

Secondary School English Teachers Caught in the NAPLAN Fray: Effects of the Disparate Responses

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Abstract: Since 2008, secondary school English teachers have been at the receiving end of contradictory advice on how to best prepare their students for the literacy component of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). On the one hand, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) asserts that the 'best preparation for NAPLAN is to continue focusing on teaching the curriculum' (ACARA, 2018a). Yet in Queensland, systems and schools are in the midst of responding to an externally mandated assessment culture (Klenowski, 2011; Hardy, 2014). Our pilot study explores open-answer survey responses from 30 Queensland secondary school English teachers who provided varying accounts of their school's responses to these competing agendas. Employing theories from Bernstein's (2000) sociology of education, we examine what the teacher participants say about (i) NAPLAN's relationship with the English learning area, and (ii) who controls the pedagogic practice for NAPLAN preparation in their school. The article concludes by considering the potential effects of these disparate arrangements.

NAPLAN – the Pros and Cons

The last ten years have seen standardised testing in Literacy becoming *de rigueur* in Australian secondary schooling. Proponents of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) claim that these tests and their public reporting reduces educational inequality, increases objectivity in the awarding of achievement standards, increases accountability (Johnston, 2016), ensures funding is directed to where it is needed, permits better tracking of transient students, allows for more meaningful international comparisons (Dreher, 2012; MCEETYA, 2008), and does not necessarily cause a negative impact on wellbeing (Rogers, Barblett & Robinson, 2016).

For its part, ACARA provides the following advice to schools: 'the best preparation for NAPLAN is to continue focusing on teaching the curriculum' (ACARA, 2018a). The NAPLAN literacy component assesses three domains: reading, writing, and language conventions, with the latter including sub-domains of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. ACARA links each domain to the English learning area:

- Reading domain: 'Knowledge and interpretation of language conventions in context are also an important part of reading and are drawn upon in many reading questions' (ACARA, 2018b).
- Writing domain: 'To date the text types that students have been tested on are narrative writing and persuasive writing' (ACARA, 2018c).
- Language conventions domain: 'The tools of language, including language conventions, are explicitly developed in the English learning area. Therefore the content assessed in

the language conventions tests is aligned to the Australian Curriculum: English' (ACARA, 2018d).

In and of itself, the advice provided by ACARA is not problematic, until it's understood within a high-stakes neoliberal testing environment and the development of statistical data on schools. Much research provides hard evidence that the datafication of schooling through NAPLAN testing puts misplaced emphasis on 'performative input/output efficiency equations' and 'policy as numbers, which lead to the recasting of education purposes and practices' (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2015, p. 2) and unhealthy competition between schools (Lobascher, 2011). Much of the literature currently written about NAPLAN discusses its use as a draconian tool for teacher and school accountability, and the negative impacts thereof (Belcastro & Boon, 2012). Much of teaching is now aimed at improving NAPLAN scores (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), especially for students near benchmarks, which ironically serves to increase inequality for certain populations of students (Creagh, 2016). Other negative effects have been a narrowing of curriculum options (Woods, Dooley, Luke & Exley, 2014), more time spent on test-readiness (Hardy, 2014), increased levels of teachers feeling responsible for scores (Cormack & Comber, 2013), increased anxiety and anger in primary and secondary students, and the changing role of the teacher from 'mentor or helper' to 'supervisor' (Howell, 2015, p. 179). Wu's (2015) statistical analysis reveals reliability and validity issues associated with the scoring of students' performance levels. The detrimental effects on teacher professionalism and the displacement of trust by the public have been noted (Gorur, 2015), as has the print media's reinforcement of the public's existential fear of an underperforming education system (Exley & Singh, 2011) and teachers as self-protective (Mockler, 2015). There is also evidence that principals appointed to Low Socio-Economic Status National Partnership funded schools have instructed teachers to shift their focus from learning area curricula to NAPLAN preparation because of the pressures of external reporting and the performance management of principals (Brennan, Zipin & Sellar, 2015).

Of note is the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (O'Mara et al., 2013). Responses were collected from 88 VATE members over 4 days, many of which were described as 'very lengthy and

extremely affecting' (O'Mara et al., 2013, p. 2). This 20-page submission provided first-hand accounts from secondary school English teachers about the unintended consequences of NAPLAN, including the added stressors to teachers and students, interruption to, and distortion of, the English learning area in favour of teaching to the NAPLAN test, decontextualised teaching practices, and less teaching based on student need (O'Mara et al., 2013). In a similar follow-up survey conducted by VATE (2017), 35 out of 216 (17.5%) respondents indicated that NAPLAN had a negative impact on the English learning area. Respondents wrote about reactive teaching, the curriculum being pushed aside, and modifications to assessment so as to model NAPLAN questions. One respondent provided a lengthy account stating that NAPLAN 'isn't relevant to the actual teaching of English that we do – text study, poetic forms, analytical writing, language analysis, etc. But we are forced to reduce our teaching down to the basics in order to accommodate it' (VATE, 2017, p. 9). Such sentiments were repeated by Loyden, the Head of Department at Spinifex State College in Mt Isa (Queensland), who drew attention to the rapidly evolving curriculum and assessment movement and noted the constant (re)negotiation foisted upon English teachers in response to neoliberal mandates and accountability regimes (Loyden, 2015).

The study

In this paper, we are interested in how secondary school English teachers from Queensland reconcile the advice from ACARA 'to continue focusing on teaching the curriculum' (2018a) *vis-à-vis* the neoliberal agendas filtering into schools via new roles and directions for school principals. This pilot study focuses on the following research question: 'How are secondary school English teachers reconciling NAPLAN's relationship to the English learning area with the relations of control over pedagogies for preparing students for the literacy component of NAPLAN?'

Like Thompson and Harbaugh's (2013) survey with Western Australian and South Australian teachers, O'Mara et al.'s, (2013) and VATE's (2017) surveys of Victorian English teachers, and Loyden's (2015) experiences as an English teacher in Queensland, we undertook research on the perspectives of the teachers who are working in schools preparing students for NAPLAN assessment. As a point of difference to these aforementioned studies, we invited secondary school English teachers from Queensland to participate in an online

open-answer six-item survey. Queensland secondary school English teachers are of interest for two reasons: (i) the particular pressure on Queensland teachers, given Queensland's performance in NAPLAN rankings (see Brennan, Zipin & Sellar, 2015; Exley & Singh, 2011; Klenowski, 2011; Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2015); and (ii) the commitment of Queensland teachers to their disciplinary specialisations rather than General Capabilities such as Literacy (see Hannant & Jetnikoff, 2015; Loyden, 2015).

To explore our research question further, we utilise Bernstein's (2000) focus on 'relations within' education. More specifically, we draw on his theorisation of the classification of curriculum knowledge and the framing of pedagogic practice as an analytic framework to map our participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions. The following section introduces this theory and explains how we employed the analytical tool for mapping the teachers' survey responses.

Bernstein's classification and framing

Bernstein's sociology of education (2000) is a useful way of thinking about the distribution of power and control relations as high-stakes initiatives are introduced into education. Two of his basic analytical tools are useful here, that of classification and framing (see also Barrett & Moore, 2016).

At its most general, *classification* refers to the strength or weakness of the power relationship between categories (Bernstein, 2000). In this research, the concept of classification is used to examine the strength or weakness of the power relations between the literacy component of NAPLAN, the English learning area and other learning areas. We examine each teacher's open-ended survey response to determine if the literacy component of NAPLAN and the English learning area are strongly bounded from other learning areas. If the literacy component of NAPLAN and the English learning area are strongly bounded from the other learning areas, this is called *stronger classification* (represented as +C) or *strongest classification* (represented as ++C). In this case, the *stronger/strongest classification* shows that NAPLAN holds power over the English learning area only. If the literacy component of NAPLAN and the English learning area is weakly bounded from the other learning areas, we call that *weaker classification* (-C) or *weakest classification* (--C). In this case, the *weaker/weakest classification* shows that NAPLAN holds no more power over the English learning area than over the other learning areas.

At its most general, *framing* refers to the locus of control of the selection, sequencing, pacing and criteria of the knowledge to be acquired (Bernstein, 2000). In this research, the concept of framing is used to examine the strength or weakness of the control relations of pedagogic practice, that is, who has control over the pedagogical practices of NAPLAN preparation. We examine each teacher's open-ended survey response to determine if the school's administration (e.g. Principal, Deputy Principals (DP), Heads of Department (HoD) and so forth) has stronger control over the pedagogies for NAPLAN preparation. We call this *stronger framing* (represented as +F) or *strongest framing* (represented as ++F). In the case of *stronger/strongest framing*, school administration dictates the pedagogies for instruction. It might be that the teachers are involved in implementing the pedagogical plan, but their expertise is not drawn upon in the selection, sequencing, pacing, and criteria of the knowledge to be acquired. If the English teachers are left to draw on their own professional decisions to prepare their students for NAPLAN, we call this *weaker framing* (represented as -F) or *weakest framing* (represented as --F). In the case of *weaker/weakest framing*, individual teachers work in isolation or with a disciplinary teaching collaborative without overarching administrative direction.

Bernstein's (2000) theories are appropriate for use in this study as they help to analyse and understand the ramifications of disparate uptakes in curriculum and pedagogy (see also Barrett & Moore, 2016). Rather than constructing choices around *stronger/weaker curriculum* and *stronger/weaker pedagogy* as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, we talk through the pros and cons of each in the paper's conclusion.

Method

An open-ended survey method was employed in this study, wherein an invitation distributed via email recruited English teacher respondents from the English Teachers Association of Queensland (hereafter ETAQ). This study used nonprobability purposive expert sampling. In total, 34 responses were recorded, although not all surveys were completely filled. We thus report on the 30 completed responses. Although respondents reported to be from a variety of secondary schools around Queensland, both government and independent schools, no claim is made for representativeness of school contexts in Queensland. The six open-ended questions are listed in Table 1 and were

all based on the concepts of classification of NAPLAN/ learning area knowledge (C1, C2, C3), and framing of pedagogy (F1, F2, F3).

Table 1. Survey items

Item	Question
C1	How does your school prepare for NAPLAN testing?
C2	Who is responsible for NAPLAN preparation at your school?
C3	How much do different departments in your school work together for NAPLAN?
F1	How much control do individual teachers have over NAPLAN preparation?
F2	How much control does the administration have over NAPLAN preparation?
F3	When NAPLAN results are published, how are these results relayed to you?

To analyse the survey participants’ written responses, a Cartesian Plane was adapted from Exley, Kervin and Mantei’s (2016) work on the classification of curriculum knowledge and the framing of pedagogic practice. A horizontal classification continuum ranged from strongest classification (++C) on the right-hand anchor to weakest classification (--C) on the left-hand anchor. Points of weaker (-C) and stronger (+C) classification were included as appropriate. A vertical framing continuum ranged from strongest framing (++F) at the top anchor to weakest framing (--F) at the bottom anchor. Points of weaker (-F) and stronger (+F) framing were included as appropriate. This produced four quadrants, as per Figure 1.

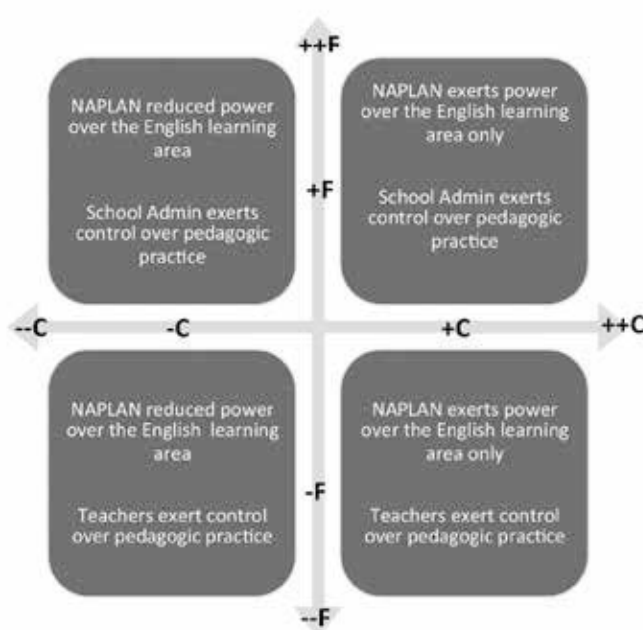


Figure 1. A Cartesian Plane representing NAPLAN’s relations with the English learning area and control over pedagogic practice

Each quadrant in Figure 1 represents a different degree of both who holds control over pedagogical framing for NAPLAN preparation, and NAPLAN’s power over the curriculum. The upper left quadrant, called ‘Quadrant 1’, represents a weakly classified and strongly framed school context where responsibility for NAPLAN preparation is distributed over the learning areas, but where school administration has control over pedagogic practice. The upper right quadrant, called ‘Quadrant 2’, represents strongly classified and strongly framed school contexts where only the English learning area is responsible for NAPLAN preparation and this occurs at the direction of the school administration. The lower right quadrant, called ‘Quadrant 3’, represents a strongly classified and weakly framed school context where NAPLAN preparation is undertaken within the English learning area only and pedagogic control is with the teachers. The lower left quadrant, called ‘Quadrant 4’, represents a weakly classified and weakly framed school context where many learning areas share responsibility for NAPLAN preparation with pedagogic practice being determined by the teachers.

Analysis: Step One

The analysis section of this paper details sample responses from each of the six open-ended survey questions. Analysis was undertaken in a two-step process. First, responses were determined to be examples of *weakest*, *weaker*, *stronger* or *strongest classification and/or framing*. The next section provides the per cent of participants whose responses were coded as such. Direct quotes from the data are shown in italics and elided text is shown in square brackets.

Responses to C1: ‘How does your school prepare for NAPLAN testing?’

Forty-seven per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest classification*. Participants detailed school contexts where test preparation only included using NAPLAN style questions to familiarise students with the style of question, or ones that undertook very little preparation. One participant said that teachers offered ‘practice tests to familiarise the students with the process of NAPLAN testing only’, instead preferring ‘[h]olistic teaching of the concepts covered in the NAPLAN test’. Twenty-seven per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker classification*, mainly stating that students were made aware of NAPLAN concepts.

On the other end of the continuum, 13 per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger classification* and another 13 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest classification*. One response that was coded as the strongest classification is as follows:

[The] English curriculum is discarded for 20 plus weeks – term 4 year 8 and term 1 year 9, to prepare students for ‘the test’. Students are told repeatedly that their English work at these times is ‘for NAPLAN’. In year 8, students complete a practice writing task for a persuasive text. In year 9, students do practice writing tests – both narrative and persuasive, and practice reading and language convention exams using past papers. These are regarded as assessment items – the numerical score is converted to an A – E grade and used to calculate semester grades for reporting. The first 4 weeks of Term 2 are used to drill those aspects of the tests the students performed less well in. Needless to say, the students are bored witless by this approach. They are well aware that the NAPLAN exam is unlike other exams because it has no CONSEQUENCES for them – no prizes for doing well and no brickbats for doing badly. They are not motivated to perform.

Responses to C2: ‘Who is responsible for NAPLAN preparation at your school?’

Twenty-seven per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest classification*. Participants detailed school contexts where test preparation responsibility did not lie with just one person, but with everyone, or a large group of people, such as classroom teachers, or all English teachers. In some cases, this was a deliberate choice on the part of administration, however in others, this was not so. Blurred leadership and responsibility is a hallmark of the *weakest classification*: ‘Responsibilities [are] not overseen in a consistent manner. There have been assigned responsibilities in the past but restructuring of DP and HoD roles has blurred leadership.’ Thirty per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker classification*, mainly stating that students were made aware of NAPLAN concepts.

On the other end of the continuum, 20 per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger classification* and another 23 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest classification*. Those responses which were identified as *strongest classification* noted that power over NAPLAN preparation existed with a single person, or a few people with defined roles from the English Department, to the exclusion of others. For example, one participant

confirmed this arrangement: ‘[The Heads of English] analyse results each year and come up with an action plan to improve results. They determine what preparation will be done based on this plan.’

Responses to C3: ‘How much do different departments in your school work together for NAPLAN?’

Twenty-seven per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest classification*. Participants described meetings between departments, and joint responsibilities for NAPLAN. One participant in this group mentioned that ‘All departments are required to teach the persuasive genre, reading and writing’. This perception of a collaborative effort was questioned by one participant who said that, although their school charged each faculty with exposing students to designated texts, there was no quality assurance to ensure that this happened. Nine per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker classification*.

On the other end of the continuum, nine per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger classification* and another 55 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest classification*. Responses which were identified as *stronger/strongest classification* said that there was no collaboration between departments.

Responses to F1: ‘How much control do individual teachers have over NAPLAN preparation?’

Twenty-seven per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest framing*. Participants detailed contexts in which individual teachers had almost full control over NAPLAN preparation. Thirty-three per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker framing*. For example, school contexts were likely to include those where there was oversight of teachers, sometimes in the vein of teachers being given resources, but where they were left to their own devices as to how to approach these resources with their classes.

On the other end of the continuum, three per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger framing* and another 37 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest framing*. In responses coded as *strongest framing*, teachers had little to no pedagogic control. One respondent explained, ‘There is known input, but by and large the expectations are made as top-down instructions’. Another participant used the term ‘scripted’

to describe teaching in this context, and another said that 'focus areas are identified through data analysis and instructions are given on what needs to be taught'.

Responses to F2: 'How much control does the administration have over NAPLAN preparation?'

Twenty-two per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest framing*. Nineteen per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker framing*. For example, these participants tended to state that the administration had *little*, or only *some* control over NAPLAN preparation. In some cases, the administration was only responsible for administering the test, rather than the actual preparation.

On the other end of the continuum, 11 per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger framing* and another 48 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest framing*. There was 'significant control' by Heads of Department, and administrative staff. One response stated that administration '[told] us what to do in terms of remedial teaching'. Another participant described their administration as 'the owners of the decisions'.

Responses to F3: 'When NAPLAN results are published, how are these results relayed to you?'

Eleven per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as the *weakest framing* and 32 per cent provided responses that were coded as *weaker framing*. Participants described scenarios where results were either not made available to teaching staff, or were 'somewhat available on a database', and it was up to the teacher to locate and analyse the relevant data.

On the other end of the continuum, 28.5 per cent of the participants provided responses that were coded as *stronger framing* and another 28.5 per cent provided responses that were coded as the *strongest framing*. Participants described staff being notified by email or at a staff meeting about results, and then given an analysis, or collaboratively analysing the results. One participant described a school where each teacher was given 15 questions to answer, which had to be returned to a HoD and then discussed with a relevant Deputy; however, the participant also stated that there was neither further action taken concerning the weaknesses revealed, nor were alternative strategies suggested.

Analysis: Step Two

Step Two of the analysis involved mapping each participant onto the Cartesian Plane diagram from Figure 1. Participant responses for the three classification questions and the three framing questions were averaged and mapped onto the Cartesian Plane as per Figure 2. The numerical values displayed in Figure 2 represent the number of participants who were mapped onto a sub-quadrant. The averaging of the three classification questions and the three framing questions meant that some participants didn't align with a sub-quadrant but were mapped onto a midpoint between sub-quadrants. Eight participants were mapped onto an axis. We explain how we deal with these data later. Sub-quadrants with no participants have been marked as 0 (zero).

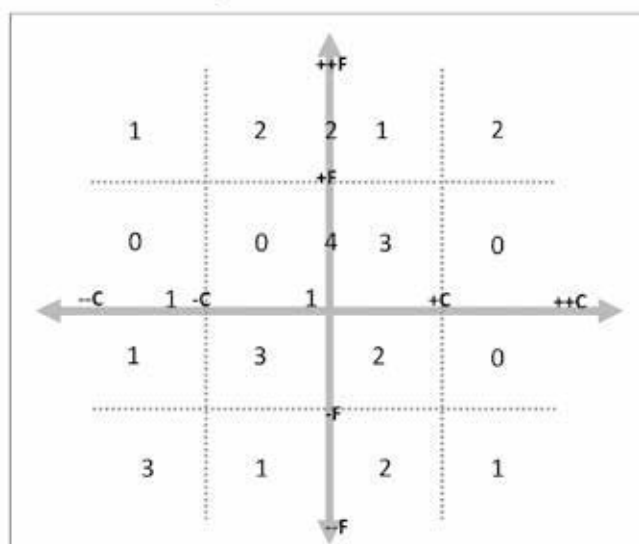


Figure 2. Number of participants who were mapped onto the sub-quadrants of Classification and Framing Cartesian Plane

At the most basic level of analysis, we consider the placement of participants on each axis, noting the positive and negative arms and the midpoints. Figure 2 shows a relatively even distribution of participants across the *classification* axis, with 11 participants mapped onto the positive arm, six participants mapped onto the midway point and 13 participants mapped onto the negative arm. This relatively even distribution of participants across the classification axis indicates a range of experiences in terms of NAPLAN's power over the English learning area (*stronger/strongest classification*) and NAPLAN's power over a range of learning areas (*weaker/weakest classification*). Figure 2 shows a relatively even distribution of participants across the *framing* axis, with 15 participants mapped onto the positive arm,

two participants mapped onto the midway point and 13 participants mapped onto the negative arm. This relatively even distribution of participants across the *framing* axis indicates a range of experiences in terms of contexts where school administration controls the pedagogies for NAPLAN preparation (*stronger/strongest framing*) and where teachers control the pedagogies for NAPLAN preparation (*weaker/weakest framing*).

Analysis: Step Three

At the next level of analysis, we consider the placement of participants within each quadrant, this time taking into account how participants' placement of *classification* of NAPLAN with learning areas intersect with their placement for *framing* of pedagogic practice. Tallying the number of participants within a quadrant had to also account for those participants who were previously mapped onto an axis and therefore not definitely in one quadrant or another. The eight participants who were mapped onto an axis were equally distributed to the neighbouring quadrants. Quadrant 1, which is represented by NAPLAN having reduced power over the English learning area and school administration exerting control over pedagogic practice, ended up with seven participants. Quadrant 2, which is represented by NAPLAN exerting power over the English learning area only and school administration exerting control over pedagogic practice, ended up with nine participants. Quadrant 3, which is represented by NAPLAN exerting power over the English learning area only and teachers exerting control over pedagogic practice, was the least populated of the quadrants with five participants. Quadrant 4, which is represented by NAPLAN having reduced power over the English learning area and teachers exerting control over pedagogic practice, ended up with nine participants.

This distribution of participants into quadrants shows a more nuanced analysis of the data compared with the basic level of *classification* and *framing* analysis in Step Two. Whilst a spread of experiences across the four quadrants is noted, this time, participant concentrations are fewer in Quadrant 3 (a total of five) which is most closely aligned to ACARA's advice that the 'best preparation for NAPLAN is to continue focusing on teaching the curriculum' (ACARA, 2018a). Quadrant 1 is the furthest position from ACARA's (2018a) advice, and is more highly populated than Quadrant 3 with seven participants. Quadrants 2 and 4, with nine participants each, are also contrary to ACARA's (2018a) advice, and also are more populated than Quadrant 3.

Findings and discussion

The small sample size of this pilot research and the self-reporting of participants' experiences mean that findings need to be treated with caution. We, however, make a few conclusions that also point to the need for further large-scale research.

The first finding is that in this era of high-stakes national testing of Literacy, the accounts of Queensland secondary school English teachers vary, a finding that mirrors the studies conducted by O'Mara et al., (2013) and VATE (2017). An overt focus on NAPLAN content and pedagogic practice does afford students the opportunity to access the coding orientations of schooling assessment (Barrett & Moore, 2016). However, we need to consider this affordance in light of other implications for the English learning area.

The second finding is that, according to the participants of this pilot study, the English learning area is a space of competing agendas, sometimes where content is overpowered and narrowed by NAPLAN and where English teachers have very little, if any, control over the pedagogic practices. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) have already reported on the 'NAPLAN effect' and the narrowing of the English learning area curriculum. At its most extreme, data from one participant indicated 20 weeks of English learning area time was handed over to NAPLAN practice in the lead-up to a NAPLAN sitting. If this scenario is repeated four times in a student's school life as preparation for NAPLAN in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, that equates to two years of English learning area content and pedagogies being forsaken for NAPLAN practice.

We view this as problematic for a number of reasons: the disregard for the English learning area and its focus on multiple contemporary text forms and its traditions of assessment (Loyden, 2015); the disregard for the local context; the disregard for students' English learning area needs; and the disempowerment of English learning area specialists. As found in Portelli and O'Sullivan's small case study research provided by Year 9 English teachers in New South Wales,

[a] focus on skills and measurable improvement around reading print based texts as a consequence of systemic and school policy, reveals a model of English that reduces the flexibility of the pedagogical choices of individual teachers, limiting their professional agency, and thus potentially, reducing the opportunities to address the diverse learning needs of their students. (2016, p. 78)

The third finding is that only a minority of participants recounted practices that aligned with ACARA's

advice that the ‘best preparation for NAPLAN is to continue focusing on teaching the curriculum’ (ACARA, 2018a). These pilot data show that the majority of the teacher respondents were caught in the fray, seemingly unable to enact ACARA’s advice. A more potent force is controlling teaching and learning in the English learning area for some Queensland secondary school teachers. These conclusions are not entirely surprising, as noted in Au’s (2008) caution over a decade ago about high-stakes national assessments.

All things considered, more research is warranted to identify if alternative approaches to high-stakes national testing can deliver the evidence of teaching quality sought by the NAPLAN regime without the negative implications identified in this pilot study. Klenowski (2011) called for such a direction in 2011. Her words are still ringing.

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