

Submission to The Senate Standing Committee On Education, Employment And Workplace Relations Inquiry: *The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy*

Submitted by: The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English

Authored by:

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About The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English

The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that aims to foster the highest quality teaching of English throughout Victoria.

Through professional networking, dialogue and learning, research, journals and publications, VATE strives to nurture a community of teachers of English and teacher educators committed to the advancement of the profession. VATE exists to support its members in the continual process of renewal necessary to engage with the dynamic nature of both the profession and the subject English.

VATE's members reflect a diverse range of voices: 430 Institutional, 338 Individual and 300 primary memberships in 2012 representing over 3,500 members. The majority of the membership comprises classroom teachers, principals and heads of departments, but also represents other areas such as university English teacher educators, pre-service teachers, teachers not currently engaged at schools and retired teachers.

Regular communication via email, hardcopy publications posted 3 times a year, a calendar of Professional Learning opportunities throughout the year and a comprehensive website reflect the concerns, interests and issues that are at the forefront of the English teaching community. VATE is also concerned with the education landscape, encompassing state, national and international perspectives. VATE has developed a number of strategic partnerships at state and national levels with other teaching associations, bureaucracies, statutory bodies and organisations, giving members further opportunity to be represented and learn from a wider audience.

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About the VATE Submission

VATE does not have a set position on the NAPLAN program. Nevertheless, VATE council was aware of some of the impacts and consequences of NAPLAN for English teachers in Victoria. Council decided to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry to communicate some of the experiences we had heard from the membership, or experienced ourselves, both as English teachers in schools and English teacher educators in universities. As a council we felt that we were in a position to respond to points b), c), d), e) and g) of the inquiry. We sent a brief anonymous survey (using an online survey tool) via email around these 4 points to the membership, expecting a few teachers to submit responses. We were overwhelmed with 88 responses over the four days that the survey was open, with many of these responses being very lengthy and extremely affecting. An overwhelming theme from our data is that NAPLAN is having very different effects on different schools, teachers and jurisdictions, some of these effects being very extreme and very negative. We did not collect demographic data with our survey, so other than knowing that respondents are members of the association, we cannot map the responses to school type, socio-economic advantage or any other factors. We have clustered the results from our membership into themes under the senate inquiry terms, and, as we received many suggestions from our membership about potential improvements to the program, we will respond to e) as well. We are willing to collect further, more nuanced data from our membership about NAPLAN, as it is clearly of high importance and concern to our members.

b) The unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction

We had 78 responses to this question. 14 respondents indicated that there were no unintended consequences; only two of these responses included some elaboration. One teacher said NAPLAN does fit into the school's culture, stating that the school was "moving towards a more evidence-based, data driven approach" which was further supported by NAPLAN data. The other respondent maintained that "there are positive consequences" (but no further elaboration was included to support this assertion). 59 respondents stated that there were unintended consequences; these respondents elaborated in some detail on this assertion. We have categorised these into the stress and pressure seen to be caused by the test; the impact on teaching itself; and the negative effect of NAPLAN on student well-being.

Stress and pressure

Teachers noted that there was inherent – and unnecessary - stress in having to devote three days to a test, and the attendant staffing decisions made by schools to accommodate this. This was commented on as a negative impact of the implementation of NAPLAN even by those teachers who say that their school "takes a balanced approach to NAPLAN". This stress is added to by the dismissal of what schools and teachers have to offer beyond the testing of a narrow range of skills. As one respondent noted:

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

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The stress caused by the perception of the meaning of the NAPLAN scores is seen to effect the reputation of the school, the perception of teachers (both within the profession and by the wider community), and as indicative of the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies used in the classroom:

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

The stresses seen to be caused by NAPLAN also extends to parents, who “worry too much” about what the test results might mean. Parents are making choices about which school will be attended by their sons or daughters based on what they believe the results say about teaching and learning in the various schools. These concerns and stresses applied by parents were alluded to by a number of respondents. This was seen to be exacerbated by inaccurate reporting:

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

This negative attitude is taken into the classroom by the students. One teacher stated:

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

Impact on teaching itself

The simple fact that the test occurs over three teaching days in what is already a crowded term was noted by a number of respondents as significantly problematic. The interruption to teaching routines and the flow of lessons was noted by a number of teachers, as is students' experience of “exam fatigue” as a result of undertaking the test; this is a significant concern for a number of the respondents. It is often pointed out that NAPLAN requires a great deal of organisation and thus puts pressure on the administration of teachers' work-loads, and disrupts students' class time for the whole week, not just the three days over which the test takes place.

The curriculum itself is changed to have teachers “teach to the test”. This is in part a response to the stresses noted above. This is not restricted to the week of the testing; teachers are often required to take considerable time to teach students what to expect in terms of both the format and content of the test in the weeks leading up to NAPLAN administration. There is significant concern that students see their performance on the test is somehow central to their education, thus reducing the importance of school-based assessments. Teachers are very concerned about this because such changes to curriculum are not based on sound pedagogical reasons. As one respondent summed up:

I have been at 2 schools where they have changed the order of the curriculum, making the work less contextual and less relevant to the students, in order to accommodate NAPLAN. This was done conscious of the impact it might have on students but deemed necessary because of pressure to improve NAPLAN results.

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Further, in those schools where there is insistence that teachers teach “to the test”, teachers are concerned that NAPLAN is “limiting the students’ ability to write in a wide range of styles”. Teachers are also in a position where they are required to respond to parent’s expectations that the style of testing undertaken reflects “real” learning, and thus “NAPLAN type exercises” need to be used in the classroom. This clearly does not match understandings of current teaching practices. This has meant that there is less scope for teachers to tailor programs to the needs of individual students, or to focus the development of a curriculum which educates students in skills they need for the futures they are wishing to pursue. Teachers are feeling quite disempowered as their professional knowledge is undermined by being forced to be so narrowly focussed. Curriculum has been narrowed in a number of ways:

We have narrowed our curriculum to focus primarily on NAPLAN preparation for the first part of the year. NAPLAN has taken over as the measure of school "success". Teachers are judged by the results. Students are actively rejecting the tests (purposely doing badly, either by not answering the questions or rushing them, in protest to the NAPLAN saturation they have experienced leading up to the tests). There is an increase in student disengagement, particularly in English (the subject that has been given the responsibility for the literacy part of the tests).

Teachers feel disempowered and feel that they are being forced into a very narrow band of teaching for “skills”:

an unhealthy focus on these test as an indication of overall teaching and learning success. For me, I just feel hamstrung in my teaching and that the real meaning of being an English teacher is becoming lost as I instead am forced to focus on teaching discrete skills for a test.

For some schools, this narrowing of curriculum and teaching and learning styles is insisted upon by those who are in charge of the programming and reporting back to parents:

Our new principal and many parents want more 'sit down' and independent style, easily measurable worksheets and are fearful of collaborative, multi literacy and oral language tasks.

There was, however, an assertion by two respondents that processes were put in place to respond to noticed gaps in teachers’ approaches to teaching of particular aspects of literacy post the NAPLAN results being published, and one respondent stated that there was attendant “raised consciousness of skills” tested by NAPLAN.

The negative effect of NAPLAN on student well-being

There was also concern noted about how NAPLAN affects the students. Many respondents expressed concern that students can be demoralised due to the test results, generally because what is tested is out-of-sync with what and how the students are generally experiencing teaching and learning. Many respondents noted that there was considerable anxiety experienced by students, both as they were undertaking the test and in the receipt of results; this was seen to be the case even though considerable time and effort was spent by teachers reassuring students that the test should not be a source of undue anxiety for the individual. Beyond the anxiety felt by “mainstream” students, many respondents noted the extra pressure felt by minority groups. EAL students, students with special needs and indigenous students all felt the pressure of NAPLAN even more acutely:

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I was confronted with having to watch a number of intelligent and capable EAL students (who had been in Australia just over one year) not cope at all with all the tests and feeling frustrated and upset. In the end, they became so frustrated that they started making jokes about it and treating it as a waste of time. The Naplan tests are all very well for those who are successful academically, for children who do not meet the set benchmarks or are disadvantaged in some way, the tests are an attack on their self-esteem as they reinforce the message that they are failing. I believe assessments should be used as teaching tools and/or as internal, contextualized reporting mechanisms. I do not see much value in NAPLAN testing.

The general anxiety felt by students, it was asserted in a number of responses, meant that the NAPLAN data was skewed, as students who were feeling such anxiety may not even sit the test:

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

Many teachers are extremely concerned about the effect NAPLAN is having on programming, on perception and on effective teaching and learning. The re-distribution of resources only reinforces the impact of the test, as such choices suggest an undue emphasis on one set of very particular standardised testing. This is true even for schools where the NAPLAN results are very positive:

At our school there have been very high levels of stress amongst parents and students ... [students] are not allowed to do out of school activities for the week before and the week during the tests, as they are said to be too tired. [Students] are stressed and unhappy about the tests, and envy any [students] who are withdrawn from the testing. [Students] have been upset, crying when they got their results, and saying things like, "I thought I was good at writing." Our school has good NAPLAN results, so more students want to come here. This meant this year we lost our music room, with a loss in the quality of education for all students at the school. Next year we may lose our art room. Our specialist teachers may be lost as well. This would be a disaster for our school, all because of the government wanting some figures. Parents don't understand what NAPLAN is, and it creates tension and stress for the school community as a whole - an external intervention in teaching and learning that has no benefit for the students, only harm.

c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices

We had 82 responses to this question. 19 respondents indicated that there was no or little discernible impact on teaching and student learning practices at their school. The other 63 responses documented negative impacts on teaching and learning practices, some of these practices were extremely negative and debilitating to teachers. Nine respondents wrote about positive impacts to teaching and learning practices as a result of the NAPLAN tests. From these responses it is clear that the impact of NAPLAN on teaching and student learning practices differs greatly between schools, with some respondents positive about the impact, but many more negative, with some respondents reporting extremely negative impacts. The key themes were interruption to and distortion of the curriculum due to teaching NAPLAN material, time lost to the practice of NAPLAN testing, uncontextualised teaching of the NAPLAN subject matter, a loss of ability to tailor curriculum to individual students' needs, student learning skewed towards competitive practices, students bored and anxious from an over-focus on NAPLAN preparation, teachers directed to change curriculum to focus on NAPLAN and some positive redevelopment of curriculum as a result of NAPLAN results. We also have included a section on respondents who

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described minimal impacts on teaching and student learning practices, so that the committee can see the full range of impacts described by respondents.

Interruption to and distortion of the curriculum

The most highly reported and most passionately described impact of NAPLAN on teaching and learning practices was from many respondents who wrote about NAPLAN as interrupting and distorting the curriculum. Respondents noted how the culture around this has changed over time:

When NAPLAN first started there was a clear message that we wouldn't 'teach to the test'. However now, especially with MySchool - we are instructed to do this. This means that we take time out of the core curriculum to teach a 'test' which bears little impact on student learning compared to the AusVels/Vels curriculum.

By now both students and parents expect some time to be given to preparation for NAPLAN and the literacy aspects all fall to English classes.

Many respondents felt that, "Too much time is spent by teaching staff preparing students for the test". That this has also, "interrupted the curriculum immensely". They described that the English curriculum has been "restricted" that there are "no broad writing tasks", that they are no longer, "catering for needs of individual students". "The only writing genre (apart from recount writing) we have taught has been the NAPLAN test genre of persuasive text".

The following extended responses detail a range of ways in which our members have experienced the impact of NAPLAN on teaching and learning practices:

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

I believe that a well-rounded curriculum is the best way to achieve good grounding in literacy and numeracy. I would be interested in some stats to see how the schools who claim loudly that NAPLAN is forcing them to drop the broader curriculum, compromising student learning to focus on what is being tested are progressing compared to those who believe that good learning will result in good test results. Overall I am not opposed to NAPLAN and similar measures to help keep track of progress, but I do not like it when these become the measure of success and the obsession of the community. It is presented as a way to hold schools to account rather than celebrating the learning that is happening. It is good to see schools from time to time celebrated when they achieve against the odds. It shows what can be done. I am not sure how struggling schools are helped to make use of the successes of others.

Teachers are not meant to teach to the test, but they do. Students learn how to sit the tests and do mock tests, to try to reduce the stress. Even students in grade one are now taught persuasive writing in preparation for NAPLAN, so you have six year olds parroting off a formula for paragraphs, TEEL style. In grade two students have to write advertisements, so they are told their work is not persuasive enough, that they haven't manipulated language effectively enough, and you can see them being crushed by this, when they are so excited by just getting their ideas down on paper and sharing them. Creative writing has been almost completely lost from the curriculum. NAPLAN has badly distorted what we

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teach and how we teach, with a much greater focus on the rote reproduction of formulae, rather than exploring imagination or experimentation with language. NAPLAN has made school less enjoyable, flexible, fun and creative for teachers and students.

Our entire teaching program in Term 1 and Term 2 has been tailored to allow time for teaching 'to the test'. A significant amount of time is spent teaching persuasive writing in the middle of a unit that does not align with persuasive writing as a text form. The teaching of English skills has been pared back to a disparate set of skills not connected to each other. We leap from one concept to another, ensuring we cover skills that will be on NAPLAN but not making any integration between concepts or meaningful links for students. When we had a number of interruptions and began to fall behind our scheduled plan, we were instructed to cut the other content out and focus on teaching NAPLAN as it is more important.

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

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

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

Time and money lost for preparation for NAPLAN

A strong theme was the loss of curriculum time to NAPLAN preparation—“It makes it difficult to fit in practice for NAPLAN as well as teach the curriculum. Time is the issue”. The respondents in this category described the loss of time to NAPLAN, without a particular change to the curriculum and teaching and learning practices overall. Sometimes this was relatively minimal, “There are now lessons dedicated to preparing students for the test rather than actually teaching an already tight curriculum”. Many teachers feel responsible for preparing the students, but negative about the time it takes: “It would be negligent to not prepare the students for the NAPLAN tests and this takes valuable time away from planned curriculum and developing social skills (especially in Year 7)”, and even when the time spent is relatively minimal, there is still additional pressure because of this, “even though we probably only spend around 10 lessons in preparation. It feels like we are juggling one too many balls in the air”.

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

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Students are looking at previous NAPLAN tests to identify the lay out & to look at the best ways to approach the tests. Teachers feel they need to prepare students so they are spending weeks reviewing NAPLAN tests.

Our professional learning mainly focuses in English and mathematics. In the catholic school system, the ONLY achievement data used in our school reviews is NAPLAN data (despite what they say about NAPLAN being only one source of data). Also our attention on learning intentions and success criteria is directly related to National testing data... the scope and sequence at our school for years 7-9 has a clear NAPLAN focus, purely because we are going to be judged primarily on this single test. We could use the money spent in far better ways.

The School has committed resources to familiarising the students with NAPLAN to try and minimise test related anxiety. This cost has been born by Departments, which is then ultimately passed on to parents. This amounts to several thousands of dollars, yet the cost is born by all students/parents despite NAPLAN only targeting 4 year levels.

NAPLAN is a huge waste of time and resources

Uncontextualised teaching of the NAPLAN subject matter

Some teachers wrote about the lack of contextualization that occurred in the way that NAPLAN skills were inserted in the curriculum. "NAPLAN preparation has become part of the curriculum at 7 and 9. Relevant skills taught in isolation, not as a part of the overall program". This occurred around grammar teaching:

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

And also around the teaching of the specific writing genre that was being assessed in NAPLAN:
Time is taken from substantive course work to teach persuasive writing out of a meaningful context.

One respondent wrote of weaker students being pulled out of a meaningful text study to be coached for NAPLAN:

When our year 9 students are studying Arthur Miller and then a pool of them are selected to be withdrawn from English classes to be coached for NAPLAN then I would say that student learning has definitely been impacted. The irony of students being pulled out of classes to be coached for NAPLAN while the rest of the kids are taught how to write an essay reflects the priorities of our country - numbers are important, not humans. Students know this - they know what NAPLAN is all about. NAPLAN has disrupted many programs that were absolutely best practice and it has been used to topple these initiatives and implement failed NAPLAN coaching programs. It should be audited.

Less able to tailor curriculum to individuals

Several respondents felt that, "We teach to the test rather than student need". This was linked to student anxiety:

Less able to tailor programs to individual needs. Some students feel anxiety about the upcoming tests. 3 days of testing is a lot for junior students.

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NAPLAN is a very narrow test, in terms of scope, and has a significance in the community beyond its capacity. It is acknowledged that the language skill focus of NAPLAN tests is by no means negative. However, the undue emphasis and continual focus on enhancing NAPLAN results in schools is clearly, and alarmingly, narrowing the curriculum as taught, and reducing its capacity to be responsive to student needs. This is a very worrying trend indeed!

Student learning skewed towards competitive practices

Students were “rewarded” by schools for positive results:

English and Maths teachers are VERY heavily criticised if results are low. If they are okay, little is said. We spend huge amounts of time preparing, huge amounts of money on breakfasts for students and we award iPads to students who show great improvement! Our principal does not appear to comprehend that the yearly result is not about the same cohort of students, so we over-react often.

Competition creates smug winners and marked strugglers:

Some of our parents and students are very marks focussed and it becomes a way for the bright kids to pat themselves smugly on the back while the strugglers are reminded yet again that they are struggling. Occasionally the parents of the weakest students withdraw their daughters, which I worry sends a message to them that they are not good enough to sit the test that everyone else has to do.

Students bored and/or anxious from an overfocus on NAPLAN preparation

Some respondents described affects on students:

Students are sick and tired of NAPLAN preparation.
It simply creates an environment of stress and anxiety
Impact on students who are seen to fail the test and therefore lose their confidence to take risks with their learning.
Pressure from some school councillors has meant we have practiced for a couple of weeks before the test... wasting valuable learning time.

Teachers directed to change curriculum to focus on NAPLAN

One teacher reported that staff were told by the administration that they must teach NAPLAN: “The principal has told staff we need to provide students with examples of NAPLAN questions in numeracy, spelling and language conventions at least twice a week”. Another respondent wrote of the relationship between results and teaching, “We focus on the results as representative of teacher success or failure. We have narrowed what we teach to ensure that students are prepared for what is likely to appear on the tests”.

Positive impacts of NAPLAN on teaching and learning practices

Several respondents reported positive impacts on teaching and learning. One respondent stated that NAPLAN was “great training for all”. A couple of respondents described specific ways in which the results of the NAPLAN tests had improved their teaching and learning practices. Two respondents noted that the test results alerted their school that the school was performing poorly in spelling, and this enabled them to address this. Another wrote that NAPLAN “has improved explicit teaching of skills in many areas. In particular the idea of scoping work for complexity”.

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More awareness in terms of key skills that our students need more targeted teaching. However this is done within the context of our whole curriculum- we do not teach to the test. Teachers collaborate more and moderate student work - we are aiming to decrease variability within the school.

NAPLAN makes students realise that their learning can be measured for their own personal use. It also makes them aware that there are learning goals they should be achieving as they progress through school. Regarding teachers, it makes them more aware (as they should be aware already) that their students need to be supported and enhanced in their learning all the time, so that students can be assessed independently to reflect the good work done in class.

We are able to use the NAPLAN testing as one of a range of measures of student performance. We have found the results to be generally accurate. The data has allowed us to identify particular needs in the student cohort, which we have addressed through the establishment of various intervention programs in Numeracy and Literacy. The NAPLAN results inform teaching and learning in classrooms.

I believe that NAPLAN has changed our teaching practices for the better. Most of us became more focussed on explicit and specific teaching of skills that make up good learning. Some of us became better at analysing data in order to improve learning for students.

Minimal impacts of NAPLAN on teaching and learning practices

Some teachers and schools made deliberate decisions not to over-focus on NAPLAN, and some other schools have very little practice and NAPLAN has little impact on their teaching and learning.

We have deliberately tried to continue with a regular curriculum and not spend time doing practice tests nor doing 'special' preparation. However this has affected our results in the past two years. We now feel the results are a more accurate picture of where our students are at an independent level.

We just do practice papers before the tests to give students an overview of the papers, and an idea of what to expect. We have also changed the way that we run the exams. In previous years it was not so serious, but now it is more formalised.

I think there is always the pressure to do well as we know that our school will look bad but though we already have a strong focus on literacy and numeracy in our school to address the needs we have, we do not alter our programs specifically to teach 'to the NAPLAN' as many schools do. We prefer to be honest and get a true representation of our student strengths and weaknesses so that we can address these in our future planning as needed.

Some teachers and schools have re-scheduled material that they covered anyway to line up with the timing of the NAPLAN tests:

Apart from the scheduling the learning of persuasive techniques to coincide with the timing of NAPLAN, there is very little impact - however, the information that schools get from NAPLAN results are far too late in the year to be meaningful for the classroom teacher - so as a kind of formative assessment it is virtually useless.

We changed the curriculum slightly so that the students would be specifically prepared for the persuasive task.

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English Curriculum sequence has been altered to move persuasive writing unit to the weeks before NAPLAN.

Not significantly, but it should be a benefit, and it has not been that either.

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

We had 76 full responses to this question. 16 respondents indicated that there was little or no discernible impact and the other 60 wrote often lengthy responses about the impact of the publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website on teaching and learning practices at their school. Three of the impacts were positive and the rest were negative, with many of these impacts being described using language such as “devastating” and “extremely detrimental”. Even those who had not looked at the website had strong opinions about it. One teacher wrote, “I have no idea as I have never looked at the MySchool website—I consider it to be a useless waste of e-space and time”. Teachers identified many aspects of their teaching and student learning practices that have been impacted upon by NAPLAN. We have categorized these into the impact on the school’s reputation (and how management responds in ways which impact upon teaching and learning); pressure felt by staff to change teaching and learning; parental/Community responses and an increased focus on NAPLAN in the school curriculum.

Impact on the school’s reputation

The publication of the NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website have resulted in many schools’ reputations being affected in both positive and negative ways (depending on results). The emotional toll is high on schools with low results. One respondent described that the publication of the results “has made the teaching and learning practices much more test driven and exam focused. It can be devastating to a school in a low socio-economic area to have these results published on this website”.

Many teachers cited examples where loss of reputation caused NAPLAN to have great significance to the school shaping teaching and learning processes. One teacher wrote that, “There are the usual complaints from on high (region) each year about how bad we all are, which is discouraging”, and there was a sense from the responses overall that school executives would be operating in crisis mode when the NAPLAN results were not positive:

I have had executive members of staff comment openly on how the results look to the rest of the community although they are aware that it is not the only measure.

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

Principals tend to over-focus on the results because of reputation:

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

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and student/ student relationships and has caused the principal to demand that teachers work in a standardised and measurable way.

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

Principals and school management were reported as sometimes going to desperate measures to preserve their school's reputation, controlling who does and does not sit the tests, or even to shift low-performing students out of the school completely:

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

...the school data published on MySchool website is of the utmost importance to leadership, and basically dictates the inane things that they do to lift these scores. My school, like many public schools in lower socio-economic areas, tries to shift kids to 'alternative pathways' - that is to say, dump them on somebody else so that they do not bring down the schools' overall data. Immoral, ineffective and sickening. There is a silent but pervasive awareness that these tests and published results drive everything at this school from the top down, that leadership makes extravagant promises about what our kids will 'achieve' on tests, and they will do anything to get those improvements to secure and advance their careers at the expense [of] learning, student well-being and teacher motivation. These tests and the publication of school results undermine the motivation and professionalism of teachers, particularly in schools like mine that are burdened with the bureaucratic pressure that falls on school communities lacking the cultural, social and financial capital to resist it.

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

In our case it has been positive - and has resulted in a surge of enrolments. We are working towards a strong collaborative culture, examining student work samples and classroom visits to reflect on student engagement with their learning. The process has encouraged more open dialogue amongst staff.

Enrolments are steadily increasing as our NAPLAN results have been quite good.

Our school is struggling with numbers of enrolments and performance issues so NAPLAN is used as evidence of what needs to be done, whether staff are able to deliver or not, in places where resources and staffing are limited.

Respondents wrote about how the comparisons between schools was leading to negative competition between nearby schools, rather than collaboration, as schools competed for students and reputation:

There is some pressure from above to ensure that our results are as good as if not better than those of our close and similar competitors.

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All the schools near us are private schools with select entry so we always look bad to local parents.

NAPLAN As Curriculum

As indicated above, principals who feel loss of reputation due to low NAPLAN scores are often looking to teachers to improve these scores. A number of respondents wrote about the pressure they feel to improve results—“Pressure, pressure, pressure! We have to take a slab of time to prepare!”— and the ways in which this is skewing their teaching to teach specifically to NAPLAN:

There is a reasonably regular reference made to our perceived 'position' as is measured by NAPLAN data and the inference that we need to improve. This is reflected in the requirement that Yr 7-9 teachers identify how they will enhance student performance in NAPLAN within their annual performance plans.

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

Our school is seen a fairly good school, the good results have put increased pressure on staff to keep results high and keep improving. It has also meant increased student numbers at our school leading to larger classes - 26 or 27 on average.

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

There was a sense that some schools were 'cheating' at NAPLAN by removing low-performing students and that this was unfair when schools were being ranked against each other:

I think it is an unfair representation of our students' abilities and know for a fact that other schools teach to the Naplan to improve results and get the students who will adversely impact their results to get parental support to be exempt. We do not do this and being from a low socio economic area, I do not think schools are being fairly represented across the state.

Another respondent felt that the results obtained by schools reflected the amount of time schools spent on teaching Naplan:

...school results are a largely reflection of amount of time school puts into it. If you allow Naplan to hijack the curriculum at the expense of all else, the school will do well. I know for a fact that some schools do Naplan from Day One of the school year. This is ridiculous! The original and worthwhile reason for Naplan was to identify struggling students. This has been lost.

Parental/Community impacts

Respondents saw that there was a “lack of understanding of the nature of the tests by parents”, the results are interpreted by the community out of context and often with little

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knowledge of what the scores might mean, or what the tests might be measuring, beyond whether the lines were green or red. One teacher wrote that NAPLAN “is a detrimental tool that is understood and used poorly by parents and the community”. The importance of the NAPLAN results to parents is extremely frustrating to many teachers who feel undermined in their teaching and learning:

As we know the results are made public and compared to other schools on the one test on the one day, we make every effort to create an environment conducive to the students doing the best that they can. It creates stress and is frustrating because the public do not necessarily understand the context.

Respondents wrote of the results publication as undermining parental “trust of the school”, despite the parents not really understanding what the tests were about, “Parents lack trust in what is being taught if their student doesn't do well”.

The bottom line for many teachers was that, “Our school is perceived as deficit and the judgments made about the value of our school have become score oriented”. Positive NAPLAN results can likewise lead to a skewing of a school’s reputation that is “score-orientated”:

I am working with a school that topped the state in some areas of the literacy NAPLAN. The principal told me that 3 parents phoned her the day after the results were released wanting to change their children to her school. She felt quite insulted by this, because she saw NAPLAN as one very small part of what the school did and stood for. These parents did not care about the enormous energy the school was putting in to inter-cultural understanding or developing their art program. It was insulting to her.

Schools are responsible for far more than the range of skills tested in NAPLAN, but many of the respondents felt the ways in which this scoring was narrowing how the community perceived their worth. Schools with positive results are affected likewise, as the community in general turns to the MySchool site as the place to compare schools, to judge them and to rank them, neglecting what they do beyond what is tested in the NAPLAN. Many teachers feel passionately about the effects that this is having on their school and their ability to work effectively in their classroom.

It just reinforces the abhorrent attitude to education. Careers have been destroyed by this. Good people who care about their students have been destroyed. No one takes into account the difficult students that some take on and make a difference to; if their little data dots aren't increased enough then a teacher is considered a failure. MySchool needs to take into account the amount of abuse that happens from students and parents at a given school and the amount of students that have sociopathic issues, suspensions etc. And please can we let future teachers know that if they are in a government high school it is likely that they will be treated as dirt.

I worry that we are creating a working childhood for kids (I think of coal mining Victorian urchins). We need to cope with grey areas, yet we are only offering black and white.

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

As stated in the opening to our submission, we did not ask our membership directly about this item.

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However many of the responses that were submitted under **g) Other relevant matters** were suggestions from our membership about potential improvements to the program, so we have included them under this item heading.

Provide the feedback and results of the testing more quickly to schools

Many respondents wrote about the huge delay between the timing of the tests and when the schools receive the results of the tests. Even people who were positive about the testing wrote this as a criticism of the process, and numerous respondents stated that this time lag made the results useless to the school— ‘Staff feel it is too late to be useful to their teaching’. The key thing here is that teachers are dealing and working with groups of individual students, so if the testing is going to help them with their work with those students, they need it in a timely manner so that they can develop a program to respond to the needs of that student—“the test is an ineffective teaching & planning tool”. The framing of the tests tends to treat students as “school cohorts”, particularly in the ways in which they are represented on the MySchool website, and this is very different from how teachers perceive students and their results.

The results themselves present a snapshot in time—6 months is a long time to wait for results, so they are not really useful for a teacher, as students have moved on since then. Additionally, some teachers questioned why there was even a need for this timelag: “By the time students receive their results they are no longer relevant. I have marked NAPLAN and the writing is marked within 6 weeks, so why are we waiting 4-5 months to get the results back?”

Respondents questioned that, as a snapshot, it does not represent the complexity of teaching and learning, so the lateness makes it irrelevant.

Despite statements about the 'usefulness' of NAPLAN data fed to teachers, the data is released FAR too late for it to be relevant to teachers, who don't look at it in any case because it's in a format that doesn't represent at all the strengths and weaknesses of a complex, emerging learner, and furthermore, teachers, more than anyone else already know the students in the classroom provided they are given enough time to establish productive, respectful and nurturing relationships with them - the capacity to do so being undermined by official projects such as the NAPLAN and all their attendant pressures. In short, the NAPLAN is not for students or teachers, it is for bureaucrats to secure their positions on the basis of data that is achieved using very questionable methods.

The timing of NAPLAN is not helpful, as the long a delay in receiving feedback on NAPLAN means, realistically, it is a measure of term one capability that is not able to be used for diagnostic purposes till after report writing - if it is used at all.

Some of our respondents indicated that teachers had taken this delay into their own hands:

The results take too long to get back to us so I cheat a bit and mark the papers myself. However, I don't have many students so this is doable for me. Surely an answer template could be provided for each test on receipt of our completed booklets so that schools can start looking at the data for themselves.

Too much time elapses before results are made available unless teachers spend hours copying & correcting the tests immediately after students have completed them.

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Do not publish the results of the tests on the MySchool website

As seen under Section d), the publication of the NAPLAN results on the MySchool website has had extremely negative impacts for many schools and very few positive impacts. As noted earlier, there are negative impacts even for schools who do very well in the testing, as the complexity of their work is reduced to a set of scores in the minds of some members of the public. This was a theme through many of our responses, with respondents feeling that this was extremely limiting and de-valued their school and its approaches to teaching and learning. "The culture around NAPLAN needs to be that it is a snapshot and other wide evidence needs to be factored in to any school's profile".

Test Different Years at Secondary Levels

Many teachers responded that in secondary schools, the testing of Year 7 (when the students had only been in the school for 3 months) and again at Year 9 (when the students were often disengaged with the idea of schooling in general, but a test that they did not see as particularly useful to themselves in particular) was the wrong time to be tested, particularly when they felt that the stakes were so high.

We test our literacy and numeracy using other tests, so our cohort of students who include several autistic and special needs students are covered by this process and do not do well in NAPLAN. Our secondary students do not try in Year 9 so again we have had to really pressure them to try.

It is a fundamentally flawed test. The fact that it is scheduled in advance means that it is not a snapshot of the students' performance, but something that is prepared for. It also fails to take into account the fact that students, especially by Year 9, are not inclined to invest effort into things that do not bring them a reward. Numbers of students I have taught have expressed that since this test is not going to be referenced in their report, they have not really tried on it. It should also be noted that the time delay between the students sitting the test and the school receiving the detailed breakdown means that it is limited in its ability to be used to inform teaching practice.

Improve the reliability of the tests

There were numerous comments about the reliability of the tests and the accuracy of what was being tested. Some of the comments point to errors in the test itself, and others pointed to the unreliability of using the series of tests across the span of years. The reading section, in particular, received criticism:

I am glad that there is some kind of accountability below VCE years. For far too long, these years have been allowed to wallow in welfare models and solo practice, not aligned to any learning continuum. If schools have an adequate scope and sequence then NAPLAN skills are addressed across the year level and with increasing complexity through the years. The Reading section is not a good measure and gives little information for the classroom teacher. It does tell me that a student is reading below level (but not at what level) or reading at level. They could be reading above level but again, we don't get that kind of information in this type of assessment. It is important to have a reliable measure of growth from Years 3 - 9 as this model allows for intervention and extension. Don't give in to the critics. They can't see the art of teaching blending with the science of teaching. The "hurdle" model of assessment is almost exclusively practiced in secondary schools to the detriment of most learners.

A teacher educator who had worked on the tests with pre-service teachers had found incorrect answers were supplied with the tests:

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When I have worked through sample tests with my pre service teachers they have identified incorrect answers supplied (7 errors in one test alone) as well as a complete absence of opportunities for children to apply literacy skills developed, such as drawing on cues or engaging in inferential reading. They have identified the tests as information based, not knowledge or learning based. These are astute observations by those who will teach literacy/English in the near future.

Align the tests with the Australian Curriculum and current teaching and learning practices

Elsewhere we have noted the number of members who said that the focus on the testing means that students have to be taught the forms of testing in advance. This is particularly true of the younger students, where teaching and learning in primary schools is usually student-centred and very responsive, rather than having a teacher at the front, reading a script to the class. Teachers noted that “The format and structure of the tests does not marry with our normal teaching and learning practices”, and many of the “unintended consequences” noted by the membership were related to this.

How can a test of 40 or so questions ever expect to accurately judge a student’s performance? The test is administered in a way that is not like children would be learning in the classroom where we scaffold and support their learning, building their confidence and teaching that it is OK to take risks and not always have the right answer.

If Australia really wants a test like NAPLAN, the questions should be related to Content Descriptions & Achievement Standards of Australian Curriculum directly. Also the test should be conducted at the end of the year and results should be available from first day back at school.

There was also criticism of the quality of what was tested: “Naplans is a waste of time - it is too easy, does not improve results, and reflects a dumbed down curriculum”.

Develop an assessment tool that takes socio-cultural and inclusion factors into account

There were a number of responses collected that called for testing that was more inclusive of all students. It was stated that the tests did not take context into account:

I agree that there is a need for assessing and monitoring children against their peers across the state and country; however, I cannot see that the NAPLAN testing is that tool. Being a random and generalized form of assessment that does not take into account context, student experience and background, I can see more negatives than positives in it.

Additionally, several respondents pointed out that the testing favours middle-class language constructions, and saw this as disadvantaging many students:

NAPLAN represents a constructed view of literacy that categorises middle-class English speakers as superior to those from a disadvantaged or non-English speaking background.

There were numerous responses about the difficulties for English as an Additional Language and special needs students:

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English as an Additional Language students should not be required to sit for the NAPLAN tests. The results published on MySchool website do not differentiate between EAL students and non- EAL/English. Therefore, overall results for the cohort of students in a school may appear to be well below the state or national mean. EAL students find the tests difficult. This is why they are studying EAL. Some students have been in the country for no more than a year and many have had limited schooling in their country of birth.

I've worked in schools that include their 'special needs' students and schools that don't. Some schools prepare excessively others don't etc. The comparative data isn't useful.

I agree that there is a need for assessing and monitoring children against their peers across the state and country; however, I cannot see that the NAPLAN testing is that tool. Being a random and generalized form of assessment that does not take into account context, student experience and background, I can see more negatives than positives in it.

g) Other relevant matters

We had 62 responses to this question, the majority of them focusing on the contribution of NAPLAN to teacher de-professionalisation or suggestions for ways in which the program could be improved. The suggestions have already been noted in section e).

Contribution of NAPLAN to teacher de-professionalisation

Many respondents wrote about teacher de-professionalisation as a result of the focus on NAPLAN. The responses included in this section represent the range of ways in which teachers described this de-professionalisation and the range of actions they were taking as a result of this.

An early career teacher is considering a career change because they are finding the culture (of which NAPLAN and MySchool contribute to), to be soul-destroying, dispiriting and disheartening:

You should know that after only four years of teaching, I'm considering a career change. This is in part due to a newfound cynicism about the education "industry" because it seems that the aim of schools now is not to produce deep thinkers but mindless workers. NAPLAN and MySchool have both contributed to a culture in which the job of teachers now is to "add value" and produce results. This is dispiriting and disheartening. I graduated with a VCE ENTER of 97.75 and could have picked a number of other professions but picked teaching because it was something I knew I would love. I still love teaching but I find that my job is only 20% teaching and the other 80% is filled with soul-destroying minutiae.

Teachers' creativity is being silenced by the focus on testing success:

The focus on success in NAPLAN and On-Demand testing is silencing creativity in teachers, taking the spontaneity out of classroom interaction, fails to leverage off teacher individual and personal strengths, encourages teachers to act as technicians rather than professionals and drives truly creative teachers out of teaching. It has done a great deal of damage to the teaching focus, the teaching profession and student wide and long-term learning opportunities and the way they conceptualise learning.

Parents want to know what "NAPLAN" thinks:

NAPLAN has had a devastating effect on the quality of education in my school, and also on teacher professionalism. Parents want to know what NAPLAN thinks, and this has undermined the class

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teacher's role. I believe NAPLAN, especially at Grade Three, is a form of institutionalised child abuse, which has caused untold distress to many thousands of children around Australia. Any caring adult seeing those 7 yr old children sitting silently and anxiously for hours, over three days, completing the tests, looking miserable, would know this to be true.

Teaching has become nothing more than “teaching to the test” when more important things are at stake:

I could go on forever about it. It is one of the reasons I will leave teaching. NAPLAN has created a state of forged data, manipulated statistics, the withdrawal of certain students, the coaching of students, teaching has become nothing more than teaching to the test... this is Australia wide. It has become such a frightful test that school programs are driven by it and we all saw it coming so it can only be concluded that the intent of the NAPLAN focus over the past few years has been to forge data at all costs - driven from the Prime Minister down. Furthermore the amount of tax-payers money that is splurged by schools needing 'literacy and numeracy' coaching, and help etc because the data is not increasing enough (the teachers aren't cheating enough) is repugnant - where is the accountability?? I would like to know who is looking at the data associated with these programs as closely as they are looking at the NAPLAN data. Many students at our school are lucky to have breakfast, lucky to have been asleep by midnight, lucky to have a pen and lucky to have ever read a book in their lives and yet they are being taught to achieve better data in a test that they won't even take seriously to begin with. We had a regional director come in and talk about the data not increasing enough, our assistant principal chastised our staff over it - no mention of the crazy and dysfunctional students that need help - and then the programs are destroyed as funding gets syphoned into rubbish programs - I really want an audit nation wide into all of the programs at schools and curriculum that was destroyed because of the NAPLAN hype. I would like to know how much money has been wasted - and I would argue that many schools have actually gone backwards because of this focus. The classroom teachers are once again smashed by the tossers outside of the classroom, and it is about time that it got turned back the other way.

Broader social pressures on teachers:

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

Conclusions

The VATE membership who have responded to our survey have put forward a variety of positions and sets of experiences about the impact of NAPLAN on their teaching and learning at their schools. Clearly NAPLAN is having a destructive effect on English curriculum and pedagogy in our schools. Even schools where the reported effects of the testing were not as devastating, still reported a lack of actual benefit from the time and resources that were given to the testing preparation and processes due to the time delays between the test taking and the test results being published. The overemphasis of the importance of these tests caused by the publication

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of the tests on the MySchool website and the structure of the site itself which encourages comparison of schools' results have led to an undermining of public trust in teachers and their professional judgements. This mistrust has reached the stage where some parents place more value on what the NAPLAN results have said about their child's progress than what the teacher who has been working with them in class every day throughout the school year has recorded. While these negative consequences have not been equally spread through the membership, the reports we have received from members who responded to our brief survey is enough for us as an organization to have deep concerns about continue with this testing program in its current form.