If there is one thing that can be said about NAPLAN, it certainly gets people talking. Just about everyone I meet has heard of NAPLAN and nearly all of them have an opinion on it. That people know about it is a good thing, and that people have views on it is also a good thing. Both are healthy signs.

Before exploring different perspectives on NAPLAN, it is worth taking a moment to consider a few of the alarming statistics associated with illiteracy:\\(^1\)

- Illiteracy costs the global economy more than USD $1 trillion each year.
- More than 796 million people in the world cannot read and write.
- Illiterate people earn 30–42 per cent less than their literate counterparts.
- A child born to a mother who can read is 50 per cent more likely to survive past age five.
- In various nations, estimates show that 60–80 per cent of prisoners have reading and writing skills below basic levels.
- Amongst juvenile delinquents, up to 85 per cent are functionally illiterate.

So it is vital to know how our young people are developing in their literacy and numeracy skills. The critical importance of literacy in particular is underscored by the fact that NAPLAN tests include assessments in reading, writing, grammar, and punctuation and spelling (all key components to literacy). The increased breadth of knowledge and skills in numeracy found in older students is recognised with two numeracy assessments at Years 7 and 9.

If literacy and numeracy are clearly so crucial to a young person’s success at school, why is there so much debate about NAPLAN? I think the answer lies in the different views people have on how best to measure literacy and numeracy. In this article I want to focus on explaining some of the aspects of NAPLAN that do not feature prominently in the public debate, and also address some of the misconceptions about the program and the tests themselves. My purpose in doing so is to demonstrate that, when understood in context, NAPLAN does have much to offer that is positive and of real benefit to students, schools and parents. I intend to leave the more rigorous debate in the public arena where it should be, but at the same time, I hope I may help in some way to inform that debate.

The NAPLAN program was introduced in 2008, after agreement by all ministers, to enable fair and informed comparisons of performance between states and territories, and to measure national performance in literacy and numeracy annually and over time. NAPLAN replaced state and territory tests, some of which had been administered for many years. This basic purpose of NAPLAN seems at times to get lost in the debate.

NAPLAN tests are developed by experts. They are experts because they specialise in test development, they apply rigorous processes and principles to item development and test

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construction, and they comply with strict specifications. It is worth noting that almost invariably test developers have themselves been teachers. The process for reviewing test items includes a very large panel of people from across Australia, most of whom have also been teachers. These experts know about young people and their learning, and what they can and should know at different levels. The test specifications have been developed against state and territory curricula and will eventually be based on the common Australian Curriculum. So students are not confronting test content they have not been taught.

How do we confirm this? Every item used in a NAPLAN test has been field-trialled with a large, scientific sample of students in the relevant year levels. The item performance statistics must meet rigorous technical standards if they are to find their way into the tests. As NAPLAN is a 'range' test, it tests student performance across a broad spectrum of ability typically evident in a large population like the one doing the tests – over one million students. In the process of test development close attention is also paid to the cultural appropriateness of items for the different ethnic groups and our Indigenous students. This ‘screening’ of items for cultural appropriateness is undertaken conscientiously and sensitively. Test developers don’t always get it right, and at times some items have been subjected to legitimate criticism in this respect. The ultimate test of the quality and suitability of the tests is the analysis of the student performance data they produce. Every year that analysis confirms that the tests have worked successfully.

So the next key question is: how are test data useful to schools, parents and students? This then is where the ‘diagnostic’ dimension to the tests comes to the fore, although once again, not without some misconceptions and mixed understandings.

A medical diagnostic test is performed to aid in the diagnosis or detection of disease. Diagnostic testing is also an important tool for educators who want to know where their students are academically in order to bring those students to where they need to be. If you want your students to move forward, you need to identify where they have started; diagnostic testing is the way to do this. Typically, these diagnostic assessments happen routinely in the classroom. Teachers need to be trained in how to develop such tests, and to understand and analyse the data they produce to maximise the positive impact on teaching and learning.

NAPLAN is ‘diagnostic’ in a different sense of the term. NAPLAN data are diagnostic to the extent that they provide detailed, item-by-item information about each student’s performance. These data can also be aggregated up to a group, class, year level and school level, where they inform different and important decisions. NAPLAN data at these different levels of aggregation provide an evidence base to inform teaching programs and a school’s use of its valuable resources.

However, the time that elapses between students sitting the tests and receiving these performance data is approximately 17 weeks. Everyone agrees it would be good to reduce this time and authorities are considering how this might be done. That time lapse is also what differentiates the ‘diagnostic’ character of NAPLAN data from the medical or educational diagnostic testing described above. Online assessment is most likely to be the best way to get results back to schools, teachers, students and parents more rapidly. Introducing a ‘branched’ or ‘tailored’ test design in an online mode will also have the significant advantage of enriching the data for each student because the tests will be more ‘targeted’.
Parents consistently express their support for the information the NAPLAN data provide on the performance and progress of their sons and daughters. Parents want honest and reliable advice that is also objective. What needs to be continually reinforced in any messaging to schools, teachers and parents is that test drills or excessive practicing is both counter-productive and detrimental to the school’s program, and is quite unnecessary. Students need to be reassured often that they need only do their best once having become familiar with what the tests look like and what they are being asked to do. It is all about keeping NAPLAN in context.

In summary then, NAPLAN is a very high-quality assessment and the tests do what they are intended to do. The data produced by the program are valuable when used effectively and thoughtfully. It is better to make decisions on the basis of evidence wherever possible. And finally, NAPLAN data are just one source of information alongside everything else schools and parents know about the skills, knowledge and talents of our young people.