

## **SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY**

The Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program– Literacy  
and Numeracy

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- a) whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives;
- b) unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction;
- c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices;
- e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment;

## INTRODUCTION

I frame my submission around the four issues copied above.

I write as an experienced educator with expertise in language and literacy curriculum.

I consider the literacy tests to be totally invalid for today's children. The type of literacy able to be measured by multiple choice, machine marked tests, is low level literacy. It is the type of literacy we taught in the 1950's, 1960's in Australia. Since that time there has been much excellent research which has illuminated the types of reading and writing necessary for a changing, global, highly technological society, as well as research about how children learn language (both oral and written). I take time here to briefly describe some research of recent decades which has changed dramatically what we know about the teaching of reading, and writing in schools.

## READING

### a) The Four resources Model (Luke & Freebody 1990)

One example of such research is that of two Australians Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1990), where they identified four different reading practices necessary for today's highly technological, global, society.

These practices are:

**Reader as code breaker:** the reader starts off outside a text and uses different strategies to get inside that text.

**Reader as text participant:** inside the text the reader needs strategies to participate with the ideas of the author; this practice involves the reader as meaning maker

**Reader as text user:** the reader uses texts as he negotiates life each day in the big wide world, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not enough that students read with understanding in school classrooms, they have to experience texts which relate to their life purposes, or else they will not read outside the classroom. Children must know and experience texts which relate to and inform about, their life interests and purposes.

**Reader as text analyst:** the reader steps back out of a text and identifies the author values. What is this author's underlying message? What bias or stereotypes are evident in the author's writing? Which position on this issue is the author ignoring? Whose voice is silent?

The text analyst practice (critical literacy) is so important today with the control of the world's mass media belonging to fewer and fewer individuals, and, simultaneously with the world wide web, any individual can now send information around the world within a matter of seconds. How does one determine the veracity of such information?

The reason I am describing this model of reading, respected by literacy educators all around the world, is because we know that reading is much more than getting words right, or, being able to find right answers to literal comprehension questions, as the majority of NAPLAN reading questions require. Today's children are wasting time, learning to colour in bubbles, as required on the multiple choice test papers, learning how to find specific right answers to some unknown person's questions – and never given opportunity to ask their own questions. Such practices are dumbing down the reading curriculum; are dumbing down children's lives.

#### **b)The Reading Process (Goodman 1968)**

The research of Kenneth Goodman in which he identified what became known as 'the reading process', describes what a reader does to get inside a text and to make meaning. Until this research, it was believed that reading was a visual process; that it was important when reading, to name each word in the text, correctly.

There is a widely held misconception in the general community that reading is solely a visual activity– that what the eye sees is all important, that the identification of each individual word is necessary and that if one does not know a word, one sounds it out.

(Wilson,2002. P45)

In Goodman's very extensive research, running records were made of children's oral reading. As the child read the text aloud from a book, the researcher, on a copy of the text, ticked the words named correctly by the child, and noted all oral reading errors, or, miscues. These miscues included words repeated, left out, or added to the text. At the end of each reading, the child was asked to do a re-telling of the text. The re-telling was taped.

What this research showed was that the quality of the child's understanding as revealed in the re-telling was not automatically linked to the number of oral reading errors. Rather a good re-telling was linked to the type of miscues, not the quantity. Some children's miscues revealed their focus was getting each word right, and so their reading errors looked like the word in the text, (visual miscues), but made no sense. What was very worrying was that these readers did not stop and re-read, when what they read did not make sense. Their purpose in reading was getting words right, rather than putting the language together to make meaning.

CH: *break. (visual miscue)*

TEXT: I heard the dog bark.

In contrast the children whose taped re-tellings showed good understanding of what they had read, had a different class of oral reading errors. Their errors always made sense even if the words looked different to the text. These oral reading errors or miscues were informed by the readers' knowledge of the subject being read about (semantics) and the reader's personal grammar. (syntax)

CH: *was (syntactical miscue)*

TEXT: Once upon a time there were three little pigs.

CH: *yelled noise! (semantic)*

TEXT: The kids were naughty. Mum shouted, 'Stop that racket!'

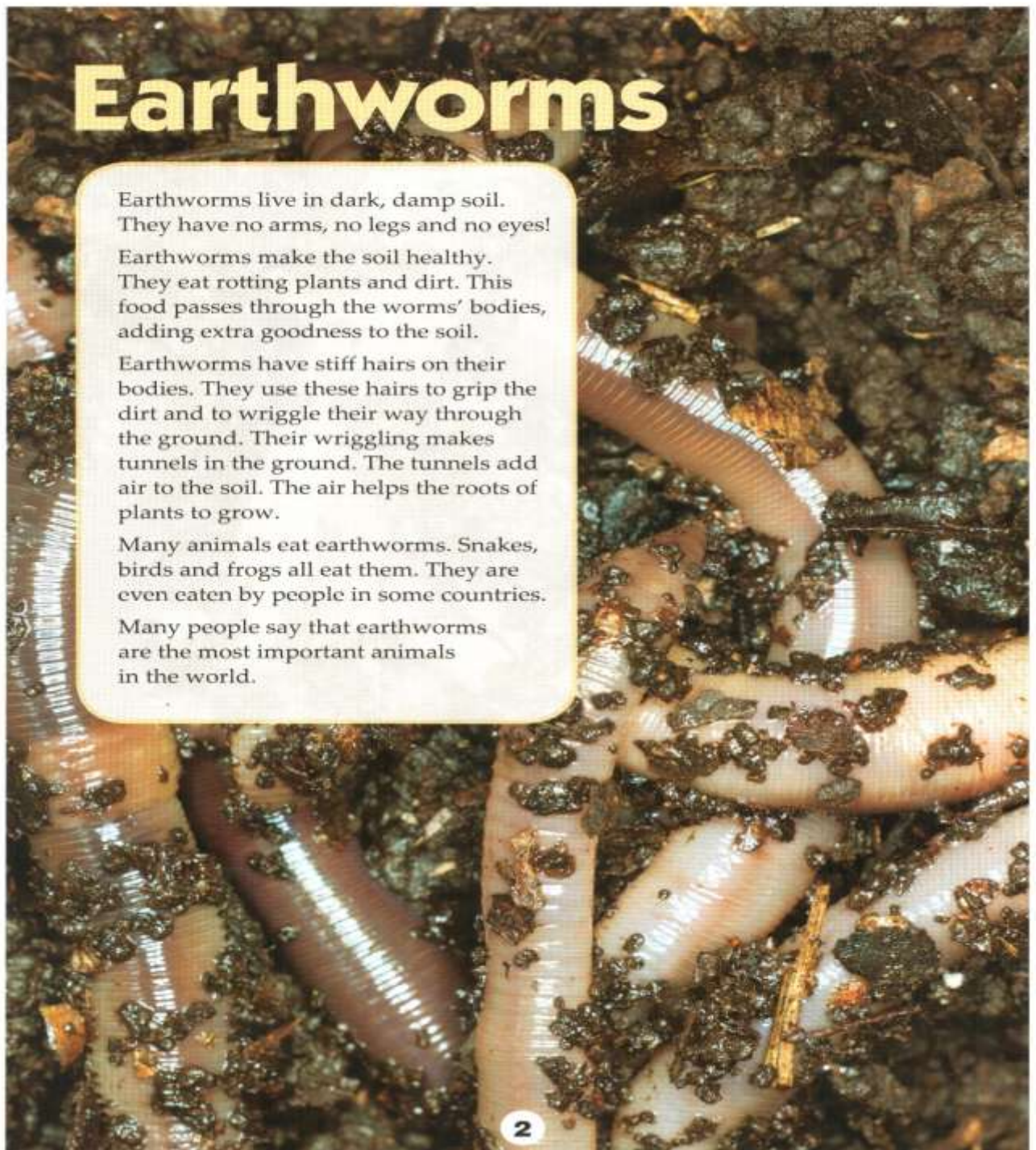
Goodman's research highlighted what code breakers do, in their efforts to get inside and make meaning of a text. They take a visual sampling of the text and allow the brain to predict the text drawing upon syntactic and semantic knowledge. When the reader's predictions do not make sense, that reader stops and re-reads or reads on, in an endeavour to connect with the ideas of the author.

In a formal, silent, reading test situation, one cannot listen to a struggling reader read aloud, to determine, if he believes reading is a purely word centred activity where he must name each word correctly. That is, the NAPLAN test cannot evaluate the code breaking strategies, or reading process being observed by the reader.

In addition, trying to find reading materials which allow young readers equal chance of interpreting or meaning making, by drawing upon their related life experience (semantics), is impossible. See the enclosed article from the Year 3 Reading Magazine 2013, NAPLAN, 'Earthworms.'

How much easier it will be for a child who has multiple experiences of earthworms, perhaps helping Dad with a worm farm in the back yard, to read this factual text and to answer the test questions. These children will have much life experiential information to use to help predict the text and to answer the test questions.

Think of other eight year old students. Think of the ones living in the high rise housing commission flats in North Melbourne. Some years ago the then local school principal decided to dig up some of the school yard asphalt to start a vegetable garden. His students from the flats were absolutely amazed that there was dirt under the asphalt. They had never seen loose earth. They thought the asphalt was a natural phenomenon. They did not realise it was put there by man. What experiences would these children have of earth worms? What pre-existing knowledge would they have to bring to this text?



c) **SPEED READING** The children who answer most questions in the NAPLAN Reading tests have the best chance of gaining the highest scores. Children soon learn that rather than reading the test article first, it saves time to read the questions first and then quickly skim the text to find the literal answer. This is low level reading. It is not about bringing meaning to text; it is not

about making use of a text; it is certainly not reading as text analyst to identify author values. It is measuring nothing of value. Speed reading to find specific right answers, serves no authentic life purpose. It tells us nothing of value about a child's reading. It does not inform whether the child reflects upon a text to clarify meaning, whether the child makes connections between the text and his life, whether in fact there are any connections in the child's life upon which he can draw, or whether, the child reader identifies cultural bias in a text.

*NAPLAN is promoted as being diagnostic.* It most certainly is not. Reading as described by the Luke/Freebody Model, by the work of Ken Goodman, and by the research of many other linguists, is in no way compatible with the model of reading upon which the NAPLAN test is based. The NAPLAN Reading test cannot measure a child's reading ability nor identify where assistance is needed.

## **SPELLING**

### **a)NAPLAN method of testing Spelling**

NAPLAN spelling is assessed in two ways.

- 1) A misspelt word presented in a sentence, is circled. The child has to write the error again, correcting the spelling.
- 2) A misspelt word is presented in a sentence, but not circled. The child has two tasks here. Firstly, identify the misspelt word, then, write it correctly.

For some strange reason each of these types of test questions is worth one mark. That is, in b) above, a child is given no credit for being able to find the un-circled misspelling. Of more importance though is the fact that the learning of spelling includes both the production of correct spelling, as a writer is writing, and recognition of errors, by proof reading for misspelt words. In the NAPLAN Language Conventions Tests, a child's ability to generate correct spelling is not assessed.

As a method of testing a child’s spelling ability, both the NAPLAN strategies are questionable. Each strategy used in the test includes misspelt words. These misspellings can impact on how the child then spells the word. Misspellings may introduce incorrect letters which the child might never have included in his production of the spelling, but seeing it in the test question, causes confusion.

‘NAPLAN makes a pedagogical assumption that proofreading can act as a proxy for a student’s spelling ability.’ (Bartlett & Buchanan 2012)

A research study by Willet and Gardiner (2010) in which they compared student NAPLAN results, with these same spelling items being tested via oral dictation, found that an astounding 75% of children had improved spelling scores. They suggest the NAPLAN spelling scores are misleading.

**a) NAPLAN: Incorrect descriptions of skills assessed**

Literacy educator Di Snowball has analysed the ACARA reasons for the inclusion of each particular spelling item in the NAPLAN Language Convention Tests. She has found that every single analysis is incorrect. I include just two of her examples.

Quest No    Test Item    Correct Answer    Skill Assessed (ACARA)    Actual Strategy Used

2 Yr 3 2013	broun	brown	Correctly spells a short word containing two letters that make one sound	Knowledge that the /ow/ sound (as in <i>how</i> ) can be represented in several ways; knowledge of correct spelling of <i>brown</i>
10 Yr 5 2012	orthar	author	Correctly spells a two-syllable word with two vowel sounds	Knowledge that the /or/ sound can be represented in several ways; knowledge of words ending with or and er, although the sound they represent is a schwa sound (e.g. as in words such as <i>painter</i> , <i>author</i> ); knowledge of the correct spelling of commonly used words ending in or or er



What is important in the teaching of spelling is a child's knowledge about, and application of, a wide range of spelling strategies. Children should be able to discuss the strategies they have used in words they have spelt. Where one strategy fails, they have others in their repertoire to try. Spelling strategies play no part in NAPLAN spelling, further evidence **that NAPLAN is not diagnostic.**

## **WRITING**

The 2013 writing assessment involved all Grade 3 and Grade 5 children writing to the given topic 'Hero Award'. See copy below. Just think – all grade 3 and grade 5 children across Australia, writing to the very same topic. How unfair that is.

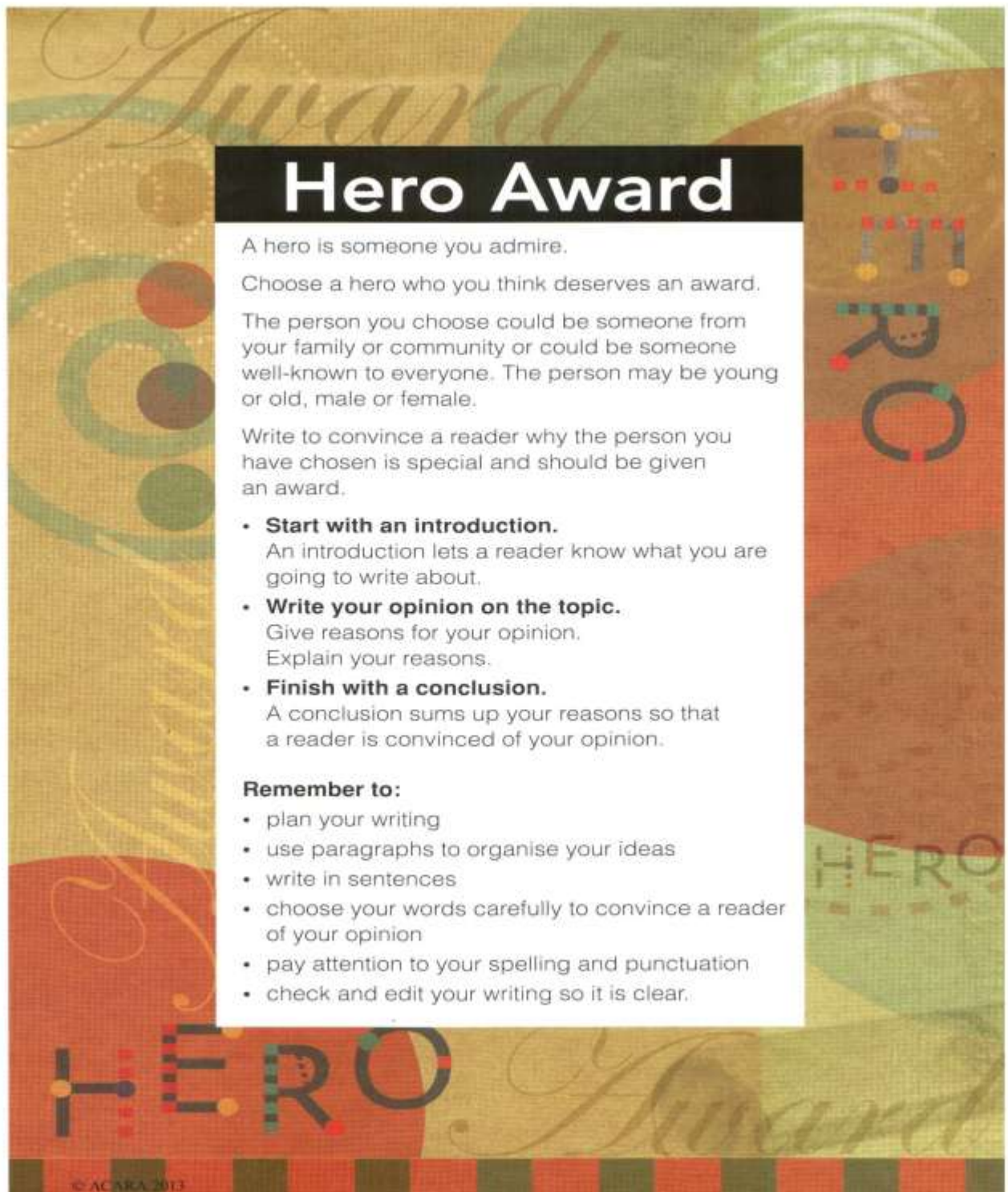
Added to this, the children are told exactly how to shape their texts. 'Start with an introduction.' A very detailed structure is set out for them

What is this writing activity measuring? It is measuring the child's ability to read with understanding and follow, the suggested out line for writing a persuasive piece. A child may have no knowledge of how to write a persuasive text, but in this test, a complete structure is printed there for the child to follow. I repeat, What is this measuring?

### **WRITING: the Writing Process**

During the 1980's, an American researcher Donald Graves revolutionised the teaching of writing in primary classrooms. Up until this time, teachers always chose the class writing topics. The children were expected to get the 'composition' right in one draft. The only audience for the writing was the classroom teacher.

Graves (1983) pointed out to teachers that in the real world, this is not the way, writers write. Generally they choose their own topics. They do not get their texts right in just one go. Writing one piece may take one draft or it may take many drafts. Often real world writers try their writing out on

The poster features a central white text box on a colorful, abstract background. The background includes the word 'Award' in a large, cursive font at the top and bottom, and the word 'HERO' in a stylized, blocky font with colorful dots on the letters. The central text box contains the following text:

**Hero Award**

A hero is someone you admire.

Choose a hero who you think deserves an award.

The person you choose could be someone from your family or community or could be someone well-known to everyone. The person may be young or old, male or female.

Write to convince a reader why the person you have chosen is special and should be given an award.

- **Start with an introduction.**  
An introduction lets a reader know what you are going to write about.
- **Write your opinion on the topic.**  
Give reasons for your opinion.  
Explain your reasons.
- **Finish with a conclusion.**  
A conclusion sums up your reasons so that a reader is convinced of your opinion.

**Remember to:**

- plan your writing
- use paragraphs to organise your ideas
- write in sentences
- choose your words carefully to convince a reader of your opinion
- pay attention to your spelling and punctuation
- check and edit your writing so it is clear.

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2013 NAPLAN Writing task, Yr 3 & 5

sympathetic friends as a way of getting helpful feedback, and, often their writing is published. Graves outlined what has become known in schools as 'The Writing Process'.

Schools across Australia adopted the Writing Process, with children of all ages selecting their own topics, conferencing their drafts with their teachers, re-drafting when necessary, taking some drafts through to publication. Thus classroom libraries came to include many attractive books written by the students. Allowing children to choose their own topics, helped value the children's lives. They were free to write about their families, their worries, their interests, not just the tired old topics of their classroom teachers. Children could bring their lives into their classrooms.

Sadly the NAPLAN testing has meant much, much less writing of this type is occurring. For three years now the NAPLAN writing test has required a persuasive piece. Every classroom one now visits, one sees evidence of persuasive writing. The children are so sick of it. Many schools have stopped allowing children to choose their own topics, and to choose their own audiences. Classroom publishing by the children has virtually ceased. NAPLAN writing has decimated what were once exciting writing classrooms.

Writing now in many classrooms has returned to writing compositions as in the 1950's, 1960's. The class writes to the teacher's topic. Children have one draft to get the piece 'right'. Such has been the impact of NAPLAN.

This Inquiry asks what impact NAPLAN is having on teaching and learning practices. I have made reference to the outdated literacy practices valued in the NAPLAN tests. Since 2008, children in classrooms are experiencing teaching and learning practices which embarrass professional educators. Outstanding classroom teachers are now required to do things in the name of teaching which they know, are in direct conflict with best practice. They hate being put in this position.

#### **NOTES FROM THE 2013 NAPLAN TEST ADMINISTRATION HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS YEAR 3 & 5**

I enclose a copy of just one of the five pages of instructions to administrators and teachers for the Yrs 3 & 5 Writing Test. (Note: these are for *one* page of *one* test.)

As a very experienced educator I cringe when I see these pages. Our teachers are treated as puppets, not able to think for themselves; as automatons, programmed as to how and what to say. Which other group of professionals would allow themselves to be treated like this? Our children, as young as 8 years, are seen as empty vessels with authoritarian adults pouring in information – reading out instruction after instruction. There is a limit to how many orders any one person can remember at any one time. This empty vessel notion of learning is so old. We know that children must be active in learning. We sit them in groups in their classrooms today, so they can talk together and learn from one another. How can we justify this unwarranted cruel, authoritarian, unprofessional treatment of both students and teachers?

The tone and content of these notes epitomise all that NAPLAN represents – a centrally determined, authoritarian manoeuvre to gain some political end, at huge expense to the tax payer. NAPLAN has nothing whatsoever to do with improving educational opportunities for all Australian children.

## **THE GOVERNMENT RIGHT TO COLLECT DATA**

### **How can the federal Government testing of students be improved?**

No-one would debate the right of Australian Governments to collect data re education, as education is largely funded with tax payer money. However such data should relate to comparisons of different populations across the country eg indigenous students versus non-indigenous; rural v city; different starting ages. Such data need only be collected every three years, certainly not every year, and to collect such statistical information, it is not necessary to test every child. A random sample is sufficient.

For such data to benefit the learning of the different student populations across the country, the methods of collection need be compatible with modern insights into how children learn, and, they should assess language and literacy relevant to today's society.

Importantly, experienced, knowledgeable educators need to be involved in the development of any such data collection initiatives. *The NAPLAN Reading, Writing and Language Convention Tests are a terrible mismatch with today's best classroom practice.*

*Assessment of individual student progress is best done by classroom teachers*, who are working with their particular students each and every day. Only individual teachers in individual classrooms are able to ensure each child is progressing, comparing what they are achieving now, with what they were achieving one week ago, one month ago.....

Children commence school at many different points along the language learning continuum. What they know about reading and writing on school entry is more a measure of their pre- school literacy experiences than of their intelligence. Curriculum begins with what the children know, not some mythical Prep or Grade 3 standard. It is the teacher's job to find out what each child knows, what his interests are, and to teach from there. It is grossly unfair and anti-educational to set the same expectations for all children of the one age.

Education does not follow the same narrow path for all children. However, in Australian schools all across the country, that is the impact of NAPLAN. Children's cultures, children's local knowledge, children's individual interests are trashed and discarded by NAPLAN. For any school to do well as judged by NAPLAN, that school must have standardised students.

## **FINAL THOUGHT**

Classrooms should be places of joy and discovery. NAPLAN is sucking the life blood from our teachers and students. Schools are no longer places of joy. I have worked for five decades in Victorian primary schools. I have never seen morale as low as it is at this point. I have never seen the teachers as dispirited as they are now.

An American educator, Alfie Kohn, writes

‘In a news report about what has been stripped away from children’s education in order that they can spend more time on test preparation, a spokesperson for a large school district defended such policies on the grounds that they were handed down from above. “We haven’t had recess in years,” he acknowledged. “They say this is the way it’s going to be, and we say, ‘Fine.’”

Why are our schools not places of joy? Because too many of us respond to outrageous edicts by saying, ‘Fine.’” (Kohn 2011, P 151)

## 2013 NAPLAN Writing Yr 3 & 5 Test Administration Handbook for Teachers

### After 35 minutes, READ ALOUD

Your writing time is now finished. You have five minutes to check and edit your work.

Check your writing by reading it carefully. You can edit your work by adding or changing words or sentences and correcting any spelling or punctuation mistakes. You can add some ideas or sentences if you notice you have left something out. However, you don't have time to make big changes.

You can choose to use this time to complete your writing if you need to. When you have finished, close your test books and wait quietly.

Supervise students to make sure they are editing and completing their texts. Students may use this time to complete their writing; however, no additional time can be provided for editing.

### After 40 minutes, READ ALOUD

The Writing test is now finished. Please put your pencils down and close your test book. Do not put your planning page or stimulus page inside your test book. I will collect them separately.

### After the test

- Collect all test books. Check that the writing stimulus and planning page are not inside test books as these are not returned for processing.
- Collect all stimulus pages and planning pages for secure storage.
- Do not remove any pages from any test book.
- Check that ALL test books are accounted for, including those for students who did not sit or complete this session.
- Ensure that student attendance details are accurately recorded, either on a printed Student Attendance form, or directly onto the Test Administration website.
- Where appropriate, ensure that disability adjustment details are accurately recorded, either on a printed Student Attendance form, or directly onto the Test Administration website.
- Where appropriate, ensure that the personalised test book is attached to the braille, large print, black and white or online interactive test papers with a paperclip.
- Return all test books, stimulus pages and planning pages to the principal or NAPLAN coordinator as soon as possible for secure storage. Do not leave any test books, whether complete or incomplete, in a classroom.
- No students, teachers (unless they are the test administrator) or other unauthorised persons should remove any test material from the test area.
- Under no circumstances should student responses be copied or transcribed, either during or after the test.

Notes from, 'Test Administration Handbook for Teachers, Year 3 & 5, NAPLAN 2013'

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