

NAPLAN, MySchool and Accountability: Teacher perceptions of the effects of testing

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This paper explores Rizvi and Lingard's (2010) idea of the "local vernacular" of the global education policy trend of using high-stakes testing to increase accountability and transparency, and by extension quality, within schools and education systems in Australia. In the first part of the paper a brief context of the policy trajectory of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is given in Australia. In the second part, empirical evidence drawn from a survey of teachers in Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA) is used to explore teacher perceptions of the impacts a high-stakes testing regime is having on student learning, relationships with parents and pedagogy in specific sites.

After the 2007 Australian Federal election, one of Labor's policy objectives was to deliver an "Education Revolution" designed to improve both the equity and excellence in the Australian school system¹ (Rudd & Gillard, 2008). This reform agenda aims to "deliver real changes" through: "raising the quality of teaching in our schools" and "improving transparency and accountability of schools and school systems" (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5). Central to this linking of accountability, the transparency of schools and school systems and raising teaching quality was the creation of a regime of testing (NAPLAN) that would generate data about the attainment of basic literacy and numeracy skills by students in Australian schools.

Keywords: NAPLAN, My School, accountability, teacher perceptions, education policy

1 Results from PISA in 2000, 2003 and 2006 suggested that while Australia had a high-quality education system, the gap between the most and least advantaged students was higher than similar countries (Perry & McConney, 2011).

WHAT IS NAPLAN?

NAPLAN tests individual students' attainment of basic skills in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The Federal Government sees it as a key program for promoting quality education in Australia through promoting accountability and transparency (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5). Since 2010, results of the NAPLAN tests have been published online on the MySchool website to enable comparisons to be made between schools based on their results. This website publishes school wide data of NAPLAN results by year, and enables comparison to be made between statistically similar schools and between schools in the same geographic location² (ACARA, 2012c). NAPLAN is an example of a national response to the promise of education reform as it has played out in other countries. Lingard (2010) argues that there has been the emergence of a global policy convergence in education where policies, such as high stakes-testing regimes, are borrowed from one context to another. Furthermore, "data and numbers are central to this new mode of governance" articulated within this global policy convergence (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2012, p. 316). An example of this convergence is the trip to Australia of Joel Klein, the Chancellor of New York Schools to discuss education reform with Education Minister Julia Gillard (Attard, 2008). Klein encouraged Gillard to use tests to improve accountability, to "get the information publicly available so parents know, so that the school knows, so that the media knows, so that we can see how our schools are doing and what the differences are" as a means to remove poorly performing principals and teachers (Attard, 2008).

In Australia, one of the key motivations for a national testing regime has been the various discourses surrounding the "quality" of teachers in Australian schools, and a sense of some real or imagined crisis impacting on Australian education. I argue this notion of accountability maps onto pre-existing discourses about a 'crisis' of teacher quality in Australia. This is exemplified by Gale's charting of a discursive shift in public emphasis about the education "problem": from a concern with governance and societal factors to problems of teachers, teaching and pedagogy (Gale, 2006, p. 12). The logic of NAPLAN, and the publication of results on the MySchool website is seductively simple: "if students and teachers are held to account they will each work harder to achieve better results... schools, teachers and students will strive to do their best to receive rewards and to avoid punishment" (Lobascher, 2011, p. 1).

Literacy and numeracy tests are not new in Australia. Neither are media reports on various rankings of schools. Prior to 2007, most states in Australia had students sitting some form of standardised literacy and numeracy assessment.³ Most states have Year

2 MySchool also publishes other data including school finance information, ICCSEA scores and average funding per student.

3 Gale makes the point that these individual state tests were largely generated as pressure exerted by the Australian Federal Government in the mid-1990s "to measure (via written examinations) the literacy and numeracy of all Australian students" (2006, p. 15). Because the Australian

12 students sitting standardised end of year examinations with the results published in 'League Tables' of the best performing school. However, what is different about NAPLAN is the age of the students (as young as 8) and the official publication of the literacy and numeracy results online. Despite many official protestations that NAPLAN is not high-stakes, and design differences between NAPLAN and the testing regimes deployed in the US and UK, it is argued that NAPLAN is high-stakes because of the impact on schools and school systems (Lingard, 2010; Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012). "Given the publication of... test-results on the MySchool website and subsequent media identification of high and low-performing schools, it is indisputable that NAPLAN tests have become high-stakes" (Lobascher, 2011, p. 10).

RESULTS OF NAPLAN

After 5 years of NAPLAN, student achievement results have been at best mediocre (ACARA, 2012b). This report shows that there have been statistically significant improvements in Year 3 Reading, Year 5 Reading and Year 5 Numeracy. However, it also shows that there have been no statistically significant national improvements in any other category, indigenous and remote students are still achieving well below their peers, and there has been no statistically significant improvement in the number of students achieving at the minimum standard across Australia. In fact, there has been a decline in some of the areas tested (ACARA, 2012a).

Furthermore, there is growing research evidence that suggests that there has been a raft of unintended consequences that are most likely having a negative impact on student learning (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). These unintended consequences mirror many experienced in the US and UK, including teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum focus, increasing student and teacher anxiety, promoting direct teaching methods, a decrease in student motivation and the creation of classroom environments that are less, not more, inclusive (Comber, 2012; Comber & Nixon, 2009; Lingard, 2010; Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnbull, 2012; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). There is also research emerging arguing that the publication of the results on the MySchool website impacts on the ways that teachers and schools are viewed, as practices of audit, media discourses and numerate data come to measure and quantify what it is that education is, and should be, doing (Gannon, 2012; Mockler, 2013; Hardy & Boyle, 2011).

Two recent studies have emerged that used online surveys to investigate teacher perceptions of the impact of NAPLAN. The first, conducted by the Whitlam Institute, involved a survey of 8353 teacher union members in each state of Australia (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012, p. 8). The results of this survey can be broadly summarised as showing that the union members perceived the tests as "a school ranking tool or a policing tool", that "lower than expected results" impacted on student enrolment and retention, that for some students NAPLAN is a stressful event, and that many

Constitution outlines education as the responsibility of the states, the implementation of these tests by each state was 'encouraged' through additional funding.

teachers reported teaching to the test and narrowing the curriculum focus in their class (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012, pp. 8-9). The second study (reported on in this paper) is an ARC funded inquiry into the effects on NAPLAN on schools in WA and SA. Rather than being limited to union members, union and non-union teachers from all school systems were encouraged to participate to provide a broader range of teacher perceptions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of NAPLAN from the perspective of teachers.⁴Ball (1994) reminds us that education policies like NAPLAN have trajectories, and often the effects of those policies at the classroom level may be vastly different than what was imagined when the policy was conceived, written and first enacted. To understand this, we ask teachers what they are experiencing, the ways that NAPLAN is being used, resisted, endorsed and contested within their schools.

METHODS

This paper uses data collected in a survey of teachers in WA and SA from April – June 2012. A snowball sample was used: teachers were contacted through a variety of means including social media, professional associations and unions, and encouraged to share the link with colleagues. This paper reports on the responses to three questions asked that gave participants the opportunity to write extended answers. Summaries of the main themes of the other two questions have also been included. The three questions asked teacher perceptions of the impact that NAPLAN has had on learning, relationships with parents and what, if any, the negative impacts have been. Results were coded thematically using NVivo software. The tables list all of these ‘nodes’ that have been coded into themes and sub-themes. The sub-themes are shown in the tables as frequencies, while the themes have been shown as an overall percentage. This percentage shows the number of nodes in a theme, compared to the overall nodes that were coded.

Sample

There were 941 teachers from WA and SA who participated in the survey.⁵ These teachers were recruited on a voluntary basis. Snowball sampling was utilised as teachers were encouraged to share the link with their networks.

The mean age of participants was 47.1 years ($SD = 10.5$), the median age was 49 years and the modal age range was 50–55 years. This corresponds with national data about the age of Australia’s teaching workforce (Productivity Commission, 2012). The

4 The comments volunteered by these teachers in no way represent the views of the school systems in which they work.

5 Across the survey (which took 25-30 minutes to complete) there was a drop-out rate of 14%. This is not unexpected in a survey of this size and there was no statistical significance in the demographic attributes of those who did not complete the entire survey.

gender demographics are similar to the overall teacher populations in Australia of 72% female and 28% male teachers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, p. 28). The responses by school system are also broadly representative: across Australia approximately 64.5% of teachers are employed in Government schools, and 35.5% are employed in non-Government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, p. 29). However, the differential for response rates in favour of Primary teachers (77%) over High School teachers (23%) is higher than the Australian populations, where 52% of teachers are employed in Primary Schools and 48% employed in High Schools. This may partly be explained by interest; in WA and SA primary school runs from Year 1-7 rather than in Year 1-6 in other states. In these states NAPLAN tests are administered three times in Primary schools, and only once in High Schools (in Year 9). Rather than using ICSEA⁶ values to measure the SES of the school (due to concerns that teachers may not be familiar with the measure or able to access the information), teachers were asked to report their perception of the SES context of the school in which they worked.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Factor | Level | Total |
|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| Gender | Male | 216 |
| | Female | 725 |
| State | WA | 558 |
| | SA | 383 |
| School System | Government | 577 |
| | Independent | 140 |
| | Catholic | 224 |
| School Level | Primary School | 715 |
| | High School | 226 |
| Age Ranges | 21-30 | 104 |
| | 31-40 | 162 |
| | 41-50 | 263 |
| | 51-60 | 363 |
| | 61 and up | 49 |

6 ICSEA stands for the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage. It “is a scale that represents levels of educational advantage. A value on the scale that is assigned to a school is an averaged level for all students in that school” (ACARA, 2013).

| Factor | Level | |
|---------------|--------------|-----|
| SES | Low | 81 |
| | Average | 811 |
| | High | 49 |
| | Total | 941 |

RESULTS

The themes reported focus on the open-ended questions in the survey. It is not possible to look at the responses to each of these questions in detail due to word limits for this paper, so Questions 1 (What, if any, are the positive impacts you have seen in your school/class as a result of NAPLAN?) and 3 (How has NAPLAN impacted on your relationship with other staff including your principal?) are not commented on in detail. These will be reported in subsequent papers. However, the general themes of Question 1 are reported, as these provide further nuance to understanding teacher perceptions. Many of these positives are also found in responses to other questions.

29% of responses argued that one of the positive effects that NAPLAN had was that it improved the whole school coordination of literacy and numeracy, increased opportunities for collaboration and sharing of resources, and was useful in supporting teacher and school assessments.

27% of responses argued that there had been no positive impacts as a result of NAPLAN.

26% of responses argued that a positive of NAPLAN was that it had helped students get better at test-taking practices, and the preparation required for the tests modelled desirable attributes such as planning, goal setting and increased engagement.

18% of responses argued that a positive of NAPLAN was that it allowed for better monitoring of student progress and achievement over time.

Table 2: Do you think NAPLAN improves the learning of students in your class? Why?

| Themes | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|---|-----------|------------|
| No, not really, very little | It has a negative impact on learning through a narrow focus, lack of relevance to students, impeding progress, disconnecting from prior learning, lack of collaboration, or lessening of intrinsic learning | 285 | |
| | It's a snapshot assessment that carries too much weight, it's an exercise in test-taking, or the questions are difficult for students to understand | 184 | |
| | It doesn't respond to individual or group needs | 133 | |
| | It increases stress or pressure or it reduces student confidence | 87 | |
| | Teachers provide learning experiences, not NAPLAN | 67 | |
| | The timing is wrong or it needs to be done more frequently | 58 | |
| | It doesn't reflect my pedagogy or my teaching priorities | 52 | |
| | Total | 866 | 67% |
| Yes or mostly | It focuses teachers, students or schools on important aspects of learning or it guides teaching and learning | 159 | |
| | It helps students to develop learning or test strategies | 41 | |
| | It works for able or motivated students or students with particular skill sets | 33 | |
| | It increases accountability | 24 | |
| | It highlights national trends or allows national comparisons to be made | 10 | |
| Total | 267 | 21% | |
| Occasionally or for some students only | Total | 127 | 10% |
| Unsure | Total | 23 | 2% |

No, not really, very little

The most common theme was that NAPLAN was not improving learning, or at best was having an inconsequential impact. 67% of coded responses identified that NAPLAN was not having a positive impact on learning. In particular, teachers perceived that NAPLAN had a narrow focus, lacked relevance to students and their prior learning, lessened collaboration in the classroom and promoted approaches that lessened ‘deep’ learning. Many comments reported that it increased stress and pressure, did not enable inclusivity or timely feedback and is an exercise in test-taking rather than a task that promotes authentic learning.

For many teachers, the NAPLAN tests remained disconnected from what was being taught in class, how learning was being facilitated and the life-contexts of many of the learners. As High School teacher Mary (25 yrs exp, SA, Cath, Low)⁷ argued:

There is no connection to the content previously learnt in class. I encourage higher order thinking in my classroom. I differentiate content, tasks, and assessments. The way I try to teach is not reflected in the NAPLAN test, the learning skills students use in my classroom are not valued by NAPLAN.

Furthermore as Lucy, a Year 7 teacher (27 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Low) argued, the format of the tests made them inauthentic: “How many real life experiences are done in multiple choice?” This point was supported by High School teacher Anne (7 yrs exp, SA, Ind, Avg), who argued that it did not link to either student learning or experience: “What they study/practise is not linked to any current learning or life experience. They cram for a week or so and then forget about it. The results come so long after the test that you can’t teach as a result of mistakes made.”

One of the major issues for many teachers was that NAPLAN, and the perceived requirement to teach to the test to maximise results, promoted superficial learning experiences. Jill, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Cath, Avg), argued:

I think that NAPLAN creates an educational environment where topics and concepts are covered superficially so that a broad area of the curriculum is taught in the early part of the year. Without NAPLAN, teachers would have the time to allow students to learn through the inquiry method and would encourage them to make links to prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding.

As Court, a Year 3 teacher (3 yrs exp, SA, Cath, Low), argued: “I find it very difficult to instil and maintain student motivation when so much of the curriculum must be devoted to NAPLAN preparation. I rarely feel like a real quality, effective teacher until NAPLAN has passed.” For students in specific contexts, the impact on their

⁷ A note on coding: Each participant was asked a series of demographic questions as part of the survey. They were asked to identify how many years they had been teaching (yrs exp), the state in which they worked (WA or SA), the school system in which they worked (Gov = Government, Cath = Catholic, Ind = Independent) and the SES context in which their school was located (Low = Low SES, Avg = Average SES and High = High SES). This demographic information is provided to further contextualise the responses of the individual teachers.

motivation and confidence could be extreme. Virgil, a Year 7 teacher (2 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low) in a remote community school stated: “The school I teach in is in a remote Aboriginal community where SAE is the second or third language for all my students. NAPLAN testing is unfair and soul crushing for my students.”

Yes or mostly

However, while 67% of the coded nodes reported that NAPLAN did not have a positive impact on learning, 21% identified some positive impacts. These varied from a perception that it provides a focus or guide on literacy and numeracy learning, that NAPLAN works for some students with particular skill sets or that it highlights national trends and enables comparisons to be made. Marianne, a Year 4 teacher (12 yrs exp, WA, Gov, High), argued: “NAPLAN does give the teacher direction on what is expected in years 3 5 7 and 9.” This was supported by Keyser Soze, a Year 7 teacher (13 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low): “It probably ensures I am more focused on understanding what level my students are at and that my teaching is focused on what the children actually need to learn to adequately develop their skills.”

To further highlight the complexity of understanding the effects on NAPLAN, there were some teachers who argued that NAPLAN could improve the learning experience of specific types of students, albeit often at the expense of others. For example, Donkey, a Year 5 teacher (2 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg), argued that the impact on learning was mixed:

To some degree and with some students. Those students who respond to pressure and challenge may improve their learning as they work hard for NAPLAN; however, most students, particularly those at risk and with learner diversity requirements are simply locked out of such an opportunity.

For many teachers who reported that it improved learning, a critical factor seemed to be that the data was used in educative, rather than judgemental ways. As Jungle, a Year 4 teacher (7 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low), argued: “When the data is used to identify areas of needs, either in student or school performance, then teachers are able to have valuable discussions and the opportunity to change pedagogy to improve student outcomes.”

For some teachers this corresponded with a belief that the accountability that NAPLAN enables is a timely corrective factor for the teaching profession. 24 teachers made some comment that argued that teachers should be accountable based on their NAPLAN results. High School teacher Kate (23 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Low), stated:

It forces teachers to address content knowledge and teach more content. It forces teachers to teach students processes and thinking styles. The way NAPLAN tests are written are excellent, what teachers need is detailed feedback data, so they know what types of thinking their students couldn't do so well.

For High School teacher Nate (5 yrs exp, WA, Ind, High) the benefit of this accountability was felt less at the level of the local classroom or individual teacher, but more so at the national level:

Not on a class-by-class basis. But at a national/population level, I believe that NAPLAN can show trends over time that will aid in the national curriculum development process; provide evidence upon which the government will be able to allocate funding and make better policy; and highlight some of the current deficits in teacher education courses.

There was also a percentage of teachers who were unsure, or argued that it may improve learning for specific sets of students, however, these responses have been already mentioned above.

Table 3: What, if any, are the negative impacts you have seen in your school/class as a result of NAPLAN?

| Themes | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Stress, pressure or anxiety | Increased student anxiety, stress or pressure | 383 | |
| | Pressure on teaching staff | 325 | |
| | Not feeling good about one's own ability, school or learning | 113 | |
| | Pressure on parents | 89 | |
| | Pressure on schools or principals | 79 | |
| | Parents putting pressure on their children, the teacher or school | 67 | |
| | Total | 1,056 | 44% |
| Curriculum & Pedagogy | Teaching to the test | 346 | |
| | It competes with balanced or effective curriculum, teaching and learning | 265 | |
| | It detracts from creating an inclusive and responsive learning environment | 140 | |
| | Total | 751 | 31% |

| Themes | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Test design | A one-off test used to make judgments | 96 | |
| | Weaker, ESL and Culturally diverse students are disadvantaged | 91 | |
| | Not a fair representation of student or school ability or effort | 89 | |
| | Skewed data - inaccurate, absent, transient, low ability students | 42 | |
| | The results don't guide teaching for that year | 35 | |
| | Political or systems level comments | 34 | |
| | Students refusing to participate or it has little relevance to them | 21 | |
| | Total | 408 | 17% |
| Relationships | Lessening of teacher confidence, efficacy or valuing of professional judgement | 93 | |
| | Inequities or friction among staff are noticeable | 45 | |
| | Total | 138 | 6% |
| None or minimal | None | 22 | |
| | Miscellaneous | 14 | |
| | Minimal | 9 | |
| | Total | 45 | 2% |

Stress, pressure or anxiety

44% of respondents nominated stress, pressure or anxiety as a negative impact of the NAPLAN tests. This stress was seen to impact a range of school community members, with teachers perceiving increased stress for students, teachers, principals as well as parents as a result of NAPLAN. In particular, teachers saw that stress and anxiety resulted as an unintended consequence of the results being used to measure the ability of the student and/or the quality of the teacher and/or the worth of the education experience a school offered. As Alyssa, a Year 4 teacher (23 yrs exp, WA, Ind, High), argued:

Media publicity and government information has misled the public into thinking that NAPLAN is the only piece of information about their child's ability that should be considered. It has created unnecessary pressure on schools to try and outperform similar schools.

Therese, a Year 2 teacher (8 yrs exp, WA, Cath, High), also saw that the pressure to get good results in comparison to other schools was having a negative impact on teachers and students:

Parents place an extremely high emphasis of the results of one test that takes place on one day and sometimes these results do not echo a student's ability or capabilities on a 'regular' school day. However, they often still value these results more than any other data provided by the class teacher. The teacher who taught the students the year before they sat NAPLAN (e.g. Year 2 and 4 teachers) feel some sense of responsibility when their ex-students have not attained good results leading to self-doubt. Students become extremely anxious leading up to and sitting NAPLAN. Self and parental expectations and pressures are unrealistic and affect the assessment process.

For many teachers, the impact on student confidence, self-esteem and motivation to do well was being damaged by the pressure of the competition to do better than other teachers and other schools. As Patricia, a Year 7 teacher (25 yrs exp, SA, Cath, Avg) pointed out, in her experience NAPLAN resulted in "extreme, pants wetting fear for approximately 2 students in every class." This was supported by KA, a Year 3 teacher (8 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), who argued that the design of the test and the media portrayal of the results were also increasing the pressure students were under.

Students under pressure, students working in an environment they don't normally face i.e. not allowed to ask for help, no talking/discussing/sharing ideas, teachers unable to support students or word a question in a different way, time constraints that are unrealistic, parents questioning teaching and learning based on media portrayal of results, students who are emotionally vulnerable on the day of the test don't demonstrate their full knowledge.

Consequently, the desire to improve test results was radically altering what teachers understood as learning. As Heartso, a Year 6 teacher (22 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), argued:

The emphasis... negatively affects the positive engagement of some students with learning. The focus of some parents on NAPLAN and its ever present shadow marginalises and diminishes the value placed on the learning journey designed and delivered by the teacher.

The effects of this were often experienced across the whole school, including in Kindergarten and Pre-Primary. As Jamdrop, a Pre-Primary teacher (22 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg) noted as a result of NAPLAN, there has been "a huge push down into PP and K to teach "academic" skills before social skills and learning skills are in place."

Curriculum & Pedagogy

31% of the responses to this question spoke of the impact of NAPLAN on curriculum and pedagogical choice in schools. Primarily these responses focused on pressure to teach to the test and a narrowed curriculum focus. It was felt that these imposts were having a negative impact on the teaching and learning in schools and classrooms.

As well, there was also concern that these effects were making classrooms more competitive, less inclusive places that could not cope with the diversity of student needs and talents. Milly, a Year 1 teacher (13 yrs exp, SA, Cath, Low), voiced her concern:

With the pressure to get good results for students, some teachers end up teaching to the test and teaching facts rather than teaching the children how to 'learn for themselves'. I worry that NAPLAN is turning the clock back to traditional teaching rather than teaching skills that students need for the 21st century.

This incentive to 'teach to the test' was supported by Damon, High School teacher (13 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low) who saw that as a result of NAPLAN there was a culture of "striving for better NAPLAN results by teaching to the test. This means many other key areas are not taught as effectively as they are not tested." Furthermore, the perceived necessity to prepare for the tests meant that teachers struggled to avoid superficial coverage of concepts rather than learning. Racquel, a Year 3 teacher (8 yrs exp, WA, Ind, Avg), stated:

It is incredibly tempting to teach to the test. Specifically, I have noticed myself and other teachers skipping around lots of teaching points quickly in the run up to the tests, just in case they come up, when this is not the best way for most students to gain understanding.

Cindy, a Year 7 teacher (7 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), bemoaned the impact that NAPLAN was having on the breadth of curriculum in her school that she saw as beneficial for her students: "The focus becomes NAPLAN and everything else goes to the side. NAPLAN does not allow you to teach what you need to teach in an already overloaded curriculum." Furthermore, the standardisation of curriculum assumed a standardisation of student needs and abilities. As Essie, a Year 4 teacher (15 yrs exp, WA, Gov, High), argued:

Students are only seen through NAPLAN glasses and if a student's strengths are anything other than literacy and numeracy (in the narrow NAPLAN sense) then their strengths very likely go unacknowledged, unvalued and unrecognised. We all have different interests, skills and strengths. NAPLAN promotes a definition of student value to such a narrow range it is frightening.

TEST DESIGN

Another negative for many teachers concerned their awareness, and concern, that the test design itself was flawed and, as a result, the data generated could not support the ways it was being used in schools. In particular, teachers remained concerned that it was a one-off test used to generalise about the quality of the learning experience; it remained non-inclusive for students from diverse backgrounds; results could be skewed by students choosing not to participate or deliberately not trying; it served a political, rather than an educative, agenda. As Catherine, a Year 5 teacher (3 yrs exp, SA, Gov, High), argued "it's ridiculous to judge a teacher or a school on a few hours of testing once a year." Janice, a Year 3 teacher (5 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), concurred,

saying: “It is not a true reflection of what a child knows or is capable of, only gives an insight in to what they could do on that particular day”. For Benaiah, a Year 5 teacher (9 yrs exp, WA, Ind, Avg), the increased focus on NAPLAN damaged the legitimacy of other assessment activities:

Increased focus on high-stakes testing means that the results of one test (NAPLAN) are seen as more important than other more realistic in-class activities. This leaves disproportionate focus on one test rather than the multitude of activities a class is normally involved in over a year.

Another major issue for many teachers was that the tests were not a fair representation of a student’s achievement or of the quality of the teaching that those students received. This unfair representation was intensified through the MySchool website. As Marg, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low), argued:

Our school is very small, has a high number of ESL children and therefore the results of the NAPLAN testing does not give a true reflection of the ability of the children in the school overall. I am so against this style of testing. It goes against my whole teaching philosophy! I will continue to be outraged by the governments push with this! It gives a false indication of ‘Great Schools’ in the ‘MySchool’ site.

Another negative associated with the test design was the time it took for results to get back to schools so that teachers could use them to support student learning. Julie, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), stated: “No immediate feedback possible for students. No immediate information for teachers that can be used to support child learning.” This point was supported by Alice, a High School teacher (8 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Low):

We never even get to see the results for our specific students in easy to read documents and there are no formal checks from performance managers or subject coordinators about specific improvement for specific students. Therefore, even if the way you prepared your students worked and they improved; if everyone else did a poor job it looks as though what you were doing didn’t work.

The test design was perceived to be open to manipulation in a number of ways. As High School teacher Lavender (16 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg) noted: “At the Yr 9 level, some students refuse to take the test seriously and sometimes deliberately sabotage the test. Especially in the Reading/language conventions when they shade in all the A’s, regardless of whether they are correct.” Furthermore, the accuracy of the data was often skewed by absent students, transient students and the numbers of low ability students who sat the tests. As High School teacher Lee (6 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Low) argued: “During NAPLAN there is a decline in student attendance. To me this means parents/caregivers as well as their child do not value NAPLAN.” This was obvious for High School teacher Peter (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low) working in a remote community school: “Non-attendance of large numbers of students in a remote community during and subsequent to NAPLAN testing - probably as it proved they could not do Gija (whitefella) work.”

The pressure to promote the school through positive comparisons on the MySchool website often caused teachers ethical dilemmas as they felt they were being asked to teach in ways that confronted their beliefs about their work as teachers. Dulce, a Year 1 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg), reported an example of this:

Teachers being instructed by administration staff not to focus extra attention on academically needy students as they are seen to be unlikely to achieve much growth according to NAPLAN results; better to focus on average to higher achievers who may have greater potential to improve and therefore get NAPLAN results that will make the school and principal look better in the community.

RELATIONSHIPS

Another negative impact teachers reported was on relationships within their school community. Teacher responses focused on two main areas: firstly, a lessening of teacher confidence and self-efficacy as they felt that their professional judgement was being systematically and deliberately undermined. Teachers also reported increased friction between staff in their school, as NAPLAN and the publication of results on the MySchool website promoted increased competition and rivalry amongst staff, and more coercive leadership to get 'good' results. As Carly, a Year 7 teacher (16 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), argued:

The MySchool website has had a significantly negative impact. They (NAPLAN results from the website) are used as a tool to slander schools and teachers. They are used as a tool to assess "good" and "bad" schools, without taking into consideration the status of schools (the "like" schools we are compared to is a load of hogwash) and their student backgrounds, which students they may/may not have withdrawn from testing, or the other extremely positive programs those schools could be running.

This was supported by Nosila, a Year 2 teacher (12 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low), who saw that her school staff was being divided into NAPLAN and non-NAPLAN years: "Disharmony between teachers, yrs 3,5 & 7 teachers carrying the load of NAPLAN and others not wanting to teach those years because of the test". Jennifer, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp WA, Gov, Avg), stated:

Lack of confidence to try new teaching strategies and techniques - not a risk-taking environment; can't afford to make mistakes even though this is necessary for professional growth. Teachers become very stressed, feel judged and criticised, negative environment and not conducive to sharing, innovation and collaboration.

Table 4: How has NAPLAN impacted on your relationships with parents?

| Themes | Sub-themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|--|-----------|------------|
| NAPLAN is changing relationships | Pressure on students, teachers or schools to improve student outcomes | 169 | |
| | Valuing or over-importance of the test or the results | 137 | |
| | More feedback or resources are required from the teacher re NAPLAN | 111 | |
| | Challenged communication or strained relationships with parents | 95 | |
| | Good relationships or communication with parents | 87 | |
| | Mixed response depending on parental attitude to NAPLAN or the results | 41 | |
| | Total | 640 | 48% |
| Little or no impact | No impact | 244 | |
| | Little impact | 71 | |
| | Miscellaneous, unsure, not applicable, or no response | 55 | |
| | Lack of parental support, concern or interest | 49 | |
| | Total | 419 | 32% |
| Difficulty in explaining NAPLAN to parents | NAPLAN is limited or parents are aware of broader educational goals | 111 | |
| | Concern, stress, or anxiety about NAPLAN for parents or children | 110 | |
| | Parents don't understand the testing process or the results | 38 | |
| | Total | 259 | 20% |

NAPLAN is changing relationships

The largest number of responses (48%) from teachers perceived that NAPLAN was having an impact on relationships with parents. This was manifesting in various ways: in pressure on students, teachers or schools to show improvement in student outcomes, strained relationships with parents as well as teachers reporting that they were having to spend more time and resources explaining NAPLAN testing and individual student

results to parents. Some teachers saw that there had been a range of impacts, both positive and negative, on teacher-parent relationships in each class. A small percentage of coded responses suggested that NAPLAN had actually improved teacher-parent relationships.

As Tammy, a Year 5 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Cath, High) stated: “Negatively – they [parents] lay blame for unexpected results on shoulders of current teachers. Always on guard, trying to justify reasons for doing things.” This perception was supported by Honey, a Year 5 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg): “It has become a lot more strained as the talk is now more about how the child will go at NAPLAN (some parents of struggling children want to pull theirs out but don’t really have an option) and less on how we can help the child.” Harley, a Year 1 teacher (4 yrs exp, WA, Ind, High), spoke of how parental concern about NAPLAN filtered into non-NAPLAN classrooms:

Even as a Year 1 teacher I have parents concerned about how what I am teaching will affect their child’s NAPLAN results in Year 3. It takes away the trust and the benefits of looking at ‘what we can do now to help’ and focuses the relationship on ‘what I can do to make sure your child passes a test’.

However, parental responses to NAPLAN were rarely uniform. As Jungle, a Year 4 teacher (7 yrs exp, WA Gov, Low) argued:

This depends on the parents, of course. There are parents who understand the value-adding that teachers do regardless of the NAPLAN results and there are parents who only look at reports and think that is a reflection of the education that their child is receiving. We have to deal with all parents from one extreme to the other and their responses vary accordingly.

Little or no impact

The next largest number of responses from teachers reported that in their experience relationships with parents had not changed as a result of NAPLAN. Positive teacher-parent relationships remained, while negative teacher-parent relationships equally remained unaffected. Judyn, a Year 3 teacher (20 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg) spoke of the impact on relationships with parents in this way:

I have established an open sharing approach with parents, having explained, shared copies of past tests, rules and expectations with them. Discussions of learning relevance, what can the child, the school and parents learn from them and how we will follow up the information has been part of the dialogue.

This was supported by Jill, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, SA, Cath, Avg), who argued: “Most parents have an understanding of their children’s ability in different areas of the curriculum. NAPLAN results mostly confirm what I and the students’ parents already know.” Andi, a Year 5 teacher (19 yrs exp, WA, Ind, High) argued: “Most of our parents seem unconcerned about the tests or results.” Chris, a Year 6 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Cath, High) agreed, saying: “Little. Most seem not to visit the ACARA website and are more interested in how their child is performing on daily tasks in my class.”

Jules, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Ind, High) made an interesting point about the impact that parental understanding and familiarity with tests like NAPLAN could have on their relationships:

We are lucky at our school that in general our parents understand the pros and cons of NAPLAN, they are aware of the small number of children at the school and how this impacts whole school results. Our parents support our views on maintaining a broad curriculum and preparing our children to sit NAPLAN but not teaching to the test. So apart from the odd exception NAPLAN has not changed our good relationship with parents. Communication and information sharing is the key.

DIFFICULTY IN EXPLAINING NAPLAN TO PARENTS

Another theme that emerges from teacher perceptions was that NAPLAN was largely misunderstood and/or misused by many parents. The effects of this were different, some parents chose to focus on broader education goals that they saw as more important, while others (as has been a recurring theme) increased the stress and pressure on students and teachers. Another response was that teachers perceived that some parents felt confused and anxious about their child's schooling because they were uncertain as to what they should be valuing in education. Teachers saw this as having a significant impact on the relationships that parents had with schools. Jennifer, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg) argued: "Only a small percentage of the parents seem to be informed about NAPLAN. Many do not seem to realise how the curriculum, timetable and the teacher's ability to meet their child's needs are affected by NAPLAN." For Doug, a Year 4 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Low), a teacher's role now included trying to explain NAPLAN to parents:

Some parents are confused: the test says Year 5 on the cover and they expect the test to assess Year 5 skills, when it actually goes far beyond Year 5 expected standards. Parents are concerned when their child's results are lower than expected. Trying to explain individual error and NAPLAN lack of complete skills coverage is difficult.

Anne, a Year 3 teacher (17 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg), agreed:

They want more information and reassurance that kids are being prepared. Most get tutors and work with children at home using internet sites. Most want their kids to be achieving at the top end and are frustrated and disappointed when their kids do not. Some still don't understand how the assessment and grading work.

Some teachers saw that NAPLAN placed pressure on parents, leading many to seek a competitive advantage for their children. As Emma, a Year 5 teacher (4 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Avg), argued: "It has impacted negatively. Parents place too much importance on the test. Parents feel pressured to coach their children. Parents compete with each other and compare their children. It detracts from a positive community approach to education."

For Sydney, a Year 5 teacher (25 yrs exp, WA, Gov, Avg), one of the effects of NAPLAN had been to make parents more aware, and supportive, of the challenges that teachers and school faced:

The parents are quite supportive and understand the pressures on both the school and the staff. They are more concerned with the emotional impact on the children because the emphasis is placed on the number of higher achieving students and encourages an element of competitiveness between students and schools.

This was supported by Jodie, a Year 3 teacher (25 yrs exp, SA, Gov, Low) who argued “parents trust my judgement and are aware that NAPLAN is but a sliver of their child’s total learning”.

DISCUSSION

These teacher perceptions suggest that the ‘policy enactments’ may be having different classroom effects than intended. These impacts are not uniform, to each of the questions asked, while the majority of responses suggested negative impacts, there were always teachers who responded about NAPLAN in positive ways. However, for these teachers who responded, the more frequent perception was that NAPLAN was having negative impacts on curriculum, pedagogy and community relationships.

Asking teachers their perceptions of the impacts of NAPLAN obviously provides valuable insight into the localised effects of the policy, but also brings with it some limitations. Firstly, while teachers have a unique and important perspective on NAPLAN and MySchool, they are far from the only education stakeholders that have experience of the impacts. Parents, principals, students and education bureaucrats, to name a few, are stakeholders who may present different perspectives. As well, given the volunteer survey method used in this research, it is also important to add that a representative sample cannot be claimed and care must be taken with generalising these results.

That said, these teacher perceptions, and the frequency of themes that emerged, contain rich and insightful feedback about what is happening in their schools as a result of NAPLAN. The challenge for education systems in Australia would appear to be that the push for improved outcomes through increased transparency and accountability turns NAPLAN into a high-stakes test, not by design, but through how the results have become tied to funding, enrolments, government and/or systemic intervention and used as an unofficial measure of teaching quality (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Lingard, 2010). There were a number of positives that some teachers suggested; that NAPLAN raised the profile/stressed the importance of literacy and numeracy and improved the coordination and collaboration of literacy and numeracy approaches in schools. This was often perceived as very important for new teachers; NAPLAN gave them something to guide their programming and teaching focus. There was also some sense that the commensurate accountability had caused some teachers to improve their efforts.

LEARNING

To an extent, the wider community may be inclined to see strained relationships, increased stress and anxiety and a narrowed or more restricted curriculum and pedagogic focus as reasonable, but unfortunate, side-effects of improvement in student learning. After all, the push to accountability and transparency of the Education Revolution, driven by NAPLAN and MySchool, is designed to improve the equity and excellence of educational outcomes in Australian schools (Rudd & Gillard, 2008). However, after five years of conducting and reporting on the tests, we are yet to see a sustained pattern of improved student results across the population, whether in terms of excellence or equity (ACARA, 2012b; ACARA, 2012a).

Understanding this phenomenon highlights a basic problem of accountability measures; learning does not occur at the policy level, it occurs in localised contexts mediated by various specificities. 67% of the coded responses that asked about whether NAPLAN was improving student learning suggested that it wasn't because of the various unintended consequences, as systems, schools and individuals engaged with the competitive realities of NAPLAN and MySchool, of a narrowed curriculum focus, teaching to the test pedagogies, a lack of authentic learning opportunities and the increased stress and anxiety felt in the school community.

That said, 21% of the coded responses saw that NAPLAN had improved learning, highlighting the difficulty of simplified representations of complex individual experiences within educational settings. Positive responses tended to focus on the fact that NAPLAN, and the scrutiny that the MySchool website guaranteed, had lead to increased emphasis and coordination of literacy and numeracy strategies and pedagogies at the school level. It has also allowed students to experience test conditions and begin to develop learning strategies to use in these conditions. The question remains, what is different about the contexts and approaches in individual schools and classrooms that generate these different responses? In other words, what is being done differently, and is there anything that could be learnt from this? These questions remain unanswered at this stage, but certainly indicate further research and consideration is warranted.

NEGATIVES

Many of the negatives that emerged about NAPLAN and MySchool resonate with the international research literature which suggests that standardised literacy and numeracy tests often result in unintended consequences such as a narrow curriculum focus (Reid, 2009; Au, 2007), a return to teacher-centred instruction (Barret, 2009; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000), teaching to the test (Jones, 2008) and a decrease in student motivation (Ryan & Wesinstein, 2009). Also significant was the teacher perception that NAPLAN was increasing the stress, pressure and anxiety for students, teachers, principals and parents for very little educational return. For a test designed to improve equity, a significant concern voiced by these teachers must be that NAPLAN,

and the pressure for schools to be portrayed as improving or doing well on the MySchool website, was creating classrooms that were less inclusive of the particular needs of their least advantaged students.

17% of the themes addressed misgivings about the design of the test and its ability to accurately represent the learning that occurred in their classroom, the ability of students and the usefulness of the exercise in guiding teaching and learning for the year. Only 2% of coded responses perceived that NAPLAN had no negative impacts.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

The ability for schools to function as inclusive communities has been shown to have a significant impact on the learning outcomes generated. As such, the relationships that teachers and parents have are highly significant to any notions of improvement of equity and excellence, as Australia's 'Education Revolution' clearly sets out to do. NAPLAN and MySchool are key policy vehicles designed to deliver accountability and transparency for parents to exercise choice. It is not that parents have not had these rights and options before, rather in a large number of cases, the testing regime has appeared to change the negotiated positionality between the two. It is not true for all teachers, of course, 32% of responses argued that not much had changed in their relationships as a result of NAPLAN.

Teacher perceptions about the effects of NAPLAN on their relationships with parents were fairly divided. 48% of the themes coded articulated the view that relationships were changing. Of the 48%, only 6% of the responses responded that this change had been positive, through improved relationships and communication. Many responses suggested that the changed relationships were negative, as evidenced by parents putting pressure on teachers to improve the NAPLAN results of their classes, parents judging teachers by the NAPLAN scores of their children, the comparison on the MySchool website and increased strain on relationships between teachers and parents. An emergent sub-theme was a concern that parents placed too much emphasis on the test, and not enough on the other learning activities and assessments undertaken during the year.

CONCLUSION

The teachers who responded to this survey perceived that NAPLAN was having a number of effects at the class and school level. For the majority of teachers, these effects were largely negative, as the associated performance pressure schools and teachers felt, and the desire to be ranked highly, impacted for many teachers on the curriculum choice in the school/classroom, on the style of pedagogy teachers felt they had to adopt, and the subsequent learning opportunities and experiences of young people. This exploratory data requires contextualisation through further research; what are the policy effects of NAPLAN for parents, principals and administrators, and indeed for politicians and policy-makers? We may be seeing that the effects

of NAPLAN at the school and classroom level outweigh, or even work against, the supposed benefits of accountability and transparency in improving equity and outcomes within the Australian education system. If the experiences of the majority of teachers in this survey are common across Australia, it remains doubtful we will see the desired systemic improvement in literacy and numeracy learning.

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