

## **Closing the emergency facility: Moving schools from literacy triage to better literacy outcomes**

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*ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the tensions between national and international testing, educational policy and professionalism for middle school English teachers. I argue that state and federal government(s) are responding to the impact of Australia's falling results on the international testing in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) through the usage of their own testing program, the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website in a searchable and comparable form has been detrimental to many schools and has pushed these schools into "emergency mode", as they struggle to improve their scores. At the same time, the results from recent PISA examinations reveal extensive inequities in educational outcomes across Australia, as well as some consistent general trends in the Australian data. I use the metaphor of the hospital emergency department to explore this situation. Drawing on Sahlberg's (2011) notion of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), I explore this metaphor becoming a pandemic. I draw on Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) usage of educational triage and cast different and multiple educational professionals playing the role of the triage nurse—the alternate federal and state government education ministers responding to international and state test results in triage; and principals of poor performing schools operating their school as though it is an emergency department; poor literacy results triaged Code Red receiving immediate focus and attention, but "treated" in terms of immediate survival and a focus on basic skills. I argue that the international testing provides better markers for how we are doing as a nation, and what might be done to improve our international standing with respect to our literacy scores. I argue that true gains in literacy and the development of more complex literacy skills are not made through triaging literacy through an emergency department, but through a long-term focus on school redesign.*

*KEYWORDS: Literacy education, high-stakes testing, Global Education Reform Movement, Australian schooling.*

### **INTRODUCTION: SCHOOLS IN TRIAGE MODE**

Researching a school animation program that had been identified as an outstanding case of school curriculum redesign, I interviewed a visiting Vice Principal, Ken, who had been placed in the school for training purposes. The school he belonged to was 25 minutes further out of the city, and in a much lower socio-economic area than this very middle-class school. The school we were in was devoting a great deal of time and resources to the innovative and creative animation program. Ken "loved" every aspect of the program and was extremely enthusiastic about it. However, when I asked him how he might adapt it for his school, he told me that there was *no way* that he could run a program like that at his school. Having just heard him wax lyrical

about the benefits of the program for some minutes, I was surprised, and so probed further. He told me that because the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy) results were very low at his school, they were in crisis and had to “focus on the basics”. I talked him through the numerous literacy skills that the students were developing through this program: the richness of the task; the complexity of the products; the cooperation skills; the creativity; the attention to good quality writing and textual structure; and the relationship between this middle-school rich task and later employment prospects. Ken agreed, but was unmoved. “It is a great program, but (at my school) we need to focus on the basics. Our kids need the basics. We have to improve our test results.”

The impact of the testing results was shaping the experience of teaching and learning at Ken's school. This school was facing a NAPLAN emergency in response to the “crisis” put upon them by their literacy results. Their response was to use NAPLAN as the basis for the curriculum, teaching the basic literacy skills of NAPLAN rather than rich, complex approaches to language and literacy teaching such as the animation program under investigation.

Ken is not alone. All over Australia, leadership teams of schools who do not perform well in NAPLAN are operating in “triage mode” as a result of the publication of their NAPLAN scores on the *MySchool* website. In this article, I argue that both national and international testing regimes are having a negative effect on English teaching and learning in Australia<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on data collected from schools and teachers in Victoria, my own experiences as a mother, language and literacy educator and researcher, as well as an analysis of the Australian PISA results from 2009/2012, I explore the notion of “triage” in literacy education. I argue that NAPLAN testing, a very negative experience for many school communities, is a response to Sahlberg's GERM spreading like a pandemic. In particular, the publication of NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website in a searchable and comparable form has been extremely detrimental to many schools. This combination of circumstances has pushed these schools into an “emergency mode”, where they “triage” their literacy activities—focusing resources on curriculum activities and school practices that they believe will increase their literacy scores and neglecting other areas of the English curriculum. True gains in literacy and the development of more complex literacy skills are not made through triaging literacy through an emergency department. In order to achieve better outcomes for all Australians, Australia requires a redesign approach to schools and systems—a long-term response that increases student inclusion and educational equality.

In doing this, I consider two different literacy tests that are performed in secondary schools in Australia, NAPLAN and PISA (the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment), and consider what they tell us and how we might respond. In Australia, Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 have been tested annually using NAPLAN since 2008. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website describes NAPLAN as testing “the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling and numeracy. The assessments are undertaken nationwide, every year, in the second full week in May”

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the NAPLAN discussion appears in O'Mara, J. (2014). An emergency response to literacy: NAPLAN on MySchool. *Practically Primary*, 19(2).

(ACARA, 2014a). PISA is conducted every three years. The OECD states that PISA is unique because the tests are not directly linked to the school curriculum but enable students at the end of compulsory education to apply their knowledge to real-life situations. PISA also collects sociological information and, importantly, information about students' reading habits and dispositions (OECD, 2014).

In researching what these tests have to say and the impacts that they are having on governments, schools and communities, I have used data collected from teachers about their experiences of NAPLAN and a literature review on PISA. In 2013 I prepared a short survey to collect responses from Victorian English teachers about the "unintended consequences of NAPLAN". I did this for the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), on behalf of the membership, so that we could prepare a submission to the Australian Federal Government Senate Inquiry. VATE is the professional association for English teachers in Victoria, and most secondary schools in Victoria are institutional members of the association. The survey was open for a long weekend and 88 English teachers responded, with 83 of the responses being negative towards the process of the NAPLAN testing.

Teachers who responded were, in the main, especially negative about the publication of the testing results in a searchable form on the *MySchool* website, and the subsequent impact this was having on them, their students and their school communities. For example, one teacher reflected:

There is a silent but pervasive awareness that these tests and published results drive everything at this school from the top down, that leadership makes extravagant promises about what our kids will "achieve" on tests, and they will do anything to get those improvements to secure and advance their careers at the expense [of] learning, student well-being and teacher motivation. These tests and the publication of school results undermine the motivation and professionalism of teachers, particularly in schools like mine that are burdened with the bureaucratic pressure that falls on school communities lacking the cultural, social and financial capital to resist it.

This response summarises the kinds of pressures that many teachers reported. Even teachers at schools with high results felt that there were negative consequences of the publication of the results in this way, and teachers were very politicised about the ways in which this process impacted upon lower socio-economic status communities. In his analysis of 55 interviews with teachers and principals about NAPLAN, Hardy (2014) describes these educators as "actively appropriating" the agenda (p. 16) in the "nuanced interplay between broader performative policy and political pressure for improved NAPLAN results, and teachers and principals' concerns for more sustained, educative approaches to student and teacher learning" (p. 16). The teachers responding to our survey showed a similar awareness and political skill.

At the same time as I was preparing the paper for the senate inquiry, I was completing a literature review focusing on how jurisdictions around the world responded to international testing results and what strategies and approaches were successful at achieving higher standards. PISA was clearly high stakes for the government, because of the ways in which the international league tables were prepared, and countries were ranked. For teachers and schools, unlike NAPLAN where their school's results are publicly published, PISA is low stakes as the results are de-identified and reported only in terms of jurisdictions. I see that these two tests interact through the pressure

placed on the government through the publication of the PISA results (and subsequent publicity and fallout) and they have responded to this by shifting the blame to individual schools, by publishing their NAPLAN results.

In PISA 2009/2012<sup>2</sup> Australia was listed as a high-performing country in reading literacy (with a score of 512 in 2012 and 515 in 2009). However, these results were statistically lower than earlier in the decade (OECD, 2010). In their analysis of Australia's 2009 PISA results, S. Thomson, de Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, & Buckley (2011) note that in reading literacy scores between PISA 2000 and PISA 2009, Australia was the only high-performing country to show a significant decline (13 score points) in reading literacy pp. vi-vii. This was largely due to falls in results of students at the top levels of schooling (COAG, 2010, p. 27). In PISA 2012, this decline had increased to 16 points. PISA assesses students as achieving at different levels from 1a-6 (with 6 as the highest and 2 as the minimum required skills for baseline participation in society). The proportion of students who achieved level 5 and 6 declined over the decade from 18 per cent to 13 per cent between PISA 2000 to PISA 2009. Barry McGaw, Chair of the Board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, commenting on PISA 2009, noted that, "The reasons for this are not immediately evident from the data but it is at least clear that it is due to schools focusing more on basic achievement levels and not so much on the development of sophisticated reading of complex text" (McGaw, 2010 p. 5). I was particularly interested in this, as the teacher responses to our NAPLAN survey showed so strongly how many of them were concerned about the reduction of the curriculum to the teaching of basic skills for NAPLAN.

The other significant trends in PISA 2009, were a 17-point decrease in males, with 4% more males not achieving the basic levels of 2 on this 6 point scale (Thomson et al., 2011), and an increase in the number of students who do not read for enjoyment. The losses in this are significant, with negative impacts for the economy, with 4% more males not having the basic skills for employment and everyday life and the follow-on effects that this has for their families and communities. Again, the average score of those in remote locations was almost two years of schooling lower than that of students in metropolitan schools. The biggest on-going news for Australia, however, is the impact of socio-economic status on test results in Australia compared to the way that this plays out in other countries. The gap between the performance of students from the highest and lowest socio-economic backgrounds can be up to three years of schooling. S. Thomson (2013) puts it succinctly:

Australia must strive to improve outcomes for all students – getting the lowest achievers up to an acceptable standard for a wealthy first-world country and extending the higher achievers to lead the country in terms of innovation and development. The goal is attainable, but research into what actually works in changing outcomes is essential (para 9).

I am not a quantitative expert or an advocate of standardised testing. However, as an educator I am appalled by the disparities of educational outcomes captured so saliently by these analyses of PISA, and feel motivated to spread this story more broadly.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2012, PISA focused on mathematical literacy, whereas in 2009, the focus was reading literacy. I have included some of the trends across the two sets of tests in this article.

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO NAPLAN: TRIAGING THE CURRICULUM AND GERMS

Medical metaphors are useful to explore the sense of panic and emergency that many members of the community are feeling around mandated testing regimes. A nurse friend often comments that the health system should be named the “sickness system”, as systemically the focus is more on treatment than prevention. These metaphors align with the systemic approach to literacy education, where the focus on national and international test scores has that same sense of “making a diagnosis” and “the search for a cure”, but fails to address the fundamental issues around equity and inclusion endemic in the Australian education system.

Sahlberg (2011) describes the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). “It is not a formal global policy program, but rather an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions to improve education systems” (Sahlberg, 2011, Chapter 4, Section 2, para 1). He describes its being promoted “through the strategies and interests of international development agencies, bilateral donors and private consultants through their interventions in national education reforms and policy-making processes. He draws on Ravitch’s (2010) description of venture philanthropy injecting billions of dollars into public education systems and then often insisting on using management concepts and business principles to describe the school system. He argues that this “promotes the viral spread of GERM globally” (Sahlberg, 2011, Chapter 4, Section 2, para 2). His metaphor of the spread of GERM can now be seen as a global pandemic.

Sahlberg describes the inspirations for GERM. One of these, which has been particularly enacted in Victoria, is the accountability movement that has:

accompanied the global wave of decentralisation of public services. Making schools and teachers compete for students and resources and then holding them accountable for the results (that is, student test scores), this movement has led to the introduction of education standards, indicators and benchmarks for teaching and learning, aligned assessments and testing and prescribed curricula. (Sahlberg, 2011, Chapter 4, Section 2, para 5)

The English teachers who responded to the VATE survey gave examples of what it was like to operate in this environment and dealing with the downward, evasive pressure of GERMS. This downward pressure, particularly in terms of accountability and the competition for resources, is what has led to the feeling of many schools operating like an emergency room in crisis.

Gillborn and Youdell (2000) describe a model of “educational triage” (p. 133) where schools ration scarce educational resources and opportunities. As in the medical model, where the nurses at the triage counter assess who is most likely to benefit from immediate treatment, and who can wait (or not be treated), they describe a systematic neglect of “hopeless cases” (p. 134) with the allocation of resources instead going to those for whom treatment would be effective. They write that schools triage in order to “maximize the effectiveness of scarce resources but their effect, in practice, is to privilege particular groups of pupils marked especially by social class and race” (p. 134). Saltmarsh and Youdell (2004) apply this metaphor to their analysis of a “special sport class”. In this paper, they describe how educational triage (in this case the creation and enactment of a “special sport class”) functions to “constitute

marginalised identities, maintain discursive hierarchies and limit possibilities for students to be constituted in other, less denigrated ways” (p. 368). They argue that these triage processes and their discursive effects are “fundamental to the production of the institutional contexts and conditions for which schools are ultimately accountable” (p. 368).

In my classification of the teachers’ responses from our survey, I noted a series of behaviours that I described as a triage response to what was perceived as a literacy crisis or emergency. When you have an “emergency situation” you need a plan of action, so I prepared a “fridge magnet” (O’Mara, 2014) based on some of the themes that emerged from the data.

<b>Literacy Triage: Emergency Response to Code Red NAPLAN@MySchool</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Blame the workers under you (Prime Minister → Education Minister → Department → Regional Directors → Principals → Teachers)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Keep “poor-performing” students away
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	“Move on” “poor-performing” students
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Reduce other activities so can focus on NAPLAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Teach to the test: Make NAPLAN the Curriculum

**Figure 1. Fridge magnet**

All of the responses listed on the fridge magnet come from the data we collected in our survey. At first it seems bizarre that schools might be operating in emergency mode, but the community perception of the school is high stakes for schools in a competitive market. Many parents “shop” for schools based on NAPLAN results, and make decisions about which school they will enrol their child with by trawling the *MySchool* website from the comfort of their own home. This cuts out the bother of school tours, discussions with teachers and principals, and the consideration of what really will suit their child and what programs and approaches the school offers. As the mother of school-aged children in a middle-class suburb, I have been surprised and dismayed about the ways in which some of my neighbours and friends draw on the green and red bars on the *MySchool* website to measure how well the school is doing, rather than visiting, meeting with teachers, and looking at how the students are faring. These well-educated and intelligent adults often have very limited understanding of what literacy is (thinking of it as a set of basic skills) and of what the test results might mean, their place in the greater scheme of things, and what might be most important for their child in the choice of school.

Parents moving students to particular schools on the basis of the schools’ NAPLAN scores is occurring en masse, hence the anxiety for schools who are losing enrolments. One of the teachers who responded to our survey wrote about the negative effects of positive results:

Our school has good NAPLAN results, so more students want to come here. This meant this year we lost our music room, with a loss in the quality of education for all students at the school. Next year we may lose our art room. Our specialist teachers may be lost as well. This would be a disaster for our school, all because of the government wanting some figures. Parents don't understand what NAPLAN is, and it creates tension and stress for the school community as a whole – an external intervention in teaching and learning that has no benefit for the students, only harm.

Ironically, programs such as music and art, which are contributing to the school's curriculum, stand to be lost due to the school's popularity. A principal I have been working with from a school that performs extremely well in NAPLAN, was very angered that, the day after a local paper reported the high spelling results, a number of parents rang to try to transfer their children to her school. She banged her hand on the table for emphasis as she repeated, "Our school is not about spelling!" The good spelling results were a bi-product of other programs and the additional work parents in the community were doing at home. She felt deeply insulted that the school's success was being measured by spelling. She wanted parents to flock to the school because of the other innovations, not the impressive spelling.

Blame the workers under you (Prime Minister → Education Minister → Department → Regional Directors → Principals → Teachers)

Blaming others for poor results was a strong theme that came through the teachers' responses—they were blamed and some blamed others. Teachers described pressure being put on them from school counsellors, principals and the senior administration team. They described the pressure that, in turn, the principal and the school leadership team felt from regional directors.

There are the usual complaints from on high (region) each year about how bad we all are, which is discouraging.

The school and community sees itself as lacking in ability due to low scores on NAPLAN. The principal and many of the staff concentrate on NAPLAN scores as the deciding indicator of success of student learning and teacher competence is viewed through the lens of NAPLAN success. Teaching and learning has become defined by NAPLAN performance.

The teachers, in turn, blamed the primary schools and the students. They blamed adolescence (the testing for both NAPLAN and PISA being done in Year 9).

Year 7 have only been teaching their students for approximately 13 weeks before they sit NAPLAN, and our school is judged on these results, even though most of the learning that has gone into these results has been in primary school

I tracked a series of reported behaviours and responses as a result of the pressure that leadership groups, teachers and students were feeling. The publication of the results on the *MySchool* website in a searchable and comparable form led to a loss of confidence in the school by the community and many teachers reported a loss of reputation and negative feelings expressed by students about their skills and abilities. One teacher wrote that "teaching and learning is defined by NAPLAN performance" and another teacher reported:

I now have students asking me why our school is so bad. I have been told by students that I shouldn't expect better results from them because, "It's just the way things are here because it's a really bad school."

As well as the loss of pride and confidence experienced by this community, the students are blaming the school for the outcomes, and the identity has shifted to it being a really "bad" school.

- Keep "poor-performing" students away
- "Move on" "poor-performing" students

Teachers reported that, in some schools, students that the school knew would perform poorly were discouraged from sitting the tests, were "kept away" and even that groups of students were "moved away" from the school or shifted to "alternative pathways".

My school was going to encourage low-achieving students to not sit the test, so their results did not impact the overall results of the school.

In 2012, 20% of our non-indigenous students were exempt or absent for the tests. I believe this was because we had a low Year 3 cohort and maybe students were encouraged not to attend school.

...the school data published on MySchool website is of the utmost importance to leadership, and basically dictates the inane things that they do to lift these scores. My school, like many public schools in lower socio-economic areas, tries to shift kids to "alternative pathways", that is to say, dump them on somebody else so that they do not bring down the schools' overall data. Immoral, ineffective and sickening.

- Reduce other activities so can focus on NAPLAN
- Teach to the test: Make NAPLAN the Curriculum

For both principals and teachers, where the emergency was seen as greatest, the school resorted to making the NAPLAN test the curriculum in an effort to improve the results. English teachers wrote at length about the interruptions and distortions to the curriculum because of the demands placed upon them. Teachers described that, "When NAPLAN first started there was a clear message that we wouldn't 'teach to the test'. However now, especially with MySchool, we are instructed to do this." Others noted that, "Too much time is spent by teaching staff preparing students for the test," and that "Teachers are not meant to teach to the test, but they do." NAPLAN has "interrupted the curriculum immensely". They described that the English curriculum had been "restricted", that there were "no broad writing tasks", that they were no longer, "catering for needs of individual students". "The only writing genre (apart from recount writing) we have taught has been the NAPLAN test genre of persuasive text."

I have had to diminish and, in places, abandon aspects of what was a very rich curriculum for Year 9 in order to accommodate the focus on NAPLAN preparation. I feel my students have been far less engaged. It's not been a happy year so far.

Our entire teaching program in Term 1 and Term 2 has been tailored to allow time for teaching "to the test" A significant amount of time is spent teaching persuasive

writing in the middle of a unit that does not align with persuasive writing as a text form. The teaching of English skills has been pared back to a disparate set of skills not connected to each other. We leap from one concept to another, ensuring we cover skills that will be on NAPLAN but not making any integration between concepts or meaningful links for students. When we had a number of interruptions and began to fall behind our scheduled plan, we were instructed to cut the other content out and focus on teaching NAPLAN as it is more important.

The writing genre tested in NAPLAN has become forefronted and in some cases is the only genre taught. The whole of first term is NAPLAN preparation and students sit a number of “mock” NAPLAN tests before the actual tests. Some students become distressed at test time and most students and teachers are nervous about the results. NAPLAN has narrowed our curriculum, daily teaching focus and our concept of competence and success for both students and teachers.

NAPLAN preparation time is definitely biting into large chunks of class time that should be used for ordinary teaching and learning, that is to say meaningful teaching and learning. Despite repeated reminders that we “do not prepare for NAPLAN” voiced in official settings, we certainly do. This is disgraceful, dishonest.

...I have even been told to have a NAPLAN specific class once a week in order to prepare for the test.

With the testing focusing on basic skills in literacy and numeracy, the ways in which the entire school curriculum is being shifted to focus on these skills, and then the ways in which English curriculum is being reshaped around the skills which are tested, is alarming. I have taught English Curriculum Studies for almost 15 years and over that time I have noticed a sharp drop in the amount of creative writing and poetry that the students (usually high-performing English students with good recollections of their school English classes) are reporting having experienced in their own schooling. For schools who are triaging, the heartbeat is at the level of the skills tested, not a holistic approach to the whole person.

## **LITERACY AS REDESIGN: LONG-TERM PERSISTENT RESPONSE TO PISA TRENDS**

In this section of the paper, I work through some of the commentary and themes from the literature regarding the past two PISA tests, and reflect this discussion back to the NAPLAN data. While PISA itself is an imperfect measure, as Thomson (2013) said, there is a strong take-home message for Australia—we have to do better, particularly in terms of social inclusion and equity. I embed this discussion with information about how some schools and jurisdictions have worked to improve their systems in ways that foster a culture of redesign (P. Thomson & Blackmore, 2006) on the whole school/jurisdiction in a more measured way. These redesigns are focused on improving the educational outcomes for all students and are long-term in their aspirations, rather than simply triaging their efforts to increase test scores. But as we noted earlier, triaging itself comes from a lack of resources, an inability to provide assistance to all, so resourcing is an issue with all of these redesigns. The areas of redesign I discuss are: developing a culture of reading; reading and writing longer and more complex texts; engaging boys and girls in literacy; retaining and expanding the

focus on digital literacy and increasing student inclusion, reducing socioeconomic segregation and educational equality.

#### Develop a culture of reading

PISA collects data on reading for enjoyment, which is a strong marker of student success. However, one third of Australian students in PISA 2009 said that they did not read for enjoyment (OECD, 2010). This suggests that there needs to be a renewed focus on reading for pleasure, and more work done on creating a reading culture in Australian schools. The provision of time for reading for pleasure in English classes is an effective way of creating a classroom culture of reading, with improved student attitude and affinity towards reading (Lonsdale, 2003). Very successful jurisdictions tend to have strong cultures of reading and have focused on this as part of their long-term reforms. Finland has a traditional strong reading culture, with free libraries and reading is part of the community everyday practice (Sahlberg, 2011). In Hong Kong, the development of a reading culture in schools was one of the specific aims of the educational reforms (Cheng, 2001) and time in class dedicated to reading, discussions about texts as well as resources were part of this strategy. Notably, the relationship between enjoyment of reading and digital reading performance is higher in Australia than other countries, which suggests that this is an area that deserves particular attention from us.

#### Read and Write longer, more complex texts

While the OECD average is consistent across the text types and the skills tested, in Australia, students are less proficient with continuous texts and the skills of access and retrieval of information and integration and interpretation. While the teaching of reading and composition of these kinds of texts is embedded in the new Australian curriculum, they are vulnerable to oversight when the focus is on basic skills. Teachers in the VATE NAPLAN survey reported this, and there were numerous comments that the teaching of writing was confined to the genres that were to be tested. As I mentioned earlier, students in my English curriculum studies course are reporting that their experiences of secondary school English did not include many opportunities to develop their writing. Higher performing countries such as Finland have a more extensive literature curriculum as well as an emphasis on composition (Sahlberg, 2011). These countries hold a conviction that all students can perform at high levels. Focusing on the inclusion of all students in developing compositional skills was an important part of the Ontario strategy (Canadian Council of Learning, 2007). In Australia, there needs to be a renewed focus on the development of sophisticated reading and composition skills.

#### Engage boys and girls in literacy

As stated early, the downward trend in male achievement levels in PISA 2009 for Australia, was a 17-point decrease in male achievement levels. This meant that 4% more males did not achieve the basic levels of literacy (Thomson et al, 2011). There was also an increase in the number of students who do not read for enjoyment. In Australia there has been concern about the lower literacy levels of male students for

some time. Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, and Muspratt (2002) found that boys made significant gains in their literacy when the teachers gave them opportunities to represent the self, relate to others and negotiate and engage with culture. We can see that these have been some of the aspects of the curriculum that have been stripped away when the focus is on the testing.

Ontario has made significant gains in both boys and girls' literacy through their provincial reforms. One specific area of this reform targeted boys' literacy practices after a significant series of efforts under the umbrella of *The Road Ahead: Boys Literacy Teacher Inquiry Project* (Bodkin et al., 2009). Eight key learnings were identified:

1. The power of teaching with a wide variety of materials
2. The role of social interaction in learning
3. The importance of regular and consistent provision of choice
4. The importance of student talk
5. The value of using differentiated approaches
6. The importance of clear assessment strategies
7. The benefits of information and communication technology
8. The need to engage parents/guardians and the community as partners.

These learnings are primarily about teacher practices and curriculum, although some (such as engaging parents/community) require a whole-school approach (pp. 3-6). It should be noted that both the Ontario researchers and Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt (2002) found that these practices, which are successful with boys, are also successful with girls and can be seen as examples of good practices to engage and extend adolescents in developing their repertoire of literacy practices. However, again, these are all practices likely to be triaged out of a curriculum focusing on basic skills.

#### Keep up the good work in digital literacy

Digital literacy skills are extremely important as they become foundational for communication and information access (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Marsh, 2004). In 2009, the OECD ran a test of digital literacy skills with a smaller sample of 19 countries. In this test, Australia achieved a mean of 537 points, ranking second in the trial. Australian students performed in general 22 points higher in digital literacy than print literacy “except for students who attended schools in remote areas, whose digital and print reading literacy performances were not significantly different” (Thomson & de Bortoli, 2012, p. ii). Australia has had robust policies and support for digital literacy for some time and there have been considerable resources devoted to it (DEECD, 2009; DEEWR, 2012) Australian teachers have knowledge and skills in this area, and the results show that students are more engaged with digital texts. The PISA 2009 revealed that girls and boys both perform better with digital texts (S. Thomson & de Bortoli, 2012), but this is particularly the case for boys. “In the digital medium, girls are still performing relatively well as readers in comparison with boys, but the gap is narrower. Finding some way to harness the reading interests and strengths of boys would have great national benefits” (Mendelovits, Ramalingam & Lumley, 2012, p. 8).

However, if Australia is to “keep up the good work in digital literacy”, it needs to ensure that all students have good access to equipment and connections and that the pedagogy and approach to digital literacy is innovative. There have been several recent pushes in Australia that have the potential to erode our standing in this area. Firstly, there is the undermining of the National Broadband Network, which had the potential to provide high quality services more equally across Australia. The revised proposals do not advantage rural and remote communities in the same ways. Secondly, and of potentially more concern, is the policy push for all schools to move from technology provided by schools, to Bring Your Own Devices programs, where students provide their own technology, thus reducing departmental budgets. The requirement for parental provision of such devices raises significant questions with respect to social equity. Middle-class schools often specify the type of device that they know that they can use effectively in their programs, in the knowledge that parents will provide the devices and that the usage of the same device is easier for classroom management. Schools in lower socio-economic areas are forced into a generalised BYOD program, where students have varying capacities on their devices, and teachers have to manage a huge range of technology in the room. While ultimately it is the pedagogy and not the device itself that matters, it is hard to keep up the good work in digital literacy if you have to spend the lesson charging and sorting out “tech problems”.

From 2016 NAPLAN will be online (ACARA, 2014b), testing schools’ technological systems and students’ digital literacy skills. This will introduce further inequities into the testing system, where the provision of technology within the school and the students’ access to it will impact upon their ability to complete the test, particularly at primary school. Additionally, schools with unreliable and inadequate wireless connections (typically those in rural, regional and remote areas) will be disadvantaged in accessing the tests online, particularly if the entire year level is trying to sit the test at once.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Increase student inclusion
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Reduce socioeconomic segregation and educational inequality

Across all cycles of PISA, Australia has shown larger than average effects for socio-economic status, and the effects of educational inequality are very pronounced. Additionally “socioeconomic segregation” (S. Thomson, 2013) is very pronounced. For Australia, the increase in the number of students not achieving level 2 in PISA is of equally high concern as the decrease in the numbers of high performing students. Luke (2010) warns that:

- That the closure of the “equity gap” in Australian education cannot be addressed by a principal policy emphasis on the teaching and high stakes testing of basic autonomous skills and behaviours;
- That longitudinally sustained improvement in the performance of students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous communities will require an enacted curriculum that features: intellectually challenging, demanding and interesting knowledge; sustained and scaffolded linguistic interaction around and about that

knowledge; and demonstrable links between school knowledge and the everyday realities of Australian life, cultures and work. (pp. 6-7)

Ontario has made substantial improvements in its reading proficiency levels: 14% more students reaching proficiency in reading and 13% more students graduating high school since 2004 (Fullan, 2007). Moreover, the improvements are sustained as numbers continue to rise and have been inclusive of all students. The five aspects of the model adopted by Ontario are *focus, build relationships, persist, develop capacity, and spread quality implementation*, all of which create successful school and system redesign. These reforms have shifted the focus away from punitive accountability measures, performance pay and course completion and towards building shared sociocultural and leadership values and purposes within a system that aspires to improve (Fullan, 2007) The key to this strategy is a professionally-driven rather than market-driven system change, which is the opposite to what is happening in Australia, where NAPLAN is shaping the educational market and the GERMs are spreading. On the basis of this professionally-driven approach, Ontario balances administrative and professional accountability and has seen a dramatic reduction of low-performing schools

Ontario's policies focus on literacy, numeracy and school completions. Rather than the government working against teacher unions and punitive interventions, they work with teacher unions and provided extensive support to help teachers and schools. A Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was formed which developed, in tandem with unions, teachers and schools, a variety of initiatives across a range of issues. A review of the reforms concluded that:

The consistent finding across all components of the study is that over its brief history, Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) has had a major, and primarily highly positive, impact on Ontario's education system. Overall, the level of activity associated with and generated by the LNS is very high. (Audet et al., 2009, p.11)

Significantly, they shifted the culture in Ontario schools from a culture much more like triaging to one focused on long-term changes that value teachers and focus on enabling the success of all students.

### **MOVING SCHOOLS FROM LITERACY TRIAGE TO BETTER LITERACY OUTCOMES: CREATING A NEW FRIDGE MAGNET**

Australia needs to close its literacy emergency facility and instead concentrate on long-term systemic changes aimed at a stronger, more holistic approach to literacy teaching and learning. Currently the situation in Australia is that, for many schools, NAPLAN has become the defining marker of their worth. One teacher at such a school commented:

The school and community see itself as lacking in ability due to low scores on NAPLAN. The principal and many of the staff concentrate on NAPLAN scores as the deciding indicator of success of student learning and teacher competence is viewed through the lens of NAPLAN success. Teaching and learning has become defined by NAPLAN performance.

In order to break the triage mindset, however, more resources are needed in middle and lower socio-economic schools to enable school redesign. This could come from either increasing or redistributing government funding to schools. Additionally, the emphasis on NAPLAN needs to decrease, or the tests themselves could be stopped. At the very least, the results should not be published on the *MySchool* website. Schools and jurisdictions need to abandon the current literacy triage approach with respect to the ways in which our national testing is used, moving to a redesign approach, responding to PISA trends.

<b>Literacy as Redesign: Long term persistent response to PISA trends</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Develop a culture of reading
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Read and Write longer, more complex texts
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Engage boys and girls in literacy
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Keep up the good work in digital literacy
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Increase student inclusion
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Reduce socioeconomic segregation and educational inequality

I call for the Prime Minister, Education Minister, Education Department workers, principals and teachers to get out of their nurse uniforms and focus on these long-term approaches—throw out your red triage fridge magnet and replace it with the green one. We need to work together on a long-term, persistent, bi-partisan response to the lessons from PISA.

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