

‘NAPLAN does not have the write stuff’

by Emily Frawley

Benjamin Franklin wrote that there are two certainties in life: death and taxes. For teachers, there are two other certainties that we face each year: reports and the NAPLAN.

As I begin writing this article to persuade readers of my views on this test, I am aware that I am mirroring a task that students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 will most likely be undertaking this week: persuading readers with their opinion on an issue (the other option is a narrative piece).

Unlike the NAPLAN writing task though, my writing has a context and a real-world purpose. The NAPLAN does not.

When it comes to the NAPLAN, the same criticisms seem to be levelled at it year after year: that it encourages teaching to the test, that its high-stakes nature has resulted in schools advising some students not to sit the test or even assisting students with answers, that the high-pressure environment it creates negatively impacts on students' wellbeing, and that it has not been culturally and linguistically appropriate for Indigenous and EAL (English as an additional language) students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

One thing that hasn't been considered though is how this test is shaping curriculum. The instigation of this national literacy test in 2007 preceded Australia's first National Curriculum (which is still under review). What this effectively means is that Australian school students were being tested on material long before there was any agreement as to what that material should actually be.

In the absence of a national literacy policy, the NAPLAN tests seem to be acting as an authority on what we should value most in terms of school students' literacy and numeracy skills.

This is an issue, especially for the teaching of writing. Why? The NAPLAN writing test is an assessment of a particular type of writing, and not the sort of writing that English teachers value.

As a timed test, it cannot account for the need to plan, draft and rewrite a composition – an essential skill for writers; nor does it help students prepare for the real-world writing they will engage with outside school. So it's an unauthentic writing task, and one that brings considerable nervousness to students and teachers alike.

As our education system moves towards an increasing system of high-stakes testing and accountability, opportunities for risk-taking and creativity diminish. Imagination is the casualty of these testing regimes.

Continuing with the persuasive writing test as an example, we know that effective persuasion can be found in a variety of forms, from opinion articles and speeches, to advertising and even poetry and stories.

Yet students reading the NAPLAN writing tests are informed that a persuasive text is something that has an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion, and the publicly available marking guide shows a wide variety of these model generic essays that students continue to emulate each year. In fact, the marking guide shows that students will lose marks if they deviate from this generic structure.

Teachers eager to help students perform well on these tests understandably try to provide students with a template and sentence starters to approach the task, with the result that

markers encounter hundreds of papers that begin with the words, "I strongly believe that..." followed by paragraphs structured by "Firstly", "Secondly" (and sometimes eventually "Seventhly", "Eighthly", and "Ninthly").

Most NAPLAN essays make for boring reading – they're not that persuasive at all. The lesson that students learn from the NAPLAN is how to produce a generic essay in a short space of time, and this "skill" comes at the expense of weeks (and sometimes months) of class time that would be much better spent elsewhere.

NAPLAN might be a certainty, but it's certainly not a test that fosters best writing practice. And as the government moves to align this test even closer to the curriculum that teachers must deliver, I'm not persuaded that this is in the best interests of anyone.