

Dear Senator Wright,

Thank-you for the opportunity to provide some input concerning the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy. My long standing career in education as a primary teacher, an academic in literacy for pre-service teachers for twenty-six years, a researcher and author and now Senior Fellow has provided me with considerable knowledge and insight into the standardised testing of literacy and NAPLAN in particular. I will solely address the literacy component of the NAPLAN assessment and its ability to meet intended objectives.

### **Does NAPLAN meet its intended objectives?**

The National Assessment Program is described as the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes. As educators Margaret Wu and David Hornsby (2012) aptly suggest, 'For assessments to be relevant to teaching and learning, what is being assessed should match what is being taught.' The authors ask, 'What curriculum is NAPLAN testing?' I would also ask, what is NAPLAN not testing? As Bill Ayers (1993) argues, standardised tests cannot measure conceptual thinking, ethical reflection, judgment, curiosity and a host of other skills such as creativity. As well, any test of 40 questions cannot possibly separate children into levels of achievement. Wu and Hornsby (2012) also argue that 'the score a student gets on a test is only an estimate of his or her ability.'

As well, as questioning what the NAPLAN data is telling us it is also important to question as Alan Reid, professor emeritus of education asks, what the data is not saying, and identifying what extra information is required.

With respect to reading, we read texts with a sense of purpose; to find information, to discover something new, to imagine, and to try on other lives. At times the teacher sets the purpose for reading while motivating children to participate. At other times, the children set the purpose for reading a text. With NAPLAN, however, taking the test is the purpose for reading. This imposed purpose can greatly affect the outcome. The NAPLAN test provides children with a magazine containing a range of texts that illustrate different writing styles. Students read the texts provided and then answer related questions in a separate booklet. We are well aware that making meaning from a text requires a complex interplay of skills (sampling, predicting, checking and confirming) while integrating the four roles of the reader (Luke and Freebody, 1990) as code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text analyst. These complex interrelated skills can never be measured by a multiple choice test. Lorraine Wilson (2012) points out that 'Multiple choice questions are either right or wrong. These tests reduce the use of language to that which can be measured and compared, for the most part, by machines. Questions about a text which require a single word answer taken from the text, make the machine marking and the comparison, easy. Never mind that it reduces reading to a most superficial skimming of a written text.'

With respect to writing and NAPLAN, the writing task and topic is the same for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. A one size fits all assessment denies the richly diverse socio-cultural

student population, English as a second language, varying learning styles and abilities. Not only is the task the same for all students, students are expected to perform at the appropriate (same) level of their development.

ACARA clearly notes that NAPLAN solely addresses literacy skills rather than knowledge and understanding. However, isolating spelling skills, for instance, with test questions devoid of any meaningful context to a widely diverse population of learners can never provide a measure of a child's learning. It is only when a child is able to see spelling in context, when there is a purpose and an audience for the writing being undertaken. It is only when a child can transfer those acquired spelling skills to another relevant context successfully over time that teachers have evidence that it has been learned.

The best way to ensure children are meeting educational outcomes is through well informed evidence based knowledge that can best be provided by teachers through formative assessment in the classroom. 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,' (Latham, Neville & Semple, 2012). The government money spent on NAPLAN and its supporting documents would be far better spent providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for all teachers. This professional learning would be directed towards fostering more explicit ways for them to use their professional judgement in concert with others; ways to collect, analyse and defend their evidenced based collective judgments (Hattie, 2011). When teachers are able to collect, analyse and disseminate their evidence based critical judgments about the children in their care, the quality of teaching as well as the status of teachers and the profession as a whole is raised.

Although NAPLAN results only claim to be a snapshot of children's learning, they are often being touted as the measure of children's learning in order to sell Australia's high levels of literacy and numeracy in comparison to other countries in the world. The results of NAPLAN are also being used as the measure of learning, of the quality of schools and the quality of teachers. As well, NAPLAN is promoted as being a useful diagnostic tool for teachers, yet NAPLAN only tests a very limited amount of literacy learning.

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