Steiner Education Australia

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

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program

Literacy and Numeracy

Submission by

Steiner Education Australia

7th June, 2013
To: Committee Secretary
Senate Education
Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

This submission has been prepared in consultation with SEA member schools by:

Tracey Puckeridge
Chief Executive Officer
Steiner Education Australia

Suite 21, Level 11
809 Pacific Highway
Chatswood NSW 2067

ceo@steinereducation.edu.au

Ph 02 9411 2579
Fax 02 9411 2577

Mob 0488 330 175
1. Introduction

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) is the peak national body representing 36 Member Schools and 14 Associate Members across Australia. Each school is independent and autonomous with their own elected governing body. We represent over 8,500 students and their families, in all States and Territories of Australia.

Our schools are diverse, ranging from larger city schools to small schools in remote areas. Many of our schools are situated in communities receiving a low to average SES score.

Steiner education is an internationally recognised educational movement. Steiner Education Australia is also affiliated with the European Council of Steiner/Waldorf Education and the Federation of Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools in New Zealand. There are over 1300 Steiner/Waldorf schools and 2000 Early Childhood centres worldwide.

This submission argues that the National Assessment Program is both limited and problematic; that NAPLAN is not effective and does not reach its intended objectives to improve student learning outcomes, to provide accountability, transparency, social inclusion, wide ranging knowledge and skills, creative and confident individuals and support to schools and teachers.

Steiner Education Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide comment to the Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy.
2. Preamble

The Council of Australian Governments agenda for educational policy reform in 2008 resulted in the National Education Agreement (NEA, 2008) being approved with the objective “that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy” (NEA, 2008). Both State and Territory governments agreed to a performance reporting framework that would collect and publish both student and school data for three reasons:

- Accountability to students, parents, carers and community
- Public accountability in support of COAG outcomes and targets
- Providing an evidence base to support future policy reforms and system improvements, including the aim of better directed resources


Economic theory is increasingly impacting on education policy, strongly focused on measurement, outputs and comparison of outcomes, largely ignoring social issues, diversity and equity. NAPLAN is an example of this, and with increased focus on international standardised tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), high stakes international league tables and competitive country comparisons are now driving global reform agendas.

We believe that education policy should be focused on the goal of a socially just society, rather than a competitive economy in which human beings are seen as human capital. Many researchers are calling for governments to have more imagination in developing education policy (eg. Thomason et al, 2012). Policy makers need to imagine a long-term future, to have progressive ideas, to create visionary policy that leads away from obsession with measurement and instead focuses on school change that encompasses a broad based curriculum; that sees the arts as a key component of all teaching and learning so that students are engaged and find learning relevant and meaningful.

The high stakes focus on NAPLAN and the drive for international country competition in reading, numeracy and science, narrows schooling to a limited view of what is important, devalues the arts, physical education and the humanities and downplays the importance of creativity, problem solving and innovation.
3. Terms of Reference

3a) Whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives

Two objectives of the National Assessment Program “are to help drive improvements in student outcomes and provide increased accountability for the community”. The NAPLAN website states that:

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

*Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the knowledge, understanding, skills and values necessary to provide the basis for a productive and rewarding life for citizens in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision.*

The *National Education Agreement* promotes the idea that being accountable encourages “innovation and excellence from school leaders, teachers and students” (*NEA*, 10). However, this accountability uses NAPLAN results to compare schools in an unhealthy competitive environment. This submission suggests that NAPLAN testing does not lead to student improvement, innovation and excellence, but rather promotes the exact opposite. Policy makers must take into account both Australian and international academic research, on the disadvantages of high stakes standardised testing, that it is not a true measure of student learning, and that testing does not improve educational outcomes for students.

Standardised testing does not support students to become “successful learners, confident and creative individuals” and “active and informed citizens” or “promote equity and excellence” (*Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, 2008). The call for transparency and accountability is leading to a limited view of literacy and numeracy, defined by NAPLAN benchmarks and narrow test methods, rather than providing a fully rounded picture of the richness of student experiences and achievements.

Even evidence from as early as the 1980s demonstrates that testing does not improve education (*Davey and Neill*, 1991). Assessment reform must be part of the whole picture of “curriculum, staff development, school structure and governance, textbooks and schools of education” (*Davey and Neill*, 1991) as well as ensuring the equity of resources across all sectors.
3b) Unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction

Most standardised testing involves multiple-choice questions. This leads to teaching to facts and a narrow curriculum rather than teaching and learning being directed at developing “higher order thinking, problem solving abilities, creativity, or initiative” (Davey and Neill, 1991), skills highlighted by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008). Knowledge today is wide-ranging, rapidly changing and more diverse than ever before. “This sheer range of alternatives and life-wide settings severely limits the effectiveness of any curriculum focused around empirically right and wrong answers, or of any assessment techniques which seek only to measure knowledge within this narrow context” (Bianco, 2000 in Kolantzis 16-17, 2003). NAPLAN testing also tends to narrow the public view of schools, teachers and student performance to those capacities that can be ‘measured’.

In Minister Garrett's media release 13 May 2013, he stated that "while NAPLAN is important, it is also just a routine part of the school year. Students should not be placed under too much pressure and schools should treat NAPLAN as just one of the number of exams that students sit throughout their schooling”. However, with results published on the MySchool website, the tests have become high stakes and many schools place too much emphasis on the tests, putting great pressure on both teachers and students. This was not the original intention of NAPLAN, but is widespread practice in schools across Australia for teachers to teach to the test in order to substantially prepare students to sit the tests and score well. This means there is a lack of equity as students are being prepared for the tests in different ways.

The Whitlam Institute report, The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families (Dulfer et al, 2012) highlights the unintended and negative consequences of NAPLAN on school enrolments, health and well-being of students and on teaching and learning. The report highlights that many teachers believe NAPLAN is not useful as a diagnostic tool, can have a detrimental effect on student self esteem and their picture of themselves as a learner, that there is evidence of teachers preparing students by teaching to the test and thereby ignoring other essential aspects of the curriculum. It shows there is added stress for teachers, schools (administration), parents and especially students.

3c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices

At the launch of the Whitlam Institute report (Dulfer et al, 2012), in Melbourne earlier this year, attendees reported that teachers in many Australian schools are spending
the first 4 months of the year teaching to the NAPLAN tests and students are sitting many practice tests in preparation. Further comments raised at this meeting were that a strong emphasis is directed towards the particular text type for that year’s NAPLAN test, providing a narrow literary focus for students. Steiner schools do not drill students in test preparation, as teachers value the importance of providing students a full and relevant curriculum; creative, imaginative and based on experiential learning. There is a clear lack of equity amongst schools due to different approaches for preparing students for NAPLAN, creating unfair advantage and disadvantage for students; therefore results should not be used to compare schools as the data is flawed.

Excellent educational practice means that teachers should use a range of assessment strategies to allow children the opportunity to demonstrate learning. Yet the NAPLAN tests appear to give more of an indication of how well the children can sit the test rather than what they know and can do. Parents get a report card “from the government” which provides a limited picture of their child’s learning, and yet great focus may be placed on these results.

Effective teachers create a positive learning environment; they promote curiosity, a sense of wonder in the world, a love of learning, participation, co-operation with others and leadership. They understand their students and how they learn. Teachers monitor their learning, their behaviours and attitude to learning daily. NAPLAN is a once every two years isolated event, is not linked to the daily happenings of the class, its school context, or the diversity of learners in the class. One of the original intentions of NAPLAN was to provide schools with diagnostic data, yet by the time results are received (4-5 months later) most students will have moved on in their learning and therefore the assessment is of limited value.

The Steiner approach is different. The Steiner curriculum and pedagogical practice aims:

…to build confidence and joy in the learning experience itself. Overt testing situations imposed in the primary years negate this striving and weaken the confidence of many children — not necessarily via ‘failure’, often just by the comparisons that the child inevitably makes of him/herself with others. Overt testing moves the child’s focus away from personal growth and personal ‘best’ and promotes a subtle competitive element within the individual. No longer is the learning process experienced as a natural process of growth that will continue for life; it is altered by the testing mechanism. Results are valued above experience and striving. Then, as the challenged child struggles towards this new point of external acceptance, confidence is eroded. On the other hand, capable children may shine because they have been accepted in a new way — ie their test results are above the norm and/or above those of other classmates. Their focus shifts then to ‘good results’, and the wholesome learning experience is for them subverted.
And yet each teacher needs to know whether a child has retained previous learning and is independently able to demonstrate particular essential skills. Teachers are accountable to parents, and schools are accountable to various government agencies that need to overview the effectiveness of the education provided in each school, on behalf of future generations and society as a whole. (Ghilgai Steiner School)

Multi-faceted approaches to assessment which are relevant to student learning, experience and context are required. This cannot be provided for by nationwide tests, but is best left to the classroom teacher, who knows their students and how they learn.

3d) The impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website

NAPLAN tests are timed, multiple choice, error-prone questions designed to trick students. This is not a normal classroom situation, does not reflect daily teaching and learning experiences for students and yet the publication of NAPLAN data on the MySchool website facilitates school comparisons and media created league tables. The stakes are high and students lose out most of all, as teachers in many schools focus significant time and effort on students achieving high test results, thereby limiting the time spent on subjects that are just as important; developing creativity, innovation, problem solving skills, higher order thinking and engaging in artistic activities.

The Australian Secondary Principals Association 2009 NAPLAN survey, completed by teachers, principals and school community leaders, clearly shows the vast majority believe that:

- League tables comparing school NAPLAN results will not contribute to school improvement
- Student performance is measured in many more effective ways other than a NAPLAN test
- Publishing the comparison of school NAPLAN results could have negative community impacts on the school
- Publishing a comparison of school NAPLAN results will have a negative impact on students, staff and community confidence in the school
- Comparing school NAPLAN results is flawed as it does not take into account differences in situations between schools
- NAPLAN results are not a reliable measure of school performance
- NAPLAN results do not take into account the inequity of education provision that exists in Australia – hence they are flawed when used to compare school with school
NAPLAN as an accountability measure focuses more on outputs and outcomes, rather than inputs and processes (Lingard 2010, 135). This form of testing does not account for a holistic approach to child development. Schools have both short and long term goals for students; they teach much more than literacy and numeracy. The importance of healthy student/teacher relationships supports not only academic learning, but also social/emotional, aesthetic, moral, physical and spiritual development.

3e) Potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment;

There are more effective, valid ways to support teachers to improve student learning, achieve best practice in assessment and also be accountable and transparent. The National Assessment Program should be comprehensively reviewed in light of recommendations by Australian researchers and evidence of the failure of high stakes standardised testing in other countries. Australia could lead the way in educational assessment reform by channeling funds into the development and implementation of assessment for learning practices that would support students and teachers and bring about real changes that would be of ongoing benefit to all students.

At present, the National Assessment Program is an example of a policy grounded in mistrust of teachers and schools, and government preference for a business/economic type of school accountability. Australia needs a new National Assessment Policy to guide the development and implementation of an assessment model that inspires teaching and learning, is creative, and highly relevant to what students are actually learning in the classroom; a policy that would achieve National Assessment Program objectives.

There has been extensive research into how policy reform could be achieved. Firstly, the “skills and characteristics required of successful learners, workers and citizens in the knowledge economy” (Kalantzis 15, 2003) need to be defined as “autonomous, self-directed, flexible, collaborative, of open sensibility, broadly knowledgeable, and able to work productively with linguistic and cultural diversity”. Secondly, it would have to be acknowledged these are not capacities that can be assessed through standardised testing. Kalantzis (15, 2003) argues that a “new basics … at the level of curriculum, with correlative assessment techniques such as analysis of portfolios, performance, projects and group work” is required. Eisner (2004) supports the argument that important capacities such as “curiosity, inventiveness, and insight” are incapable of standardised measurement, yet should be held as being of utmost
importance. Any form of standardised assessment that narrows the curriculum and hinders the development of these essential human capacities, should be reviewed. A new style of assessment that covered these attributes would certainly support the objectives and goals of both the National Education Agreement and the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008).

3f) International best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing

Evidence from the past decade shows that many UK, US and European schools are experiencing substantial problems and adverse consequences, resulting from standardised testing. Professor Dylan Wiliam from King’s College in London has for many years been exposing the fundamental flaws in the thinking behind both the policy and the implementation of national curriculum assessment and how data is being used to measure performance of students, teachers and schools. Wiliam and Black (2005) compared assessment traditions and education systems in France, Germany, United States and England. Their evidence concluded:

...that it is precisely the demand for accountability which has produced unprecedented pressure to improve education systems that is likely to be the biggest impediment to achieving that improvement.

Britain’s Association of Teachers and Lecturers have stated grave concerns that the push to raise standards to meet the needs of international economic competitiveness and economic growth has narrowed the curriculum. Teachers are under great pressure to teach to the test and students are being taught to view learning only as a means of gaining employment or higher learning qualifications. Publicising league tables in England has meant that schools are either determined as ‘successful’ or ‘failing’: threatening closure of ‘failing’ schools and “the pupil intake of schools being no longer reflective of the communities they were intended to serve”. (ATL, 2010). The report, Make Assessment Measure Up (ATL, 2010) states:

There is substantial evidence that the current focus on high-stakes tests has negative effects on pupils and their learning ... Testing has been found to be stressful and demotivating, particularly to lower achieving pupils on whom there is now such a policy focus ... Indeed, international evidence shows that the most educationally successful countries postpone national testing.

In addition, the high and inappropriate emphasis on standardised assessment in England is affecting the ability of teachers to plan personalised learning as they
spend their time and skill assessing the National Curriculum level of their students, reducing their own ability to make judgements and plan for good assessment, limiting student learning experiences and diminishing teaching skills. It states:

*However much they question test reliability, they face a relentless media and political bombardment about test-defined success or failure which takes the reliability of national tests as a given. In short, the capacity of teachers to assess confidently and accurately is central to systemic improvement, and is depressed by a national testing system.* (ATL, 2010)

Australian researcher Bob Lingard (2010, 132) has found the effects of borrowing policy from other countries (as Australia has done with copying education policy from USA and England) can be negative, if research is not undertaken into the effects of a particular policy, such as standardised testing, and applying knowledge by consideration of national and local history and culture. He states that:

*Evidence from the highest performing schools systems, such as Finland, suggests the need for ‘informed prescription’ at the systemic level and support for ‘informed professionalism’ at the school level within a culture of trust, innovation and ongoing learning for all in schools...[V]ery successful schooling systems such as that in Finland do not have high-stakes tests, standardized testing; rather they have highly educated teachers with a high degree of professional autonomy practicing intellectually demanding pedagogies for all students.*

He calls for ‘better policy learning’ and rejects ‘blind policy borrowing’ calling for ‘richer and more intelligent’ educational accountability linked to a ‘new social imaginary’ (2010, 132).

3g) Other relevant matters

Linda Darling Hammond in Lingard (2010, 144) highlights the importance of educational accountability combined with a rich and socially just schooling agenda. She gives some clear pointers for future reform that show NAPLAN is inadequate as a national assessment program and suggests the following:

- Recognise the responsibilities of all actors, including governments, systems, schools, students, communities and parents to learning outcomes;
- Acknowledge the broad purposes of schooling;
- Reject the view that improved test results on NAPLAN are indicative of improved schooling or a more socially just school system;
- Reject the top-down, one-way gaze upon teachers as the sole source and solution to all schooling problems;
- Recognise the centrality of informed teacher judgment and quality of pedagogies to achieving better learning outcomes for all students; and
- Recognise the need to address poverty.
Qualitative educational outcomes are essential for Australia to maintain a cohesive and diverse culture, as we continue to integrate a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural population with significant immigration to our shores. Any assessment of education that gives weight to this is essential for Australia's future. We therefore need to relook at the national schooling agenda with imagination and creativity. Schools can be accountable to government, parents and students by focusing on excellent school leadership, quality teaching and learning, ongoing professional learning for teachers in all aspects of schooling, and forming stronger community/school relationships.

Lifelong learning emphasises dispositions such as creativity, adaptability, initiative, responsiveness and confidence. The OECD policy brief on Lifelong Learning (2004) highlights the importance of motivation, the importance of learner-centred pedagogy, wider range of opportunities and greater flexibility in teaching programs.

In Steiner schools, experiencing wonder and reverence for the natural world in the early years is how we lay the foundations for the development of healthy curiosity and inquiry skills in later years; but how can we be accountable for wonder? How do you assess reverence? How can we measure the ability to problem solve and adapt to new situations?

If all young Australians are to become "successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens" (MCEETYA, 2008, p.8), then policy makers could look to Lingard's (2010, 144) suggestion to "attempt to develop rich and intelligent forms of educational accountability linked to a socially just schooling agenda".

We appreciate this is a difficult task, but public policy debate is urgent; to explore and create new ways of monitoring, tracking, articulating and evidencing the complex, qualitative aspects of teaching and learning processes; to write "rich and intelligent" (Lingard 2010, 144) indicators that give teachers accountability and support students in developing learning capacity over fixed ability, emphasising the creative dispositions required to build a positive future.

We do not believe NAPLAN is an effective measure of reaching this goal. If we don't find ways to measure what we value, we will end up only valuing what we can measure.


*National Assessment Program* [http://www.nap.edu.au](http://www.nap.edu.au)


