

Submission to the Senate inquiry on: The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy.

As a teacher of some 30 years of experience, I have seen how the many formats of NAPLAN have influenced schools and the curriculum the school delivers. This has become more and more apparent since the results of such testing have been published on the My Schools website. In the school that in which I teach, and many others like it, students with low socio-economic backgrounds and students who have EAL backgrounds are being disadvantaged by the choice of testing instrument.

Where in the past parents were able to compare their child to the rest of those students tested, now the cohort as a whole is compared to other schools. The website does not show the wellbeing of the students in the school, the engagement of the students, nor does it take into account the varied backgrounds of the students. As a teacher who teaches mainly in low socio economic areas within the Secondary field, I believe that NAPLAN, in fact, discriminates against our students, as they are unable to access much of the written material to show their true capabilities.

The recent AEDI (Australian Early Development Index) states that the Community in which our students come from, Hume, has 14.3% of the students surveyed vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains and 27.2% of the students vulnerable on one of the AEI domains. This indicates that over a quarter of the students within our catchment area are not at the required standard as a five year old. These students then come to school and experience failure immediately, as they are unable to access the curriculum as expected of them. Without serious intervention for one in four students their ability to “catch up” to their peers will not be possible. Extrapolate that to the students who then sit the NAPLAN and are unable to access the information in the documents. One in four of our students cannot read at their peer level and thus are unable to show their ability within the exam. Furthermore, as this exam is a group test, the ability to assess these outliers accurately is non-existent.

Within our College, we have a high proportion of EAL students. These students are also at a disadvantage as their first language is not English. While they are able to read, the texts that the NAPLAN offers are not accessible to them as the language is extremely difficult and very culturally specific. In this year’s NAPLAN, there was an article in the Year 7 reading section on Skippy the bush kangaroo. Many of our students’ experiences of the native Australian wildlife are through television and, unless they have visited the zoo, have not seen a kangaroo in real life. The actual programme would not be in most of our student’s vernacular as their parents were born overseas and would not have grown up with the show. Thus, it would never have been discussed as it may have for students whose parents grew up in Australia during that era. Consequently, our students are already disadvantaged, as they do not have the cultural linguistics necessary to access the text.

NAPLAN, I believe, works on a deficit model. It does not assess how well the individual can do something but rather it assesses your ability to complete a given task compared to others. This would be fine if all students being assessed were equal in their experiences, their ability to access the information and their English language development. When these things are not equal results show us what we know – that students from EAL backgrounds and low socio economic areas perform poorly against their peers who are from middle to high socio economic areas and non-EAL backgrounds. Unfortunately, this is not translated well on the My School website and the public judges the schools based on the single results displayed.

“A prime difference in children’s early experience is in their exposure to language, which is fundamental in literacy development and indeed in all areas of thinking and learning. On average, children growing up in low-income families have dramatically less rich experiences with language in their homes than do middleclass children: they hear far fewer words and are engaged in fewer extended conversations. By 36 months of age, substantial socioeconomic disparities already exist in vocabulary knowledge, to name one area.”

<http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/position%20statement%20Web.pdf>

As this statement shows, children do not come to school having the same equal experiences from home. NAPLAN does not take this into consideration nor that many students in our area have been unable to access intervention of any type as there are so many students who need intervention and not enough resources to go around.

NAPLAN, in my view, does not allow our students to be accurately assessed as to their ability. Instead, it is hindering them, as they need to first understand the language within the text, the cultural nuances and then determine what the question is asking. The objectives of NAPLAN need to be re-established. If, for example, it is to assess how well a student can comprehend what is read then the texts need to be inclusive for all students so that students can show what they can do, not what they are unable to do because they do not have the cultural and language understanding required.