

Jane Louise Hunter

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia.

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write in response to the invitation to make a submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry and Report on “The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)”.

This submission responds to Reference b): *unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction*. My comments are based upon my professional knowledge within the field of education, having been a classroom teacher, English head teacher, senior education bureaucrat, academic partner to schools and teacher educator for 25 years. I have also received education recognition in citations for outstanding contributions to student learning in two universities. In May 2013 I submitted my PhD in Education; a study of exemplary teachers' knowledge of technology integration in classrooms in NSW primary and secondary public schools. I have written and researched quite broadly in education over the past 15 years in the areas of pedagogy, technology and the integration of new media in learning in schools, civics and citizenship and teacher professional learning; the publications from this work are a mix of scholarly articles, book chapters and conference papers.

I wish to address Reference b) *the unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction* in two areas: the first, gives attention to the ‘narrowing of the curriculum’ and evidence of ‘teaching to the test’, and the second, targets how too much attention on NAPLAN preparation in schools means more limited opportunities for creativity in learning in classrooms. The submission will explain each area with reference to examples from work in teacher education and new research in school classrooms.

1. Narrowing of the curriculum and evidence of ‘teaching to the test’

For some time now teacher education students have reported to me at the conclusion of their professional experience in schools that they are observing “very little classroom practice outside the teaching of English and Mathematics”. Many students describe classrooms dominated by attention to two subjects at the expense of learning in other key learning areas, in particular, Science, The Arts, Social Studies, and Physical Education. In a unit I coordinate in a teacher education program, students learn rich content in history, geography, sustainability, civics and citizenship and yet when they are on professional experience in schools they recount little, or very limited opportunity, to teach content outside of English and Mathematics. Descriptions of primary school classrooms, where the school day is broken down into small chunks of learning time and teachers and students move from “20 minutes on English”, to “another 20 minutes on Mathematics”, and “back to another 20 minutes on spelling” are common recollections.

Whilst not denying this learning is important, the focus on just ‘literacy and numeracy’ should not come at the expense of broader subject matter in school curriculum.

2. Too much attention on NAPLAN preparation in schools means more limited opportunities for creativity in learning in classrooms

One international blueprint for education reform in the US, *Race to the Top* (2010), shone a spotlight on testing and accountability regimes. Research since then has shown that in many US schools and to some degree in Australian schools there is now less time to teach all subjects in the school curriculum, give priority to technology integration and consider education reform in creativity in learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dulfer, 2012; Goldman & Lucas, 2012; Schrum, 2011; Schrum & Levin, 2012; Ward & Parr, 2011). When there is less time for these priorities, it creates tensions for schools and for teachers about where to place the focus of learning. Issues of policy enactment also arise, and there are resourcing and parental concerns (Jukes, 2010; Zhao, 2012). Well known educators like Sir Ken Robinson (2012), Professor Anna Craft (2012) and Professor Howard Gardner (2012) lament the ‘narrowing of school curriculum’ and yet new reports (Australian Government, 2013; Ito et al, 2013; OECD, 2013; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012) demand teachers “be more creative” and give school students “opportunities to produce” and “time to show their learning across the curriculum” ... beyond mere short answers and multiple choice responses.

Further support for increased time for teaching all subject areas in school curriculum was evident in my doctoral research. Teachers spoke about tensions between ‘playing the game of school’ and ‘what was required by school policy’. This tension clashed with what they believed constituted ‘quality or good learning’. It presented a formidable challenge. One teacher said: “Learning is being hijacked in schools right now” and another expressed: “Life’s most important lessons don’t generally appear in standardised tests”. Classrooms observed in the study drew on data gathered over a two year period (2010-2011). The classrooms of these exemplary teachers were characterized by high levels of engagement in authentic tasks, purposeful teaching, rich subject matter, deep conversations and thinking, playful moments, flow, and imagination. Students, also achieved excellent results in external tests in these classrooms. There was some support for NAPLAN by the study teachers in terms of what NAPLAN should be doing for students and for the profession; one teacher expressed her view this way: “NAPLAN should be telling us more about our students’ progress and how I can improve my teaching”.

In examination of more than 400 separate references to support research in my doctoral study, a strong case is made in the work of Zhao (2009, 2012) that shows following East Asian models of schooling (characterized by high levels of testing with recall and reproduction seen as important) in countries like China, South Korea, and Singapore will not develop young people’s creativity and entrepreneurship, nor allow opportunities for exploration, experimentation and expression of meaningful learning. Zhao (2013) cites statistics that show less than 1% of the world’s patents (as measures of original thought and innovation) are produced annually by China, whereas in countries like the US, patent production for the same period is greater than 34%. Other education literature (Chen, 2010; Richardson, 2012) details how “innovation and individuality” are being driven out of public schools globally as a direct consequence of ‘testing regimes’.

In Australia, Professor Erica McWilliam (2012) cites “personally significant learning” as important in countering current education policy direction in this area: “When learning is not personally significant

children become vulnerable, and if they think learning is boring and just about preparing for tests and reliant on teachers and parents who tell them what to do, then they are in deep trouble”. This warning and that of other respected international educators cited in this submission gives cause for alarm.

There is increasing evidence that ‘testing regimes’ will not fulfil what students need in order to lead successful adult lives into the future. It is timely to review the effectiveness of NAPLAN in light of recent evidence that shows its unintended consequences have contributed to a ‘narrowing of the school curriculum’, ‘teaching to the test’ and ‘limited creativity in learning’ in some classrooms. Instead, more support must be given to free up teachers to seek out further opportunities for innovation and creativity in learning in all classrooms ... in all subject areas. A return to fewer external tests and placing greater value on the professionalism and judgment of teachers are steps towards that goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Committee Inquiry and Report on “The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)”.

Yours faithfully,

Jane Hunter BA (Hons), M.Ed.

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