AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS (ACTA)

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

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Contents

Executive Summary 3

Introduction 4

Who are EAL/D Learners? 7

Is there evidence to suggest that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives? 8

Unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction 16

NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices 18

The impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website 21

Potential improvements to the program to improve student learning and assessment 22

International best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing 23

Other relevant matters 25

Conclusion 26

References 27

APPENDIX A: What is ACTA? 29

APPENDIX B: Who Are EAL/D Learners? 30

APPENDIX C: How Are EAL/D Learners Distinctive? 32

APPENDIX D: EAL/D Assessment Tools and Frameworks Developed for Use in Australian Schools 34

Executive Summary

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) submits that for learners of Standard Australian English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D):

1. NAPLAN tests are not meeting the stated objective of identifying and monitoring students' literacy and numeracy skills, and are not "a measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not" EAL/D learners "are meeting important educational outcomes" (http://www.nap.edu.au/). On the contrary, to the extent that the tests provide any data on these learners, it is distorted, inaccurate and unreliable. It does not provide a basis for developing appropriate pedagogy or progams for these learners.

2. Without national disaggregation of data on EAL/D learners' performance on NAPLAN tests, it is impossible to gain a systematic picture of how they are faring on these tests.

3. The tests are having unintended and deleterious effects on students, parents, teachers, school administrators, schools and school systems in regard to:
   - setting priorities and decision-making, especially in regard to EAL/D learning needs
   - reporting, accountability and evaluating the performance of schools with high populations of EAL/D learners
   - the emotional well-being of EAL/D learners, and their parents and teachers
   - resource allocation for EAL/D programs
   - public understandings of schooling, education and EAL/D learning.
4. The tests are narrowing and distorting curriculum, teaching and assessment practices. In particular, EAL/D learners are being subjected to inappropriate and misguided teaching and programs.
5. Publication of test results on the MYSCHOOL website is a fundamental contributor to many these deleterious effects.
6. International best practice does not support national standardised testing and publication of individual schools' results. On the one hand, the deleterious results experienced in Australia are well-documented overseas, including in regard to EAL/D learners. On the other hand, research and best practice indicates that quality teaching, including by specialist EAL/D teachers, is key to achieving high educational standards.
7. Careful independent research is needed into all aspects of the issues raised above.

Introduction

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). We wholeheartedly support the Senate's continuing interest in this matter.

We fully endorse the Government's commitment to improved educational outcomes for all students, as set out in the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEECDYA).

We recognise that educational programs, departments and jurisdictions require agreed standards to ensure delivery of quality education.

ACTA's specific mandate is to advance the interests of learners of English as an additional language or dialect (henceforth EAL/D learners), their mainstream and specialist teachers, and the educational systems within which they are located.

This submission therefore addresses the Inquiry's terms of reference as they relate particularly to EAL/D learners. It draws from our previous submission to the 2010 Senate Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing. This earlier submission (which is attached) was jointly from ACTA, the Australian Applied Linguistics Association (ALAA) and the Australian Linguistic Association (ALS).

The central propositions in that submission remain, notably our insistence on the need to:

1. identify EAL/D learners in NAPLAN reporting
2. analyse, develop and research potential and existing NAPLAN test items with respect to the linguistic, cultural and cognitive barriers they create for EAL/D learners, and hence their validity and reliability as literacy and numeracy tests for these learners
3. monitor EAL/D learners' progress using professionally recognised EAL/D assessment tools.

In the next section, we explain what we mean by '*EAL/D learners'*.

This current submission draws from further information and input from the most recent 2013 NAPLAN tests supplied by our members and their fellow teachers in a range of EAL/D contexts. We also refer to recent research into standardised testing and related issues.

Our submission is a further contribution to the advocacy that ACTA has consistently pursued with various authorities in regard to EAL/D learners. Of relevance to this submission (and the earlier 2010 one) is our letter on 17 August 2008 to the then Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister,

the Honourable Julia Gillard, concerning the discontinuance of earmarked funding for English as a Second Language programs for new arrivals. Her response included the following positive assurances:

> *The Government recognises the importance of focussing on outcomes measures under the new arrangements in order to gauge whether newly arrived students are receiving appropriate levels of intensive English support to participate successfully in mainstream schooling. The current definition for identifying students with a language background other than English is not suitable for identifying newly arrived students with language-related learning challenges and a more refined measure is needed.*
>
> *State education authorities also set the band scales for entry and exit to intensive English support in their respective jurisdiction. It will be important to consider whether variation in ESL assessment tools impact on newly arrived students' performance across states and whether there is a need for national standards in this field.*
>
> *We are working with education authorities around Australia to develop better measures that will help governments focus resources where they are needed, so that all students who need extra assistance receive it. This includes disaggregated reporting on ESL and an ongoing commitment to reporting.*

This commitment to disaggregated identification and assessment of new arrivals (or other and EAL/D learners) has yet to be acted upon.

Such a development is further authorised in Recommendation 15 of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs report, *Our Land, Our Languages* (2012), that:

> *the Minister for Education work through the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood to develop a National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) alternative assessment tool for all students learning English as an Additional Language/Dialect.*

From an EAL/D perspective, the NAPLAN as currently administered:

- is not achieving its objectives as stated on the NAPLAN website (http://www.nap.edu.au/)
- has low test validity and reliability for EAL/D learners because test questions often contain biased assumptions that test takers are Anglo-Australian urban dwellers who are fluent users of Standard Australian English as appropriate to their age and school level
- provides no national data about EAL/D learners' performance on NAPLAN tests
- has unintended and undesirable pedagogical, behavioural, systemic and other consequences that are both complex and well-documented
- does not encourage best practice in valid and reliable assessment and reporting, or in addressing the learning needs of EAL/D learners.

Our submission elaborates on these claims and includes some proposals for improvements in determining and monitoring the achievements and needs of EAL/D learners. It is organised under the headings of the Inquiry's terms of reference, viz.:

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;

d) the impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MYSCHOOL website;

e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment;

f) international best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing; and

g) other relevant matters.

Before addressing the Inquiry's terms of reference, we explain what we mean by learners of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D learners).

Who are EAL/D Learners?

Current NAPLAN reporting includes separately disaggregated information on:

i. the performance of students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), who are also commonly described as being from a language background other than English (LBOTE),

and

ii. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (ASTI).

EAL/D learners are found within both of these groups but they must be distinguished from them.

Students who are classified in educational surveys as NESB/LBOTE may be fluent in English – or even be monolingual English speakers. These students are classified as NESB because their parents/guardians are bi/multilingual and they live in a household where languages other than English are in frequent use. At the moment, we have no way of knowing how many of those classified as NESB/LBOTE are fluent English speakers, how many are learning English as an additional language or dialect and how many do not share the cultural knowledge assumed in Australian schools.

Similarly, students who are classified for NAPLAN purposes as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) may be highly proficient in Standard Australian English (SAE) and live in households and communities where SAE is the main language in use. For others classified as ATSI, English may be a foreign language – it is never used at home or in the community and is encountered only in school and through the media. Others may use a creole or very distinctive dialect of English. As with those classified as NESB/LBOTE, there is no way of knowing how many ATSI students are English language learners.

The key distinguishing feature of EAL/D learners is that they are *learning* Standard Australian English (SAE), usually in a school environment. As stated in the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA 2012) EAL/D Learning Progression:

> *EAL/D students are those whose first language is a language or dialect other than English and who require additional support to assist them to develop proficiency in English.*
>
> *EAL/D students come from diverse, multilingual backgrounds and may include:*
>
> - *overseas and Australian-born students whose first language is a language other than English*
> - *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose first language is an Indigenous language, including traditional languages, creoles and related varieties, or Aboriginal English. (p. 3)*

For an elaboration of this point, please see Appendices B and C.

Is there evidence to suggest that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives?

The NAPLAN website (http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/the-tests.html) states:

> *The National Assessment Program is the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes.*

And further:

> *NAPLAN is not a test of content. Instead, it tests skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time through the school curriculum. …*
>
> *NAPLAN tests identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for their learning, and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community. Students are assessed using common national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and Numeracy.*
>
> *NAPLAN tests broadly reflect aspects of literacy and numeracy common to the curriculum in each state or territory. The types of test formats and questions are chosen so that they are familiar to teachers and students across Australia.*

The NAPLAN tests do *not* measure whether EAL/D learners in Australian schools meet valued educational outcomes. They do *not* identify whether these learners have the literacy and numeracy skills requisite for learning.

There are two main reasons for this failure:

1. At the national level, the data yielded from NAPLAN testing is not disaggregated to identify EAL/D learners.
2. The test questions make fundamentally invalid assumptions about the conceptual, cultural and linguistic knowledge that EAL/D learners bring to the tests. Hence the test questions inconsistently test knowledge and skills that are extraneous to what they aim to test.

1. Disaggregation

As already explained, both EAL/D learners and fluent users of Standard Australian English can be found among those classified as NESB or ATSI. There is no national data on how many EAL/D learners are classified as NESB or ASTI, or conversely how many fluent users of Standard Australian English are within each group.

The categories used to identify and analyse student performance therefore do not permit any national picture of whether EAL/D learners are meeting *"important educational outcomes"* as described on the NAPLAN website.

Remedying this problem would not be difficult. It simply requires inclusion of an EAL/D identifier for those sitting NAPLAN tests, a procedure already in place for students from the NSW Department of Education and Communities.[1] All other States/Territories and systems have tools for identifying EAL/D learners at various stages of English development (see Appendix D). ACARA now has also a similar tool (ACARA, 2011), which was developed by EAL/D experts in consultation with other EAL/D experts from every State/Territory. It would very easy to use either the ACARA tool or existing State/Territory tools to identify those sitting NAPLAN tests and to disaggregate test performance data accordingly.

A further step would be to use an EAL/D-specific assessment tool to monitor the progress of EAL/D learners nationally and to identify those who require support.

> Until EAL/D learners sitting NAPLAN tests are identified nationally, it is impossible to measure the extent to which these *"young Australians are meeting important educational goals".*

2. Validity and Reliability of NAPLAN Tests for EAL/D Learners

NAPLAN test questions rest on the fundamentally false assumptions that those taking these tests:

i. are speakers of Standard Australian English as a first language or mother tongue

and/or

ii. have been raised within Anglo-Australian culture.

That is, and as will be shown in the following, the tests assume that:

- students' proficiency in English relates to their maturity and their grade level in Australian schools
- students' development in English follows an English-as-a-first-language pathway
- students have a knowledge base related to "*the curriculum in each state or territory"* (as stated on the NAPLAN website)
- students are urbanised

and sometimes that:

- students are from middle class Anglo-Australian backgrounds.

These assumptions do not hold with any consistency for learners of English as an additional language or dialect. Consequently, test items frequently do not test what they aim to test.

[1] The Department of Education and Community identifies students sitting NAPLAN tests according to three broad phases in English language learning.

Rather:

i. they often test skills that are irrelevant to the test item; and

ii. they frequently do not reveal the literacy and numeracy skills that EAL/D learners have or lack.

The false contextual and linguistic assumptions in NAPLAN test instruments have been well-documented for Indigenous EAL/D learners (Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011). Equally false assumptions regarding migrant/refugee learners are repeatedly evident in the same and other test items. The tests cannot therefore be seen as valid and reliable measures of EAL/D learners' literacy and numeracy.

In the remainder of this section, we elaborate on these claims.

For EAL/D learners who are below the highest level (*Consolidating*) on the ACARA Learning Progression, NAPLAN tests are largely unsuitable.[2] On the one hand, EAL/D learners at lower levels may have literacy and numeracy skills in their first language (or another language) that are on a par with or better than their English mother tongue age peers. However, the English in the tests is simply too difficult for these learners to demonstrate their literacy and numeracy skills to any reasonable extent.[3] On the other hand, other EAL/D learners with minimal/no previous schooling may have extensive learning needs in literacy and numeracy. NAPLAN tests cannot reliably distinguish between these radically different types of EAL/D learners or indicate their very different learning needs.

> Until EAL/D learners reach the ACARA *Consolidating* level (or State/Territory equivalent), their numeracy and literacy should be measured on EAL/D-specific assessment tools.

Our members report that more appropriate methods exist to test EAL/D learners, especially younger learners and those at lower English proficiency levels. Assessment tools can be designed to take place in meaningful contexts, based around familiar classroom activities. Tasks can include hands-on activities with familiar classroom materials such as pictures and realia. Learners can often work one-to-one with either their teacher or a test administrator, who records their responses according to pre-set criteria that are based on what is known about EAL/D learning pathways. These records can focus on learners' strategies in tackling tasks as well as final products. There is nothing to prevent

[2] The ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression describes English language development in four stages: *Beginning*, *Emerging*, *Developing* and *Consolidating*.
[3] To say that these students lack literacy and numeracy skills is analogous to saying that a well-educated speaker of English as a mother tongue is illiterate or innumerate because he/she cannot pass a test in another language.

this kind of assessment being aligned with with State and Territory curricula or, for that matter, with NAPLAN benchmarks.[4]

Good EAL/D teaching follows similar principles to those just outlined. Good teachers activate students' prior knowledge and use concrete and hands-on experiences to support English learning. In contrast, NAPLAN tests require students to engage with multiple texts out of context, which is especially difficult and stressful for EAL/D learners. In itself, this stress can undermine test validity and reliability.

Even for EAL/D learners at the *Consolidating* stage, NAPLAN test questions frequently pose irrelevant barriers to these learners in demonstrating their literacy and numeracy. These barriers can be created by:

- the choice of texts, prompts and how questions are worded
- a lack of context and support for understanding what is required by a test item, especially in multiple-choice format, which frequently oversimplifies possible answers to a question
- the marking system in multiple choice questions (where only one answer is correct), which rules out valid interpretations by some EAL/D students when their cultural assumptions lead them to construe the context differently from the assumptions underpinning the correct answer.

Example 1

In this year's Writing tests, students tested at all year levels (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) were asked to write about a *"hero"* they *"admired"*. The question was said to aim at testing students' ability to write "persuasive" texts.

The prompt examples given from the Australian Defence Force held little meaning for some students and may also have offended others.

Knowing what constitutes an admired hero is a culturally specific and culturally relative concept. One of our members' students wrote about Spiderman. Another wrote about why he liked his teacher, the main reason being that the teacher supported students in using computers. It is unclear whether these descriptions, no matter how well-written, were regarded by test markers as acceptable descriptions of heroes.

Further, members have commented that the topic could equally well have prompted writing that did not use language recognised as "persuasive", for example, a narrative about a hero's exploits. The

[4] For a detailed report on this approach to assessment, see Purdie et al (2011).

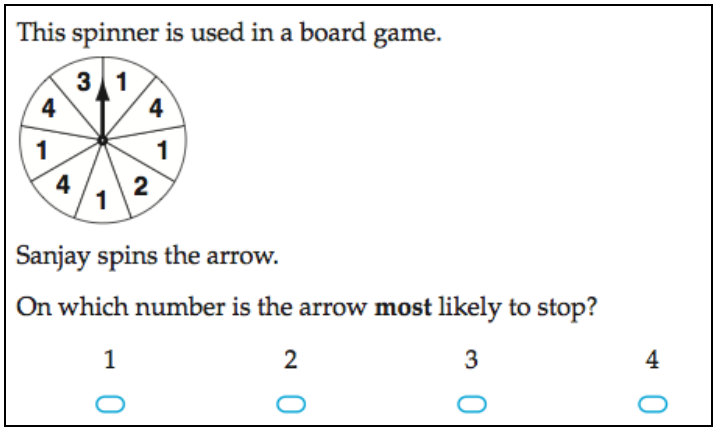
topic was also a departure from typical persuasive writing topics (for example, whether school uniforms should be required or homework is useful).

Leaving aside the question (which we find problematic) of the appropriateness of the specific aim of testing writing considered to be "persuasive", and evaluating texts in regard to particular rhetorical markers, the cultural and linguistic specificity of this writing test did not permit at least some EAL/D learners to demonstrate their actual writing abilities. That is, it was not a valid or reliable measure of EAL/D learners' writing skills.

Finally, persuasive writing is an advanced skill. The English required is complex and comes late in EAL/D students' acquisition of the language. Learners at *Consolidating* stage in the ACARA framework find persuasive writing demanding. It is not only unreasonable but dysfunctional to expect learners in earlier stages to produce this kind of writing. As will be elaborated below in regard to NAPLAN's impact on pedagogical practice, the "backwash" from the test's focus on persuasive genres gives rise to teaching that may be ineffective (or even detrimental) in addressing EAL/D learners' learning needs.

Example 2[5]

A Year 5 example test item for Numeracy (ACARA, 2012) is as follows:



Contextual and cultural barriers that would prevent many students in remote Aboriginal communities, or those from some migrant/refugee communities, from understanding this question will occur if:

- they are unfamiliar with board games
- they do not recognise what the *'spinner'* is or does.

[5] The examples that follow are from NAPLAN practice tests. It is illegal to copy or retain test papers. Hence it is impossible to offer detailed analysis of actual test items.

The question assumes the contextual knowledge that the spinner is attached at the centre of the board and will rotate several times before its pointed end comes to rest on a number. (The tokenistic use of the non-Anglo name 'Sanjay' does nothing to address these fundamental cultural/conceptual problems.)

The linguistic barriers to for many EAL/D learners understanding this question are:

- key vocabulary items in the text (*board*, *spinner*, *arrow*)
- the complex syntax of the question (relative clause in question form: *on which number* …; superlative combined with an adverb: *most likely*)
- the passive form of the verb in the opening statement (*is used*), which is not acquired early in EAL/D development.

All this conceptual, cultural and linguistic knowledge is *completely irrelevant* to the skills that the problem is purportedly testing, namely the student's ability to estimate chance by counting the numbers of 1s, 2s, 3s and 4s on the board.

Example 3[6]

The stimulus in a Year 3 Reading example test item is a flyer advertising a movie. The first three lines are:

> *Scott Cinema presents*
> *Lucy's Holiday*
> *A new movie directed by Lars Hoylen*

The flyer is set out according to various sub-headings which provide information on the movie's rating (*"G-Rated – recommended for all ages"*), *"running time"*, *"prices"* and *"session times".* It includes a large image of a very young white girl chasing after a white man flying a kite, and a smaller image of theatre tickets. Multiple choice questions require test takers to identify the director of the movie, distinguish between running time and session times, determine what the movie rating means, work out how many times the movie is being shown on Mondays, and decide what genre the flyer is (an advertisement, timetable, report or list). These questions test students' ability to extract information in relation to sub-headings and the genre labels widely taught in Australian schools.

The test item assumes students' familiarity with family holidays and movie-going. Culturally and linguistically, it would be completely alien to many refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote communities.[7]

[6] The full text of Examples 3 and 4 are attached to this submission.

In any case, we suggest that there are higher priorities in testing literacy than determining whether these kinds of Year 3 EAL/D learners (and, in fact, any EAL/D learners) can extract information from a tabular format.

Example 4

The stimulus in the item following Example 3 above in the same Year 3 example reading test is a short text about a paper boy called Splinter who angered a home owner (Mr Drake) by never placing the newspaper in the letter-box to the owner's satisfaction. Its urban (and dated) cultural assumptions would again be alien to many migrant/refugee and Indigenous EAL/D learners. It is assumed that students recognise that *"the Gazette"* is the name of the newspaper, know the linguistically complex idioms *"What sort of a paper boy do you call yourself?"*, *"I've got a good mind to …"*, *"Stuff and nonsense"*, *"modern day children"* and that the paperboy has the highly unusual name "*Splinter"*.

The test questions require the student to work out who the characters in the story are, recognise that the following syntactically complex phrases are more or less synonyms all referring to how the newspaper was placed in the letterbox: *"jutting out the back of"*, *"poking out the front*", *"not in line"*, *"sticking out one side or the other"*, and *"folded to fit any space"*, and finally determine Mr Drake's view of the cause of the problem. It is a test is of the student's ability to read a text closely, picture the different options for putting a newspaper in a certain kind of letterbox, and follow the twists and turns in spoken dialogue (indicated by inverted commas) between the two characters in a story.

A Year 3 EAL/D learner may well be able to read a text in their dominant language closely, decipher and use inverted commas, and follow an argument between characters about something culturally familiar. However, the vocabulary, idioms, syntax and cultural assumptions in this question make it impossible to determine whether or not English language learners with different cultural understandings have these skills.

These problems are further compounded by their combination in one test item, thereby creating massive cultural and linguistic overload. One can imagine how such overload would be demoralising in itself for any 7 or 8 year old EAL/D learner and hence affect his/her expectations of succeeding in actual NAPLAN tests.

Our members report that the multiple barriers that EAL/D learners encounter in test questions lead to high levels of guessing. One member described how a school was asked why three students had performed above benchmark. When the students' answers were investigated, it was found that they

[7] The item is also likely to be at best culturally insensitive to those who cannot afford either movies or holidays, and would be offensive to those from religious backgrounds that forbid attendance at movies.

had merely guessed correctly. The extent to which this phenomenon specifically undermines test reliability for EAL/D learners would need to be researched.

Currently, NAPLAN test items consistently make cultural and linguistic assumptions that prevent them from testing what they aim to test. For NAPLAN test items to validly and reliably test EAL/D learners at any level in their English language development, careful analysis, research and trialling of specific items with EAL/D learners is essential.

Unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction

> *"A Year 3 EAL/D student who lacked test taking experience, hid under a table and cried, when confronted with the formal conditions of taking the test."*
>
> EAL/D Teacher, Western Australia

The pressure for improved NAPLAN results *"constitutes a high-stakes environment for teachers, schools and students, resulting in potentially problematic and contested responses on the part of those involved"* (Hardy, 2013:3). NAPLAN has had unintended systemic, operational, socio-emotional and behavioural consequences for all involved in and affected by educational provision in Australian schools.

Probably the most significant unintended effects have been on curriculum, teaching and learning practices, which we cover in the next section. Leaving these aside for the moment, we summarise below other unintended consequences of standardised testing that our members have reported from around the country.

- Schools are gaming the system, for example, by encouraging students likely to underperform to stay at home on test days and thereby boosting school's apparent performance.
- Some school systems may also be gaming the system by focussing resources on those schools where progress in NAPLAN tests is easier to demonstrate, rather than schools where this is difficult.
- Schools are facing unreasonable threats of loss of funding if they fail to demonstrate improved NAPLAN scores.
- Parents are removing their children from schools with high EAL/D numbers, undermining the school's resource base and leaving it to be ghettoized.
- Demonstrating school improvement through performance on NAPLAN tests has reduced the emphasis on community partnerships, and the development of strategies to encourage increased student attendance, family/carer involvement and improved social and emotional outcomes.
- Teachers are being evaluated on the basis of their learners' NAPLAN scores. It is well recognised that such evaluations are grossly misplaced (Jensen and Reichl, 2012). The flow-on

effects cannot be under-estimated in regard to teacher motivation to take on students who face major learning challenges.

- Teachers lack support in using assessment and reporting tools that are more suitable for EAL/D learners, not least the new ACARA EAL/D Language Learning Progression.

- Many EAL/D students are experiencing very high levels of test anxiety. They might come from cultures where performance on tests has huge consequences for individuals. They and their parents believe that they must succeed at any cost. High levels of parental pressure on students from these cultures, compounded by poor performance due to linguistic barriers, lead to a distorted and negative view of self and potential mental and physical health problems.

- Younger learners and older learners with minimal/limited schooling find NAPLAN tests particularly confronting and demoralising because, as described in the previous section, the decontextualized nature of the test items are quite alien to their everyday pedagogical experiences.

- To combat test anxiety, schools devote varying amounts of time to familiarising students with NAPLAN test items under test conditions. This diversion from other teaching and learning is disruptive and time-consuming. It can also increase rather than lessen test anxiety. These problems are compounded in primary school mixed-Year classes because not all students will sit NAPLAN tests. For EAL/D learners, whose learning needs are particularly urgent, these classes can be quite counter-productive.

- A corollary of the high value placed on NAPLAN results is the devaluation of EAL/D learners' command of literacy and numeracy in other languages and varieties of English. The flow-on effects include undermining learners' sense of self-worth (heightened by poor performance on the NAPLAN tests) and learners and their families questioning the value of their home languages and cultures.

- Opportunistic paraprofessionals and tutors are using NAPLAN to bolster their clientele. Tutoring is not always complementary to the student's classroom program. Parents are paying extra fees that many can least afford.

NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices

> *"My student can talk about it [the test stimulus] fluently, but he can't write it down. Not only is it in another language, but he's hardly been in school and he is scared of writing."*

International research has extensively documented the impact of large-scale, high stakes testing on teaching and learning. Rather than promoting educational excellence, it has a restricting effect on pedagogy and practice (see, for example, Hursh, 2008; Horn 2003). High stakes testing causes schools to teach to the test, reducing instructional time on non-test subjects such as Art and Science (Zhao, 2009).

Au's (2007) meta-analysis of research into high stakes testing found that these tests affect curriculum in three main ways:

1. **Content Control:** The majority of research found a narrowing of curriculum (both subject areas and content) to meet testing needs.
2. **Formal Control:** A significant number of studies suggested that knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented in high-stakes test situations to allow for test-size pieces of knowledge.
3. **Pedagogical Control:** High stakes testing encourages teacher-centred instruction to allow for transmission of test-related knowledge.

In their OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Australia, Santiago et al. (2011) noted that:

> *NAPLAN addresses a … narrow range of learning goals relative to what parent, teacher, principal and business representatives with whom we spoke want for students… it is a potential concern if the system were to overemphasise NAPLAN results" (pp. 147 – 148).*

Although generally positive, they cautioned that:

> *NAPLAN is given annually and school reporting makes it a highly visible assessment that is likely to send a strong signal to administrators, teachers and students about what is most important for teaching and learning. The risk is that the emphasis on NAPLAN may 'narrow' teacher-based assessment.* (p. 148).

Evidence at the grass roots level bears out this caution. For individuals, it appears that the focus on NAPLAN tests is undervaluing and underdeveloping other abilities in students (Harris, Smith and Harris, 2011). Our members report that the emphasis on NAPLAN has resulted in other forms of knowledge (such as practical ability and Indigenous understandings of the weather and environment) being viewed as less important and therefore less desirable. These effects will be profound, long-lasting and difficult to reverse.

We speculate that the growing impact of NAPLAN is not unconnected to the concurrent decline in Australian students' performance against international measures. Clearly, NAPLAN testing has not improved our international rankings.

Specifically in regard to EAL/D learners, to the extent that teaching is directed to preparing them for NAPLAN tests and/or based on NAPLAN results, this teaching is distorted, narrowed and not directed to what these learners actually need. Pressured teaching to the test also reduces opportunities for the practice necessary to consolidate learners' fluency in English and for extending their English across a wide range of social and academic contexts.

Further, when NAPLAN results indicate *literacy* problems rather than *English language* problems, inappropriately directed programs are resourced.

Teaching programs have become narrowly focused on reading and writing skills, ignoring the need for EAL/D learners to develop the fundamental listening and speaking skills that underpin learning a new language. Oral proficiency is the precursor to reading and writing, and is essential for acquisition of the additional language (Cummins, Mirza, & Stille, 2012; Gibbons, 1993).

Research into second language learning has consistently demonstrated that some key aspects of languages are learned in relatively fixed sequences. Effective teaching targets elements of the language that are ready to be learned and builds on what has already been established. To teach elements of the language before someone is ready to learn them is to waste valuable teaching and learning time and frustrate the learner.

Term 1 of English classes in NAPLAN testing years (and every year for those students in multi-level primary classrooms, probably in all remote schools) are commonly devoted to intensive teaching of "persuasive" writing, described in a previous section. This genre is typically acquired late in language learning development. It requires understanding and use of particular content knowledge and very complex syntax, for example cohesive and rhetorical conjunctions, compare/contrast top-end structures, emotive language, modal verbs and adverbs, and an array of persuasive devices. The NAPLAN marking criteria related to these texts are at the level of students in the fourth *Consolidating Stage* of ACARA's Language Learning Progression.

For EAL/D students in the *Beginning*, *Emerging* and *Developing* stages, the emphasis on "persuasive" writing in Term 1 is not directed to their learning requirements. This emphasis also means that other genres, such as narratives, report writing, explanations and procedures, are neglected. This test-directed focus is undesirable for all students but is especially problematic for EAL/D learners, who need to develop their English across all subject areas.

Overall, for EAL/D learners in particular, the pressures induced by NAPLAN testing have:

- restricted the teaching of oral English, which is an essential foundation for EAL/D literacy
- led to literacy teaching and programs that are inappropriate for EAL/D learners
- focussed teaching on content and skills that do not accord with what learners are able to learn.

The impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website

The publication of NAPLAN results on the My School website has greatly intensified all the effects already described. It is having wide-spread detrimental effects on:

- parental choice of schools
- school resourcing
- system, school and teacher priorities in regard to curriculum and teaching
- evaluation of school and teacher effectiveness
- student, teacher and administrator stress.

Publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website has been critiqued by researchers for perpetuating a reductionist view of education (Hardy and Boyle, 2011). The results are open to misinterpretation and unjustified extrapolations (Wu, 2011). Evidence exists that not only the general public but also most principals and teachers fail to interpret NAPLAN correctly (Pierce and Chick, 2011).

> The publication of NAPLAN results inevitably positions EAL/D learners as failures who cannot but undermine a school's profile in the public domain. Because EAL/D learners are not disaggregated and because test bias discriminates against these learners, publication of NAPLAN results provides no avenue for recognising EAL/D learners' actual knowledge, skills and achievements and their teachers' and school's contribution to these achievements.

Potential improvements to the program to improve student learning and assessment

Based on our arguments and evidence above, and what we know of best practice, we propose that:

- NAPLAN results should not be published by ACARA or schools.
- NAPLAN results should be available to parents/guardians, the child's school, education systems (state and nation), and used as a basis for monitoring and improving educational outcomes.
- A soundly based, professionally acceptable EAL/D assessment construct should be recognised at the national level. The recently developed ACARA Language Learning progression is an obvious candidate for trialling and possible further development.
- LBOTE and EAL/D data should be disaggregated nationally. Until this is done, the learning needs and progress of EAL/D students cannot be tracked.
- Online adaptive testing should be developed and trialled. This technology has advantages in terms of administration and potential cost savings. Adaptive features could be explored that allow the test to be customised for EAL/D learners. For example, audio options could allow test items to be heard as well as read; they could also provide extra context; hyperlinks could allow for glossaries; video could make for better comprehension (see the board game example above); oral answers might be possible; and timing adjustments might allow for the extra processing time that some EAL/D learners need.
- Students should receive a copy of their own work on tests. If learning is to be reflective and meaningful, students should have the opportunity to reflect and improve upon work done under test conditions. Likewise, teachers would benefit from having copies of their students' work on tests to inform their teaching and to allow them to provide feedback to test authorities.
- The time allowed for students to complete test papers should be researched and reviewed. Some evidence exists that even mainstream students have insufficient time to complete the numeracy tests (Carter, 2012). This problem is exacerbated for EAL/D learners working in a language in which they lack fluency. If tests were delivered online, students could take them in less exhausting stages.
- Research and trialling should be undertaken regarding various accommodations that can be made for EAL/D learners (see, for example, Jorgensen, 2010; Morley, 2011).

International best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing

Proposals for wide-spread standardised testing often occur in the context of aspirations for high academic standards, nation building and global economic standing, such as the following:

> *In the 21st century Australia's capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation.* (MCEECDYA, 2008: 3)

In our discussion above, we have included reference to international research as relevant to particular issues. Here we consider more general matters.

In a report for the World Bank on the results of national assessment of educational achievement, it was recognised that assessment is a "political act reflecting the power, ideologies, and interests of social actors" (Kellaghan et al., 2009:24). It follows that standardised testing should be carefully developed and deployed. The report recommends that "test instruments should provide information about student achievements (a) that is accurate and comprehensive, (b) that measures a range of achievements, (c) that provides guidance for remedial action, and (d) that is sensitive to instructional change." (ibid: 25). It is also noted that assessment data will be enhanced if background information on students' experience is collected. Many countries collect supplementary information about students in order to understand other factors that might influence test performance, including their experiences, their home and community lives and circumstances.

In Uruguay, data on the achievements of all students (including the most underprivileged) are "intended primarily for consumption within the education community" (Benveniste, 2002, cited in Kellaghan et al. 2009:5). Data on school performance is not published. The influence of student background on performance is given "due consideration."

Some countries, such as Finland and Wales, have abandoned national testing and have subsequently observed improved teaching and learning (Collins et al., 2010). Finland, which dropped national testing in the 1980s and topped international educational rankings from 2001 to 2008, does not use standardised testing. Instead, it invests in preparing teachers and trusts in their ability to work professionally. Teachers are highly regarded by the wider society.

Other education authorities, for example Hong Kong, still use national testing. But the importance of the tests as perceived by the public has been mitigated by other best practice such as student portfolios and classroom-based assessment (Davison and Hamp-Lyons, 2010).

TESOL Inc, which represents 103 international TESOL associations, has developed an important position statement on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, whose provisions clearly influenced developments in Australia. As with NAPLAN tests, the Act required that English language learners be assessed using the same instruments as fully-proficient standard English speakers. Performance standards are based on sample populations that either contain no English language learners or where no specific data is collected about those learners. TESOL Inc proposes that:

> *any standardized test used to assess the academic achievement of English language learners should provide evidence that the comparison group included English language learners and that these learners were selected and represented in such a way as to permit valid and reliable inferences to be made about their performance on the test. If a test of academic achievement in a state's accountability system does not meet this requirement, TESOL recommends that local authorities, in consultation with ESL-trained educators, be permitted to modify these tests, use alternatives to them, or utilize multiple instruments as a way of providing confirmatory evidence*. (TESOL, 2005).

The focus on outcome and students spending large amounts of time without acquiring actual knowledge or skills has been formally recognised as problematic by UNESCO at the World Conference on *Education for All* held in Thailand, in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990) and again in the Dakar *Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2000).

Other relevant matters

With respect to NAPLAN data at the system level, ACTA does not have the human or material resources to undertake systematic research to document the issues our members have raised. The following questions require careful and systematic investigation:

1. How are NAPLAN testing and results impacting upon resources specifically devoted to assisting EAL/D learners?
2. How are teachers being assisted to mine NAPLAN data for information on EAL/D learners and learning?
3. Does the data adequately identify the language challenges that are specific to EALD learners?
4. To what extent is test literacy an issue for EAL/D leaners with limited schooling, younger learners and those in remote areas?
5. To what extent are EAL/D learners prevented from demonstrating their literacy and numeracy skills by the English used in NAPLAN tests?

Conclusion

It has long been recognised at every level that Australian education operates in a multilingual and multicultural context (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). However, our assessment and reporting systems are lagging well behind. Learners of English as an additional language or dialect – and their learning needs, abilities and achievements – are not being acknowledged. NAPLAN is undermining appropriate teaching and resourcing for these learners. Professional and public understandings of what constitutes good schooling are being distorted.

The goals of the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* will not be realised while this situation persists.

From ACTA's particular perspective, these problems will only be resolved when EAL/D learners and learning are acknowledged as distinctive, with the consequences for assessment and reporting that we have indicated in this submission.

As ACTA has continually indicated in all its submissions to government and other authorities, we would be pleased to work constructively with such authorities to advance the legitimate interests of the learners and teachers to whom our mission is directed.

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APPENDIX A:

What is ACTA?

The **Australian Council of TESOL Associations** (ACTA) is the national coordinating body of state and territory professional associations for the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Our membership comes from all educational sectors: pre-schools; schools; adult, community, TAFE and other VET settings; consultancy services in state and territory Education Departments and the Independent and Catholic sectors; and university teacher education departments. Our objectives are to:

- ensure access to English language instruction for speakers of other languages and dialects (Indigenous, refugee and migrant background, and international students)
- encourage implementation and delivery of quality professional programs at all levels, and
- promote study, research and development of TESOL at state, national and international levels.

APPENDIX B:

Who Are EAL/D Learners?

The 2011 ACARA document English as an Additional Language or Dialect Teacher Resource: Overview and EAL/D Learning Progression was developed by EAL/D experts in intensive consultation with an ACARA working party comprised of other EAL/D experts from all States/Territories and members of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) and the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA). The document represents the best efforts of those most expert in EAL/D pedagogy and assessment, including some who played important roles in developing the other EAL/D assessment and curriculum frameworks listed in Appendix D. Nevertheless, it remains a working document that will, no doubt, be open to refinement in the light of its use and further research and analysis.

Below we cite in full the section entitled "Who are EAL/D students?" (pp. 3-4) as the best available description of its kind.

> EAL/D students are those whose first language is a language or dialect other than English and who require additional support to assist them to develop proficiency in English.
>
> EAL/D students come from diverse, multilingual backgrounds and may include:
>
> - overseas and Australian-born students whose first language is a language other than English
> - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose first language is an Indigenous language, including traditional languages, creoles and related varieties, or Aboriginal English.
>
> EAL/D students:
>
> - have diverse educational backgrounds. They may have:
>   - schooling equivalent to their age peers in Australia
>   - limited or no previous education
>   - little or no literacy experience in their first language (or in any language)
>   - excellent literacy skills in their first language (or another language)
>   - learned English as a foreign language and have some exposure to written English, but need to develop oral English.
> - already speak one or more languages or dialects other than English. This language knowledge is an advantage when learning an additional language and, along with their life experiences and diverse cultural knowledge, provides learners with

resources upon which to build their English language, literacy and educational development

- may have good academic language skills, but struggle with the social registers of English.
- are generally placed in Australian schools at the year level appropriate for their age. Their cognitive development and life experiences may not correlate with their English language proficiency. For example, a student entering Year 8 at an early phase of English language development may already have covered the learning area content for this year level in Mathematics in previous schooling but may not have sufficient English proficiency to understand the teacher's explanation of it or to demonstrate this previously acquired knowledge.

EAL/D students:

- may live in remote, rural or metropolitan Australia
- may live in advantaged or disadvantaged socioeconomic situations
- may have experienced severe emotional or physical trauma that will affect their learning.

Considerations for EAL/D students with limited schooling

Students with limited schooling are those students who, for a variety of reasons, have been unable to access ongoing and continuous schooling. There is a wide range of proficiency within this group of EAL/D students. They may:

- require high levels of support socially, emotionally and culturally as their social and cultural expectations may vary greatly, for example. accepted interaction between teachers and students, or they may have experienced situations of torture and or trauma
- be unfamiliar with accepted classroom routines and the organisational aspects of learning, such as deadlines, dates and divisions of time
- benefit greatly from bilingual support where available
- take more time than other EAL/D students to understand the concepts and language required in the classroom and to complete classroom tasks
- be unfamiliar with the purposes for reading and writing, and rely heavily on visual cues
- be unfamiliar with some digital technologies or subject-specific equipment commonly used in Australian classrooms.

APPENDIX C:

How Are EAL/D Learners Distinctive?

The pathway in learning another language or significantly different variety/dialect of a language is not the same as the pathway for those who have been learning that language or variety from infancy. It follows that, if assessment is to provide useful and effective information on EAL/D learners' achievements, progress and learning needs, it should map their progress along their actual learning pathways.

In regard to the variety of English that constitutes the required norm in Australian schools, EAL/D learners differ – in different ways – from English mother tongue speakers and from each other. For example:

- EAL/D learners (from Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds) will have age-appropriate oral skills in another language/variety but may not speak or (fully) understand Standard Australian English – hence many need assistance in building oral English skills as a foundation for learning literacy in English
- migrant and refugee EAL/D learners may enter Australian schools at any age – hence the age-related English and educational norms for Australian-born, mother tongue English speakers will not apply to many of these learners
- EAL/D learners may or may not have advanced literacy skills in a language other than English but assessments in English will not reflect/reveal their literacy and numeracy skills in other languages
- EAL/D learners' cultural and social understandings cannot be assumed to be the same as those of English mother tongue speakers – hence the cultural and social assumptions embedded in assessments may be quite misplaced.

EAL/D learners face the complex task of simultaneously learning Standard Australian English as a new language or variety, coming to grips with a different culture, acquiring English literacy, and gaining school-specific knowledge.

In regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners, a recent report (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2006) stated that:

> *In the 2001 Census, about one in eight Indigenous Australians (12 percent) reported that they spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home. The majority (about 80*

percent) reported that they spoke English. However, the Census does not differentiate between standard Australian English and Aboriginal English. Kaldor and Malcolm ('The language of school and the language of the Western Australian Aboriginal schoolchild – Implications for education', Aborigines of the West: Their Past and Their Present, p. 411) suggest that 'Aboriginal children's speech today is probably best seen as a post- creole continuum,' and Harkins ('Structure and Meaning in Australian Aboriginal English', Asian Englishes: an international journal of the sociolinguistics of English in Asia/Pacific, 2000, 3 (2): 60) asserts that 'Australian Aboriginal English ... is now the primary language of internal and wider communication for the majority of Australian Aboriginal people.' The literature also reveals that standard Australian English spoken by Indigenous students frequently shows evidence of conceptual features that are not shared with non-Indigenous speakers. Aboriginal English shows itself at the level of conceptualization, even when it is not so apparent at the level of linguistic form. (See, for example, the extensive body of work by Ian G. Malcolm, as well as recent work by F. Sharifian, 'Cultural conceptualisations in English words: A study of Aboriginal children in Perth'). (p. 33)

APPENDIX D:

EAL/D Assessment Tools and Frameworks Developed for Use in Australian Schools

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