

Freedom and Authority, Success and Failure in Australian Education

Disruptive Designs in Curriculum Policy and Practice

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Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the potential impact of educational policy on curriculum practices. The chapter is not an evaluation of the impact of contrasting policies on education. The evaluation of significant policy and curriculum changes is technically problematic because the consequences and impact of curriculum change are not evident in the short term. A fundamental evaluation of curriculum implementation requires documentation over at least the years of compulsory schooling and some years beyond in order to obtain evidence for the impact of educational practices on students' lives. At the same time, curriculum discussions are necessary for consideration of the potential impact of different policies and curriculum designs on teachers and children, taking into account the formative role of compulsory years of schooling. The following is a preliminary discussion for situating curriculum design in the context of policy. The educational outcomes of the disruptive policies discussed in this chapter are not amenable to objective evaluation. Curriculum research is difficult to carry out, as policies change and a lack of documentation makes it difficult to compare educational outcomes without studies of large cohorts of students across different levels of schooling. The case of devolution of authority in South Australia has not been extensively documented, but some consequences of the implementation are suggested in this chapter. In the alternative case of centralisation of curriculum and school testing, there are some detailed reports but not comprehensive documentation. The discussion of the two cases in this chapter situates language education curriculum in the wider context of organisational policy.

The Context

In this chapter, we discuss contrasting Australian cases of policy and the potential impact on curriculum practices. The cases illustrate the disruption of system-level decisions on curriculum design and implementation. The first case study is of the implementation of the policy document *Freedom and Authority* released to schools by the Director-General of Education in South Australia in 1970 (Appendix 1). This document devolved curriculum decision-making to school principals. The second case study examines the influence of a policy of centralising curriculum management since

2008 in a national curriculum and assessment scheme. The chapter reviews consequences of contrasting policies on educational practices in systems and schools. The review relates to the present context of national and international reports on curriculum and testing, which document declining literacy and numeracy standards in Australian education. The documentation suggests that, according to testing scores, literacy and numeracy achievements in Australian schools have declined and this has occurred over a period of ten years. The period corresponds to the implementation of a national curriculum and the application of a national testing system. The chapter considers the influence on curriculum, on literacy and numeracy instruction and on outcomes in Australian schools.

The issue of educational standards is serious for a nation with a small population like Australia, which is attempting to achieve international status as a global leader in education (Department of Education and Training 2018). The reported decline in standards has taken place in a period of exceptional economic prosperity, social stability and investment in education intended to reduce social inequality and advance children's literacy and numeracy achievements. Australia is a federation and, under the federal system of governance, each state and territory has authority over and responsibility for education. In the state education system, curriculum directorates oversee policies and practices, evaluate programs, select teachers, develop resources and manage assessment. Educational managers have direct influence on schools with involvement in teacher selection, in the preparation of curriculum guidelines and assessment and in the evaluation of the experiences of teachers and children. Since the middle of the 20th century, and specifically in the past ten years, there has been increasing involvement of a federal department of education in schooling through funding of teachers in private and public schools and through the allocation of resources to selected areas of educational disadvantage.

Since 2008, state and federal ministers of education have negotiated a centrally managed national curriculum and assessment procedure, with the comparison of schools' achievements published in national league tables. This is a disruption of curriculum practices managed by state education departments and a monumental shift in educational policy and practice. The contrasting case studies examine factors in the disruption of decision-making—from a central state department to school principals and from states to a nationally managed curriculum and assessment system. The Australian perspective gives insights into the tensions between local and central responsibility in curriculum design and implementation and into the potential consequences for the quality of teaching stemming from local—compared with centralised—decision-making. What is of particular interest in Australia is that literacy and numeracy standards have either declined or not risen during the period of direct national involvement in curriculum since 2008. After ten years of centralisation, it is important to reflect on the system changes and to consider factors that stand out as influential over the past decade with the increase of federal involvement in curriculum, assessment and reporting.

Curriculum Disruption in the South Australian Education Department

In 1970, the Director-General of Education disrupted curriculum management procedures in South Australian schools with the release to school principals of a memorandum, entitled the *Freedom and Authority Memorandum* (Jones 1970; Appendix 1). It introduced a dramatic change from a centrally directed curriculum model to a system of local school decision-making. It triggered administrative changes with direct effects on curriculum processes from policy to classroom practice. It set in train the need for school community consultation, curriculum negotiation and renewal and teachers' professional development. The purpose of this section is to discuss consequences for policy and practice triggered by the promulgation of the memorandum, which delegated power over the management of schools to principals, entrusting curriculum decisions to schools and teachers. Through this document, principals gained leadership authority over school organisation, curriculum and pedagogy.

Jones (1978), in a study of the impact of the *Freedom and Authority Memorandum*, concluded that the tenor of policy after the memo was toward openness, school-based decision-making, school-based curriculum, community involvement, cooperation in change, professional development and trust. In another study of the memorandum, Kaminsky (1981, p. 188) notes that ‘schools were granted relief from the strictures of teacher assessments, rigid and inflexible attendance procedures, excessive examinations, restraints on physical movement, and gag-rules that forestalled professional criticism of educational practices’. Thomson (2017, p. 61), in a study of school leadership at the time, writes that, through the memorandum, ‘head teachers had the legitimate power to make a number of important decisions about their schools—school rules, how curriculum guidelines were to be implemented and organisational and school ethos issues, including student groupings, setting and streaming, length of school day and timetables’. Principals had agency to act in the interests of their school communities. Thomson (ibid.) writes they had ‘autonomy from interference from central authorities in order to have the autonomy necessary for running their schools’. This structural and policy change set up conditions for school communities to be involved in curriculum processes of evaluation, negotiation and development and for teachers in collaboration with colleagues to focus on and respond to their students’ needs by determining content and teaching approaches.

The shift in responsibility for curriculum management from state system to school principals and teachers was accompanied by expansion of professional support services for teachers. The support services comprised appointment of subject-specific advisers, writing and publication of curriculum guidelines and resources and funding for teacher in-service programs. Teachers’ centres (Wattle Park Teachers Centre and The Languages and Multicultural Centre) were designated sites for building curriculum expertise and for subject-specific curriculum teams and advisers to develop curriculum guidelines, to conduct professional development activities and research and to provide advice to teachers. Curriculum writing teams and a research unit developed local expertise by reviewing international educational reports, by comparing and sharing initiatives with other Australian education departments in a competitive process and by documenting effective practices in local schools. Subject-specific advisers worked with teachers in schools, prepared teaching materials and assisted teachers’ investigations of teaching practices. Subject-specific teachers trialled and evaluated curriculum guidelines. The processes of consultation built local expertise in the analysis of children’s learning, which was applied in development of resources across the curriculum and in teacher education. The validity of the curriculum was achieved through consultation, research, trialling of materials in reference groups and evaluation of the daily experiences of children working under the direction of their teachers.

The consultative processes directly influenced teachers’ work, from participation in curriculum development to involvement in planning and negotiating the curriculum (Boomer 1992). The direct links between curriculum writers and teachers created conditions for successful application in classrooms and, as Jones (1978) claimed, added to the professional status of teachers. Teachers’ involvement in curriculum processes gave them agency to prepare and negotiate programs of work relevant to children and their communities, to undertake further studies and to apply their individual expertise to respond to children’s needs and local community interests.

At the time, Australian educators participated in international discussions and research into the role of language in learning. They engaged in international discussions about language learning with influential international researchers (Barnes 1969, 1976; Holt 1970; Halliday 1973; Heath 1983). Teachers’ orientation to professional learning fostered classroom research and inquiry into their own practices as a model for building teachers’ knowledge and skills and for implementing change (Burton & Mickan 1993a, 1993b). The state Language and Learning Project and the national Language Development Project organised seminars for teachers’ knowledge-building with time release to attend in-service programs and to carry out investigations into classroom teaching. The combination of teachers’ insights gained through professional development,

together with the engagement of national and international collaborators, advanced understanding of children's learning, built local expertise and leadership and encouraged teachers to take initiatives and pursue interests in research.

Teachers' curriculum expertise fostered through the devolution of decision-making had longer-term outcomes in education in response to identified cultural priorities and to the changing profiles of children. Projects developed in the 1980s included the ESL in the Mainstream project, which supported teachers working with new arrivals learning English as an additional language. In the program, teachers took part in a series of knowledge-building workshops followed by the investigation and documentation of their own teaching as information for discussion in workshops. The introduction in 1985 of the policy to teach languages other than English in primary schools responded to the specific needs of Khmer and Vietnamese children of refugees. Seconded teachers prepared curriculum documents and provided advice in schools for instruction in French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Italian and Vietnamese. In the Languages Inservice Project for Teachers (1988–1990, Languages and Multicultural Centre 1990), teachers attended seminars on language learning and teaching and were supported to undertake working in networks and reporting their findings in publications (Burton & Mickan 1993a, 1993b). The theoretically informed and school-based approach to professional development has continued to influence teachers and teacher educators' involvement in classroom research informed by functional linguistics (Custance et al. 2017; Mickan et al. 2006; Mickan & Lopez 2017; Shum & Mickan 2018). Teachers' engagement in curriculum processes built their expertise and inspired personal involvement, initiative and responsibility. These processes contrast with teachers' enactment of a national curriculum. The following section examines the alternative case and discusses the potentially disruptive effects of national curriculum and testing on teachers' work, on children's learning and on literacy and numeracy standards.

National Curriculum

A national curriculum and tests managed by a federal authority, which compares the literacy and numeracy performances of schools and children, is a radical change from a decentralised, state curriculum. State ministers of education authorised the federal government's intervention in curriculum with the introduction of a national testing system in 2008 and an agreement on a national curriculum in 2012. The decisions have consequences for teachers' professionalism and teaching.

In the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008), state and territory ministers of education delegated to the federal education department responsibility for a national curriculum, national testing (National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy, NAPLAN) and management of a national league table comparing schools' and children's literacy and numeracy scores. Curriculum and testing responsibilities were assigned to the independent statutory authority, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). According to its website, 'The Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all young Australians should be taught, regardless of where they live in Australia or their background. ACARA draws on the best national talent and expertise, and consults widely to develop the Australian Curriculum' (ACARA 2012). The introduction of a national curriculum and testing system was intended as a strategy to establish standards across education sectors and to monitor individual children's literacy and numeracy achievement. Specifically, the NAPLAN tests were designed to generate data for needs analysis for the allocation of school funding to equalise educational outcomes.

The concept of a standardised curriculum and assessment system relevant to all children and responding to individual, national and global literacy and numeracy needs is controversial and contradictory. Societies, social conditions and community institutions change, as do technologies,

economies and political policies. Children's interests, prior experiences and aspirations diverge, and literacy and numeracy needs vary according to social environments and living conditions. The Australian Curriculum (ACARA 2018a) defines literacy as follows: 'Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school.' The definition of literacy is intended to cater to communities comprising diverse groups of people from different social backgrounds with wide-ranging beliefs, practices and social norms. The assumption of the capacity of a curriculum to cater to all children with differing linguistic and social experiences and capabilities into the future is ingenuous. The reports of Parkin and Harper (2019, this volume) and Santos and Gomes (*ibid.*) testify to the complexity of teaching children from different community and linguistic backgrounds. The diversity of children's cultural experiences challenges national measurement of literacy and numeracy relevant to and valid for all students.

A national curriculum modifies teachers' roles from curriculum designers and program managers to agents for interpretation and delivery of an externally devised curriculum. This curriculum procedure dispenses with teachers' research, analysis, observation and ownership of their programs. Instead of implementing a responsive curriculum, teachers become dependent on external criteria. This shift devalues teachers' judgement and professional knowledge. In the longer term, the national curriculum—including the national tests—presages narrowing the scope and innovative potential of school programming, of pedagogy and of teacher education. The capacity for renewal in Australian education is reduced due to the complexity of negotiating change in a national system. The national system is reliant on external expertise and centralised resourcing, with limited scope for the initiatives and adaptation which characterised state-managed curriculum at least until 2008.

The centralisation of curriculum authority through delegation to ACARA has affected Australian school education in significant ways. State authorities have reduced investment in professional support for teachers, local curriculum development and teacher in-service programs. Teachers' compliance with the national curriculum has limited options and opportunities for enactment of a responsive curriculum designed for children's engagement in challenging and innovative programs.

National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy

In 2008, NAPLAN was implemented. NAPLAN is a high-stakes test: 'NAPLAN tests the important skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy. The content of each test is informed by the Australian Curriculum. The literacy tests are based on content in the English learning area, and the numeracy tests draw content from the mathematics learning area' (ACARA 2018a). The assessment is undertaken by all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. According to its website, the NAPLAN 'standards are intended to be a snapshot of typical achievement' (ACARA 2016a). The findings from the tests are reported to ACARA, which manages the testing. 'Students are assessed using common national tests in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy' (ACARA 2016b). ACARA determines systemic responses from the analysis of the testing data. The results of the tests are aggregated and used to show all schools' average performance against other schools in the country on the My School website. The results are published nationally and used to compare performances of schools and individual children. The Federal Education Minister uses the information generated through the tests to comment on national school performance. The federal ministry and schools commit resources for the preparation, supervision and delivery of the tests and analysis and publication of the data (Carter et al. 2016).

High-stakes, standardised tests like NAPLAN affect teaching and children's schooling experiences. Despite ACARA's (2016b) statement that 'NAPLAN tests are not tests students can cram for', the stakes attached to schools' NAPLAN results encourage students, parents and teachers to prepare—to teach to the test (Thompson 2013; Lobascher 2011; Polesel et al. 2012; Independent Education Union 2010). To this end, ACARA provides past exam papers on their website, disclaimed with a statement: 'ACARA would like to stress that we do not believe in the value of excessive preparation for NAPLAN beyond teaching the Australian Curriculum and familiarising students with the NAPLAN process. These tests should not be used for drilling students for future NAPLAN tests' (ACARA 2016b). This statement at once acknowledges the practice of 'drilling students', guides readers to practice materials, and deflects responsibility for the practice.

Research has been conducted to specifically address the effect of testing on curriculum (Cheng et al. 2004). This effect is called 'washback' or 'teaching to the test' and is a well-researched field. Studies over many years (some described subsequently) report the effect of high-stakes tests on teachers' work and children's learning. In a research project on high-stakes testing across 25 states in the United States, Nichols et al. (2006, p. 52) report: 'In light of the rapidly growing body of evidence of the deleterious unintended effects of high-stakes testing, and the fact that our study finds no dependable or compelling evidence that the pressure associated with high-stakes testing leads to increased achievement, there is no reason to continue the practice of high-stakes testing.' The authors of the study write that the pressure of doing well on a test seriously compromises instructional practice and keeps teachers from caring for students' needs that are separate from how well they score on tests. Thompson and Harbaugh's (2012) survey of teachers on the impact of NAPLAN on pedagogy and curriculum in two Australian states reported that teachers 'are either choosing or being instructed to teach to the test, that this results in less time being spent on other curriculum areas and that these effects contribute in a negative way on the engagement of students' (p. 1).

Their research corresponds to findings of international studies that show that high-stakes literacy and numeracy tests often have unintended consequences, including narrowing the curriculum focus, resulting in teacher-centred instruction and a decrease in children's motivation. Wyn et al. (2014) analysed a survey of more than 8300 teachers from every Australian state and territory, which found that NAPLAN is having a negative impact on student well-being. Polesel et al. (2012, p. 5) noted that high-stakes testing 'influences curricular structures in terms of content, since the content of standardised tests defines what may be regarded as legitimate knowledge'; this is supported by Ewing's (2010) findings on the perceived higher value of (and therefore allocation of time and resources to) tested curriculum in contrast to non-tested (arts) subjects. Lee (2017) analysed the impact of a high-stakes, national oral test on English teaching in a South Korean high school. She reports the negative washback on teaching, which focused on test exercises and restricted students' opportunities for authentic speech. Mickan and Motteram's (2008, 2009) studies on students' preparation courses for the high-stakes IELTS test report the test's influence over the design, content and method of teaching. Instructors taught test-taking behaviours (students practising test questions), which limited the discourse experiences of students.

Different conceptions of literacy complicate the capacity to design a test with the scope of NAPLAN to measure skills of literacy and numeracy essential for all children. Wu and Hornsby (2012, p. 16) have noted that 'NAPLAN tests are limited in their coverage of the wide range of skills in literacy and numeracy, and in their capability to measure the achievement levels of individual students.' NAPLAN designers claim the tests make it 'possible to monitor how much progress [students] have made' (ACARA 2008, p. 2) over their years of schooling. NAPLAN's measure of this alleged progress—skills developed in reading, writing, language conventions, and numeracy—is distilled into 'individual student reports, provided to parents/carers, [which] show student results against the national average and the middle 60 per cent of students nationally. These reports contain a description of what was assessed in each of the tests and provide information

about the knowledge and skills the student demonstrated in the tests' (ACARA 2018b, p. iv). Parkin and Harper (2019, this volume), with reference to the definition of literacy in the national curriculum and its application to Indigenous education, explain the complexity of the concept.

The definition is daunting: flexible, sustained mastery; the use and production of texts; traditional texts and new communications technologies. Not only must teachers aim to make meaning of, and develop student automaticity—that is, mastery—in decoding and encoding written texts, but they have to include the comprehension and composing of oral, multimodal and digital texts, and in some cases written texts from students' home languages as well as texts in English for different purposes.

(pp. 109–110)

For assessment purposes, literacy skills must be defined, prescribed and limited to what can be tested and measured. The validity of a test is whether it measures what it claims to test. In order to manage and process the results of large-scale tests, designers need to narrow what is tested and reduce the complexity of phenomena to meet the technical requirements of validity and reliability. This places in question the validity of NAPLAN's capacity to measure 'the important skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life' (ACARA 2018a).

The correlation of NAPLAN test scores with children's literacy and numeracy capabilities is questionable. The reality is that literacy comprises complex interrelationships of spoken and written texts used for different purposes in different contexts (Mickan 2019). School children and adults daily manage multiple spoken and written text types with different discourse features in response to purpose, people and topic. Christie's (2005, 2012) overview of the development of literacy in the years of schooling presents evidence of the complex documentation of relevant information required for understanding a child's strengths and weaknesses. Carter's (2012) quantitative study on the NAPLAN indicated that students may not have had sufficient time to show what they could do in mathematics, and Mickan et al.'s (2000) study of response validity in the high-stakes IELTS test examines difficulties test-takers face in understanding test items, which influences their test scores. Perelman's (2018) review of the NAPLAN writing test criticises the weight given to spelling and punctuation over the communication of ideas; in an interview with the ABC, he referred to the writing assessment as 'the most absurd and least valid of any test that [he has] seen' (Robinson 2018). Leonard Freeman (2013), in a response to a Senate Committee Inquiry into the effectiveness of NAPLAN, provided evidence of the tests' cultural bias and reliance on 'western cultural norms' (p. 3) that disadvantage students from remote or non-English speaking backgrounds. The integrity of the literacy component of NAPLAN is exposed in dismantling literacy into the separate skills of writing and reading and in detaching 'language conventions' from discourse. Literacy as language-in-use integrates spoken and written language according to context and purpose of communication, with 'language conventions' constructing, and integrated in, the discourse (Mickan 2018). The separate testing of 'language conventions' out of context is not indicative of the grammatical decision-making involved in students' speech and writing. The discrete testing of the items reduces the authority of the test and challenges the capacity of NAPLAN to measure and validate all children's literacy and numeracy capabilities.

The age-related and multiyear test assumes school entry as a level playing field with children's age and year level matching literacy and numeracy experiences. The test is based on the idea that one test suits all. However, children's preschool literacy experiences differ dramatically. The Language Gap studies (Suskind 2015) initiated by Hart and Risley (1995) refer to children's language experiences in early childhood. Hart and Risley (1995) reported that some children heard 30 million fewer words by their fourth birthday than others. What is significant about children's experiences with the suggested 30 million words is that they are heard and seen in context as discourse as

children and adults read, listen and speak together. The studies of Hasan and Cloran (1990) and of Heath (1983) document the differences in children's preschool literacy experiences as preparation for responding to and using the complex and formal language of schooling. The preschool literacy studies together with The Language Gap research challenge the capacity to design valid year-level measures of literacy and numeracy for children in the early years of schooling. The use of standardised tests overlooks individual social and age-related differences in development of literacy skills and differences in cultural and linguistic practices in communities.

ACARA's (2016e) claim that the program can 'help drive improvements in student outcomes' is debatable. The corollary of the potential of NAPLAN to contribute to enhancement of educational outcomes is the potential for negative effects on teaching and learning. Nichols et al. (2006) refer to the deleterious and unintended effects of high-stakes tests, such as teaching to the test. Masters (2009, p. 57) reports in a review of literacy, numeracy and science in Queensland primary schools that, as preparation for NAPLAN, 'attention [. . .] was being given to improving students' test-taking skills, such as completing test booklets and working under test conditions'. The availability of NAPLAN test preparation publications are indicative of the focus on successful testing as a key goal for school communities; this focus on testing has supplanted serious engagement with complex literacy and numeracy texts and tasks (Moghaddam & Mickan 2014).

At a state and institutional level, there are practical limitations on the usefulness of NAPLAN to provide information about a child's literacy and numeracy strengths and weaknesses. As with the implementation of a national curriculum, NAPLAN has reduced the role of state and territory education departments in curriculum decision-making and diminished teachers' authority and participation in designing and negotiating curriculum. Testing and test results intervene between teachers and children and parents and interfere in teachers' professional practices and in their relationships in school communities. Prior to NAPLAN, the professional expertise of teachers was paramount in evaluating, recording and reporting children's achievements to parents. The NAPLAN claim that child, school and parents best understand where children's strengths and weaknesses lie undervalues the professional role of teachers, whose informed understanding of a child's developing literacy and numeracy is evidence based (Christie 2012). Teachers are professionally positioned to recognise and respond to individual literacy and numeracy needs and to mediate effective activities. Their recognition and response are not dependent on external tests or curriculum. Understanding a child's strengths and weaknesses is the normal business of teachers, who have the knowledge of what interventions are appropriate to meet students' needs, independent of the restrictions of conforming to one-size-fits-all curriculum and tests. Further to the point, even if the NAPLAN were a perfect diagnostic tool, the delay between the testing period and delivery of results (May to September) undermines NAPLAN's suggestion that the test results be used by 'parents and students to discuss individual student progress with teachers' and 'teachers to better identify students who need greater challenges or extra support' (ACARA 2018c, p. 2). According to the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA 2013, p. 2), this time lapse 'has always made it impossible for teachers to use NAPLAN data effectively to adjust education programs to improve the learning of those students tested'. NAPLAN's belief that a move to completely digital testing by 2020 'will provide better assessment, more precise results and faster turnaround of information' (ACARA 2016d) has been confounded for the last two years, with the electronic system collapsing under the strain of hosting the exam online (e.g. Singhal 2019; McGowan 2018).

The period since the introduction of a national curriculum and NAPLAN corresponds to reports of a decline in literacy and numeracy. The reports question the reliability and integrity of NAPLAN to 'identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for their learning, and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community' (ACARA 2016b). The most recent report of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Thomson et al. 2015, p. xix), an international assessment scheme measuring student

performance in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, records that ‘the reading literacy performance for Australia and eight other countries declined significantly between 2009 and 2015’. In mathematical literacy, ‘Australia was one of 13 countries whose performance declined significantly between 2003 and 2015. Australia’s performance declined by 30 points’. Muller (2018) discusses the danger of reliance on testing to ascertain the quality of children’s educational experiences with a warning about the obsession with metrics. He notes (Muller 2018, p. 93) that ‘many teachers perceive the regimen created by the culture of testing and measuring accountability as robbing them of their autonomy, and of their ability to use their discretion and creativity in designing and implementing the curriculum of their students’. Further, ‘the growing emphasis on testing students in English and math as early as kindergarten may come at the expense of nonacademic activities, such as creative play and the arts, that contribute to individual development but are not easily measured’ (Muller 2018, p. 89). The data generated through large-scale testing is limited by the external design of test items and control of variables which diminish the usefulness for identification of students’ literacy and numeracy needs.

Reports on decline in school literacy and numeracy achievements challenge the validity of NAPLAN and question the value for schools, parents and children of the information generated in expensive testing procedures. NAPLAN is limited in the credible measurement of literacy and numeracy necessary for schooling and for life-long learning. ACARA (2016c) states that ‘success in any learning area depends on being able to use the significant, identifiable and distinctive literacy that is important for learning and representative of the content of that learning area’. NAPLAN does not have the capacity to assess the ‘significant, identifiable and distinctive’ subject-specific literacies and numeracies necessary for children to work across the curriculum (Alyousef & Mickan 2016). The de-contextualised measurement of literacy and numeracy skills for administrative purposes across educational systems and settings constitutes a reduction and simplification of the dynamic and functional capacity of children’s use of language in different contexts in the many domains from preschool to work and to further education. NAPLAN’s measurement of children’s literacy and numeracy reduces and alters complex experiences of natural language use in order to achieve objective, analytic testing. This reduction and simplification are likely to increase as NAPLAN explores automated (computer) marking in an effort to reduce turnaround times. Although an outcry led to the scrapping of digital marking for the written component of the test, all other sections will be evaluated by an automated scoring system instead of teacher-markers (ACARA NASOP 2015; ACARA 2018d; Koziol et al. 2018; Perelman 2017; Riemer 2017). Standardised tests reduce the agency of teachers in responding to specific individual children’s literacy and numeracy needs. They fail to take into account a child’s potential and aspirations within the social contexts of schooling activities and cultural ecologies.

The decline in standards reported in the review *Through Growth to Achievement* (Department of Education and Training 2018) over the ten years since the introduction of NAPLAN is a cause for reflection on the consequences of nationalising curriculum and the impact of large-scale testing on children’s literacy and numeracy achievement. Prior to the centralisation of curriculum, the state-based education systems administered schooling, with each state competing to improve educational practices. The investment in curriculum design and development was part of a competitive, national discussion at professional conferences and seminars and in publications. At subject-specific conferences, researchers and teachers from across Australia reported their school-based studies on teaching and learning. Professional conversations took place between local and overseas teacher-scholars at conferences and seminars. The enterprising, competitive model of curriculum development and delivery fostered dialogue and debate within and across states as each vied for leadership in effective teaching and viewed critically the curriculum of other states and nations. The national curriculum has reduced the imperative for investment in state-based professional and curriculum development. National curriculum decreases flexibility in the delivery of programs relevant to children living in

different contexts and preparing for uncertain cultural futures. Changes, revisions and even review are difficult due to federal administration and political influence.

The claim that NAPLAN measures ‘skills which are essential for everyday life’ overstates its reach. The claim presupposes it is possible to predict human endeavour and social change. Assessment of essential skills in a limited series of tests assumes a stable and homogenous society with defined cultural contexts for determining educational objectives. There is societal and global contestation about educating children with skills for life; for digital and financial literacies; for life-management skills; for knowledge-building; for individual action, innovation and democratic participation and for communal and global responsibility. According to Boomer (1992, p. 8), ‘politicians, parents, administrators, teachers and children all need to be brought into discussions about how we learn, if we are to raise the quality of thinking and learning in schools and society’. It is not sufficient to delegate the discussion to external experts or to a federal department and state and federal ministers. It is not sufficient to distil students’ learning into scores obtained via debatable testing methods by which they will be measured against their peers and their schools will be ranked. What are the costs of the consequences of NAPLAN and the national curriculum for teachers, teacher educators and school administrators, and for the quality of Australian children’s education?

Reviewing Curriculum Policies and Practices

The review in this chapter offers a perspective on policy changes with potential to affect teachers’ work and children’s educational experiences. In the Australian federal system, states and territories have been invested with legislative responsibility for education. The implementation of the South Australian Director-General’s memorandum *Freedom and Authority* (Appendix 1), through the delegation of authority to school principals, promoted initiatives in curriculum design and development supported by investment in teachers’ learning and professional development. The policy was complemented by the allocation of resources for teachers’ professional development, for preparation and production of local curriculum resources and for teacher research. A general outcome of the policy was the professionalisation of teachers in roles as advisers, curriculum developers and teacher educators. The contribution to applied research continues to inform teacher education, inquiry-based teaching and research into teaching language (Custance et al. 2017; Mickan & Lopez 2017). The policy created conditions for studies in early childhood and language education and built expert knowledge in literacy and numeracy related to equity, achievement and access to the language and practices of schooling (Comber 2016).

The implementation of a national curriculum and a standardised assessment system has failed to improve educational outcomes in schools. NAPLAN and the national curriculum have reduced the capacity of states to provide relevant, responsive and rigorous education. The direct effects of an externally produced curriculum have been to remove teachers’ involvement and perspectives on design and content and to reduce the opportunity for local contributions and initiatives, thus reducing educators’ agility to respond to local and world changes. Boomer (1992, p. 13) asserts that

if teachers set out to teach according to a planned curriculum, without engaging the interests of the student, the quality of learning will suffer. Student interest involves student investment and personal commitment. Negotiating the curriculum means deliberately planning to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes.

Washback and high-stakes test studies consistently show that increased testing restricts the educational actions and initiatives of teachers, limits the valid measurement of skills and diverts attention from children’s potential attainment.

The Australian curriculum experience is a salutary check on the validity of large-scale tests for measuring complex human behaviours such as literacy and numeracy. Curriculum policy and management significantly impact the quality of children's educational experiences and their engagement in knowledge- and skill-building. Curriculum in a global culture is designed to embody complexity as preparation for indeterminate futures in which children's experiences of negotiating the curriculum (Boomer 1992; Breen & Littlejohn 2000; Bron et al. 2016) have a role in the preparation for unpredictable life experiences and decision-making. Curriculum design in language and numeracy education determines opportunities and options for students' civic participation, responsibilities and leadership in the support of human rights. Hasan (2011) has warned of reproductive literacy that perpetuates injustice, dictates human action and devalues social responsibility in local, national and global communities. At the time of writing, the literacy and numeracy skills for children's and citizens' management of their everyday lives need to take into account responsible and compassionate citizenship, critical literacy, science scepticism, media manipulation, human and environmental exploitation, cultural homogenisation and reduction of cultural life to economic parameters.

The priority for Australian education is the deployment of federal resources for children's capacity-building, for civic participation and for taking initiatives in responding to changed circumstances and emerging needs. In defence of NAPLAN, Blaise (2018) asserts the key benefits of the test system are as a tool to improve schools and teaching, as it provides transparency and accountability. Ten years of evidence from research reports by PISA and NAPLAN contest the role of a national curriculum and the efficacy of NAPLAN as valid and realistic interventions for the improvement of children's literacy and numeracy. Amrein and Berliner (2002, p. 2) report the following from a large-scale US study:

Evidence from this study of 18 states with high-stakes tests is that in all but one analysis, student learning is indeterminate, remains at the same level it was before the policy was implemented, or actually goes down when high-stakes testing policies are instituted. Because clear evidence for increased student learning is not found, and because there are numerous reports of unintended consequences associated with high-stakes testing policies (increased drop-out rates, teachers' and schools' cheating on exams, teachers' defection from the profession, all predicted by the uncertainly principle), it is concluded that there is need for debate and transformation of current high-stakes testing policies.

Ten years after the federal agreement on a national curriculum and tests, it is time for a re-assessment of federal and political intervention in school education. There have been repeated calls for the review of NAPLAN by state ministers of education who are aware of the negative effects on teaching and learning (Robinson 2018). The credibility with teachers, parents and students of school education in Australia is at risk (APPA 2013). The alternative to the national curriculum and assessment scheme is the restoration of curriculum decision-making to state and local educational centres for teachers' professional action as curriculum creators rather than consumers. Wyn et al. (2014, p. 6) concluded in their study into NAPLAN that the assessment program

is a significant pedagogical intervention which has some positive uses, but is plagued by negative impacts on learning and on student wellbeing. While it may provide a diagnostic tool for some teachers to re-evaluate their approach and how they teach literacy and/or numeracy, there is a disconnect between the formal and inflexible style of NAPLAN and learning and teaching approaches that emphasise deep learning supported by student and teacher teamwork in a process that tailors learning to the student's needs.

National standardisation of education circumscribes and constrains teachers' initiatives, diverting their attention from children's interests and abilities.

Serious concerns about achieving excellence in education have been reported by the Australian Government Department of Education (2018): ‘Declining academic performance is jeopardising the attainment of Australia’s aspiration for excellence and equity in school education. Since 2000, Australian student outcomes have declined in key areas such as reading, science and mathematics.’ Since its introduction, NAPLAN has dominated educational discussion in Australia, distracting from implementation of best teaching practices appropriate to diverse contexts and based on extensive Australian professional research evidence, documentation and experience. NAPLAN data does not report what a child has achieved, what a child is capable of or how teaching should be tailored for a child’s intellectual, social and physical development. Language educators’ professional role in curriculum design and implementation is central to teaching literacy and numeracy responsive to changing social practices, environmental conditions and challenging technologies. The practical task for Australian policy makers and educators is to act on the reports of declining literacy and numeracy, review alternatives to standardisation of education, respect and restore the professional roles of teachers and implement strategies for regenerative and innovative teaching.

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Appendix 1

Memorandum to Heads of Departmental Schools

Freedom and Authority in the Schools



DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

G.P.O. Box 406c
Adelaide
Phone: 28 3150
Ref.:

MEMORANDUM TO HEADS OF DEPARTMENTAL SCHOOLS:

FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY IN THE SCHOOLS.

I have been asked to define more clearly what is meant by the freedom you and your staff have been exhorted to use in the schools. I shall be grateful if you will make the contents of this memorandum known to your staff.

Let me say at the outset that you as Head of your school, by delegated authority from the Minister and the Director-General, are in undisputed control of your school.

Within the broad framework of the Education Act, the general curriculum advised by the curriculum boards and approved by me as Director-General of Education, and the general policy set by the Director of your Division and communicated to you by circular, you have the widest liberty to vary courses, to alter the timetable, to decide the organisation of the school and government within the school, to experiment with teaching methods, assessment of student achievement and in extra-curricular activities.

Grouping, setting, streaming, development of tracks, block timetabling and ungrading are all acceptable schemes of organisation. Co-operative teaching, team teaching, tutorials and independent study are all acceptable methods for teaching and learning.

In any experiment or variations the general well-being and education of the students must be the prime concern. Consequently any major change should be with the full knowledge of parents.

In exercising your authority and freedom to run your school as you think fit, of necessity you must have the backing of your staff. Without their support and participation and their adequate preparation, any departures from tradition will have little chance of success.

Just as you have professional freedom and delegated authority, so too the same privileges should be extended to your staff, who in turn must accept your ultimate authority in the school and the stake that parents and students have in what goes on in the schools.

.../2.

Staff members will more readily follow a course of action if they have been taken into confidence and have shared in formulating the policy. They will be less effective and less enthusiastic if they feel that communication is all one way and their voices are not heard.

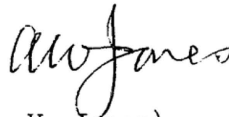
With any innovation it is expected that the motive is to meet more effectively the needs of students. A sound reason for rejecting, say, a trial of "setting" English or Mathematics or indeed of classes in any given subject, might be that there were insufficient teachers of the appropriate kind available at the one time to organise it. An unsound reason would be that "setting" is perhaps more difficult to arrange administratively.

No experiment must commit the Education Department to supply more staff, more accommodation, more equipment or more funds without prior consultation. Nor must parents be put to expense without their concurrence.

The question of government in a school is of prime importance, and should therefore make provision, especially in secondary schools, for student opinion to make itself known. Ways of bringing this about will differ with the size and nature of each school, and the relative age and maturity of the students concerned. Methods are best left for the schools to work out.

Finally, the sooner the old concept of the fixed timetable and strictly regulated movement as the blueprint of the school day disappears, the better.

The timetable should reflect a great variety of individual approaches. The timetable should be the servant of the curriculum, and both be servants to the student.



(A. W. Jones)

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION

August, 1970.