

Chapter 33

NAPLAN Negativity: The Effects that NAPLAN Has on Teachers and Students



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Abstract The school I myself attended was academically orientated and had no special needs students; I developed the belief that NAPLAN was a vital part of education. This changed during my practicums when I had to work with special needs students who were singled out and treated separately because they were exempt from NAPLAN. They found this experience very distressing, and at the same time, I saw how teachers were very stressed and rushed as they tried to prepare other students for the test, at the expense of covering another curriculum. At the same time, the results of NAPLAN do not come back quickly enough to affect teaching, and the results of this single test cannot be as reliable as a portfolio of all the student assessment throughout the year.

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NAPLAN testing is coming up, so my mentor teacher Lisa [not her real name] has asked if I wanted to help out by taking out three different students to work with them on their maths whilst the rest of the class prepared for NAPLAN. This week has been very muddled, and Lisa seems stressed. We have diverted from the curriculum and put normal learning on hold whilst they practice revising their maths and literacy skills in the last effort dash to the test next week. The three students I have taken aside to practice their maths have some sort of intellectual disability each so they won't be sitting the test. I feel bad for them because they seem to not be happy about the fact that they are singled out.

Introduction

I am a very passionate teaching student with lots of experience behind me. I love to work with children and find the world through their little eyes extremely fascinating. Whilst at school I completed my Certificate III in Children's Services, then as I finished school I jumped straight into university as I was keen to get out and become a primary teacher. For the past three years, I have worked at two different primary

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schools as a Schools Service Officer (SSO). I worked in a curriculum-based role in the classrooms with the students and also running my own reading support programme. The other area, which was my favourite, was working with students with special needs. I would assist them in their work and then help integrate them into being able to work as a part of the mainstream classrooms as best they could.

As a child, I hated school with a passion! I enjoyed the academic side as I was quite bright, but I was always bullied and in turn would forever feel uneasy about going and would do anything to keep the attention off me. Because of this, I have found that in the classrooms and schoolyard I am a lot more empathetic and aware of the students' struggles and emotions. I feel I can relate when someone does not want to be singled out or is struggling and embarrassed. For this reason, I have noticed more and more students becoming uneasy when it comes to certain situations, one of these being around the time of NAPLAN particularly those who are singled out as being exempt, showing the class that they are not capable. This became a clear issue for me when the autistic boy that I worked with was embarrassed and confused, asking me as to why he couldn't sit the test with the other students, and there wasn't one for him as he was part of the 5% of students that did not participate from that year level (NAP 2016).

Who Did I Think I Was?

For the duration of my schooling, I attended a very prestigious Christian college. At this college, they were very much interested in academics. I was always at the top of the class, so for myself I did not struggle in this aspect. Special needs students were zero to none. When NAPLAN came around, I was never worried or concerned as academics were my strong suit. We were always told that NAPLAN was extremely important because we were representing our school. There was a high emphasis on preparation both at school and for homework.

When receiving back the results, the school would make a big deal out of your scores when they found out how well students had performed. For me this meant that I always believed it was a vital part of our education because this is how the school made it seem. Because it was quite an academic school and very formal, I never saw anyone having issues with the test or really complaining. This gave me a very biased view of the test. Even the teachers did not seem stressed because they were confident in the students' results as a whole. This biased opinion I then took into my first practicum believing that it was a very vital part of the testing system and that there was nothing for the children to worry about. I did not see it yet from their perspective.

Who Do I Think I Am?

My views on NAPLAN now have been based on two quite prominent points in my recent experiences. The first was a practicum last year where I was asked to take three students aside and complete a different activity with them because they would be exempt from the test. In the lead up to NAPLAN, there were quite a few practice sessions, so my three ended up sitting out on their fair share of lessons. When they first got called and told they would not be doing NAPLAN, they seemed quite confused. The other students were asking questions to both the teacher and among themselves: “Why can’t they? Don’t they know how?” and so on. The class seemed full of questions, and in turn, so did the students who were singled out. One of the students did not seem to mind at all, but it was clear that the other two felt left out.

The second incident was when I was working with an autistic boy. At the time he was quite aware that he was below level, but he was always pushing to try his hardest. His common phrases at the time were “I am too dumb” and “Everyone treats me like a baby”. He would say these when he got angry, frustrated or felt left out, so we strived to involve him in everything the class did, but just at a different level.

This was the issue when the NAPLAN test came around: he was asking why he could not do it and if he was too dumb to take the test. This sparked a range of emotions and made a whole week of anger and frustration as he was continually reminded that he simply could not sit the test. We are constantly told that all students are individuals and should be treated as such, but are we now standardising them all and putting them into one big category so that they can be judged and critiqued?

Students do not seem to be the only ones affected negatively by NAPLAN either. After working in a school and on practicum, I realised how stressed and rushed teachers are and that there are a lot of students below year level. Teachers are so stressed in trying to explain each part of the test and give practice, so students get used to the style, along with recapping what they have previously learned. This made it hard for teachers to fit in all curriculum content, with about one to two weeks wasted on preparation. New learning and teaching should not be interrupted because of this, but it is clear that this is the case. When I was having a conversation with some teachers around the topic of the test, a Year 5 teacher stated with sarcasm, “I think it is great that I can finally start actually teaching the kids; feels like the first day of term again”.

This was at the beginning of Week 3 of the term. Learning should not be put on hold for NAPLAN. Teachers have admitted to skimming through a certain unit. It can also be a big stress on teachers as they can be pressured by leadership, and although they might have taught the students well, some students might not be as good as others from previous years. I believe that students should be subject to only their school assessments, and in the case of ensuring that schools are up to standards and teaching correctly, I believe that the money used for NAPLAN could be better used in getting assessment pieces moderated as a whole portfolio to determine the standards, rather than to base it on one test.

Of This Much I Am Sure

The negatives of NAPLAN far outweigh the positives. There is an emphasis on schools to be inclusive of all, embrace individuality and cater to all different student learning styles, but then along comes NAPLAN which scraps this whole idea and decides to standardise all students and assess and judge both the students and teachers on one assessment piece.

How about Fleming's VARK theory, where each child learns and expresses themselves differently (Fleming 2001). This is the fact for all the students who are better verbal communicators or those who have put in amazing efforts through other assessment pieces but cannot handle pressure. They then get judged and put down from one test. This can affect their self-esteem and have negative effects on their schooling.

I also had conversations with some students from two separate schools. Only one of ten students expressed their confidence in the test before they sat it. The results are out too late to be effective in so far as changing of teaching. Teachers have this extra pressure to push students to quickly familiarise themselves with the content of the test and wear the extra stress and anxiety that the students have from this.

After discussions with both public and private school teachers, they all admitted to being more stressed and anxious around the time of NAPLAN. These views align with Greg Thompson's (2013, p. 64) statement that:

there is growing research evidence that suggests that there has been a raft of unintended consequences that are most likely having a negative impact on student learning ... These unintended consequences ... teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum focus, increasing student and teacher anxiety, promoting direct teaching methods, a decrease in student motivation and the creation of classroom environments that are less, not more, inclusive.

Conclusion

Thus, the negative outcomes of NAPLAN by far outweigh the positives. I personally cannot understand how our whole country is placed under one umbrella and put under pressure to complete this test that runs for three days just to see a few months later how well the school has done and supposedly what needs to be improved. Class teachers already have this information on hand through their formative and summative assessments throughout the year and by working with these students. The information from NAPLAN is not released quickly enough and secondly not reliable from just this one test. If we could rely on one test to understand the students, then why bother with the rest? The students are put under pressure and made anxious for no reason, and I do not believe it is productive at all.

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