to write to the local council, so the students work in small groups to list their concerns and possible solutions. This leads to persuasive writing in the form of letters to the local council.

So yes, we teach persuasive writing – but always as part of the work in progress; always when the students see a purpose that drives them to express their views. Different forms of text are experienced and written by the students to investigate and understand issues of concern and interest to them. It's one of the most powerful ways of engaging students. They are not subjected to fractured writing experiences dictated by a May test.

Do we really want all Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students studying the one form of writing for the first few months of the year in preparation for an invalid and unreliable test in May? Consider the needs of some Australian children – those who have been affected by bushfires, cyclones and floods. What are their immediate needs? Do the politicians and bureaucrats truly respect individual differences among students, or do they desire uniformity? Do they truly want equity in education (as stated in the Melbourne Declaration, 2008) or are they exacerbating the growing gap between our advantaged and disadvantaged students?

Children in the same year levels across Australia are clearly not all the same. To have all year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students practise one form of writing for three to four months simultaneously across Australia is a matter of shame. It defies logic. We thought we'd moved past the nineteenth century "factory approach" to education where students were all doing the same thing at the same time. Is this what we want for students today?

4. The NAPLAN view of reading, teachers and learner-readers

Lorraine Wilson (2012)

For assessment of reading to be relevant to teaching and learning, what is being assessed should match what is being taught and how it is being taught. The NAPLAN tests fail to do this and do not represent the current view of reading. The following comments highlight specific differences between the NAPLAN view of reading and the current view.

1. A 21 st century view of reading

- Reading is part of real-life activities; it is not an end in itself. It accompanies routines and purposes of daily life.
- Because reading accompanies life activities, it always involves personal reasons for reading and looking for meaning in what we read. Different life experiences help shape different meanings for different readers, so we don't all get the same meaning from the same text.
- Sometimes, in real life, reading quickly is important. But time is not the key consideration. Time for re-reading is important for learning to read and for developing skills of critical reading (such as detecting bias and prejudice on the part of authors).
- In the process of learning to read, re-visiting texts is important, for re-reading provides opportunity for meanings to be revised or elaborated. Re-reading allows exploration of author messages and identification of stereotypes.

2. The NAPLAN view of reading

The following description of the NAPLAN reading materials highlights the NAPLAN view of reading.

a) *The NAPLAN Reading Magazine* (Year 3, 2010) has eight pages containing six different articles on six pages. There are 1240 words in the six articles:

How Birds Use their Beaks (non-fiction)
The Recycling Box (fiction)
The Ant (non-fiction)
The Best Teacher (fiction)
Athletics versus Gardening (two pieces of persuasive writing on this issue)
Elvis with Stripes (fiction)

b) *The NAPLAN Test Magazine* (Year 3, 2010) has 12 pages, with 35 test questions covering 9 pages. Children have the *Reading Magazine* to read, plus a 12 page *Test Magazine.* They have only 45 minutes to complete the test, which includes reading the articles, reading the test questions, thinking about the alternative answers and then writing the correct answer.

c) *Test Administration Instructions*
Before the children start the test, the teacher must read the prescribed test instructions aloud, from a script. For the Year 3 Reading Test 2010, there were 17 instructions to be read aloud. For example, one instruction was, 'Read the instructions for each question carefully. Remember you will either have to write a word in the box or shade a bubble. When you have to shade a bubble a pencil picture tells you how many bubbles to shade.' It is unreasonable to expect students in Year 3 to remember so many instructions of this nature!

Clearly, the NAPLAN view of reading is very different from the current view of reading.

- NAPLAN reading requires students to answer an unknown person's questions. It requires them to select a specific, correct answer. The reader's own questions about the text are not considered important.
- Time is critical. NAPLAN reading needs to be done very quickly. Students realise it's expedient to read the questions first and then refer briefly to the article to find the answer. It advantages the shallow reader and disadvantages the reader who prefers to reflect, re-read and develop deeper understanding.
- NAPLAN reading is unrelated to one's own life interests and purposes.
- There is no room for individual interpretations – one right answer is required. There is no room for readers to interpret texts through their differing cultural, social, religious or life experiences. All children are assumed to have equal capacity to make sense of the same text.
- NAPLAN readers are passive in the learning process. They answer questions with a word or a coloured bubble! Discussion, questioning, visual arts and other forms of response can't be used to develop text interpretations. NAPLAN is very limited as a form of assessment.
- Critical literacy (eg. reading to determine author bias, or to discover stereotype or 'silent voices') is not assessed in NAPLAN reading.

View of teachers	View of learner-readers
Teachers are without power.	Learners are without power.
Teachers are standardised and become robotic – all teachers say and do the same thing.	Learners are standardised. They have the same capacities, the same texts to read and the same questions to answer.
The teachers' knowledge is not relevant – they must follow a script.	The individual knowledge of children is not important.
Unknown external body imposes curriculum. Teachers have no responsibility for planning teaching and learning.	Unknown external body imposes curriculum so it cannot begin with the children. Children have no responsibility for their own learning.
During test, teachers have the role of guards, ensuring that the children are silent and that they move in one direction through the test book.	Children are passive in the evaluation process. Children are not involved with goal setting, nor with evaluating their own learning.
Role of coach or encourager: 'Make sure you do your best. Shade the bubbles carefully.'	Readers can be evaluated by colouring bubbles in multiple choice questions.
Role of timekeeper: 'Half the test time has elapsed. If you are not up to page 6 in your Text Book, you should be close to doing so.'	Readers must always read very quickly. There is no acknowledgement of the benefits of slower reading or re-reading.

5. Exploring NAPLAN spelling data

Jane Buchanan & Brendan Bartlett (2012)

Are the NAPLAN spelling assessment items valid measures of student learning of the spelling system? Is the data collected educationally useful in terms of assisting teachers to improve student spelling?

What is the NAPLAN view of spelling?

Two dimensions of spelling knowledge and skill can be assessed—expressive and recognition. Expressive refers to a student's ability to independently generate the correct spelling of a word. Recognition refers to a student's ability to proofread. This can be done in two ways – the student proofreads his or her own writing, or one written by someone else which contains misspellings.

NAPLAN authors have chosen to assess spelling recognition behaviour only and this occurs in two ways. In one section of the test paper, the student corrects an *identified* error in a written text. This task demands one cognitive action and a correct answer scores one point. In another section the student must locate and correct an *unidentified* error in a written text. This task demands two separate cognitive actions, but the correct answer scores one point only. In other words no distinction is made between students who select the target word and misspell it and those who select and misspell another word. In this case, little or even misleading information about students' ability to spell may be provided from the test.

Developmental research suggests that learners progress through phases or stages as their knowledge of the spelling system becomes more sophisticated (Read, 1971; Henderson & Templeton, 1986). Students' mis-spellings are indicators of the stage in which they are currently learning.

Teachers determine students' spelling stage or instructional level by examining the error patterns they make. Test items should be reflective of orthographic knowledge consistent with developmental expectations (Bond and Fox, 2001).

Is NAPLAN spelling data a valid measure of student learning of the spelling system?

By testing recognition behaviour only, NAPLAN makes a pedagogical assumption that proofreading can act as proxy for a student's spelling ability. A recent quasi-experimental study conducted by Willett and Gardiner (2010) questioned this assumption. This research compared student performance on the NAPLAN items with their performance when asked to spell the same words in a dictation activity. The study found that:

- Dictation and proofreading perform differently and therefore provide different information about student spelling ability.
- At all year levels, more than 75% of students had more words correct when asked to spell them in a dictated context.
- The proofreading format used in the NAPLAN tests does not accurately reflect student capability and may be seriously misleading.

Instead of developing a research-based framework NAPLAN authors have used an arbitrary 'common sense' approach which perpetuates the notion that

spelling is simply a matter of representing sounds, or learning words and not the spelling system. Because of this, many of the 'errors' used in the spelling items reflect artificial rather than authentic student errors which provide teachers with little or no information about what their students know and can do.

This naïve, 'common sense' perspective is also evident in the writing rubrics where the spelling challenge of words is given such 'common sense' descriptors as *simple*, *difficult* or *challenging*. This 'common sense' approach makes the informed and systematic approach to item development difficult, if not impossible (Willett and Gardiner, 2009, p 5). If this is so, the validity of the tests and the resulting data needs to be questioned.

Is the NAPLAN data educationally useful in terms of improving student achievement in spelling?

To be educationally useful in assisting schools to improve student achievement, the NAPLAN items should:

1. Be developed against explicit links to the Australian Curriculum 2010. The Australian curriculum articulates the need to teach students words that contain developmentally appropriate orthographic patterns. Because NAPLAN tests proofreading only, the data does not provide the information that schools require— what students know about the various developmental features of the orthographic system.
2. Provide information that links to the diagnostic and formative assessment data collected by classroom teachers (Timperley, 2009). Teachers analyse students' misspellings to determine their developmental stage of learning and then plan growth programs to move the learning along the continuum. They use tools to assess knowledge of the spelling developmental patterns, strategies to spell and learn new words as well as metacognition — the ability to monitor and articulate what spelling knowledge they are currently learning, how they are going and where to next. This knowledge is critical if our instructional goal is to ensure students become independent, self-monitoring spellers. (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
3. Reinforce our current understanding that we do not just teach students words — we teach students about the orthographic system and how it represents both sound and meaning. It is critical for ACARA to develop and publish a scientific framework to underpin the testing program. One which includes the testing of critical elements such as syllable, derivation and etymology.

Conclusion

This paper expresses some concerns about both the validity of NAPLAN spelling data and its usefulness in improving student achievement. NAPLAN test developers could address these issues by designing a research-based spelling framework with clear links to the Australian curriculum, developing dictation items since proofreading cannot act as a proxy, and refining the design of the proofreading items to address validity content and construct issues.

For a more detailed paper, including all references, go to:
www.literacyeducators.com.au/naplan/

6. Your children and NAPLAN

Meryl Hyde & Jacinta Cashen (2012)

Parents and carers, do you know that your children do not have to sit the NAPLAN tests?

We all want to know how our children are doing at school and whether we can help them. Schools use many different means to find out and use this information.

NAPLAN is a national testing system, which seeks to rank schools according to the testing of children in years 3/5/7/9 over three days in May. All students are encouraged to participate. On the government National Assessment Program website it is stated that "The National Assessment Program (of which NAPLAN is a part) is the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes." (www.nap.edu.au/About/index.html)

Critics of NAPLAN are concerned that the tests:

- provide poor quality information about children, which is being misused
- only cover a very small part of the curriculum
- assume that all children come from the same background
- have a negative impact on students' attitudes to learning
- require millions of dollars which could be better spent, and
- require much practice time which excludes other important learning.

Most importantly, we know that children's learning is evaluated over the whole year and that the NAPLAN tests are only one small part of this.

In response to a small survey of parents about their reactions to the NAPLAN tests, conducted in 2011, one parent wrote, "I don't need a national testing system to know how well my child is doing at school. I would much rather talk to him or his teachers to check on his progress." This parent wrote a letter to the principal outlining reasons for withdrawing her son and offered to keep him home on the test days, which the principal agreed to.

There are many articles about NAPLAN and its effects included in this package, or available online, to help you decide if you wish to proceed.

Since you are the legal guardian of your child, you can state that you don't want your child to be tested, just as you can state you don't want your child to go swimming or to participate in any other event. You do not have to give a reason.

Remember ...

NAPLAN is not compulsory.

If you decide not to allow
your child to do the tests,
you may wish to use the form
on the other side of this page.

Date: ……/……/……

Dear ……

As the parent (or legal guardian) of the following children, I request that they are withdrawn from all NAPLAN testing.

Name of child	Year level

Yours sincerely

……

(parent / guardian)

7. The risks of NAPLAN for the Arts in Education

Robyn Ewing (2012)

The Arts are the expression of the most profound thoughts in the simplest way. (Einstein)

The Arts are as old as human civilization and they enrich our lives in a myriad of ways. Quality arts experiences can and should have a profound experience on children's lives and life chances and therefore should be an important part of the school curriculum.

Over the last fifteen years a succession of international research reports have clearly demonstrated that children who engage in quality arts processes, activities and experiences achieve better academically; develop more positive self concepts; are less likely to be bored; watch less television; and, are more often involved in community service than those students who are deprived of arts experiences (e.g. Catterall, 2009; Gadsden, 2008; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999). Recent Australian reviews have also confirmed the important role of the Arts in learning (e.g. Ewing, 2010; Caldwell and Vaughan, 2011). Embedding arts-rich experiences in the curriculum has also been shown to be most important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds because their families and caregivers are less likely to afford extra-curricular arts opportunities outside school.

Yet with the increasing emphasis on high stakes testing such as NAPLAN in Australian schools, the Arts will continue to be relegated to the margins of the mandated curriculum. Those subject areas that politicians and bureaucrats believe can be measured by multiple choice testing will be given increasing priority. Art, poetry, creative writing, music-making, aesthetic appreciation and dramatic performances cannot easily be graded after a thirty to forty minute test. And many teachers are already commenting that they feel pressured to teach to the tests. They are concerned that they have less time to read literature or program time for their students to express themselves through dance, song, paint or clay and drama.

Why are the Arts so important in learning?

The kind of engagement with ideas and processes inherent in all Arts disciplines (including dance, drama, literature, media arts, music and visual arts) helps develop children's already rich imaginations and creativity. Critical engagement through Arts processes can help us to see things from a range of different perspectives and suggest connections between different phenomena. Quality arts experiences can help children:

- observe their environment carefully
- make links with their own knowledge and understandings
- explore possibilities in different ways
- learn to challenge stereotypes and tolerate ambiguities
- represent a range of possible meanings through various media

- engage in both abstract and concrete thinking
- work collaboratively and flexibly
- take risks when something is unsuccessful
- think reflectively

It is the arts *processes* or the *making* or *creating* rather than the final outcome or artefact (the finished painting, the DVD, the performance) that is the most important learning because that making process will inform the next one and provide opportunities to extend and amplify understandings (Archer, 2008).

Current concerns

Despite this growing body of evidence pointing to the educational and wider social benefits of the Arts, to date equitable provision and resourcing of the Arts and monitoring teaching quality in arts education has received insufficient attention in Australian education. Recent reviews of both music and visual arts have depicted a very uneven picture of provision. Teacher preparation in the Arts for primary teachers and ongoing professional learning has also been much reduced. While the second phase of the national curriculum mandates for two hours of arts experiences each week from K/R-10, it is important that the Arts should also be integrated across the curriculum rather than minimised.

Many successful quality arts programs have been established in schools and the broader community by arts organizations and by philanthropic groups (Ewing, 2010). Such initiatives should also be the responsibility of government through both educational and broader social policy. Achieving the demonstrated educational and social benefits of Arts in Australian primary education will require a change in thinking by policy makers to ensure that cultivating imagination and creativity become priorities rather than 'add-ons'.

It is not too dramatic to suggest that not offering students the opportunity to experience a broad array of thinking, social, and emotional dispositions through the Arts – to reorder their 'habits of mind' – is to deny them a full experience of learning (Gadsden, 2008, p.33). Learning in, through and about the Arts must become a priority in Australian classrooms. And, while tests and teaching to tests take precedence, this is unlikely.

References
See a full list of references on the last page.

8. Wake up Australia

or we'll have a nation of unimaginative robots

Richard Gill (2011)

I want to make my stance very clear from the outset: NAPLAN and My School have NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING to do with the education of a child. This abhorrent and insidious method of assessing children, teachers and their schools needs to stop now.

School is back and it is a matter of regrettable fact that large numbers of children in state and independent schools will be subjected to a style of teaching which is directed exclusively to producing satisfactory results in the NAPLAN tests and consequently scoring high ratings with My School.

I want to make my stance very clear from the outset: NAPLAN and My School have NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING to do with the education of a child. This abhorrent and insidious method of assessing children, teachers and their schools needs to stop now. Principals, teachers and parents need to stand up and be counted and resist this unnatural activity which only succeeds in turning education into some sort of cheap competition in which the last consideration seems to be the mind of the child.

Screaming the words literacy and numeracy from Canberra does not constitute having an educational policy. In fact the race to become the most literate and numerate schools with the best rankings nationally is exacting a terrible price.

Evidence is now available that schools all over the country are cutting back on arts education to devote more time to subjects which will make children literate. It can be demonstrably proven that activities used in teaching NAPLAN tests destroy individuality, stifle creativity, stultify thought and make all children respond in the same way – a sort of educational circus in which the children are the trained animals and the teachers the poorly paid ring-masters.

The very things which promote literacy and numeracy are the arts, beginning with serious arts education in the early years. If we want a creative nation, an imaginative nation, a thinking nation and a nation of individuals, then we must increase the time for arts education especially music education. If we want a nation of non-imaginative robots who can do NAPLAN tests then we are well on the way to achieving that condition.

Parents need to know that it is through participation in arts subjects that the mind, imagination, spirit and soul of a child are stimulated. Through this stimulation comes a bonus in all other areas of learning.

Music, for example, by its very nature when it is properly taught requires an extraordinarily high level of listening and concentration from the student. It requires the student to have a capacity to work in the abstract, an ability to work across several skill areas simultaneously and the ability to

rationalise this verbally.

Children's involvement in musical activity has a profound effect on the development of the child's general learning. It is now proven beyond doubt that children who are engaged in arts activities, especially music, have advantages in all areas of learning. The research is in, proven and beyond doubt.

Why then, with the evidence so overwhelmingly supporting children's involvement in arts education would schools decide to reduce teaching time in these important fields of learning? In supporting statements of this nature let's examine one school in Victoria, the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School where senior students spend half a week on the academic curriculum and half a week on their chosen arts discipline. Each year the students from this school seem to manage to do extraordinarily well at the Year 12 examinations in spite of only spending half the time on academic work. How can this be? My view is that they are highly motivated children who have, early in their lives, encountered enlightened parenting and teaching and are motivated to work hard in all disciplines in an environment which promotes creativity, imaginative thinking and individuality. In short, most of them have had early, prior opportunities. All children in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark seem to have such opportunities; why can't all Australian children?

By ignoring arts education we say to our children, 'you are too stupid to have good education in the arts - your brains will never cope with intense learning in music, for example, so we will only do the bare minimum with you in any arts education and really concentrate on getting you through your NAPLAN tests.'

Wake up Australia before it's too late. Teachers, parents and children need to let governments know that we are heading into a cultural and educational crisis unless we address these issues now.

9. The age of contempt and absurdity

Phil Cullen, AM Former Director, Education Queensland (2012)

Australian compulsory schooling is enduring the very worst of times. Present day blanket testing (NAPLAN) is linked to political ambitions and economic interests, with little thought for our children's future or our national welfare. The intentions of the operators might be honourable, but their manipulators are interested only in profits.

High stakes testing

There has never been a time when so many absurdities have occurred, or when so much contempt has been shown for school children. During the past few years, schooling in the USA, Britain, Australia and New Zealand has become a test-driven, fear-based operation. Effective teaching-learning strategies are being contemptuously ignored. Preparing for the tests dominates school time and pushes creative aspects of the school curriculum out of the way.

Test publication is big, big business

We know from international experience that when teaching becomes test preparation, big business loves it. Think of the millions of test papers that have to be published for distribution to victims in classrooms. In 2011, Australian taxpayers paid for five million test papers used by over one million nervous school children. Millions of dollars down the drain. Sadly, some parents believe what the 'politocrats' want them to believe – that the results indicate how well their child is doing at school (see Papers 2 and 3).

In the United States, big businesses use their political servants to exploit the education system for mega-dollars. Rupert Murdoch purchased the testing company Wireless Generation for $360 million and placed Joel Klein (designer of the testing-based school system that Australia has copied) in charge. Increasingly, tests are being provided electronically. Murdoch has said that digitised schooling, which includes testing, is worth over $500 billion in the USA alone.

Standardised testing results, such as those NAPLAN produces, cannot give us meaningful information about individual students and schools (see papers 1 and 2). However, they will be used to provide a reason for near-complete digitisation of instruction in K-12 schools everywhere. It is on the agenda. Australia is an easy target if our complacent attitude to blanket testing endures. Australian parents should know that Australia's NAPLAN testing is not about improving school performance – there are other agendas that have nothing to do with the quality of education.

Test preparation – or cheating?

ACARA, the controller of blanket testing, suggests that ".... cheating occurs when there is intent to gain an unfair advantage or improperly influence test results." Agreed. But test books are used for practice, practice, practice – practice clearly designed to

give unfair advantage, which is defined by ACARA as cheating.

State Departments turn a blind eye to the use of these test books for more and more practice. Indeed, they support (and even encourage) this cheating but use a heavy hand with principals and teachers who are accused of minor infringements of the test administration guidelines. Two-faced absurdity prevails.

The NAPLAN results will only be showing how well the practice has taught the students to answer a limited kind of test question. It is not assessing important learning.

The book list of one school in Queensland required parents to purchase '*Excel* NAPLAN Practice Test Books' ($24.95 each). Some parents objected. They could see that a part of each school day or a regular homework requirement would consist of working through examples of tests and nothing else. They realised there would be no real teaching and learning during some school hours, severe pruning of a full curriculum for months, and suspension of stimulating, exciting and challenging learning. Things are just so crazy!

Professional Code of Conduct

ACARA sanctimoniously pronounces that it has instituted a Code of Conduct "to establish clear expectations around appropriate behaviour in the administration of the tests." This means that Australia has imposed a limitation on normal professional ethics, which for principals and teachers would normally stress care of students as the top priority. The Code of Conduct is really a Code of Control in contra-vention of a professional Code of Ethics.

School principals are unsure of their place. Their professional ethics are under deep scrutiny as they deserve to be. Do they stick up for kids and known learning principles, or do they just hand brick-bats and bouquets to teachers and pupils as they pass along the test-controllers' one-size-fits-all assembly line? Is their moral responsibility to the children in their schools, or to some unknown 'politocrat' somewhere else?

Opting out

There is an increase in the numbers of parents who are finding that all they have to do to protect their children from the effects of NAPLAN is to write a simple note to the principal of the school (see Paper 6). Opting out is so easy that many are expressing their amazement at its simplicity. Some heavies, including school principals, have suggested to parents that NAPLAN is compulsory. It isn't. Some democratic principles do survive – parents are still the legal guardians of their children. Thank God.

George Orwell suggested that the manipulation of social institutions, such as the schools, is "a condition that leads to the destruction of a free society, controlled by propaganda, surveillance, denial of truth and manipulation of the past." This is now especially noticeable in Australia. Most schools comply and the rest of us encourage them by our silence. It **is** a sad page of history that records our Aussie children being treated with such gross contempt and absurdity.

10. Making learning visible

Evidence-based assessment in Di Nevile's classroom

Gloria Latham, Di Nevile & Cheryl Semple (2012)

When teachers assess learning their focus is on providing a comprehensive picture of children's lives as learners and on monitoring, better understanding and supporting individual children's growth in learning. NAPLAN can never provide this detailed analysis.

The following account demonstrates how one experienced teacher, Di Nevile, defines learning and makes learning visible to herself, her Year 3 students, their parents and the principal. In planning for the following unit of work Di was guided by her students' prior knowledge, school curriculum and colleagues.

The task

Prior to planning a rich learning experience around advertising, Di revisited the information she had collected on each student to determine what was needed next for both individual students and the class as a whole. Within this unit the students were asked to design and produce packaging for a product that they had invented. They then created text for the packaging that captured the buyers' attention and provided basic information. Once the packaging was complete the students gave an oral presentation about their product to the class.

The assessment context

When the students did the presentations Di took notes in terms of what she believes are the important oral language presentation skills, such as making eye contact, audience awareness, volume and humour. She knows what these criteria are, but less experienced teachers probably refer to curriculum documents and make checklists for themselves. The students knew what criteria she was using to assess them because they had been explicitly articulated at various times during the year, and the students had previously undertaken a formal class presentation.

When the students had completed their presentations Di provided immediate feedback in relation to these criteria. She asked the students how they felt the performance went, then she asked why they thought that. It is the '*why*' question that gets them to analyse their performance. The rest of the class, the audience, watched how she gave feedback and they used this demonstration as a model for their own feedback. Talk is evidence of learning.

Di used notes from a previous presentation to guide her analysis of the students' current performance. Students' ability to identify concepts, transfer knowledge, and then articulate it, is evidence of growth in learning.

Di's feedback gave the students evidence of what they had learned so that it was visible for them for future oral performances. She then asked the children to assess their own performance in relation to the same criteria – both what they did well, and what they would like to improve. The audience then gave the presenter additional feedback – again in relation to the articulated criteria, as well as any extra feedback they considered appropriate. The criteria for an effective presentation were continually reviewed

and articulated during the presentations.

The students were learning during the assessment process. When presenters were assessing their performance they commented on what they had wanted to improve on from their last presentation.

They remembered what these things were, even though they were not written down. After the presentation, the students set goals for further learning. This enabled them to take more responsibility for what they learned and to assess their own progress more easily. The students set their learning goals and measured subsequent performances against these so that they could assess their progress.

Assumptions regarding effective assessment

Di Nevile's assumptions	NAPLAN's assumptions
Learning can only be fully measured over time. Growth in learning is valued and made visible.	Learning can be measured at one point in time with no recognition of growth.
A range of assessment strategies is needed to provide a complete holistic picture of learners.	One pen and paper test can accurately describe students' performances.
Learning is made visible when students make connections to prior learning, to themselves and the world, and then transfer, apply, defend and articulate their learning.	Learning is made visible through a pen and paper test.
Teachers require deep knowledge of their students to accurately assess what they know and need to know next.	Learning can be accurately measured by a computer with no knowledge of learners or their needs.
Assessment practices need to acknowledge and value that learners construct and interpret text in a range of ways, as required by the new Australian Curriculum.	Only one construction or interpretation of a text is deemed correct (which is incompatible with the new Australian Curriculum).
Learning, in all its complexity, is assessed most effectively/comprehensively when students demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understandings in authentic and meaningful contexts, within their own time frame.	Learning of isolated skills can be effectively/comprehensively assessed when students demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understandings in decontextualised and meaningless test items, within a set time frame.
Involving learners in self-assessment promotes further learning and allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning.	It is the test that best assesses learning.
Assessment is effective when it informs further teaching, and makes learning visible for all stakeholders.	Assessment is effective when it allows the ranking of one student against another and one school against another.

This case study provides an example of ways teachers can monitor, assess and report evidence of learning, while engaging students in using literacy for authentic purposes. In order to gain credibility about the knowledge teachers have of their students, they need to provide concrete evidence of learning to all stakeholders. NAPLAN is not the answer.

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