

How do secondary school English teachers score NAPLAN?

A snapshot of English teachers' views

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Introduction

“... we should not forget that if we try to control education completely, we turn it into a machinery in which what matters educationally – such as freedom and independence of the student – is ultimately squeezed out” (Biesta, 2017, p. 317).

The purpose of this paper is to report on a strand of a research project which sought to gather the views of secondary school English teachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, on a range of matters relating to their working lives. Given their significant role in preparing students for external testing programs, we were particularly interested in English teachers' views on the Australia-wide standardised system of testing – the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) – and the newly-instituted government policy of

requiring all Year 9 students to meet a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy in order to 'pre-qualify' for entry to the HSC¹. In this paper, we report on English teachers' perspectives on NAPLAN, including their judgements about the utility and validity of this external test as an instrument to determine a student's access to the HSC². Given the paucity of teachers' voices and perspectives in public discourses and debates about NAPLAN, one significant aim of this study has been the collation and direct representation of English teachers' views.

Background and Context

In Australia, as in many countries around the world, the educational landscape of the past decade has been characterised by an intensification of standards-driven policy and reform fuelled by the ideology and "technology of performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Performativity agendas, pursued by successive Australian federal and state governments, have manifested most visibly in the increased emphasis on national standardised testing programs; prescribed curricula; and a classification of professional teaching standards (AITSL, 2011). These agendas have relied on a "hyper-narrative" (Kennedy, 2014, p. 691) based on politico-media discourses that assume an unproblematic nexus between higher levels of student performance in standardised tests, teacher quality, and educational improvement. Under this scheme, student achievement in standardised tests functions as a proxy for teacher quality (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) and presumes a "strong and secure connection between quantifiable educational 'inputs'

¹ This requirement was withdrawn by the NSW Minister for Education following widespread controversy on 22 February 2018.

² This paper is limited to investigating teacher views on the literacy component of NAPLAN, rather than the numeracy component.

and measurable educational 'outcomes'" (Biesta, 2014, p. 354). Yet, as Biesta argues, education cannot be reduced to a 'technology' with "totally predictable outcomes" and "totally guaranteed" successes because the relationship between teaching and learning is not "physical", but "hermeneutic" (p. 354). The almost exclusive reliance on single measures of student achievement prompts the question: "are we measuring what we value, or ... are we just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure" such that "targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself" (Biesta, 2009a, p. 35).

The dedication to standardised testing by successive Australian governments reflects similar priorities in other developed Western nations including the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Singapore and China where a "strengthening commitment to ... standardised testing", reveals an "insatiable appetite for data" (Wyatt-Smith & Jackson, 2016, p. 233). In an era characterised by educational accountability (Biesta, 2017; Lindgard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016; Prøitz, Mausethagen & Skedsmo, 2017; Werler & Klepstad Faerevaag, 2017), standardised testing is now the dominant mechanism for "educational reform" (Au, 2011, p. 29). In many countries, including Australia, standardised testing opens the classroom to external scrutiny and judgement, making teachers "accountable to and for student performance data" (Lindgard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016, p. 1).

This commitment to standardised testing exemplifies a "modern reverence for quantitative evidence" (Porter, 2012, p. 594) whereby the data interpreted from tests are often thought to be "efficient, standardized, uniform and intuitive measures that are productive for use in a range

of processes for the development of the educational system and teaching and learning” (Prøitz, Mausethagen & Skedsmo, 2017, p. 1). The data gleaned from these tests are also often lauded as “the centre-piece of evidence-based governing regimes” (p. 1) enabling the application of what has been termed “thin prescription” (Porter, 2012, p. 565) where judgement of a school, school district or teacher is undertaken on the basis of a series of numbers or a single number. Here, the “wielders of numbers” work hard to make these numbers appear as “boring and technical as possible” (p. 595) to galvanise public trust working towards the “containment of subjectivity” (p. 595). In doing so, the complexity and nuances of statistical analysis are deliberately shielded “from the eyes of the curious” (p. 596): in the “boringness” (p. 595) of statistics, the potential for challenge to these numbers is reduced thus eliminating “the basis for controversy ... because (t)echnical routines shut down dissent” (p. 595). The “machinery” (Biesta, 2017, p. 317) of this system of measuring and interpreting student, and by extension, teacher performance, thus becomes increasingly impenetrable to alternative forms of scrutiny and serves to ramp-up the high-stakes authoritative status of standardised test results.

Standardised testing, however, in the form of system-wide formal examinations and mass literacy and numeracy tests, continues to be controversial within both the educational realm and the wider community. Critics of mass testing point to high levels of stress and anxiety for students (Au, 2011; Jones, 2007; Wyn, Turnbull, & Grimshaw, 2014); the inappropriate use and detrimental impact of an over-reliance on statistics in education (Enslin & Tjiattas, 2017; Ozliņš, 2017; Stolz, 2017); the role of mass testing in diverting attention away from the important aims of education (Biesta, 2017; Ozliņš, 2017); the identification of a series of unintended negative

outcomes of mass testing (Jones, 2007; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013); and mass testing as an expression of neoliberal discourses (Biesta, 2017; Jones, 2007; Prøitz, Mausethagen & Skedsmo, 2017; Stolz & Webster, 2017; Werler & Klepstad Faerevaag, 2017).

The Impact of Standardised Testing Programs

The research literature investigating the implementation and impact of standardised testing in schools both nationally and internationally has drawn attention to a number of themes which highlight unintended outcomes of mass testing. One dominant theme is the increased pressure on teachers to constantly improve student test results (Au, 2011; Behrent, 2009; Burns, 2007; Davies, 2008; Goldstein & Beutel, 2009). This pressure centres on the expectation that teachers assume responsibility for student performance, regardless of contributing contextual factors such as social and economic circumstances impacting on their students (Au, 2011), or as Werler and Klepstad Faerevaag (2017) contend, contextual factors of the home including the level of education of parents.

Emerging from the increasing trend of publicly blaming teachers for student performance is what appears to be a growing resentment from teachers regarding the implementation of standardised testing and its ramifications (Finnigan & Gross, 2007). Teachers become increasingly resentful at what they see as escalating bureaucratic intrusion wrought by burgeoning administrative demands that result in a “shrinking space” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007, p. 517) in the classroom where innovation, creativity and autonomy are marginalised in

favour of 'teaching to the test' (Abrams, et al, 2003; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jones, 2007; Taylor, Briscoe & Mussman, 2009; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). In Norway "61% admitted that they (teachers) practiced test-relevant tasks shortly before the pupils took their tests" (Seland, Vibe & Hovdhaugen, quoted in Werler & Klepstad Faerevaag, 2017, p. 69).

Allied to the notion of a decreasing 'space' for creative, innovative and autonomous teaching is the phenomenon of the "scripted curriculum" (Au, 2011, p. 31), starkly apparent in the United States with the 2001 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB) education strategy of the Bush administration. NCLB required that low performing school districts use commercially packaged reading instruction programs "which tell the teachers exactly what page to be on for each day as well as every word and line they are allowed to say while teaching reading" (p. 32). Here, the pre-packaged resources resulted in the delivery of "atomistic elements" (p. 35) where teachers have been forced to assume the role of the labourer, having "lost control over aspects of their very own labour" (p. 35).

This scenario is reminiscent of a production-line approach to education, based on 'Taylorism', a type of industrial production "predicated on a lack of trust for the working man [*sic*]" (Winch, 1996, p. 10) and characterised by quality control and quality assurance (p. 10). The emphasis is on developing quality products – skilled and knowledgeable school-aged students – followed by ensuring that the 'quality' of those students is maintained by regular 'checks' through the compilation of mass testing data based on the performance of students as captured by test results. In this context, teaching is "broken down into minute units of work" (Au, 2011, p. 28) to

enable a sequential and pre-packaged (and easily tested) approach to teaching and learning. This culminates in the standardisation of “teachers’ pedagogies as they work to deliver test-driven curriculum in an efficient manner” (p. 19). In addition, the publication of test results, for example, and in particular, poor test results, can compound a sense of mistrust of teachers from the public in general, resulting in declining teacher morale (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; Davies, 2008; Finnigan & Gross, 2007). When the results of mass testing are published, the tests themselves become even more high-stakes and consequently, parental choice of schools, principal and teacher job security and school funding are all affected (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). Evidence for this flow-through impact was set out in the 2014 *Senate Report into the Effectiveness of NAPLAN*. The *Report* acknowledged that “a large number of submitters (to the inquiry)” had “attributed problems with the NAPLAN scheme to the publication of data on the MySchool³ [web]site” and the “high-stakes culture this has created” (Commonwealth of Australia, 1.2, 2014, p. 40).

Teachers’ Perspectives on Standardised Testing Programs

Australian research confirms these unintended and negative consequences of standardised testing and identifies an increase in teacher-centred approaches to instruction at the expense of other approaches; and a consequent decrease in student motivation (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013).

³ The *MySchool* website was established in 2008 by the Australian government to provide data and comparisons between schools on student performance in the national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN).

In their survey of over 700 teachers in South Australia and Western Australia, Thompson and Harbaugh (2013) reported on teacher perceptions of the effects of NAPLAN on pedagogy and curriculum. In addition to corroborating the findings of similar studies about the detrimental consequences of testing regimes, this study found that the implementation of NAPLAN in the classrooms of those two Australian States contributed to a negative classroom atmosphere. More than 83 percent of respondents in the study reported that preparing students for the NAPLAN tests involved using teaching time that would have otherwise been used for curriculum implementation. More than 80 percent of respondents believed that NAPLAN did not promote a supportive and positive classroom environment. The researchers found that a number of “pedagogical responses” (p. 310) to NAPLAN included the adoption of teacher-centred instruction that resulted in the promotion of “less-inclusive classrooms” (p. 310) where students have “less voice” (p. 310) and less time is spent on developing high-order thinking skills. In other words, with the heavy emphasis in NAPLAN on testing “constrained skills” (Paris, 2005, p. 184) attention to the “unconstrained” (p. 185) domains of learning are necessarily at best compromised and at worst, negated. These findings align with the results of international research which establishes a strong connection between high-stakes testing and “modified teacher behaviour” (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 310) which tends to exhibit “superficial content coverage” resulting in a “narrower curricular experience for children and a steadier diet of test preparation activities that distract from the larger goals of educating children” (Supovitz, quoted in Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 310).

This Australian research identifies that the NAPLAN tests have impacted substantially on teachers' work. In the first instance, the tests have "required them to prepare for the tests" (p. 312) and second, to "change their teaching style to a more teacher-centred approach" (p. 312). However, the research found that despite the implementation of NAPLAN, there had not been any improvement in student literacy and numeracy skills; students have been less motivated and less engaged in class; and the tests resulted in less inclusive classrooms, particularly for students in less advantaged socio-economic and geographical locations (p. 312).

The practice of 'teaching to the test' also figures strongly in the United Kingdom's *Testing and Assessment Third Report of Session 2007-08* conducted by the House of Commons. In this report, 'teaching to the test' – the practice whereby "teachers drill(ing) their pupils in a subject on which they will face a test or examination" (House of Commons, 2008, 114, p. 42) appears to occur concurrently with "teachers coaching their pupils on examination technique, question spotting, going over sample questions similar to those likely to be set in the test" (p. 43).

Although this House of Commons' *Report* was published almost a decade ago, there are clear resonances between its findings and those of more recent Australian studies (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013).

The Impact of Standardised Testing Programs on Students

Another prominent theme in the research literature in the field is that of student stress. In 2014, *The Experience of education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families. A*

Qualitative Study (Wyn, Turnbull & Grimshaw, 2014) released by the Whitlam Institute, reported on student perspectives on NAPLAN. The study concluded that in general, and unsurprisingly, students did not like NAPLAN with many citing that they were uncertain about the purpose of the tests. At the same time, students assumed that the tests were important given the emphasis by their schools on preparation and training for the tests (Wyn, Turnbull & Grimshaw, 2014, p. 6). The study found that the majority of students indicated feeling “some stress associated with NAPLAN” (p. 6) with some experiencing conditions such as “insomnia, physical reactions such as hyperventilation, profuse sweating, nail biting, headaches, stomach aches and migraines” (p. 6). When students were asked what changes they would like to see made to NAPLAN, a majority of students - again, unsurprisingly - responded that “it should be scrapped” (p. 6).

The report concluded that “NAPLAN is not in the best interests of young Australians” (p. 3).

This conclusion was not based on the expected and predictable finding that students did not ‘like’ the test, but rather, that the rationale for and purported utility of the test as a meaningful, equitable and effective form of assessment *of or for* student learning could not be supported by valid, research-based evidence.

Importantly, research into the educational experiences of students in Aboriginal communities in Australia has identified the actual and potential deleterious impact of standardised testing on Indigenous students. Prominent amongst the concerns identified in the literature are the implications for students undertaking the test in remote communities where a mix of traditional languages and non-standard varieties of English as well as standard English characterise the

learning social and learning contexts (Wigglesworth, Simpson & Loakes, 2011). The authors of this research point out that the sharing of hegemonic cultural knowledge with Indigenous students in remote locations may be less likely than it is for those students who live in urban settings because the NAPLAN tests are “standardised on groups of English language speaking children” (p. 321). This research concluded that the NAPLAN tests are “linguistically and culturally unsuitable for Indigenous children, especially those living in remote communities” (p. 340), and thereby serve to further entrench the already significant educational disadvantage and cultural marginalisation of many First Nation students.

The Present Study

The present study utilised a questionnaire to gather quantitative and qualitative data from NSW secondary English teachers across the three sectors of government, non-government and Catholic schools. Participants were recruited through an invitation via the professional association’s social media platform. Non-random sampling was employed as the data compilation method. Although such an approach limits the generalisability of the findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), teachers’ perspectives reported in this paper contribute to a growing corpus of research that gives prominence to the voices of professionals in a wider educational, political and socio-media landscape that too often marginalises their expertise and judgements.

The structured questionnaire used multiple choice questions (multiple answer mode) and Likert rating scales to “build in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response while still

generating numbers.” (p. 325). Open-ended questions included the option of a comment to catch the “authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour” and “gems of information” that are the hallmarks of qualitative data (p. 266). This word-based data were analysed and interpreted using an inductive, iterative approach.

Participants

In the research sample of the 211 secondary school English teachers who completed the questionnaire, 181 were female, 29 were male and one identified as gender fluid. Twenty-two percent of the participants can be categorised as early-career teachers, with teaching experience of up to five years. Mid-career and later career teachers constituted 74 percent of the sample. Of the 211 participants:

- 64 percent were classroom English teachers in a secondary school; 30 percent were Heads of Department; and the remaining participants were either retired, or in school-based leadership, co-ordination or executive roles;
- 85 percent were teaching in a full-time position, 11 percent were teaching in a casual or supply capacity and the remaining participants in the group were either retired, or in fixed-term contract positions;
- 68 percent of teachers who completed the questionnaire were also teaching either History, Drama or English as a Second Language/Dialect in addition to teaching secondary English;

- the large majority were teaching in government, metropolitan secondary schools, with one quarter of the sample teaching in regional, rural or remote settings; and
- 60 percent held a double degree, Honours, Masters or PhD.

Results

Item 16 of the questionnaire included a number of statements designed to elicit teachers' views on the Australia-wide standardised test, NAPLAN. Participants were asked to rate each statement according to a five-point Likert Scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Participants also had the option of providing written responses to each statement. The following discussion presents the quantitative and qualitative findings gleaned in response to these statements.

1. *The NAPLAN tests provide important information on the literacy skills of my students*

“I can diagnose student literacy levels with far greater precision”

(Male early-career teacher, 2017)

A majority of participants – 56.5 percent – ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with this statement, with a further 23 percent indicating they were ‘unsure’. Written elaborations revealed consistent evidence of teachers’ strong antipathy to the view that NAPLAN tests provide important information about the literacy skills of their students. Written comments ranged from outright condemnation of the tests – “standardised testing means

nothing!" (F⁴/EC⁵); "I've marked NAPLAN exams. They are rubbish" (F/MC⁶) – to dismissive statements such as "NAPLAN has lost its way and is no longer used as originally intended" (F/MC). A number of participants indicated that they considered the test's usefulness as limited, asserting that NAPLAN is "one test on one day" (F/MC). Some of the comments questioned the accuracy of the test results, with one teacher claiming that her school had discovered "errors in the marking" (F/MC).

A substantial proportion of teachers were firmly of the view that as professionals working with students each day, they are well aware of their students' literacy skills and do not require the results of the NAPLAN tests to extend or deepen this understanding. Typical of the range of comments, teachers remarked that "quality teachers are well aware of their students' abilities" (F/MC) and test results are "not as accurate as what I observe over time" (F/EC). Others believed that their own professional, contextually-based judgements constituted a more valid and authentic means of assessing their students' literacy: "I don't need NAPLAN data to tell me which ones (students) can't read or spell" (F/MC); "I know what my students can and can't do from my knowledge of their work in class" (F/MC); "I can assess the literacy skills of my students and their progress far quicker and with greater accuracy and relevance – at a much cheaper cost!" (F/MC); and "the data is inaccurate at best" (F/MC). One teacher noted that during the course of teaching where student workbooks and writing are regularly marked, "I

⁴ 'F' identifies female participant. 'M' identifies male participant.

⁵ 'EC' denotes early career teacher 0-5 years.

⁶ 'MC' denotes mid-career teacher with 6-10 years of teaching experience. 'LC' denotes later career teacher with ten or more years of teaching experience.

already know – and usually (compile) a more complete picture than NAPLAN provides” (F/EC).

Some participants drew attention to what they consider to be the disproportionate levels of stress and anxiety that NAPLAN generates for students: NAPLAN is a “waste of time and a case of further stressing already stressed kids” (F/MC) while another remarked that the tests “create too much stress for both students and teachers” (F/MC) – “(is) the hype and stress is worth it?” (F/MC). One teacher articulated a widespread belief that “too much is hinged upon a three-day test in terms of judging both student and teacher achievement” (F/LC).

2. The NAPLAN tests influence the content and teaching/learning strategies I implement in my classroom

“Every year we are told not to teach to the test, yet each year we are forced to do blatantly obvious teaching tasks that are ascribed to NAPLAN”

(Male early-career teacher, 2017).

Since the research literature reports an increasing trend towards ‘teaching to the test’ (Au, 2011; Jones, 2007; Rubin, 2011; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), we were keen to identify the extent to which NSW secondary English teachers’ planning and pedagogy has been shaped by the imperative of preparing students for NAPLAN. In response to this statement, more than 52 percent of teachers in the study ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with a further 16 percent indicating

that they were 'unsure'. Around one third of participants 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with the statement. The bifurcated results suggest the influence of a range of contextual forces on teachers' decision-making when it comes to 'teaching to the test'. While more than half the participants agreed that they implement strategies directly geared towards student performance in NAPLAN, others registered their robust resistance to reshaping classroom teaching and learning in response to the requirements of an external test.

Participants' written comments shed further light on certain contextual forces that compel teachers to 'teach to the test'. While some teachers address the need for preparation for NAPLAN in their classroom practice "only in the broader sense" (F/MC) or "as a school, we target key areas for improvement" (F/MC) and "I use the data to help inform my teaching practices" (F/MC), other comments disclosed the institutionally-driven pressure to ensure student achievement and improved school ranking: "we have to (teach to the test)" (F/MC); "to some extent because of the pressure and expectations from above" (F/MC); "we get pressure to do so" (F/MC); "(there is a) strong push from the senior executives to improve (test results)" (F/MC); "only because we have to – not by choice" (F/MC); "I feel forced to teach to the test" (F/MC); and "because I'm told to (adopt teaching/learning strategies based on NAPLAN)" (F/MC). Around one third of the written comments in response to this statement revealed that the individual school requires the adoption of teaching/learning strategies based on NAPLAN, forcing teachers into pedagogical compliance.

One participant argued that the integration of literacy skills is an important component of subject English but school senior executives “see it as a means to improve NAPLAN which is unfortunately myopic”; “it (the tests) influence school policy and planning” (F/MC).

Pressure from respective school communities which assign value to test results were reflected in a range of comments: “there is a strong community sense of the importance of the test) results” (F/MC) and in the classroom, the implementation of “strategies of exam (test) preparation” (F/MC) are prioritised. Another participant commented that in order to “placate the parent body” (F/LC) content and teaching/learning strategies were influenced by the test.

A number of responses revealed that teachers implement class activities primarily for the purpose of supporting students to become familiar with the NAPLAN structure and question-types. One participant underlined the commitment to student welfare and access when he wrote that “I feel it is important to prepare them so that they are not adversely affected (by the tests)” (M/MC). Another stated that “we spend one or two lessons at most revising (NAPLAN) writing tasks” (F/MC). In two responses, teachers indicated that they undertake NAPLAN-like activities in class to make the “students more comfortable and equipped to deal with it (the test)” (F/MC) and “because the kids are often anxious about it” (F/EC).

This statement also prompted written comments which qualified the participant’s agreement with the statement. Although these teachers did not agree that NAPLAN directs all classroom teaching and content, one participant stated that the school spends “one or two lessons at most revising the writing tasks” (F/MC). Another commented that “I feel it is important to prepare

them so that they are not adversely affected" (F/MC), while in a confessional tone, another wrote that "with regrets – I do 'teach to the test' occasionally, as does everyone" (F/MC). Other teachers believed in the need to embed the teaching of literacy skills into daily teaching to "make it (skills development) relevant and engaging" (F/EC) with one teacher reporting that "units (of work) are planned to lead into NAPLAN" (F/MC). Other responses reinforced the prevailing commitment to supporting students in their preparation for tests and at the same time, maintaining a more holistic approach to teaching and learning in English: "my focus is not on NAPLAN ... my focus is on their (students') overall skills" (F/MC).

3. The NAPLAN tests are an appropriate way to measure student achievement

"The tests capture only a narrow aspect of a student's capabilities"

(Female mid-career teacher, 2017).

In response to this statement, more than 76 percent of teachers in the sample either 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' and a further 16 percent were unsure. Only eight percent of participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. Overwhelmingly, participants disagreed that the NAPLAN tests are an appropriate way to measure student achievement.

From the written responses to this statement, the consistent theme was teachers' beliefs that the tests only address a narrow range of knowledge and skills: "NAPLAN is a narrow measure" (F/LC); "they (the tests) do not show you how they (the students) socialise or try their hearts out or play music or play sport"; and the NAPLAN tests are a "narrow measure" (F/LC).

Representative of a number of responses was one teacher's concern that "I still don't understand how the measurement of (somewhat antiquated) grammar and language conventions fits with 21st century competencies" (F/LC) since "(NAPLAN) captures only a narrow aspect of student capability" (F/EC); "external, standardised testing is not the best way to assess student achievement" (F/MC); and as a teacher, the test "measures the least important aspects of what I do" (M/LC). One teacher asked "where's the consistency between the markers and the tests? Where's the consideration of the holistic synthesis of elements? Where's the timely feedback?" (F/MC); and another commented that the test is a "snapshot only and (is) unreliable" (F/EC). Teachers questioned the premise of NAPLAN as a reliable instrument, claiming that because "so many schools 'teach to the test'" (F/MC) NAPLAN is "losing its validity".

Teachers' judgements about the validity and utility of NAPLAN is unsurprising given that the tests were originally intended to provide a snapshot on the day of student literacy and numeracy skills for *diagnostic purposes only*. However, over the past decade the tests have become increasingly high-stakes and attracted considerable media attention, with print media coverage of the tests intensifying during the first three years of implementation, culminating in 2010 with the launch of the MySchool website (Mockler, 2016, p. 184). Fuelled by this media coverage and growing professional and community disquiet about the ideologically-driven use of NAPLAN as a proxy for judging the worth and quality of teachers and schools.

Consequently, it could be argued that the test is no longer merely a diagnostic 'snapshot' of

students' skills: it looms large on the educational landscape as a powerful sorting and regulatory instrument for teachers, students and schools, alike.

4. The NAPLAN tests are an important component in preparing students for future employment

“Hell no”

(Female mid-career teacher, 2017).

The vast majority of teachers in this sample – 85.63 percent – reported that they do not consider the NAPLAN tests to be an important component in preparing students for future employment. If we were to add to this percentage the number who are ‘unsure’, then a total of 96.55 percent of participants either ‘disagreed, ‘strongly disagreed’ or are ‘unsure’ of the relevance and utility of NAPLAN in preparing students for the world of work, beyond schooling. Only six participants agreed with the statement and none strongly agreed. The written responses all expressed a firm belief that there is no relationship between the tests and future employment. The majority of comments were negative: “they (the tests) couldn’t be less related to students’ lives if they tried” (F/MC); “absolutely no relevance” (M/MC); “outdated system of testing” (M/EC); and “it (the test) doesn’t measure what students can truly do” (F/MC).

These responses are not unexpected given that the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) state that one of the major aims of the NAPLAN tests is to “provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests” (ACARA, n.d.). The tests have not been developed as

indicators of student aptitudes for future employment. However, none of the teacher responses identified the development of literacy and numeracy skills targeted by the tests as important 'building blocks' for future employment. Instead, the comments reinforced teachers' general skepticism about and contempt for the content being tested: "how does teaching them to use a subordinate clause help them become critical thinkers and empathetic, responsible citizens?" (F/MC); "they (the tests) have absolutely no relevance" (M/MC); and "(the tests are) absolute rubbish" (F/LC).

Teachers consistently articulated an explicit view that the NAPLAN tests have little or no relevance to the students *at this point in their lives*. One participant encapsulated a 'disconnect' between the lives of students and the tests with this comment: "the tests seem to be getting further away from real life" (F/LC). This finding is of particular relevance for education authorities and governments around the nation in that the key professionals responsible for preparing students for these tests – that is, teachers – appear to not only question but also reject the validity, reliability and rationale of the tests.

5. The introduction of a 'pre-qualification' for the HSC based on a student's performance in Year 9 NAPLAN (or other subsequent literacy and numeracy tests) is beneficial for students

"It always amazes me that people who have never taught and rarely deal with kids make decisions about teaching and kids"

(Female, later-career English teacher, NSW, 2017).

By way of background, in July, 2016, the former NSW Minister for Education announced a series of reforms to the State's leaving credential, the Higher School Certificate (HSC). One of these reforms was the "establishment of a minimum standard in literacy and numeracy for the award of the HSC" (BOSTES, 2016). From 2017, Year 9 students in NSW are required to achieve a Band 8 in NAPLAN in order to 'pre-qualify' for the HSC in Year 12.

A key motivation behind development of these reforms resides in the results from Australia's *2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* which indicated that "Australia is falling behind internationally" and that "up to one-fifth of 15-year-olds fail to meet the international proficiency standard in literacy and numeracy" (BOSTESa, 2016, p. 4). Further motivation can be identified in the following comment that "many countries are not well prepared for the knowledge society in terms of the literacy and problem solving abilities of their next generation." (OECD/CERI, 2008, p. 6)

In response to this statement in the questionnaire more than 79 percent of teachers in the study registered their opposition to this new requirement. A further nine percent of participants were 'not sure'. In sum, an overwhelming 88 percent of teachers were either 'not sure' about, or 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that this new policy is beneficial for students.

The written responses likewise reflected participants' opposition to this new requirement.

Various adjectives were used to describe the requirement: "appalling on so many levels" (F/LC),

“absolutely abhorrent” (F/MC); “it’s the new requirement - rubbish” (F/EC); “ridiculous” (F/MC); “outrageous, too much pressure too soon” (F/LC); “simply unnecessary” (F/LC); “it is just laughable and deplorable educational policy” (M/MC); and “pointless” (F/EC). One significant theme emerging from the comments was that of student maturity or, as one teacher described it, the “big developmental gap” (M/LC) between a student ‘pre-qualifying’ for a leaving certificate qualification in Year 9. Many teachers argued that students in Year 9 – in the midst of adolescence and all its tribulations – were being subjected to requirements relevant for Year 12 students. They asserted that students need the chance to mature over the three years from Year 9 to Year 12, because “so much changes in these years” (F/LC).

Another common theme in participants’ comments addressed the issue of the stress and anxiety these teachers believe Year 9 students would now be subjected to: the requirement would induce “awful stress and labelling of students who don’t pass the test” (F/LC) and the requirement amounted to “undue pressure” (F/LC), “inappropriate pressure on students” (F/MC); “too much pressure too soon” (F/LC); and “unnecessary pressure on teenagers” (F/MC). One teacher made the point that “Year 9 are too young for such high-stakes testing” (F/MC). Another teacher wrote that “mental health must be taken into account” (F/EC) while another wrote that “Year 7 students (are) experiencing anxiety about this already” (F/MC).

Synthesis of Findings

This study set out to explore secondary English teachers' views of the role, utility, and impact of NAPLAN. What emerged from the data is a range of findings that add additional weight to the research literature in the field. Foremost amongst these is the consistency of teachers' antipathy to and robust criticisms of the tests themselves and the reported flow-through detrimental consequences for teachers, students, school culture and the integrity of the subject, English.

From an analysis of responses to the questionnaire items, teachers in this sample believed that:

- the pressure to prepare students for the NAPLAN tests constrains to a greater or lesser degree, the scope of authentic, contextualised and student-centred pedagogy and classroom teaching and learning experiences;
- the data gleaned from the NAPLAN tests do not provide additional understandings of students' literacy skills, above and beyond what teachers themselves already know from their professional judgement in classroom settings;
- the high-stakes nature of NAPLAN has negatively impacted student wellbeing;
- the extrinsic, institutional and other pressures on teachers to 'teach to the test' (and be held accountable for the performance of their students in a 'one-size-fits-all' diagnostic test on a single day) have an adverse impact on many teachers, serving to erode their professional agency and autonomy and engender frustration, anger and resentment;
- the validity of the NAPLAN tests and the credibility of the data on student performance is highly questionable; and

- despite the extensive government rhetoric surrounding the purpose of NAPLAN and the enormous financial resources directed to and derived from the tests, students' achievement in literacy has not been lifted.

These findings corroborate and extend those from other similar empirical studies on standardised testing, nationally and internationally (Au, 2011; Davies, 2008; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Goldstein & Beutel, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012; Rubin, 2011; Stolz & Webster, 2017; Werler & Klepstad Faerevaag, 2017; Wyn, Turnbull & Grimshaw, 2014). In addition, this study highlights the commitment that a group of NSW English teachers demonstrate to their students' learning and to teaching to their best. These teachers articulate the reality and implications of the pressure to improve student test results without compromising the more holistic goals and purposes of the curriculum. For many teachers, the challenge of this balancing act has been heightened and intensified by the introduction of a minimum standard for literacy based on a student's Year 9 NAPLAN results which the majority of teachers in this study not only disagree with but also vigorously oppose.

Conclusion

“...we are now witnessing the dehumanizing effects on the lives of some individuals and communities because the objectified tendencies of assessment and measurement are not being recognised or challenged in a sustained or rigorous manner”

(Stolz & Webster, 2017, p. 314).

The findings of this research study are consistent with those of similar national and international studies that have offered compelling evidence of the wide-ranging deleterious consequences of narrowly-defined assessment and standardised testing programs. As Stolz and Webster (2017) argue, it is imperative that “objectified tendencies of assessment and measurement” (p. 314) are “recognised or challenged in a sustained or rigorous manner” (p. 314) in order to expose and ultimately redress their “dehumanising effects” (p. 314). Through reporting on the perspectives and judgements of NSW secondary English teachers, the present study offers additional empirical evidence to inform debate and policy reform.

Given that the majority of teachers in this study do not believe that the NAPLAN tests provide any additional information on the skills of their students that they themselves are unable to identify in their regular teaching, it would appear that these teachers take issue with the ACARA statement that NAPLAN is a “measure through which governments, education authorities, schools and the community can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes” (ACARA, n.d.). According to the professionals in this study – who are, after all, best positioned and equipped to make holistic, evidence-based judgements about their students’ needs, capacities and achievements – the NAPLAN tests provide limited insight into students’ literacy skills. Furthermore, these teachers assert that because NAPLAN tests do not and cannot measure the full gamut of knowledge, skills, and understandings - nor the values and attitudes that these teachers believe to be at the heart of quality education in NSW - the “machinery” (Biesta, 2017, p. 317) of NAPLAN serves to

undermine and constrict rather than enable and embolden teaching and learning in NSW schools.

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