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An Emergency Response to Literacy: NAPLAN on MySchool

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This article considers the 'unintended consequences' of the publication of the NAPLAN results on the 'MySchool' website, and what that has meant for leadership teams, teachers, students and parents in many schools.

This article is written from the data cited in the VATE submission to the Australian Federal Senate Inquiry into 'unintended consequences' of NAPLAN, but does not represent the official position of the association – it represents my own views and the views of some of the membership who responded to the survey. This said, most of the data we collected was extremely negative towards NAPLAN, and there were fewer than five of the 88 respondents who had positive things to say about NAPLAN. Obviously teachers who felt the effects more strongly were more motivated to participate, but even accounting for this, the data collected showed a significant number of teachers and schools who were experiencing extremely negative impacts from the testing and publication regime. In this article I have theorised that one of the consequences of this has been to push some schools into acting in an emergency mode, triaging their literacy curriculum in an attempt to perform better in NAPLAN.

High-minded intentions, alarming unintended consequences

When, in June 2013, the Australian Senate announced an inquiry into the 'unintended consequences' of NAPLAN, I prepared a short survey for the membership of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) on behalf of VATE Council. The aim was to collect some direct quotes from some of our primary and secondary members to include in our senate submission. This short anonymous survey was sent to the membership via email (using an online survey tool, Survey Monkey) and open only from a Friday afternoon to a Monday evening. We had expected only a low response rate, but were overwhelmed with 88 responses, with many of the responses long and extremely affecting. I, VATE President, Monika Wagner, together with VATE staff, Nicoll Heaslip and Kate Gillespie, struggled to get the submission ready in the very short turn-around time in a way that did justice to the reported experiences of our membership. An overwhelming theme from our data was that the publication of the NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website was having a very strong effect on many schools, teachers and jurisdictions, with some of these effects being extreme and very negative.

Our survey was entirely anonymous and we did not collect any demographic data. Other than knowing that respondents are members of the association, we cannot analyse the responses according to school type, socio-economic advantage or any other factors. This said, the teachers whose responses were the most distressed, the most passionate and where the effects were reported as being the greatest, also often mentioned aspects of their school and student body that one would assume as being from a lower socio-economic area, such as describing the adverse circumstances that students were in. For instance:

NAPLAN has created a state of forged data, manipulated statistics, the withdrawal of certain students, the coaching of students ... Teaching has become nothing more than teaching to the test ... This is Australia-wide. It has become such a frightful test that school programs are driven by it and we all saw it coming so it can only be concluded that the intent of the NAPLAN focus over the past few years has been to forge data at all costs – driven from the Prime Minister down. Furthermore the amount of taxpayers' money that is splurged by schools needing 'literacy and numeracy' coaching, and help etc. because the data is not increasing enough (the teachers aren't cheating enough) is repugnant – where is the accountability?? I would

like to know who is looking at the data associated with these programs as closely as they are looking at the NAPLAN data. Many students at our school are lucky to have breakfast, lucky to have been asleep by midnight, lucky to have a pen and lucky to have ever read a book in their lives and yet they are being taught to achieve better data in a test that they won't even take seriously to begin with. We had a regional director come in and talk about the data not increasing enough, our assistant principal chastised our staff over it – no mention of the crazy and dysfunctional students that need help – and then the programs are destroyed as funding gets syphoned into rubbish programs – I really want an audit nationwide into all of the programs at schools and curriculum that was destroyed because of the NAPLAN hype. I would like to know how much money has been wasted – and I would argue that many schools have actually gone backwards because of this focus.

This school and teacher are clearly suffering as the school responds to the regional director's criticism leading to the principal's chastisement of staff, who are dealing with the no breakfast, not enough sleep, not the right equipment, as their starting point for working with the students. The shift of blame that this teacher describes as occurring from the regional director to the principal to the staff, was a pattern across many of the responses, as is the description of good programs that have been lost because of the ways in which the NAPLAN accountability agenda is being enacted at the chalkface. There was a series of similar comments we received from teachers who were extremely passionate in their responses and cited similar conditions that their students were dealing with on an everyday basis – some of these responses had a similar tone of anger as expressed in the comment above, yet others were a lamentation, with the despair that the teachers felt embedded in every phrase. Later in the article you will read some of these comments and hear the tone of anguish contained within them.

In my discussion in this article, I have focused only on comments from teachers who describe NAPLAN as changing the curriculum in their school. The article considers how these teachers described their experiences in terms of the impact of the testing on their sense of professionalism and autonomy, and changes that were occurring in the school around curriculum that they ascribed to NAPLAN. I describe a phenomenon I observe through this of schools 'triaging' the literacy curriculum as they operate their school in 'emergency mode' as they respond to the pressure of the consequences of having poor published results. Teachers describe these pressures as coming from different sources: the department on the principal, the leadership team on the teaching staff

and parental pressures, through school council and directly to teachers, as well as the pressure to help maintain school numbers through good NAPLAN scores. In my writing of this, I note that the effects of publishing the NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website, while they impact everyone, are very unequal across schools and jurisdictions. As teachers, teacher educators and other education professionals, we have a responsibility to think through the range of effects on schools across our country, even if it is not having a particularly negative effect on our own jurisdiction.

Code Red: Entering Literacy Emergency Mode

The publication of the NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website has pushed some school leadership teams into operating in emergency mode, triaging their curriculum and turning the study of NAPLAN tests and topics into the major focus of the curriculum. While this is a terrifying outcome, I do not blame the schools and leadership teams for this, as the construction of the website invites the reader to read low scores as an emergency, and results in a loss of confidence in the school by the community and a loss of reputation. One way of reading the results on the site is as a series of bar graphs which show the tests results coded as dark green (very high), light green (high), white (neutral), light red (low) and dark red (very low). These are all compared to the Australian average and then they are also ranked compared to 'like' schools. Any school that gets under the Australian average is going to look bad, and this is particularly the case for schools that do not do well compared to 'like' schools either.

VATE members reported on some of the fallout of how these graphs were being read by the community, resulting at times in the community losing confidence in themselves, as seeing themselves as failing, and that the school is 'really bad'.

We are now being compared unfavourably with 'like' schools when the comparison methodology is questionable and most likely inaccurate. The 'value adding' that is achieved at this school is higher than most other schools but that is not taken into consideration.

The school and community sees itself as lacking in ability due to low scores on NAPLAN. The principal and many of the staff concentrate on NAPLAN scores as the deciding indicator of success of student learning and teacher competence is viewed through the lens of NAPLAN success. Teaching and learning has become defined by NAPLAN performance.

No matter how much information is communicated to parents they choose to believe the inaccurate reporting in the media both newspapers and radio and the school has been left to deal with concerns.

I now have students asking me why our school is so bad. I have been told by students that I shouldn't expect better results from them because, 'It's just the way things are here because it's a really bad school.'

I think the broader social picture has also intensified the issues around NAPLAN for teachers. The fact that NAPLAN preparation books are available in supermarkets and that 'health food' companies are marketing herbal supplements as useful for NAPLAN only intensify broader social pressure on teachers and students around NAPLAN. They also target parents, making them feel that they need to be working with their children at home to prepare them for these tests. This then intensifies the pressure on teachers and schools to 'prepare' students, as parents begin asking why children haven't had any preparation.

These comments give an overview of the kinds of comments we received about some of the impacts that, what the teacher above describes as 'the broader social picture' is having on the schools. These responses all reflected the demoralisation that the schools and teachers were feeling, the ways in which the comparative tool created feelings of low-esteem and failure for the school. Teachers wrote about NAPLAN now being the measure of a school success, with the idea of what 'value adding' might mean in a broader sense being diminished by the simplification of the complexity of their work into a simple set of scores. Parents become very drawn into this, as they compare schools, their insecurities about schooling becoming focused on the NAPLAN results. As pointed out by one teacher, the general community is producing broader social pressures on the teachers and schools, as the burgeoning industry of NAPLAN do-it-yourself at home books are available from supermarkets and herbal NAPLAN supplements are sold to enhance performance.

The publication of the NAPLAN test results on the *MySchool* website has resulted in many schools' reputations being affected significantly. The emotional toll is high on schools with low results. One teacher wrote that, 'There are the usual complaints from on high (region) each year about how bad we all are, which is discouraging'. This pushes down onto the school council and principals, who begin triaging:

Pressure from some school councillors has meant we have practised for a couple of weeks before the test ... wasting valuable learning time.

I have had executive members of staff comment openly on how the results look to the rest of the

community although they are aware that it is not the only measure.

As teachers, we are held responsible for this. We are told that we have the responsibility to keep these results good or our reputation will be destroyed and 'public education is in crisis'.

The principal places pressure on the teacher leaders to improve NAPLAN scores and be able to explain from year to year why there has not been a significant improvement. It over-simplifies the process of teaching and learning, ignores the social and cultural aspects of schools, learning and teacher/student and student/ student relationships and has caused the principal to demand that teachers work in a standardised and measurable way.

There have been very interesting conversations and comparisons made between different cohorts of students which many of the senior admin team look at as showing 'improvement' etc., when it's a different group of students altogether.

There is a lot of pressure to get high NAPLAN results so that the school can have a 'good reputation' on the *MySchool* website. It is a political tool and is not relevant to the abilities of the students on a day-to-day basis.

There is a great deal of pressure placed upon individual teachers – which is difficult for them to address within the short space of time available. For example, Year 7 teachers have only been teaching their students for approximately 13 weeks before the students sit NAPLAN, and our school is judged on these results, even though most of the learning that has gone into these results has been in primary school.

Principals and school management were reported as sometimes going to desperate measures to preserve their school's reputation. Schools have been reported as encouraging low-achieving students not to attend school on the day of the testing or not to sit the test. One teacher even reported that at their school students with very poor results are shifted to 'alternative pathways'.

My school was going to encourage low achieving students to not sit the test, so their results did not impact the overall results of the school.

In 2012, 20% of our non-indigenous students were exempt or absent for the tests. I believe this was because we had a low Yr 3 cohort and maybe students were encouraged not to attend school.

... the school data published on *MySchool* website is of the utmost importance to leadership, and basically dictates the inane things that they do to lift these scores. My school, like many public schools in lower socio-economic areas, tries to shift kids to 'alternative pathways' – that is to say, dump them on somebody

else so that they do not bring down the schools' overall data. Immoral, ineffective and sickening. There is a silent but pervasive awareness that these tests and published results drive everything at this school from the top down, that leadership makes extravagant promises about what our kids will 'achieve' on tests, and they will do anything to get those improvements to secure and advance their careers at the expense [of] learning, student well-being and teacher motivation. These tests and the publication of school results undermine the motivation and professionalism of teachers, particularly in schools like mine that are burdened with the bureaucratic pressure that falls on school communities lacking the cultural, social and financial capital to resist it.

We had numerous reports of students who were poorly performing being 'moved on' from schools, or at least told to stay away. While there are categories of students who are exempted from NAPLAN, such as EAL students and students with additional funding, poor performing students who lie outside the official exclusion zones are often also excluded from the testing. This is problematic for both those who are officially excluded from the tests and those who are unofficially kept away. Given the tests are leaking out in the curriculum time they are taking, exempted students are marginalised in the classroom for far longer than the time of the tests themselves and both they and those who are unofficially excluded are being labelled as not a part of the main game of the classroom.

Sometimes triaging is in the form of teachers being 'instructed as to what to tell the public'. Having positive NAPLAN results reported can lead to parents wanting to move their children to the school and poor results can lead to parents removing their children from a school. In a competitive school environment, such as we have in Victoria, where parents can choose any government school that has places, this can lead to school numbers being both positively and adversely impacted.

Our school has good NAPLAN results, so more students want to come here. This meant this year we lost our music room, with a loss in the quality of education for all students at the school. Next year we may lose our art room. Our specialist teachers may be lost as well. This would be a disaster for our school, all because of the government wanting some figures. Parents don't understand what NAPLAN is, and it creates tension and stress for the school community as a whole – an external intervention in teaching and learning that has no benefit for the students, only harm.

Our school is struggling with numbers of enrolments and performance issues so NAPLAN is used as evidence of what needs to be done, whether staff are

able to deliver or not, in places where resources and staffing are limited.

Because of the numbers of parents who were choosing schools based on NAPLAN, even schools that were achieving positive results were suffering the consequences of that. The example above showed that even in positive cases there were impacts on the curriculum that the school could provide, as the school began to struggle with space and deal with the pressures of additional enrolments. Important aspects of the school curriculum, such as the music program and art program being lost to classroom space, and the additional pressures of the increase of size are negative effects of positive NAPLAN results. Conversely, schools who are struggling with enrolment numbers receive less resources and staffing, so they have fewer opportunities to make changes.

CODE RED: NAPLAN as Curriculum

For principals and teachers where the emergency was seen as greatest, the school resorted to making the NAPLAN test the curriculum in an effort to improve the results. English teachers wrote at length about the interruptions and distortions to the curriculum because of the demands placed upon them. For instance, 'When NAPLAN first started there was a clear message that we wouldn't 'teach to the test'. However now, especially with *MySchool*, we are instructed to do this'. Teachers were angry about the time being used for this and the ways in which dedicating time to NAPLAN was reshaping the teaching and learning, and reducing student engagement – 'Too much time is spent by teaching staff preparing students for the test'. 'Teachers are not meant to teach to the test, but they do'. That this has also, 'interrupted the curriculum immensely'. They described the English curriculum as having been 'restricted', that there are 'no broad writing tasks', that they are no longer, 'catering for needs of individual students'. 'The only writing genre (apart from recount writing) we have taught has been the NAPLAN test genre of persuasive text'.

I have had to diminish and, in places, abandon aspects of what was a very rich curriculum for Year 9 in order to accommodate the focus on NAPLAN preparation. I feel my students have been far less engaged. It's not been a happy year so far.

Our entire teaching program in Term 1 and Term 2 has been tailored to allow time for teaching 'to the test'. A significant amount of time is spent teaching persuasive writing in the middle of a unit that does not align with persuasive writing as a text form. The teaching of English skills has been pared back to a disparate set of skills not connected to each other. We leap from one concept to another, ensuring we cover

skills that will be on NAPLAN but not making any integration between concepts or meaningful links for students. When we had a number of interruptions and began to fall behind our scheduled plan, we were instructed to cut the other content out and focus on teaching NAPLAN as it is more important.

Pressure to perform is placed on staff, who then spend a large amount of time preparing students, when this time would be better spent teaching in real life contexts. Over all I believe this has a negative impact on student learning. This was particularly evident this year, when the writing task did not meet previous criteria, hence students spent a lot of time preparing for a task, perfecting essay skills when the task called for a somewhat different style.

The writing genre tested in NAPLAN has become forefronted and in some cases is the only genre taught. The whole of first term is NAPLAN preparation and students sit a number of 'mock' NAPLAN tests before the actual tests. Some students become distressed at test time and most students and teachers are nervous about the results. NAPLAN has narrowed our curriculum, daily teaching focus and our concept of competence and success for both students and teachers.

Because the writing task is PERSUASIVE at all year levels, this has meant an over-presence of this writing style in the curriculum at each year level (to prepare students for NAPLAN). The focus on persuasive writing comes at the expense of teaching/ learning other valuable writing skills/styles such as imaginative, instructional and expository writing.

NAPLAN preparation time is definitely biting into large chunks of class time that should be used for ordinary teaching and learning, that is to say meaningful teaching and learning. Despite repeated reminders that we 'do not prepare for NAPLAN' voiced in official settings, we certainly do. This is disgraceful, dishonest.

I do a lot more uncontextualised grammar practice to prepare students for NAPLAN. I have even been told to have a NAPLAN specific class once a week in order to prepare for the test.

The overemphasis of the importance of these tests caused by the publication of the tests on the *MySchool* website and the structure of the site itself which encourages comparison of schools' results, have led to an undermining of public trust in teachers and their professional judgments. This mistrust has reached the stage where some parents place more value on what the NAPLAN results have said about their child's progress than what the teacher who has been working with them in class every day throughout the school year has recorded. It has resulted in a reduced curriculum in many

schools, an overfocus on the genre of writing that is being tested in NAPLAN at the expense of a wider writing program and a broader approach to language, literacy and literature teaching.

A Triage Approach to Literacy

When the new federal government assumed power in late 2013, they did not continue with the senate inquiry into the unintended consequences of NAPLAN, focusing attention instead on a review of the Australian National Curriculum. So now the unintended consequences of the NAPLAN regime have come off the agenda, even though the consequences of NAPLAN are the same – the blame games continues, the curriculum is skewed towards NAPLAN preparation, the impacts are unequally spread, students who do not achieve high NAPLAN scores are a threat to schools, and often moved on, or at least instructed to stay away for the duration of the tests.

Literacy Triage: Emergency Response to Code Red NAPLAN@MySchool

- ☑ Blame the workers under you (Prime Minister → Education Minister → Department → Regional Directors → Principals → Teachers)
- ☑ Reduce other activities so can focus on NAPLAN
- ☑ Keep 'poor-performing' students away
- ☑ 'Move on' 'poor-performing' students
- ☑ Teach to the test: Make NAPLAN the Curriculum

The Code Red fridge magnet above shows the steps that many schools are taking as a survival response to what is happening to them as a result of what is measured as being of importance and how that measurement is reported and used. We should stop publishing the NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website, recognising that this act is a misuse of the testing and results in poor school management and teaching practices. Schools and jurisdictions need to abandon the current literacy triage approach and to engage with long-term approaches to overcoming the educational disparities across our schooling system.



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