The Impact and Legacy of NAPLAN on the Work of Australian School Leaders

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The introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) by the Australian government in 2008 was heralded with policy rhetoric from leaders in government attesting to its diagnostic purposes, greater transparency, international comparability (with suggestions of declining standards) and improved capacity for parental choice. In this article the author explores this rhetoric by exploring the concept of datafication and its impacts on schools.

The introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) by the Australian government in 2008 was heralded with policy rhetoric from leaders in government attesting to its diagnostic purposes, greater transparency, international comparability (with suggestions of declining standards) and improved capacity for parental choice (Lingard et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2018). NAPLAN inherently changed the work of school principals over the decade which followed – a clearly documented evolution noted in literature (Baroutsis, 2016; Hardy & Lewis, 2018). Despite an initial low-stakes design of the program and the potential usefulness of the data, it morphed rapidly into a high-stakes phenomenon that mirrored international developments (Johnston, 2017; Lingard et al., 2016). On 14 August 2020 the NAPLAN Review Final Report which had been commissioned by three Australian state governments (including Queensland), was released publicly (McGaw et al., 2020), amidst a growing chorus of overt calls for the tests to be abolished. The review report acknowledges that the tests have become a vexed issue in Australia, which is typical of similar testing regimes internationally. Discussions regarding a useful focus on the diagnostic value of the data for local-level pedagogical purposes have been subject to constant over-shadowing by intense media interest, publication of league tables, bureaucratic competitiveness between state jurisdictions and political commentary promulgating a narrative of failure. The differences in school and state rankings that are highlighted as noteworthy in commentary, are often statistically insignificant. This has inevitably contributed to a high-stakes culture for principals to navigate.

Datafication

The notion of datafication in education has been put forward by numerous researchers to identify the emergence of new powers of governance arising from statistical data and its

publication in comparative ways (Hardy & Lewis, 2018). In Australia, 'this datafication process suggests that NAPLAN data may have become more powerful than intended' (Rose et al., 2018, p. 6).

The impact of such comparative publication and the advent of associated 'big data', particularly online, is regarded by Niesche (2015) as a form of governmentality which has made principals 'perpetually assessable subjects' (p. 134). The availability of such data has enabled non-government policy institutes, consultants and academics in particular, to produce multiple recommendations and formulas for improving school outcomes, that have been critiqued as lacking the unique perspectives associated with the local complexities of individual schools (Loughland & Thompson, 2016).

More recent studies such as Spina et al. (2019), have published findings of more creative and proactive responses which principals can lead, specifically processes of collaborative inquiry around the data sets. Nevertheless, a majority of relevant research links the phenomenon of datafication with serious concerns, including the validity of the data itself. These concerns have been articulated as making performance judgements regarding school effectiveness, at times specifically the principal's performance, in ways that have been de-contextualised too broadly through statistical rankings and thus are somewhat inaccurate (Baroutsis, 2016; Hardy & Lewis, 2018).

Questions around validity are profound in their impact on leaders in schools, such that any associated commentary published by journalists and analysts means that 'principals have to be prepared for the fallout if it's a bad result' (Baroutsis, 2016, p. 575).

Questions of validity however, go beyond the de-contextualisation that big data facilitates, with additional findings in research revealing a range of consequences and concerns. For example, the impact of test withdrawal rates which are authorised locally by principals, measurement errors for individuals and in group mean scores, the limited scope of curriculum tested, and potential injustices when attempting to link individual, class or school scores to individual teacher performance and specific school performance (Wu, 2016). The regular release of detailed iterations of the data, league tables, the MySchool website and associated interpretations, has often rendered principals to be 'working in reactive states … to each new piece of information and changing focus as a result' (Heffernan, 2016, p. 387).

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The assertion that NAPLAN has narrowed the breadth of the curriculum and reduced the range of pedagogical approaches being deployed is expressed in numerous studies (Polesel et al., 2014). Practices implemented by some principals such as intensive test preparation, have been shown to be ineffective yet they continue despite the existence of ethical and more-effective alternatives (Turner, 2009). Further, analysis of media coverage of NAPLAN in

Australia reveals that a high percentage of print media stories articulate teachers, principals and pedagogy as the problem that needs to be addressed, regularly calling for reforms in pedagogy, curriculum and school leadership (Mockler, 2016). So called 'hero schools' are frequently held up as examples to be followed with a formula for success, which if adopted, inevitably leads to further limitations of principals' and teachers' agency.

In contrast, a small body of literature emerging more prominently in recent times, documents school leadership practice that resists such pressures and practices, placing a greater emphasis on balance in the curriculum, holistic child development and age-appropriate pedagogies (Spina et al., 2019). In their case study of a school with improved NAPLAN results, Herbert et al. (2019) noted evidence of positive leadership in a school setting whereby NAPLAN data was used as a tool to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching practices and programs. Critically, it was one tool of several used to ignite an atmosphere of professional enterprise in the service of quality teaching and learning. Such Australian findings are not unique, and are replicated in international studies of high-stakes testing regimes (William-White, 2016; Turner, 2009). Notions of ethics and moral leadership run strongly through these studies.

Closely associated with this, the particular micro-political climate and culture of an individual school has been shown to be integral to how principals can lead productive engagement with such data (Johnstone, 2017).

Theoretical Perspectives

The analysis of national testing more broadly, is frequently referenced and understood through the lens of philosophical and sociological theories. Deeper theoretical analysis in the NAPLAN literature base usually refers to notions of performativity, managerialism, governmentality and hyper-accountability.

Performativity in schools has been revealed by Hobson and McIntyre (2013) to take the form of limited transparency and selective information in conversations between school staff and supervisors or other external personnel, at times becoming a form of fabrication. They note specifically that such fabrication can manifest through attempts to conceal what might be perceived as weaknesses, which in turn limits the opportunity for quality professional development and personal autonomy in leadership. The earlier work of Ball (2003), which itself draws strongly on Foucault's notions of discipline, games of truth, surveillance, surrendered autonomy and control, identifies examples of performative practice led by principals such as stage- managed events, constructed accounts of the institution and the selective use of statistics.

Managerialism has been identified by Bloxham et al. (2015) as a key component of the changes impacting on school leaders, positioned within a neoliberal ideology, and is closely linked, indeed actively facilitated by, NAPLAN. They define this corporate supervision of

principals as 'one that sees a very narrow, top down, data driven agenda, driven into schools in an attempt to improve efficiency, accountability, raise standards and competitiveness' (p. 366). In Queensland, this has manifested through the advent of regular school audits and the operationalisation of the Assistant Regional Director (ARD) role. This same practice has been noted as flourishing in American schools (William-White, 2016) and is often presented in literature as symptomatic of international trends such as Sahlberg's (2018) frequently referenced acronym – GERM (Global Education Reform Movement). Managerial supervision of principals, within a high-stakes testing environment, has been shown in literature to have a narrow focus that is predicated on a strongly pervading belief in bureaucracies that management produces performance (Bloxham et al., 2015). In Australian schools, Niesche (2015) regards these powers of governance over school principals as a form of ongoing discipline, although not always in a negative way. He references Foucault's concept of counter- conduct as a means to explain some leaders' choice to be silent on certain topics in community discussion – such as not mentioning the MySchool website.

The accountability culture that has evolved around national testing, particularly those components that are regarded as negative, is referred to in some international literature sources as a form of hyper-accountability (Ahlquist et al., 2011). This concept is poorly defined, but appears to be a confluence of many of the features of datafication, performativity, managerialism and governmentality. A clear link can be drawn to the philosophical work of Apple (2013), who notes the intensification of work in schools. This intensity of pressure and expectations demands a clear moral and ethical leadership response from principals in response to the impact of NAPLAN. In a further observation of such hyper-accountability, Keddie (2016) asserts that without this moral compass in leadership 'regimes of accountability and competition can clearly compromise student equity and delimit schooling purposes' (p. 713).

Concluding Recommendations

Further research is needed to augment the limited number of existing studies which identify how teachers and school leaders can effectively interrogate and use standardised test data as part of a holistic school strategy. Arguments pertaining to the validity of NAPLAN data also need to be studied further with clear recommendations for policy makers, so that doubts are removed. This is particularly relevant, as the continuous policy cycle of reform and review with NAPLAN has been an enduring feature of the program. A change to the way NAPLAN outcomes are publicly displayed and compared, would likely result in a profound alteration to the impact on teachers and school leaders. Current features of public accountability mechanisms such as the MySchool website, actively facilitate the production of comparative tables, rankings and de-contextualised conclusions which in turn, carry significant influence over government and media responses.

Advocacy from professional associations and researchers to educate the public and leaders in

government in ways that de-politicise education are paramount. Further research, particularly quantitative studies, to expose myths, exaggerations and perceptions that can easily underpin the existing tone of debate are urgently needed.

NAPLAN is indeed a complex issue in modern Australian school education, making simplistic conclusions unrealistic and the likelihood of ongoing contestation predictable. It is without doubt, presenting in many ways as a 'wicked problem' (Johnston, 2017). The recommendations in this paper have potential to amplify our moral purpose, as the collective voice of principals actively challenges the contemporary conversation and the most appropriate future position for NAPLAN or any alternative is found in these uncertain times.

MICHAEL WARD recently graduated from QUT with a Master of Education (Inclusive Education) as part of the first cohort of principals supported by a Department of Education scholarship. This article is an abridged version of his final literature review. Email the author at mward85@ eq.edu.au to request the full paper.

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