School Agreement Interim Report September 2022 - Response.

This response is directed to Information request 3.2. Priority equity cohorts for the next agreement.

Are there student cohorts, not identified as a priority equity cohort in the current National School Reform Agreement, such as children in out-of-home care, that should be a priority in the next agreement? If so, which cohorts and why?

Response written by Dr Sue Creagh.

My argument is that a series of intersecting historical and political factors have rendered English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) students invisible in education systems, though this is not consistent across all states and territories. At the national level, and particularly with national assessment through NAPLAN, this is certainly the case. The EAL/D group should therefore be recognised as a priority equity cohort.

Further, **within the EAL/D group** there are students with particularly high learning needs which relate to their migratory and prior schooling experiences. These students are predominantly from **refugee backgrounds, and have limited or no prior schooling**, or have only had access schooling which is far inferior to the experience of schooling in Australia. I have considerable empirical evidence to support my stance and present it in summary form below. Therefore, in addition to the broader EAL/D group, recognition should be given to refugee background students with limited prior schooling as a priority equity cohort.

I would also like to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may also enter school as speakers of languages and dialects different to the English of school. Indeed, for these students, their language status may be completely misunderstood and misdiagnosed. Traditional languages may be identifiable as different to SAE. However, contact languages may not be recognised as different to SAE if there is no 'language awareness'. Students may be using any of the following:

- creoles, languages which have developed from contact between local language and language of wider communication (English) which provides most of the lexicon
- mixed languages: where both languages (local and English) contribute grammar and lexicon, perhaps more likely in remote communities
- non-standard varieties of language of wider community (English) or local language. Non-standard varieties of English perhaps more likely in more urban areas
- indeterminate varieties (not described) (Wigglesworth and Simpson 2018)

Who are EAL/D students?

In schools, English as an Additional language or dialect (hereafter EAL/D) students may belong to the following categories: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with Māori and/or Pacific Island backgrounds, students of South Sea Islander background, immigrants and temporary visa holders from non-English speaking backgrounds, students with a refugee background, children born in Australia of migrant heritage where English is not spoken at home, children returning from living abroad, children of deaf adults who use AUSLAN as their first language, international students from non-English speaking countries (ACARA, n.d.). Whilst this definition of students with EAL/D learning needs is used by ACARA for the Australian curriculum, and by state and territory education systems, this definition is *not used in the NAPLAN data collection* system, and instead, LBOTE (or

Language background other than English) is the category intended to recognise language background. My research has clearly shown the failure of this statistical category to adequately recognise language as a factor in the NAPLAN performance (see below). This has had a domino effect in the delivery of EAL/D services, and I will explore this below.

EAL/D students who have emerging bilingual skills or would be considered to be in the first two to five years of learning English, are not unusual in our school systems. Every classroom in Australia will likely have at least one student who is either fully or emerging bilingual. The process of adding academic English to the linguistic repertoire, across listening and speaking, reading, and writing, can take considerable years. International research suggests 5-7 years with some variation around age of student and stage of schooling. See Collier (1987) or Creagh et al. (2019) for a summary of the key research. Variation in the acquisition of English as an additional language is partly determined by the age of the student, their access to English support in school, and their prior schooling experience, if they arrive at school in Australia having come from another country. Within the broader EAL/D group therefore, there needs to be scope for recognition of students, primarily of refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, who may have limited or no prior schooling. This group is a high needs subset of the larger EAL/D group.

Understanding the distinction between language and literacy

The failure of the NAPLAN assessment regime to distinguish language has largely led to the conflation of language with literacy, however these are different though related skills. For EAL/D learners, the development of literacy is contingent on the development of English language skills, including vocabulary, and the ability to use and understand spoken English. Naidoo et al, make this distinction clear.

Language is the tool that enables communication to occur. Literacy is the manifestation of those communications—our written and spoken texts. The effectiveness of our literacy—our communicative effectiveness—is dependent upon our efficacy with language, our repertoire of language tools. The smaller our language repertoire, the less efficient and effective our literacy practices. (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou and Langat 2018, Chapter 7, section 7.2)

Wigglesworth and Simpson (2018) also talk about this distinction in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who may speak languages or dialects other than English when they arrive at school. They flag the dire consequence of confusing language and literacy.

Literacy has become so bound up with schooling that in politically monolingual countries such as Australia, little distinction is made between learning the language of schooling and learning to read and write…This can create difficult situations for children who don't speak the dominant language when they enter school…They may be incorrectly assessed as failing to learn to read and write, when in fact they haven't yet learned enough of the dominant language to be able to read and write in it. (Wigglesworth and Simpson 2018)

Angelo and Hudson (2018), in their work with classroom teachers working with Indigenous EAL/D students found that literacy pedagogy is applied erroneously when language pedagogy is in fact required, and that accountability processes are often interwoven with the teaching of literacy at the expense of language pedagogy.

Pro-language messages (e.g. EAL/D proficiency levels, complex contact language backgrounds) are sporadic and inconsistent in the schooling domain and are overwhelmed by the unremitting cascade of non-language messages (e.g. phonics teaching, sight words, reading levels). The result is that, for

schools and teachers, language-oriented processes can be less visible, seem of less importance and/or appear problematic or in conflict with other accountabilities… (Angelo and Hudson 2018)

In the following I will present three key research publications which highlight the specific needs of EAL/D learners as equity priorities. Each of the studies **interrogates the educational attainment of EAL/D students of migrant/refugee background**, in the Australian context and provide empirical evidence that EAL/D learners need a) access to specific targeted EAL/D support and b) differentiated access to that support determined by learner background factors. While the research presented below is primarily concerned with EAL/D students or migrant and refugee background, the findings would be relevant to EAL/D learners who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Empirical research to support the identification of EAL/D students and EAL/D refugee background students with limited prior schooling as equity groups.

Study 1.

Creagh, S. (2014). A critical analysis of problems with the LBOTE category on the NAPLaN Test. *Australian Educational Researcher*. 41: 1-23

Abstract

The National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLaN) is an annual literacy and numeracy test for all Australian students, and results from the test are disaggregated into a number of categories including language background other than English (LBOTE). For this and other categories, results on each section of the test are aggregated into state, territory and national means and standard deviations enabling comparison of performance. The NAPLaN data indicate that since the test began, in 2008, at a national level there is little difference between the results of LBOTE and non-LBOTE students on all domains of the test. This is a national result, and there is greater variation at state and territory level. However, these results defy a logic which might suggest that the LBOTE category will reflect the influence of English as a second language on test performance, rather suggesting that a second language background is not associated with test performance. In this paper, I will interrogate the variation in the LBOTE category, using data provided by the Queensland state education department, focusing on year 9 students who participated in the 2010 test. Using multiple regression and focusing on variables which are specifically related to language background, I will show that within the LBOTE category there is a wide variation of performance, and the LBOTE data are in fact hiding some of our most disadvantaged students. I will suggest alternative ways in which language learners could be identified to better empower policy and pedagogical responses to student needs.

Significance of findings

Using cross sectional data, first, using visa category as a proxy measure of education background, I was able to show that LBOTE students have enormous variation in their performance on the NAPLAN test. Students of refugee background are achieving some of the poorest results on NAPLAN, whereas students from skilled visa backgrounds are outperforming Australian students, on average. Using a second more detailed and smaller dataset, I was then able to demonstrate that level of English language ability, as measured by the Queensland EAL/D Bandscales, is a key factor in NAPLAN performance, and any student who is in the early stages of learning English is being tested on language rather than literacy in that test, rendering the results invalid. Whilst this seems an obvious finding, the statistical architecture that sits around the NAPLAN tests fails to adequately represent language learners, and in particular, completely hides those EAL/D students who are in the early

stages of learning English, as well as EAL/D students of refugee background who may have had limited or no prior education.

Study 2

Creagh, S., Kettle, M., Alford, J., Comber, B., and P. Shield. (2019). How long does it take to achieve academically in a second language? Comparing the trajectories of EAL students and first language peers in Queensland schools. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 42: 3, 145-155.

Abstract

For the past four decades, the question of how long it takes to achieve academically in a second language has been the subject of research. It is a key policy question informing the allocation of resources for the support of English language learners in schools, with the existing research from the United States (US), Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) showing it takes varying lengths of time depending on a range of variables. Until this present study, no research had been done on the trajectories of English language learners in the Australian context, where increasing numbers of English learners form the student population. As part of a broader mixed methods study designed to address this gap in the research, we present quantitative analyses of longitudinal school data on NAPLAN reading results for two large regions in Queensland from the years 2009–2015. Using two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures, we identified the academic trajectories of EAL students as compared with the trajectories of the same age cohort, most of whom are English as a first language speakers. The findings show that EAL students who had been in schools long enough to sit four NAPLAN tests reached parity by Year 7, suggesting that it takes the whole of primary school for them to achieve at the same level as their English-speaking peers. Those who entered between Year 3 and Year 5 reached parity within two to four years of arrival in Australia. For older learners entering school between Year 5 and Year 7, reaching parity took much longer. The implications of these findings are far reaching for policy, teacher preparation, and the provision of high quality language support programs in Australian primary and secondary schools.

Significance of findings.

This study highlights the time that is taken to acquire academic English, and the impact that age of entry to school in Australia can have on academic progress. The findings indicate that language support services are necessary across the whole of primary school for EAL/D students who enter the schooling system early in primary school. For secondary learners, consideration needs to be given to the increasing complexity of the curriculum in terms of academic and linguistic demand, as well as the delivery of content across a range of discipline areas, and teachers. More than ever, language support needs to be available for EAL/D students, and especially for secondary EAL/D students with limited prior schooling, if they are to reach their potential in school.

Study 3

Creagh, S. (Forthcoming). Measuring the academic progress of newly arrived Migrant and Refugee youth: An Australian school-based longitudinal study. Book chapter in *The Research Handbook on Migration and Education*. Edward Elgar.

This study tracked the English language development of young people, newly arrived in Australia, whilst they attended an intensive English language secondary school program in Queensland. Utilising school-based and enrolment data, collected across the duration of enrolment in this school, I created a bespoke dataset which allowed me to map the language development of 232 students. I was able to disaggregate the progress of these students and show that for some students, primarily students of migrant background with educational opportunities prior to arrival in Australia, that

these students were able to reach a level of academic English in this intensive setting sufficient to enable them to exit to the next stage of their schooling, in a mainstream setting, with continued though reduced EAL/D support, and the majority of this group were able to achieve this level within one year. Some students, predominantly of refugee background, needed longer in the program, on average, up to 10 weeks (the equivalent of a school term), and exited the program on a level of English that would require continued high-level support in the context of a mainstream classroom. Aside from identifying school-based practices which are responsive to the heterogeneity of newly arrived EAL/D students, this study established that even after considerable time in a program with the most intensive of support, students of refugee background will continue to require high levels of support. Mainstream schools and classrooms need to provide some form of intensive language support, while students familiarise themselves with the new school setting, and learning and assessment expectations. Professional development is needed for principals including in the provision of research-informed models of whole-of-school support for EAL/D students and how these are effective, and finally, professional development is also required for classroom teachers in relation to language pedagogy and the selection of teaching strategies which support EAL/D students to build their academic English language capacity.

Key messages from Australian and international research:

- LBOTE is a poor indicator of language learning status and has no capacity to indicate a language learning need
- EAL/D students in primary schools, on average, and in comparison to, English speaking peers, take all of primary school to reach parity on NAPLAN
- EAL/D students who arrive in Australia in high school need more intensive and longer levels of English language support, in part because of the greater demands of the secondary curriculum, demands which continue to increase across the upper years of secondary school.
- EAL/D learners are not a homogenous group. Some are highly educated in their first languages and arrive in Australia also with some exposure to English. These students are often high achievers and outperform Australian students on standardised testing, once they have a good grasp of academic English
- Can I reiterate: EAL/D learners are not a homogenous group. Some groups of EAL/D learners, particularly those students who are of refugee background, may have limited exposure to schooling prior to arrival in Australia. These students may take considerably longer to acquire academic English because of the requirement to be learning to listen, speak, read and write in English, whilst learning curriculum content. The great challenge for these students, of course, is that they are required to develop first time literacy skills, in a second or additional language. This takes considerably longer and requires specialist English language pedagogy to support these learners, particularly if they are arriving in the school system from year 4 onwards.
- Language issues are not confined to subject English. The language demands of all subject areas impact the performance of EAL/D learners.
- There remain poor processes of longitudinal data collection related to EAL/D learners, which hamper capacity to track progress of language learners. These data collections would be improved if data were maintained within student records, rather than overwritten when student change schools.
- There would be considerable merit in collecting educational history of students upon arrival to Australia. This too would support the allocation of appropriate levels of EAL/D pedagogical support.

Implications of this invisibility, currently being experienced in education systems.

Across Australia there has been a considerable shift away from the provision of specialised EAL/D support within schools. In Queensland, for example, a commendable policy focus on inclusion for all student groups has been operationalized in an exclusionary way, reducing access to specialised EAL/D services, and relying on school principals to allocate funding for these services, whilst relying on classroom teachers (with limited access to professional development) to address the learning needs of this group (see Creagh 2022).

These issues are further confounded by the following:

- a failure to recognise and name EAL/D in the AITSL teaching standards as a differentiated group requiring a language pedagogy
- this is turn has led to a decline or complete elimination of specialist EAL/D training in Initial Teacher Education programs because of the link between AITSL standards and the design of teacher education programs
- failure to recognise the impact of language on NAPLAN performance because of poor data collection using the LBOTE category
- NAPLAN's 'invisibilisation' of language as an issue in NAPLAN performance has resulted in a prioritization of literacy for all students, regardless of first language spoken, and a conflation of language and literacy.

By identifying EAL/D students, and EAL/D students of refugee background with limited prior school as equity groups, there may be a domino effect which will counter many of the current failures listed above. However, until this is the case, all students who are EAL/D including Indigenous EAL/D will experience continued significant disadvantage if they are subsumed with all other learners and assumed to have academic English in full, as part of their language repertoire.

> *Classroom "insufficiencies" are perpetuated when "mainstream" classroom curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are delivered to L2 language learners without differentiation, as though such learners were in fact first language (L1) SAE speakers with full, age-appropriate fluency in SAE. (Angelo and Hudson, 2018).*

Finally, to quote from Ramos (2021, p.451), in her study of refugee-background students who achieved academic success:

> *They talked about education as a once in a lifetime opportunity to self-empower and take charge of their destinies; to build a positive future for themselves and their families; to have a career and a steady job; to give back to the community; and to escape the label of 'victimised refugee'. Education is thus articulated as 'pivotal in increasing conditions for the exercise of agency, in which both individual and community benefit might be achieved' (McPherson, 2007, p.135)*

Given the high levels of migration Australia relies on, and the proud history we have as a country which supports humanitarian resettlement, it is important that our education services provide equitable opportunity for all students who come here to reach their full potential.

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