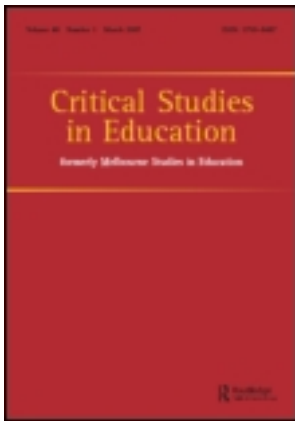


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### Mandated literacy assessment and the reorganisation of teachers' work: federal policy, local effects

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## **Mandated literacy assessment and the reorganisation of teachers' work: federal policy, local effects**

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This paper explores how mandated literacy assessment is reorganising teachers' work in the context of Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, which was implemented in 2008. Students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are tested annually, with school results publicly available. The wider policy context and the emergence of different forms of interconnected educational work associated with the testing phenomenon are described. Taking an institutional ethnography approach, the local effects of the federal policy regime are examined through a case study of one school. What mandated literacy assessment *does* to educators' work in a culturally diverse low-socioeconomic school community is discussed. Key themes include strategic exclusions of students from the testing process, appropriations and adaptations of literacy theory, work intensification and ethical mediation of results. Questions concerning equity are raised about the differential effects of policy in different school contexts.

**Keywords:** ethnography; institutional equity; literacy; policy; standardised testing; teachers' work

### **Introduction**

Standardised literacy assessment regimes purport to measure student outcomes in a reliable enough fashion for judgements to be made about the relative performance of individuals, schools, states<sup>1</sup> and territories. Predictably, governments of various persuasions focus on these comparative statistics. The ubiquitous nature of standardised literacy testing requires ongoing critical interrogation of testing practices, claims made about data and other associated effects (Smyth, 2006).

This paper reports on early findings of a larger project considering the international educational phenomenon of mandated literacy assessment by exploring the experiences of educators in one school community as they implement the national standardised assessment regime introduced in Australia in 2008 (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]<sup>2</sup>). Whilst strong similarities exist in international educational policy discourses in the 'PISA era', in terms of a 'neo-liberal social imaginary' (see Lingard, 2009), my aim is to examine how these policies are experienced in a specific local setting. Investigating the everyday experiences of educators may illuminate the unanticipated and distinctive effects of policy in specific communities.

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Through the approach of institutional ethnography (Smith 2005, 2007), the wider study is investigating mandated literacy assessments (of which NAPLAN is but one element) and the reorganisation of teachers' work in South Australia and Victoria, Australia, and in Ontario, Canada. Although these states have different histories with respect to school reform, they were selected because they are each experiencing similar policy shifts in terms of the requirement to engage in mandated literacy assessments from which school performance data are publicised. Policy and media analysis relating to mandated literacy assessment has been ongoing during each year of the project. We commenced with an analysis of policies and texts related to mandated literacy assessment and reporting at state or provincial level, as well as the policies, texts and processes that each of the schools produced locally.

In the first year of this study (February–December 2009) the research team conducted focus groups and interviews with educators in a range of schools (in terms of size, student demographics and location). The South Australian-based research team worked in seven schools, interviewing 5 school leaders and 31 teachers. In the second year, the South Australian team engaged in ethnographic observations in three schools, seeking to document teachers' experiences of 'preparing for' and administering NAPLAN, interpreting data and dealing with test results. The data discussed here are mainly taken from one school, where the author, along with a research assistant, was involved in negotiating access and conducting observations, interviews and focus groups. The author had already developed a trusting relationship with the leadership team at this school, which had an excellent reputation for its professional development and teaching in the area of literacy. In reviewing the data from this school, the author believed there was some urgency in disseminating the findings as other schools may be facing similar challenges. The school, Waterwell Primary,<sup>3</sup> serves a linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse community in suburban Adelaide, South Australia.

In 2009, the principal and assistant principal at this school were interviewed twice and focus-group discussions were conducted with volunteer teachers. In 2010 the principal and deputy principal were interviewed twice, six teachers participated in a focus group and two parents were interviewed. Observations of strategies teachers used to prepare students for NAPLAN were undertaken in six classrooms and a staff meeting where teachers shared those strategies was observed. Follow-up interviews were conducted with three teachers post-classroom observations and post-NAPLAN. In addition, a meeting between the principal, deputy principal and a data analyst who provided interpretation of the school's NAPLAN results, and the staff meeting where the results were shared with the staff, were observed. In 2011, the administration of the NAPLAN test was observed: Years 5 and 7 spelling and language conventions test and the Year 3 writing test.

From our interactions with educators at this school it was clear that this was not a test shy community. Indeed they already collected significant student literacy performance data. However, mandated literacy assessments are not all the same. For instance a school, district or state may require teachers to use Running Records (Clay, 1998) as a way of assessing reading development. Such practices inform teaching and are mostly welcomed by educators, because their rationales are clearly tied to professional decision-making, judgement, autonomy and, sometimes, to extra resourcing. However, the past decade has seen the global proliferation of testing with a different underlying intent – compulsory standardised literacy tests aimed at measuring whole populations as a part of school and system-wide audits. This paper examines the national testing of literacy conducted at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 early in term 2 of the Australian school year. Given the recency of the phenomenon, having been mandated only since 2008, this study seizes the rare opportunity, in the Australian context,

to document changes as they happen and indeed as they are resisted.<sup>4</sup> It is the first institutional ethnography of the mandated literacy assessment phenomenon across a range of school settings.

This paper begins with a discussion of how and why institutional ethnography is an appropriate and new way to investigate this new assessment context. This is followed by an explication of Australian educational policy, within which mandated literacy assessment is just one part of a policy ensemble of reforms purporting to address quality and equity in education. New forms of work associated with mandated literacy assessment, as one strand of evidence-based educational discourses, are identified. A case study of one school follows in order to instantiate the ways in which educators' work is being re-organised by standardised, mandated literacy assessments. Finally, trends in project findings to date are summarised with respect to broader research questions about equity, teachers' work and mandated literacy assessment.

### Why institutional ethnography?

Dorothy Smith (2005) describes institutional ethnography as 'a sociology for people', research that seeks to 'discover' how things are put together in everyday life. Working from feminist standpoint theory, Smith and colleagues have investigated how textually-mediated practices of neo-liberal governments reorganise the work of people and alter their relations with school systems. In particular, it focuses on those in helping professions (such as nursing), in broader social movements (such as environmental activism) and mothers (in particular, single mothers) (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Rankin & Campbell, 2006; Smith, 2007). In institutional settings, Smith (2005) argues that texts have become integral to coordinating what people actually do. Recently described as an 'under-appreciated epistemological position' (Hart & McKinnon, 2010, p. 1039), Smith's approach asks us to consider 'how specific societies are made possible' (Hart & McKinnon, 2010, p. 1045).

Informed by Smith's approach, the aim of the study is to understand how mandated literacy assessment, as textual practices, done in real time, is reorganising teachers' work. Institutional ethnography avoids *a priori* theorisation, preferring instead to 'discover' how things are actually put together and how these processes and practices are mediated by key texts. In the context of standardised testing, institutional ethnographers identify relationships and processes that are being built across educational institutions and subsequent inequitable impacts in communities.

Discussing the 'managerial turn' in governance and educational policy in British Columbia, Nichols and Griffith (2009) explain:

Texts, created to govern public schooling, can only do so when they are taken up by people in their everyday work. Texts require someone who is able to actualize them as instructions for action, and then move these (or consecutive texts) onto the next someone, somewhere, whose reading and action will continue the textually-mediated relation. (p. 241)

Institutional ethnographies, such as that undertaken by Nichols and Griffiths, identify and track the relationships between translocal discourses and organisations and the actualities of people's lives in institutions. Institutional ethnographers are seeking to explain connections across sites of practice, that is, beyond just one workplace or institution – regimes of institutional and governance processes – that organise people's lives (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). The embodied experiences of educators located in different schools,

regional and state offices as they coordinate their work around national directives are important to discover, not simply to be guessed. Of particular interest is how specific texts mediate and organise the everyday work and relationships of people in local sites and how they elicit chains of actions. It is important to remember that the substantive on-the-ground work of policy reform is accomplished by people at a local level, who reorganise their activities to bring off required tasks in real time. As Angus (2004) puts it, ‘contemporary discourses of globalisation and managerialism have been asserted as virtually “regimes of truth”, but ‘any educational change, even within the current era of globalization, must be accomplished in the dynamic world of complex human agents’ (p. 26, emphasis). Similarly, Ball (2010) notes that while changing transnational networks ‘provide conduits for the movement of generic policy ideas’ (p. 132), policies are ultimately experienced personally and locally (see also Ball, Hoskins, Maguire, & Braun, 2011). In this sense NAPLAN becomes what Smith (2005) would call a ‘regulatory text’ in that it simultaneously organises the work of educators translocally around Australia in various ways during the first term of school and in very similar ways on the three days of testing, which is conducted in May of each year.

The project reported here considers teacher agency, with particular focus on the effects of mandated literacy assessments on teachers’ work in low-socioeconomic school communities. If we see mandated literacy assessment as an example of text-mediated power relations, it is imperative to begin with the experiences of women educators, as in this case, it is women who ‘do the ‘people work’ that mediates the abstract activities of the ruling relations’ (Hart & McKinnon, 2010, p. 1046).

In Australia, as I will show below, the annual national tests have the capacity to significantly regulate the work of a range of educators from state and regional levels, right through to school leaders and teachers. These practices are part of an international trend towards audit cultures (Nichols & Griffith, 2009), which result in professionals being ‘subjected to a process that denies their agency’ (Ranson, 2003, p. 460), particularly with respect to professional judgement (Ball, 2009; Ozga, 2009; Ranson, 2003).

Conducting this study during the emergence of national testing in Australia allows us to hear the experiences of people doing the work before it becomes ‘all too familiar’. This unique opportunity allows us to work towards institutional ethnography’s aim of avoiding ‘institutional capture’ – that is, the dominance of institutional discourse and its capacity to ‘displace descriptions based in experience’ (Smith, 2005, p. 155). This approach identifies and describes the micro practices of actual people in order to inform larger questions such as issues of invisible labour. After all, the re-prioritisation of work and resources makes a difference to what is accomplished in a school. If principals are doing substantial work around student exclusions from testing, what are they not doing? Race and class are also important, not only in terms of test results, but also in terms of how educators re-configure time and resources. As Smyth (2006) insists, such relentless claustrophobic accountability ‘demands certain actions be performed, while forcefully foreclosing on others’ (p. 304). Given that policy effects are uneven, it is urgent to identify how national testing plays out in schools with diverse student profiles (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). A key research question discussed in this paper with reference to the case study school is: How does mandated literacy assessment and reporting reorganise the work of educators in particular school contexts?

On the basis of our work thus far, I argue that teachers’ work is being reorganised by mandated literacy assessments; that it is changing in relation to the emergence of new workers and new tasks related to the management and interpretation of standardised data; that the changes are more profound where the student profile is culturally diverse and where parents have less educational capital.

### The Australian education policy context

Although institutional ethnography begins in the actualities of the lives of those involved in institutional processes (Smith, 2005, p. 31), understanding the wider policy situation remains important. In order to situate the case study of one primary school, I first map the wider national policy scenarios at play at this time. This is crucial in order to understand how the everyday work of school-based educators is being reorganised translocally.

Australia's engagement with national testing is relatively recent, despite the increasingly federalist agendas of the Howard Liberal (Smyth, 2006) and subsequent Labor governments (Brennan, 2009). This occurred against a backdrop of a longstanding (and continuing) tradition in Australia of state education departments and teachers' unions resisting standardised testing, national curriculum, league tables and the like (see <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/2010/NS/papers.html>, retrieved October 12, 2010). Indeed, unions dispute both the validity of the test as an accountability measure and the publication of results on the My School website (<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>, retrieved March 18, 2010). Full discussion of this wider political history is beyond the scope of this paper but has been reported elsewhere (see Doecke, Howie, & Sawyer, 2006; Lingard, 2009; Smyth, 2010; Snyder, 2008). Nevertheless, the broader move towards increasing federal control is evident in the prominence of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), a peak intergovernmental forum in Australia, which has become central to educational policy development as it provided the impetus for both national assessment and curriculum. Since January 2009, a new intergovernmental agreement on federal financial relations commenced, with the COAG Reform Council established to 'drive its reform agenda' (<http://coag.gov.au/crc/index.cfm>, retrieved March 18, 2010). The COAG Reform Council has accountability for federal monies and, as such, its future 'reward funding' is contingent upon targets, milestones and benchmarks, as written into financial agreements between state and federal governments. In terms of education, state and federal governments joined in a 'National Education Agreement' and 'National Partnerships (with Reward Payment)' on Literacy and Numeracy ([http://www.coag.gov.au/crc/reform\\_agenda.cfm](http://www.coag.gov.au/crc/reform_agenda.cfm), retrieved March 18, 2010). In other words, federal government financial resources are now explicitly tied to various forms of compliance *and* to demonstrable gains in standardised measurable performance. Unlike the USA, where states have room to manoeuvre in terms of measuring annual yearly progress (Lee, 2010), all Australian states and territories are now subject to NAPLAN testing. Nevertheless, this does not mean that governments, sectors, regions or schools respond uniformly to new policy demands. Schools and systems inevitably strategise in ways they believe will help them survive and prosper. (In secondary schools NAPLAN is not yet high-stakes compared with assessments that impact on school completion credentials.)

My purpose here is not to interrogate the dominant performative discourses at work in these policies (see Reid, 2009), rather it is to indicate that there are new financial and legal relations between state and the federal governments underpinning and driving educational policy, practice and resourcing, which result in changed positions for both teachers and schools as educational institutions. Such conditions result in the emergence of new forms of educational work – paid and un-paid – which in turn impact on relations between educational workers in and out of schools.

### New forms of educational work

The policy context and emergent forms of associated reorganised educational activity as described above shares many similarities with trends in the UK and the USA that have

created new opportunities for the privatisation of educational services (Ball, 2009; Burch, 2006; Sloan, 2008). In the USA, Burch (2006) identified four main kinds of new products and services that emerged in connection with *No Child Left Behind* legislation and funding – test development and preparation, data management and analysis, remedial services and content-areas-specific programming. In the UK, Ball (2009, pp. 49–50) has also investigated and described the multi-layered fields of policy at institutional, national and international levels, documenting the complex relationships that have emerged.

A similarly complex proliferation of new kinds of work and services is occurring in Australia, with the re-organisation of traditional work, the emergence of new businesses, along with re-badging of existing businesses, government companies and organisations. Online private consultants offer to support schools in improving standards through coaching, practice tests, expert data analysis and so on (see <https://aussat.com.au/>). Some businesses seek to capture the parent market as well, by offering online literacy practice tests for use at home or at school (<http://www.intrepica.com.au>; <http://lms.naplanonline.com/>), while others produce practice test booklets available for purchase in supermarkets, newsagents and post offices.<sup>5</sup> Coaches and expert data analysts are relatively new to the education landscape in Australia and our interviews indicate that teachers, school and district leaders still find the new lexicon odd.

Not all of the new work associated with mandated literacy assessment is remunerated. Teacher professional associations provide assistance and advice through volunteer labour. Parents also report changes in expectations in terms of how they support their children, for example helping with practice tests that constitute homework and assignments based on test marking rubrics, as well as the counselling work that some report doing for children who fear test failure. This is important because parents are differently placed to do supplementary educational work in terms of their cultural, linguistic, educational and time resources (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 127). This fosters the potential for an ‘engine of inequality’, whereby the unpaid labour of middle-class women is interlocked with the practices of schools. When high-stakes educational work is shunted home to families, capabilities of parents, siblings and extended family can become a serious equity issue.

A major incentive for school systems to prioritise these activities lies in the significant percentage of federal government funding tied to what is described as ‘reward funding’. Given the need to provide evidence of enhanced student outcomes using government approved standardised measures, it is not surprising that *data* and *evidence* are increasingly keywords in schools and in the advertising of educational events, services and products. The providers in this new educational territory include publicly funded organisations, quasi-public institutions, private groups and individuals.

In 2009 the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) ran what was described as the ‘Roadshow – Understanding NAPLAN – Evidence-led Leader Series’. A team of nationally known researchers travelled throughout Australia conducting whole-day workshops designed for school leadership teams. The day for which I registered was over-subscribed with around 200 educators packed around tables.

The flier for the Roadshow stated that it was ‘presented by ACER Leadership Centre in partnership with Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (CaSPA)’. This indicates the scale of cooperation being cemented in these changing conditions. While ACER enjoys a strong history of cooperation with principals’ associations, the current policy moment ensures that shared priorities continue to foster ongoing alliances, which are now re-directed towards

the analysis and interpretation of data, which is becoming new knowledge for educational professionals.

Whilst the content of the Roadshow is not discussed here, it suffices to say that basic information about NAPLAN was duly delivered. Despite the cost of \$295AUD plus goods and services tax (GST) applied in Australia per person or \$999 plus GST for a school team of four, the event was over-booked. Schools that sent teachers would have paid not only for registration, but also for replacement teachers. Even if numbers had been confined to the promised maximum of 150, the income from the day would have been \$45,000.

The Australian Council for Educational Research describes itself as a ‘private, not-for-profit company, independent of government that receives no direct financial support and generates its entire income through contracted research and development projects and through products and services that it develops and distributes’ (<http://www.acer.edu.au/about/>, retrieved March 18, 2010). Nevertheless, ACER has a clear history of government funding and frequently undertakes commissioned research for government as a preferred provider. Undoubtedly, as national policies take hold and educators grapple with new forms of work, the time is ripe for such organisations to become key players, especially with respect to the production, management and analysis of quantitative data. Schools become sites of data collection, management and storage, dividing labour around data, and become targets of sector analysis and media representation. In line with Smith’s emphasis on ‘the distinctive textuality of power’, we can see how ‘ruling relations are structured by sets of expert knowledge, bureaucratic categories, organisational policies and forms that must be completed’ (quoted in Hart & McKinnon, 2010, p. 1045). Indeed the outcomes of the analysis of mandated literacy assessments can be swift and serious in schools, as highlighted by the example below.

### **Impact of mandated literacy assessment in a low-socioeconomic, culturally diverse school community**

The study outlines above deliberately included contrastive school communities, as research (Thomson, 2002; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006) indicates the importance of school student profiles and location in terms of teachers’ work and the way in which reform is experienced (Carlson, 2005; Lipman, 2005). Hence we are interested in the unanticipated, uneven effects of policy reform – in ways that relate to class, location, cultural groups and gender – for teachers, students and families.

Research from just one school is discussed below. In so doing, the intention is to follow the approach described by Thomson, Hall and Jones (2010) as deliberately focusing on ‘the very local of the local-global policy relationship’ (p. 639) in order to explore in depth, and in a concrete way, how policy is experienced. Our inquiries in this school commenced just over six months after the introduction of NAPLAN, as one cycle of testing and results were being completed. Waterwell Primary School incorporates a Child Parent Centre and takes children from Reception (the first year of compulsory schooling) until Year 7 (the final year of primary schooling in South Australia). It is located in a low-socioeconomic community that is linguistically and culturally diverse. Of the children, 60% are on school card, a recognised indicator of poverty. Around 13% of children are Aboriginal and 72% are English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners. The school has seven ‘New Arrivals’ classes dedicated to students who are learning to speak, read and write in English for the first time. For many years this school has systematically engaged in explicit literacy teaching, following Brian Gray’s approach to accelerated literacy (Gray, Cowey, & Axford, 2003), where teachers lead students in deconstructing texts to learn how the language works and to read



deeply for meaning. It committed resources to teachers' ongoing professional development and collected in-depth longitudinal literacy data to map student learning.

The following narrative identifies key emerging themes from interviews and focus groups conducted towards the end of 2009. These initial conversations indicated:

- the intensity of work involved in strategic exclusions of students from testing,
- how the leadership team appropriated and adapted literacy theory,
- what gets lost in the intensification of teachers' work associated with testing,
- how teacher autonomy is being discursively eroded,
- and how teachers ethically mediate when interpreting test results with parents and students.

The data highlighted in this narrative illuminate aspects of the reorganisation of teachers' work as part of a chain of textually mediated actions associated with national testing and raise significant questions regarding the effects of policy with respect to schools in low-socioeconomic communities. I argue that it takes more work and time to successfully manage standardised testing in such schools than it does in schools where the student population is largely Anglo and middle-class and that the associated effort and redistribution of resources required detracts from other educational practices.

### ***Strategic exclusions – the data that counts***

NAPLAN testing is compulsory unless parents withdraw children for philosophical reasons, or the principal, parents and teachers decide that due to an intellectual disability, or because the students have been in Australia less than one year and are learning English as another language, they are unable to undertake the test. When NAPLAN was first introduced, Waterwell School included all recently arrived ESL category students in the testing. Indeed the politics of inclusion were integral to the school's ethos and they genuinely hoped to generate useful information about their students. When the researchers discussed the impact of the testing at Waterwell with the principal and her assistant principal, they made it clear that the changes had been extremely significant in ways that had not anticipated:

Principal<sup>6</sup> (P): . . . it was made very clear at the end of last year that that is the data that counts . . . and that it is practically the be-all and end-all. They say it's not, but it is.

Researcher (R): Counts for what?

P: How successful you are at teaching.

Assistant Principal (AP): At this school.

P: And student achievement, which is sort of the flipside of the same coin, isn't it, yeah.

R: So who is saying what, and how do you know?

P: OK! The Federal Government has made it very clear; Julia Gillard<sup>7</sup> makes no doubt about the fact that NAPLAN is the way schools will be judged in terms of student achievement. Then our CE [Chief Executive] and our Minister have made no bones about it – that, that's the data that counts. The Regional Directors made no doubt about it, that that's the data that counts. They're also talking about wellbeing but in terms of literacy and whether or not you're successful, it's all around NAPLAN.

The principal's repetition of the phrase 'the data that counts' is telling. From the political speeches of the Education Minister to those of CEOs and regional directors, the

emphasis on NAPLAN data is consistent and unleashes a chain of action at the school level. Other criteria for school performance shrink into the background as the NAPLAN data takes centre stage. The dominant texts that come to regulate and re-organise educational practice are now those associated with NAPLAN. In high-stakes contexts, with NAPLAN data being tied to ‘reward funding’, educational leaders must assess the risks of policy developments for their school community and strategically plan a response:

NAPLAN – last year . . . they said ‘This is it, this is everything’. I came back and said to staff, ‘This is it, this is everything, we just have to lift our NAPLAN up’, and they said ‘Yeah, but we’ve put all these kids in’, and I said ‘Well we don’t next year, we just don’t’. . . . so compared to other category 2 schools, it looked like we were failing, so we were classed as an [acronym for identified schools] because we were a failing school in NAPLAN, and I also said to the teachers, ‘We now have to teach to the NAPLAN’.<sup>8</sup> (Principal)

Based only on the first year of NAPLAN data, Waterwell was judged as a ‘failing school’ (which elicited a range of systems processes not discussed here<sup>9</sup>). The leadership team’s faith in principles of inclusion had not paid off. The following year, Waterwell legitimately excluded ‘new arrivals’ – children who were learning English and had been in Australia less than one year.<sup>10</sup> This served to raise the school’s performance data to above average in most areas, in comparison to similar schools and schools across the nation. Their decision about the need for strategic exclusions was validated. It is striking that the results of one test can result in a school being judged as ‘failing’ and how rapidly systems processes (such as reviews and coaching) were brought into play to rectify an assumed problem. Other performance data collected at the school, regional and district level indicating long-term, sustained learning gains for these very same students was initially ignored. In short, only data tied to funding counts. In this context the ensemble of texts associated with NAPLAN become powerful regulators of educators’ work.

The altered work of the school leadership team involved risk assessment around such strategic exclusions. Such decisions may be motivated by pragmatic rather than ethical frames of reference. Once decided, a significant amount of work is required to withdraw students, as outlined in the ‘Principal’s Handbook’, a 26-page text produced annually to instruct principals on their roles and responsibilities with respect to NAPLAN. The Principal’s Handbook is produced by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority and customised with local information by state and local education authorities. Negotiating student withdrawal with teachers and parents, including obtaining parent/caregiver signatures, explaining decisions to students and entering data online has to occur within a short timeframe. These tasks are particularly complex and resource intensive when families do not speak, read or write English. These ethical dilemmas, and the sheer amount of work required in terms of student withdrawal, occur far less in largely Anglo middle-class communities. The extra work compounds exponentially in low-socioeconomic contexts and it occurs at the expense of other activities.

As well as complying with official demands, this principal instructed staff that they must now ‘teach to the test’. Whilst there may be no surprises here, the opportunity costs lie in alternative pedagogical approaches that were forsaken.

### *Appropriations and adaptations of theory towards new ends*

The directive to ‘teach to the test’ did not go without comment in this school, where there was strong union representation. Yet the school culture and level of trust in the leadership team meant that despite teachers’ personal and professional misgivings, they went along

with ‘teaching the NAPLAN’. The principal explains how they practised deconstructing past examples of the ‘magazines’ used in the reading tests:

Some of them think we’ve sold out, but they are all so cooperative that they all do it. I think they all do it! We have year level meetings where we work to teach how to do the NAPLAN. . . . We look at just how the magazine is constructed. Yeah, and use strategies that teachers are using to teach to the test, yeah, looking at the previous . . . magazines and deconstructing that using AL [Accelerated literacy (Gray et al., 2003)] for methodologies and questioning that you were using AL.

The principal calls upon staff loyalty in prioritising NAPLAN, even in the face of professional doubts and accusation of ‘selling out’. The emotional labour involved in sustaining a positive school ethos and a unified staff under these conditions is significant. Not to be deterred, the principal outlines how the textual design of NAPLAN tests now overlays the pedagogical work done by teachers and children. She explains how pre-existing pedagogical approaches to literacy (such as deconstruction and questioning) were being applied specifically to the demands of the test. The principal and assistant principal elaborate:

P: And there’s a sort of pattern to the questions and a physical layout, and things that you need to teach them about the prompts and the clues, and the instructions. If you don’t warm them up to that, the disadvantaged kids, well probably any kid really, just don’t get, you don’t get the best results for the child because, you know, they can miss that bubble over there which says *colour two boxes*, you know, if you only colour one you’re going to get it wrong, so it’s all that about doing the test we . . .

AP: Yeah, how to manage their time, how to do multiple choice.

Their explicit approach to the teaching of reading, informed by theories of Accelerated Literacy, is extended to practice tests in the belief that disadvantaged students would need to be prepared for these different genres, language, test questions, layout and instructions. They take the underlying patterns of NAPLAN testing and use it in re-designing their approaches to ordinary classroom curriculum. The NAPLAN text works as a pedagogical text – a prototype for how texts should be read, questions answered and so on. Hence it is not only test literacy that is being practised here – in this case the logics of the test items are being used to devise similar exercises across the literacy curriculum as the principal explains:

What we have done since I found out that it’s the be-all and the end-all, we have taken our ordinary work through ordinary classroom curriculum and we have extracted or identified or created, NAPLAN-type exercises, so that if you’re looking at this text, for whatever reason, you might do a cloze<sup>11</sup> and do the spelling, like it is in NAPLAN. You might do a punctuation exercise, like it is in NAPLAN. You might do a comprehension question like it is in NAPLAN, so that we replicate the kinds of tasks that are coming out of NAPLAN in our usual literacy program.

These educators adjust their pedagogical approaches to strategically prepare students for NAPLAN, some willingly, some less so. They spend most of first term of school working this way, so students become familiar with likely test requirements, in terms of language, test items, how to mark the paper and so on. This is more than just assessment literacy in a shallow sense. In this school, teachers explain the context for the tests, why and how they are used by governments. In helping students become test-savvy, they also intend for students to become critically literate. That hope is part of the justification for the time they now devote to NAPLAN. As Seddon (2003) has argued, neo-liberal educational

policies can have a range of effects – both positive and negative – when negotiated between skilful and committed educators and engaged learners. In this case, the principal works incredibly hard to persuade herself and her colleagues that they can ethically and theoretically align what they do pedagogically in the name of NAPLAN. However, it could also be argued that the very pedagogy instantiated in NAPLAN tests has infiltrated everyday practice and that students are learning which knowledges and practices are important and which are not. What remains unknown is the extent to which students appropriate this approach to learning activity as normative or understand it as test-specific behaviour.

While teachers may on the surface co-operate with the whole-school prioritisation of NAPLAN, it comes at a cost, as different teachers' accounts of the dilemmas with which they were grappling make clear.

### *Work intensification: what gets lost?*

Despite the discourse of NAPLAN being 'the be-all and end-all' in terms of its official status, a number of teachers were unhappy with the effect it was having on their practice and reported that the allocation of time towards it was having a negative impact on relationships with students and curriculum delivery. In the work intensification associated with test preparation, other pedagogic activity was sidelined. One upper-primary teacher explained how her usual approaches to working with a disengaged student were abandoned:

I'm going to tell a different story. I've got a kid who's doing really badly . . . he's just, his grades have just gone [sound effects] down this year, and I've just spent time talking to the counsellor and an outside counsellor that's coming in to support this kid, and when the counsellor said 'Have you done this and this, and this and this, and this and this, for the kid in the class?' I've gone 'Well actually, I normally do those', or I've done those in previous schools, but the pressure this year was so great to meet the requirements for the . . . the NAPLAN stuff . . . that actually I couldn't do any of those things. I tried to put tiny little windows in it but I could not cover the other things, the social learning stuff, that I think is really important that these kids need, because I wasn't meeting my 300+ minutes of literacy a week, and I wasn't matching the description of Accelerated Literacy, and I wasn't covering a reading program, and I wasn't teaching them how to do the test and get their writing stuff prepared anyway, let alone trying to add this extra stuff in. I haven't taught SOSE [Studies of Society and the Environment] all year. I haven't taught Visual Arts all year, on the grounds that, well . . . there's nowhere to put it, because I needed to do this other stuff, because the pressure has been so huge. (Teacher 1)

This teacher identifies several quandaries. Her professional knowledge and practice has been put in abeyance; her previous approaches to students with difficulties, which she has used successfully in the past, are temporarily overlooked. Ironically the counsellor advises her to do what she already knows, but hasn't found the time or space to apply. As she goes on to detail a litany of what she believes she wasn't doing, we hear her increasing frustration with 'stuff' – the collective term she uses to account for perceived mounting and overlapping demands. Because NAPLAN is what counts, other curriculum areas and other literacy activities are sidelined; even preparing for all elements of the literacy test is difficult. Apart from stress, the secondary effect here is that a disengaged student experiences a teacher who is unable to use her full repertoire to re-connect him with the educative process. It is not that she doesn't have the professional knowledge or experience, so often seen as the causes of student alienation. The pressure she experiences in terms of NAPLAN, and the processes associated with the school's designation as failing, means she is not meeting her own expectations. Subsequently, a student, who most needs her expertise, becomes a problem in a different way.

The first term of the school year, in its relentless focus on NAPLAN, may produce a chain reaction that leads to unanticipated teacher and student casualties, confirming findings elsewhere that high stakes testing may displace teachers' educational priorities (Watanabe, 2007). This teacher's sense of her professional capability is dislodged. It is not only that the policy narrows her curriculum and pedagogical responsiveness, but her fundamental faith in her own judgement is shaken. This loss of confidence is unlikely to be visible and the collateral local and personal effects of national (and international) policy are likely to be missed, along with other long-term consequences for school communities, such as those for whom recruiting and retaining experienced teachers, is problematic.

Below, another upper primary teacher reports a different form of professional dislocation as he portrays his experience of test administration.<sup>12</sup>

### *The discursive erosion of teacher autonomy*

It may seem obvious that teachers administer tests in classroom contexts. However, as teachers and parents reported, the altered context where the classroom becomes as a site of testing, is experienced as strange by both teachers and students. Moving desks so students are sitting 'alone', not speaking for 45 minutes, observing the test-taking rules as a particular kind of aural event, prohibitive of the usual helping forms of pedagogic discourse, can be unsettling. Pedagogical relationships are temporarily altered. The teachers below contrast the test discourse with the talk they associate with 'how you teach':

T2: It really formalises the things because it says *Teachers must . . .* and then you read this script that says *The following test goes for however many minutes. You are not allowed to do this or You're not allowed to do this. Please make sure you answer all the questions. Can you now . . .* and it's almost like across the nation we're going to synchronise watches and start. *Now turn to the back of the test to the practice questions.* The practice questions are really, really easy, but that script was just, I mean I skipped over certain parts of it. As I was reading I just said to my kids 'Blah and blah, blah, blah' . . .

T3: Because that's not how you teach.

T2: . . . it's not how you teach, and it makes you feel very . . . if I was a student, kind of raises your anxiety level even more because there's this voice, this authoritative voice coming through this piece of paper. *That was not what my classroom teacher speaks to me like.* It's just this huge, quite powerful kind of voice behind it . . .

This somewhat dramatic account indicates the extent to which some teachers see these requirements as an imposition that supplants their pedagogic discourse. Having to read a non-negotiable script to students clearly creates dissonance for them and, they imagine, for their students, many of whom are learning English as a second language. The subjectivity of the teacher is changed by these performative policy technologies and accountability regimes (Ball, 2003). If teachers feel like ventriloquists' dolls in May (in supervising the tests), their position alters again in September, when test results are sent to schools and have to be explained to parents and students.

### *Ethical mediation of results*

Regardless of teacher frustrations over NAPLAN data, they need to be ready to answer student and parent questions about individual results as they are sent home, some five months after test administration:

- T2: . . . I had a couple of kids who worked really, really hard and they came a long way, I think we were talking about this, their movement, and then they got . . . the test and they see this . . .
- T3: In comparison, yeah [interjecting]
- T2: . . . little black dot sitting underneath the line and they just go sort of . . . I said ‘Look, don’t worry about it, that’s not what it’s about’.

Where a student is below the norm, their results are visually represented as a dot below a line depicting the national average. Teachers must interpret this result and counsel students about its importance in relation to other assessments that have measured their learning over time. Teachers mediate the actual results in terms of long-term educational trajectories, informing students that this result ‘is not what it’s about’. In addition, parents told us that students frequently compare their results with peers and siblings, creating further interpretive and counselling work within the family context. The results elicit inquiries from parents, particularly those who have recently arrived in Australia, as the ESL teacher explains:

. . . yeah, it was New Arrivals. *What on earth does all this mean?* And it’s very hard to translate, except for kids that have been through Indian systems that are used to having standardised tests. They can sort of understand, but for the other ones it’s just like something completely new, and I would say ‘Don’t worry about it really. Worry about it later when they get older’, because I think it’s just, it’s not measuring their true abilities of English anyway, so ‘Try not to pay attention to their grid’. (Teacher 3)

Explaining NAPLAN results to parents and students is fraught. On the one hand, teachers have a responsibility to explain the literal meaning of the report. On the other hand, they must ethically mediate the meaning-making that parents and students do with this text. Teachers attempt to qualify the results so that neither parents nor students see the report as the final judgement of their abilities. Interestingly, this teacher reported that she advised parents to ignore ‘their grid’, which indicates where the student is situated relative to peers. Yet, according to the federal government, this is what parents want and need to know. Indeed this repositioning of teachers as interpreters of information is new for teachers, students and parents alike, as (unlike other forms of assessment) both assessment and judgement are out of their hands. Whilst teachers may use their professional knowledge to inform their conversations, they may feel themselves to be in contradictory positions if they do not truly believe the results present an accurate picture of student learning. It is not surprising that, internationally, teachers are attempting to ameliorate the worst effects of performative policies (Troman, 2008; Watanabe, 2007).

Despite these dilemmas, this school leadership team and teachers ensured students did as well as possible. As Nichols and Griffith (2009) observe with respect to educators in British Columbia, ‘Regardless of their discursive sympathies, principals’ work across the province is oriented to these official accounting procedures’ (p. 251). At Waterwell, NAPLAN was one part of a larger accountability agenda. The assistant principal explained that quite apart from NAPLAN, there was ‘a huge push’ for ‘evidence’, which was affecting their work as leaders. School rhythms were now scheduled around planning, data collection, analysis and reporting. The principal explained the production of ‘a whole spreadsheet on what data we collect and when, and who examines it and how’. The assistant principal worked after hours at home to customise this for teachers. Data management calendars proliferate as demands for evidence are reiterated at all levels.

Data is not a new concept for educators, having been part of action research for decades. It is not that educators are averse to using data to inform their practice. Indeed, at this school

they were regularly using data to inform and improve practice. However, NAPLAN data is different in that it is standardised, mandated and tied to funding, but also publicly available, and allows for comparisons across schools.

This school, along with many others, has made the best of these circumstances. As a school with an espoused and enacted commitment to social justice, they have grasped this as yet another occasion to demonstrate what their community could accomplish. How sustainable it will prove to be in terms of teacher workload, balance of curriculum, student motivation and improved measurable outcomes, is too soon to call.

## Conclusion

Policies enter the life of schools at particular times and places. A school's profile, its ethos, its cultural, theoretical and discursive resources all mediate how policies are interpreted and implemented. Already existing at Waterwell Primary School were strong leadership, a collaborative culture, a commitment to, and respect for, the diverse student population and high expectations for students' learning. The call for mandated literacy assessment was addressed with energy by the school leadership team, but not before they were positioned textually as a 'failing school'.

With strategic, but appropriate, student withdrawals and a concerted focus on NAPLAN, the school was able to 'turn around' their results within a year, thereby changing their status in the textual order. This new non-negotiable accountability agenda, with all its dilemmas and contradictions, required a great deal of time. At one level, it was a case of managing requirements: these school leaders sought to make the effects of accountability policies less toxic in their workplace, through ethical mediation of policy and assessment texts and practices and sometimes by simply protecting staff and students from as much of the work and stress as they could. At many other levels, it was a case of grappling with new emotional, intellectual and ethical demands, to the extent that some teachers told us they will leave a profession that is intent on locking them into goals and practices to enhance short-term test results.

In this primary school in a low-socioeconomic, culturally diverse community, a federal policy to mandate standardised literacy assessment presented many challenges. The leadership team re-organised the year around NAPLAN and the need to collect, analyse and report on data. Teachers made test preparation a priority, looking for ways to build in NAPLAN-like exercises into the broader curriculum, in order that their students would not be disadvantaged on the national tests. They subsequently mediated student results some months later when students and families sought their counsel. Educators experienced a discursive shift towards 'data' and 'evidence' as keywords not only to be spoken about, but also in terms of time and resource allocation. Given that this school was able to cope and even turn around results, why and how does this matter in terms of equity? As Seddon (2003) eloquently argues:

It depends not on social justice in the abstract but on lived justice within the social practices at every level of everyday life – from immediate face-to-face relations in classrooms to the highest level of government. (p. 241)

Waterwell educators were overtly committed to social justice and examined their practices in terms of the effects of mandated literacy assessment on their diverse student community. They tried to genuinely make sense of NAPLAN as best they could and demystify the embedded logics of these assessment practices with their students. Project interviews in a range of school communities suggest that NAPLAN has less impact in more

affluent school communities where student literacy and numeracy achievements are not ‘a problem’. In schools situated in low-socioeconomic communities, a close examination of the ways in which this program of testing matters is crucial because it changes teachers’ work, the curriculum and pedagogy on offer to the children who are statistically at most risk educationally at a crucial time in their educational trajectories. The teachers reported that the focus on NAPLAN took time away from other learning areas that are important for students’ long term-engagement with schooling (such as Art and Physical Education) and induction into the discourses of other important academic subjects that matter (such as Science and Society and Environmental Studies) (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon, & Pitt, 2002; Gee, 2000; Luke, 2010). In addition, NAPLAN impinges on school leaders’ priorities and time. The principal, teachers and school support officers at Waterwell all reported significant time spent on data collection, management and communication. The Assistant Principal at Waterwell reported having less time to devote to her Aboriginal community liaison role. Mandated literacy assessments need scrutiny, in terms of both what they produce *and* what they remove.

Beyond the impact on educators we should also consider impacts on students, because standardised testing not only re-organises the work of teachers, but children also learn to coordinate and re-orient their work as part of the internationally organised testing processes as exemplified in the NAPLAN tests. Children, too, learn that this is the data that counts.

As the study proceeds the research team is tracing translocal discourses and practices, the involvement of public and private companies and the increasingly global literacy assessment apparatus. Already it is evident that there are new forms of work being produced for educators at all levels, and also for parents. These forms of work are textually mediated by handbooks, test kits, markers’ rubrics and so on – unleashing complex chains of action and new economies.<sup>13</sup> These changes are accommodated differently in different schools, offices and households in ways that are contingent upon the social, cultural, linguistic and economic resources that can be applied to the problem. A range of people work at different times and places to ensure that teachers across Australia can synchronise their watches and supervise the actual work of students sitting the test. The question is with what benefits and at what cost for which students and for the profession? Whilst changes will be experienced by the profession and the student body as a whole, our data suggests that the physical, psychological and intellectual impact may be most telling for educators in low-socioeconomic and culturally diverse primary school communities.

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### Notes

1. In the Australian context I am referring to the states and territories, with reference in this paper to South Australia and Victoria. In Canada the states and territories equate with the province.
2. In 2008, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) commenced in Australian schools. The NAPLAN program continues with all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 being assessed using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling,



- Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. Whilst NAPLAN assesses literacy *and* numeracy the study reported here is concerned only with literacy. The data from the NAPLAN test results gives schools and systems the ability to compare their students' achievements against national standards and with student achievement in other states and territories. It also allows the monitoring of progress over time. <http://www.naplan.edu.au/> (retrieved February, 9, 2010).
3. Waterwell is a pseudonym. I would like to thank the educators at this school for their openness, professional commitment and generosity in welcoming our research and informing our work. Confidentiality requirements prevent me from acknowledging them by name. Individual members of the research team have worked in particular schools to ensure continuity and more fully develop trust with the community. The author and a Research Assistant have worked with Waterwell over a three-year period. This paper has been written by the author only.
  4. At the time of writing the Australian Education Union was encouraging its members to participate in a national boycott of the 2010 tests.
  5. See for example Athanasou and Deftereos (2010), *Year 3 NAPLAN\*-style tests* produced by Pascal Press independently of Australian governments and on sale at Australian Post Offices at a cost Aus\$19.99. This particular booklet contains five sample tests for Numeracy, Language Conventions and Reading.
  6. In Australia, the term Principal is used to denote the role of Head (UK) or Administrator (Canada). The Assistant Principal is also known as Deputy in some contexts.
  7. Julia Gillard is now the Australian Prime Minister. At the time the initial data were collected she was the Australian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education and Minister for Social Inclusion.
  8. The acronym has been omitted here as it may identify the school. Its meaning is that it is a school needing to improve in literacy.
  9. Again the full description of this process and its outcome is not provided here in order to protect the confidentiality of the school and school system concerned.
  10. There is an explicit written process for students to be exempted from NAPLAN as described in the Principal's Handbook: [http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/accountability/files/links/Principal\\_Handbook\\_190310.pdf](http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/accountability/files/links/Principal_Handbook_190310.pdf) (retrieved March 30, 2010).
  11. This refers to a common approach to testing reading comprehension known as 'cloze procedure' where words are removed from a printed text and students are asked to predict them, based on meaning and syntax, and write them into their copy.
  12. In Australia the NAPLAN tests are conducted and supervised by classroom teachers and school leaders. In an attempt to ensure common test conditions a Test Administration Guide informs teachers how the test must be administered. This includes a script with instructions for teachers to read to students.
  13. See for example Burch (2010) for a detailed analysis of new relationships between different kinds of educational institutions and the political economy of testing-related industries.

### Notes on contributor

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