

# Doing something about it: Representations of NAPLAN in the public domain

---

Greg Thompson<sup>1</sup>, Tomaž Lašič<sup>2</sup>

1 Murdoch University, School of Education, South St, Murdoch, 6150,  
[Greg.Thompson@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:Greg.Thompson@murdoch.edu.au)

2 SMYL Community College, 32 Tesla Rd Rockingham, Western Australia, 6168,  
[moodlefan@gmail.com](mailto:moodlefan@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Since 2008 all Australian school students have sat standardised tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy in years 3,5,7 and 9. NAPLAN tests report individual students' attainment of skills against a set of standards. Individual student results are communicated to parents. Schools are then ranked against other schools depending upon the aggregate of their NAPLAN results. The process is explained to parents and community members as "improving the learning outcomes for all Australian students" (MCEETYA, 2009). This paper will examine NAPLAN as it is being played out in a mediated space through analysing unsolicited comment found in new media such as Twitter and online forums. NAPLAN intersects with contemporary debates about Australian education policy: the roles schools should play in improving national productivity, the relationship between state and federal government interest in education, the role and expectations of the teacher, what curriculum and pedagogy should be and look like and how limited financial resources can best be spread across education sectors and systems. These are not new considerations, however, what has changed is that education policy seems to have become even more of a political issue than it has before. This paper uses Ball's 'toolkit' approach to education policy analysis to suggest that there are multiple 'effects' of NAPLAN culminating in a series of disconnected conversations between various stakeholders.*

## Introduction

Since 2008 all Australian school students have sat the National Assessment Program – Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy in Years 3,5,7 and 9. NAPLAN tests report individual students' attainment of skills against a set of standards. Individual student results are communicated to parents. Schools are then ranked against other schools depending upon the aggregate of their NAPLAN results and these results are communicated via the My Schools website. The process is explained to parents and community members as "improving the learning outcomes for all Australian students" (MCEETYA, 2009). At the government level NAPLAN is framed as improving the education outcomes of children across Australia through identifying and

supporting schools and teachers to make education more equitable for student diversity (McGaw, 2010).

Various stakeholder groups such as politicians, education bureaucrats, academics, parents, teachers and teachers unions have engaged in a very public series of commentaries through traditional media about the impacts of NAPLAN based on conjecture, anecdotal evidence, theory and 'spin'. One of the subjacent effects of the hyperactivism of education policy has been the increased "mediatization" of education policy. Utilising Bourdieu's theory of "cross-field effects" in journalism, Lingard and Rawolle argue that education policy is now so heavily 'spun' that policy is "being more directly framed by politicians (with advice from their political and media advisers) than by bureaucrats, policy makers, and educational professionals" (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004, p. 362). This mediatization can be found in "media constructions as *de facto* policy, policy as sound bite, media policy representations as deliberate political misrepresentations, and policy release as media release" (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004, p. 363). There is certainly a sense that NAPLAN, and in particular a narrow, commonsense of what education is and should do, has been forged through this process of mediatization. Looking at another policy issue, Hattam, Prosser and Brady argue: "Broadly speaking, neoliberal policy actors (and in our case the previous Australian Federal Government) are increasingly doing their policy work through selected parts of the media" (Hattam, Prosser, & Brady, 2009, p. 160).

Government press releases and speeches frame NAPLAN within notions of improving equity, accountability and outcomes (Gillard, 2008a). On the other hand media reports recount stories of teachers cheating on student tests, schools telling weaker students to stay at home for fear of dragging down their test results, and principals and teachers being told that their jobs depend on their NAPLAN achievements (Howells 2010, Harrison 2010, Barrett and Minus 2010). This paper argues that the multiple experiences and perspectives on NAPLAN, the "complexity and scope" mean that it is not appropriate to reduce these to a simplified and sensitised story that reduces policy to polarised opinions. Rather this paper aims to integrate some of the unconnected conversations, experiences and opinions of different voices multiply positioned in practical and idealised ways within the policy discourse of NAPLAN.

## **The Current State of Knowledge**

NAPLAN intersects with contemporary debates about Australian education policy: the roles schools should play in improving national productivity, the relationship between state and federal government interest in education, the role and expectations of the teacher, what curriculum and pedagogy should be and look like and how limited financial resources can best be spread across education sectors and systems. These are not new considerations, however, what has changed is that education policy seems to have become even more of a political issue than it has before. The Rudd/Gillard Labor government and its predecessor the Howard Liberal government have assumed greater control over education and education funding in an attempt to apply neoliberal thinking that sees education as a key factor in global and national economic concerns (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In 2008 the then Education Minister Julia Gillard outlined the Labor government's interest in education as "a major plank (...) which outlines a productivity and participation agenda that spans early childhood to adulthood" (Gillard, 2008b). The push for a national curriculum, the comparison of schools

via the My Schools Website, the support for performance pay for teachers, the implementation of Teach for Australia and the reviewing of funding arrangements for schools is framed within notions of improving productivity through access to the 'right kinds' of schooling.

Education policy and practice has become a highly significant political issue in most Western democracies (Hurch, 2008). It is part of the terrain of national interest in promoting economic growth and the belief that market forces, accountability, efficiency and individual choice are the best ways of achieving improved societal equity and good (Labarre, 2007). Educational outputs, as measured in terms of 'basic skills' such as literacy and numeracy have become seen as key markers of whether education will be able to produce the types of workers needed in a competitive globalised economy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). An apparent decline in the OECD's PISA rankings of Australian school student literacy and numeracy standards has resulted in Federal policy initiatives designed to improve these standards (McGaw, 2010). Chief amongst these is the nationwide NAPLAN testing conducted each year designed to provide data that can be used to improve equity and quality in all Australian schools (McGaw, 2010). Education policy matters. It shapes and informs the ways that schools undertake the business of education. Currently we are seeing education (and corresponding debates) become more significant in national and federal policy initiatives that are part of a wider shift to a more prominent role for the Federal Government in deciding the directions education should be taking (Reid, 2009). Ironically this has corresponded with a rise in the belief that market systems are the best regulators of increasingly complex and expensive education systems (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). So we have a conflicted policy environment – on the one hand the hyperactivism of federal policy designed to ensure accountability, efficiency and quality of education systems to best meet economic imperatives (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987). On the other hand education policy has shifted from ideas of evidence-based policy that was so persuasive in the 1970s and 1980s (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

This policy approach has been controversial at all levels of the education world. Supporters suggest that it improves the accountability of schools and teachers, and is an appropriate mechanism for ensuring that teachers are implementing best practice to drive educational (and therefore economic) improvement through improvement in literacy and numeracy. Critics suggest that standardised testing is not a fair and accurate measurement of the breadth of educational objectives, and the transference of this data into virtual league tables via the My Schools website is an unproductive and dangerous practice. As well, critics argue that international experience of education policy that promotes high-stakes testing has not shown that it improves literacy and numeracy (Harlen, 2004).

I would also add a caveat to both of those positions. Schools are productive places, in that the processes, practices, curriculum and pedagogy that they deploy teach all people (such as students, teachers and principals) to know themselves in certain ways (Symes & Preston, 1997). Examining the effects of NAPLAN testing, with its powerful discourses concerning success, competition and accountability would seem to be a tool that could amplify some of the negative factors affecting teacher and principal work, and the relationships they maintain with each other and parents. From another perspective, the extra support and funding offered to schools could be a positive factor in enabling teachers and principals to better meet the demands of their job and to foster better relationships with students and parents. As well, the claim to transparency and accountability will most likely resonate with many

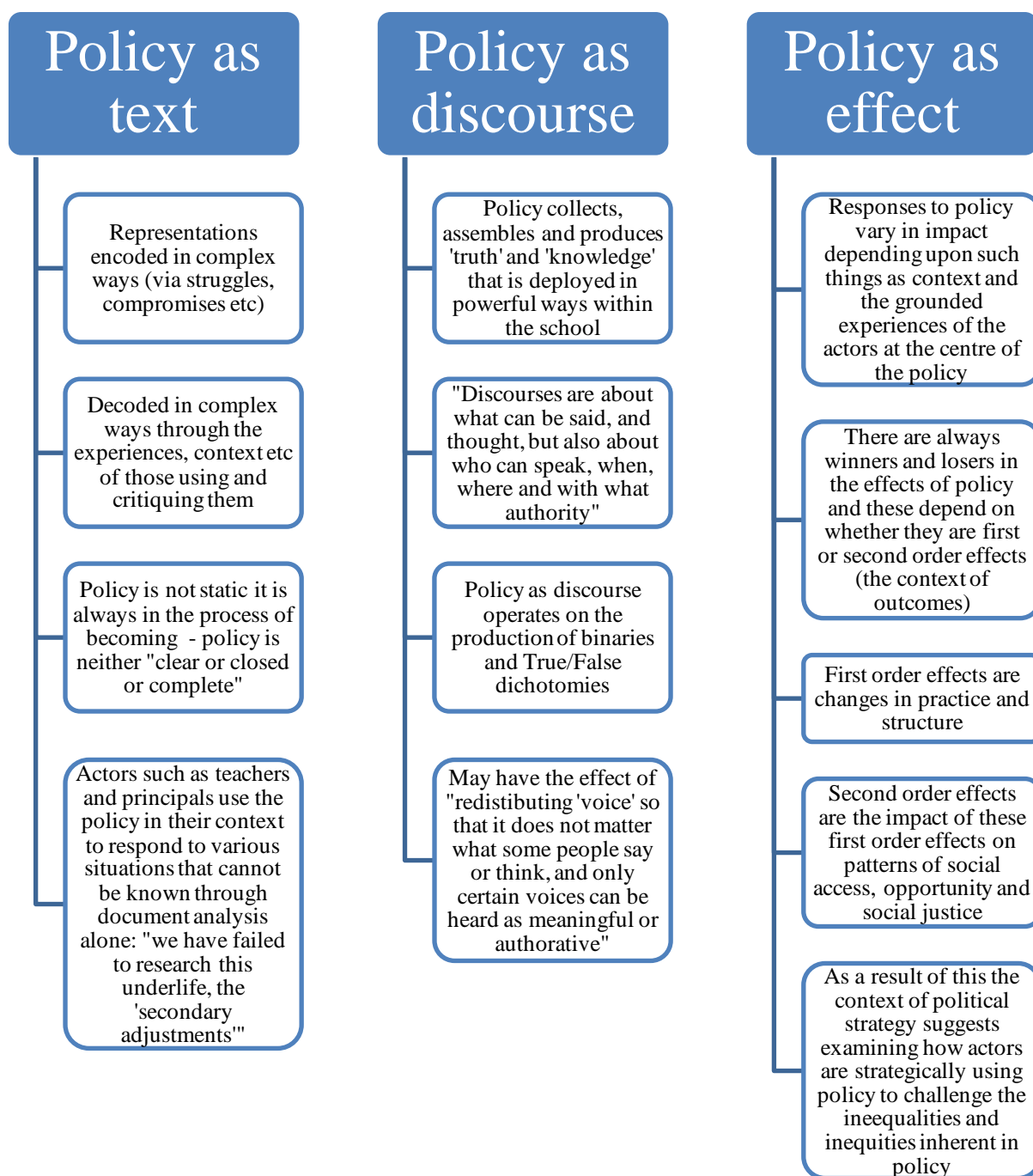
parents. At the state level the implications for education systems of NAPLAN on teachers and teaching is significant within an environment in which Departments struggle to retain quality school teachers. Consider the following quote from Julia Gillard in 2008: “We would expect parents to have robust conversations with teachers and principals. This should put pressure on people” (Coorey, 2010). What kinds of professional selves and relationships are possible within this discursive production, and how well do they intersect with improving efficiency, equity and quality within Australia schools? We argue NAPLAN is neither a good thing nor a bad thing for education - it is a productive tool, and what it produces is certain kinds of subjectivities. The question that has hitherto failed to be addressed within the Australian context is whether the subjectivities produced through testing programmes such as NAPLAN are helpful in creating a citizenry best suited to contribute to the public or common good in the future. It is this question that will allow a more nuanced and useful critique of the value of high-stakes testing to the Australian society and indeed feed into wider articulations of the schooling that we see as central to that common good.

Stephen Ball has suggested that when looking at education policy it is not possible to choose a single theory that accounts for the “*complexity and scope of policy analysis*” (Ball, 1994, p. 14). Ball suggests that there is a strong tradition of looking at **policy as text**, **policy as discourse** or the **effects of policy** in local settings on those players within the policy game – often teachers, principals, students and parents (Ball, 1994). What is needed, he argues, is a ‘toolkit’ approach to policy that allows us to view policy through a lens that connects the unconnected and partial conversations that we are currently having. If we consider NAPLAN it is possible to see three dominant disconnected conversations: that of policy-makers who are interested in quality and productivity, that of academics who often write about the failings of NAPLAN and similar policies from a theoretical perspective and that of the teachers, parents and students whose experiences appear to bear little relation to the idealised conversations found in the policy documents (See Figure 1).

**Policy as text** requires seeing policy as “both contested and changing” and to understand that its meaning is not defined. Rather it is a contested and negotiated space within which ‘actors’ such as principals, teachers, bureaucrats, politicians and parents read and interpret the policy, decide whether it is good or bad, and strategically plan how best to use this policy to serve their and other’s interests (Ball, 1994, p. 16). In the Australian context policy as text is the most conspicuous form of debate. Policy as text is the realm of the media, or more specifically of the mediated and mediatized conversation, of politician’s press releases, of various lobby groups that have a vested interest in how the text is read (Hattam, Prosser, & Brady, 2009; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004). In all these instances it has its own spin, bias or agenda, but all of them share the idea that within the policy those of whom it speaks have some ability to act and/or enact the details of the policy. Policy as text creates an expectation that there is autonomy for the actors named and that there must be someone to blame or someone who is responsible. In terms of NAPLAN this can be seen in those opinions that see a ‘crisis’ in education and attempt to apportion blame – variously blaming teachers, parents and/or students because as autonomous individuals declining education standards are a result of poor choices. NAPLAN as text is given over to simplified, concrete understanding of complex ideas such as equity and accountability: NAPLAN is equitable because everyone has to do it so it is a fair measure of teaching and learning in schools. There is also the idea that teachers are employees who do what they are told – they are enacting policy in the same way across Australia regardless of the micro-level differences

schools and classrooms may experience. NAPLAN as text also encompasses the idea that the 'old days and old ways' were better and what is needed is a return to basics.

The other side of the NAPLAN debate being played out is that of **policy as discourse**. In this mode, NAPLAN is understood as a set of practices, statements and 'truths' (discourses) that privilege certain interpretations, values and expectations above others. Knowledge is not external to the institution – a rational, absolute, objective knowledge, but is created within the discourses of the institutions and its practices. The innumerable discourses at play within schools; accountability, professionalism, responsibility, learning, success, performance, equity to name a few, are significant because they produce the 'truths' within which the 'actors' constitute their subjectivities. Critique of standardised testing is taken up by various academics to examine the rationalities of policy (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; McGregor, 2009). This critique has been extensively undertaken by various socially critical academics within university contexts. Their work lays bare the systems of power that construct teacher and student subjectivities in light of policy and practice.



**Figure 1: A Policy Toolkit (Adapted from Ball, 1994)**

The third element of policy is that of **policy as effect**. Responses to policy vary in impact depending upon such things as context and the grounded experiences of the actors at the centre of the policy. For example, Reid suggests countries that have adopted and later discarded the high-stakes testing model of education reform found there were a number of unintended (and often unhelpful) results (Reid, 2009). These included the narrowing of the curriculum, schools becoming institutions that 'hide' information and even manipulate data,

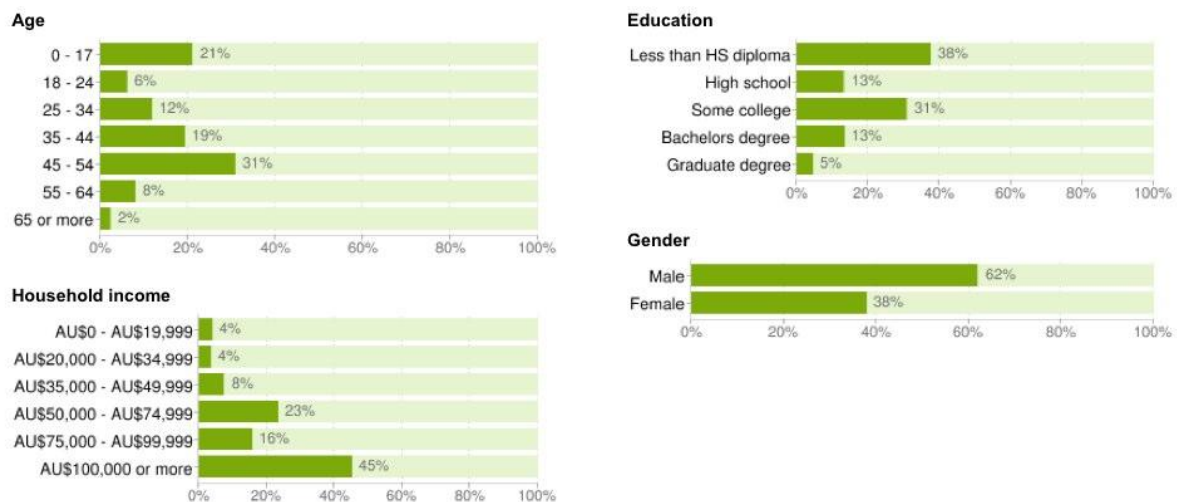
schools focusing teaching intervention on a narrow band of students and that the tests only tell educators what they already know – that the results largely reflect the school's demographics (Reid, 2009, p. 11). Whilst bureaucracies debate the theoretical and ideological merits of policy, teachers and students are daily interpreting policy in subtle and dynamic ways. Decisions about policy may be made thousands of kilometres away from where they are implemented. Tools designed to improve equity may actually be counter-productive depending upon the implications that the stories each school has (Lumby, 2009). There are always winners and losers in the ways that policy is implemented and performed. For example Ball, reporting on the implementation of policy on schools, argues that there are first or second order effects (Ball, 1994, pp. 24-25). First order effects are changes in practice and structure, such as the ways that schools and classrooms have changed what is taught and how it is taught, and investigating how the roles of teachers and principals have changed – are there different pressures associated and/or has NAPLAN changed or altered relationships in the school? Second order effects are the impact of these first order effects on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice. This paper attempts to nuance the NAPLAN debates by addressing the complexity and scope of the terrain through a preliminary examination of individual perceptions and experiences that communicate what is occurring at the micro-level in local sites. Certainly the aims of the current policy that gives rise to NAPLAN are persuasive. Improving quality and equity for all students are admirable objectives and deserve to be the focus of policy. However, whether high-stakes testing is useful in achieving these national priorities is another matter. International experience, largely in the US and UK, would seem to suggest that it is not and that it actually decreases important features of good educational practice such as lowering student self-esteem, promoting shallow and superficial learning, narrowing the curriculum, promoting student, teacher, parent and principal anxiety, harming the profession of teaching and widening the inequities found within (Lumby, 2009; Ball, 1994; Ball, 2008; Youdell, 2004; Burnard & White, 2008; Harlen, 2004). This means that a significant part of our work should be to also ask how is NAPLAN being played with and by whom? What strategies are being employed to maximise return within the performative education culture by teachers, students and parents? What changes of practice and structure have resulted from NAPLAN (first-order effects)? How have these changes of practice and structure above impacted on education as a vehicle for social justice? How has the role of the teacher, student, parent and/or principal changed? This paper is a first step at adding some of this information to the 'toolkit'.

## **Data Collection**

Accessing multiple perspectives of synchronous experiences can be a difficult challenge for all researchers. NAPLAN is mandated to occur at the same time (excusing time zone differences) on the same date across Australia. In any given year there are literally hundreds of thousands of students, parents, teachers and interested stakeholders who have something to say about their experiences and perspectives. One of our concerns as outlined above was that many of the voices at the micro-level were not really being heard in the policy debate. Another of our concerns was that schools and schooling look differently when viewed from different perspectives – the gaze of the Federal Minister would most likely be completely alien to that of a school student. To counter this we decided to seize on non-traditional forms of media such as Twitter posts, online news articles and public posts/responses to the online articles.

The online articles were collected from mainstream Australian newspapers between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> May 2011. There were 22 articles collected. These articles were coded to see whether the conversations being prioritised through the online articles described NAPLAN as text, discourse or effect. A significant feature of the online article is the ability for the public to post comments on the story. These have been included to give further data on how NAPLAN is being discussed and experienced within the public domain. The second data source was tweets that mentioned NAPLAN.

Twitter is a microblogging service which allows registered users to publicly post short updates or 'tweets' of no more than 140 characters. Twitter, currently the 9th most accessed internet site in the world, is one of the three most popular social media platforms in the world next to Facebook and YouTube (Alexa, 2011). It has an estimated 160 million users worldwide reaching 12.4% of population. In Australia it has been estimated that there are 1.9 million users reaching 11% of population (Google Analytics - AdPlanner, 2011). The 2010 demographic for users in Australia looks like the following:



(Google Analytics - AdPlanner, 2011)

Non-traditional media such as online posts and Twitter are characterised by the ability of people to publicly post and reply to events and/or texts. By using this information we were able to access previously unutilised perspectives and stories. However, we were unprepared for the sheer scale of public comment. Volume charts generated by Google Realtime indicate that during the period from 8<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> May 2011 there were over 3000 tweets mentioning the word 'naplan' (Google Realtime, 2011). After seeing the volume of tweets, we limited the tweets collected to May 9<sup>th</sup> the day before NAPLAN, May 10<sup>th</sup> the first day of NAPLAN, and May 13<sup>th</sup> the day after NAPLAN. Those three days had the highest volume of tweets in the week in which NAPLAN was conducted. Together, they accounted for approximately 2000 or two thirds of the tweets mentioning NAPLAN within the mentioned annual peak. From the week 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> May NAPLAN generated so many tweets that it 'trended' worldwide on Twitter across the world<sup>i</sup>. Further, within these three days we identified three daily volume peaks, all following a similar pattern: morning - midday/early afternoon - late afternoon/early evening. These tweets were coded as follows: as text, as discourse, as effect and as indeterminate<sup>ii</sup>.



## Results

The Results are split into two related yet distinct sections. The first of these deals with the online newspaper articles and the subsequent public comments section. The second of these is tweets down loaded as specific times during the week in which NAPLAN was held in 2011. For both of these sections the results were coded as one of four possible representations of NAPLAN: as text, as discourse, as effect and as indeterminate. The results of this coding have been collated into a table where the frequency and a summary of main conversation points may be made. Following each of these tables is a brief contextualisation of some of the main points being made via these online forums.

### Online Newspaper Articles and Comments

<p>Text (21 Articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers should be held to account for their NAPLAN scores</li> <li>• NAPLAN promotes transparency</li> <li>• Literacy and numeracy are easily understood and defined</li> <li>• Schools need to get back to basics – literacy and numeracy like the old days</li> <li>• NAPLAN is a diagnostic tool</li> <li>• NAPLAN provides information about whether a school is teaching effectively</li> <li>• NAPLAN prepares young people for a competitive world</li> </ul>	<p>Discourse (0 Articles)</p>
<p>Effect (6 Articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools are using NAPLAN results as part of their admission process</li> <li>• School curriculum is becoming ‘dumbed down’ as a result of the narrowing to teach to the test</li> <li>• Schools are asking weaker students to stay home so as to not bring the average down</li> <li>• High number of incidents of teachers assisting cheating in 2010</li> </ul>	<p>Indeterminate (0 Articles)</p>

**Figure 2: Table Summary of Online Articles**<sup>iii</sup>

The online articles published from major newspapers in Australia represented a set of conversations where NAPLAN was predominantly represented as **text**. One of the reasons for this may be the prominence of politicians and policy makers quoted in the news stories. For example, the Federal Education Minister Peter Garret commented:

“NAPLAN is critical to a transparent education system that allows students, teachers, schools and parents to use the results to acknowledge achievements and identify areas for improvement - literacy and numeracy are the benchmarks to a good education.” Mr Garrett said the NAPLAN test will be critical towards the government's education reform agenda, a move he said is "ensuring that every kid has access to a great education" (Chilcott, 2011).

This quote demonstrates the seductiveness of NAPLAN as text in the media world of the politician. Key ideas such as transparency, literacy, numeracy are simplistically explained in positive and commonsense ways. There is an assumption that this certain and assured conceptualisation of NAPLAN will resonate with the reader and promote the ‘rightness’ of the policy. One of the key themes running through NAPLAN as text lies in the iteration that it is about ‘basic’ literacy and numeracy, and this should be the core business of schools (but that somewhere they have taken a wrong turn and stopped focusing on these). This image is further supported by key policy makers who take a macro-level view of education and link it to admirable national objectives such as employment and improved standards of living:

Professor Geoff Masters, said proficiency in basic literacy and numeracy was fundamental to the future of school children. “We know there is still quite a significant proportion of young people who get to the age of 15 and still have inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy. Those who don't have these basic skills struggle in the rest of the school curriculum. They are also less likely to finish high school. And if you follow them beyond their school years you'll find they are less likely to be employed and they generally have much lower levels of income” (Dillon, 2011b).

Within these conceptualisations NAPLAN becomes a vehicle for bringing about admirable objectives such as improving life chances and promoting social equity through education. At its root is a binarisation of the debate – a conceptualisation of education into good/bad, right/wrong that privilege an earlier, better time when education was good and that now it is not. An example of this is a comment left by Jim of Penfield: “If they learn in school that they have to compete it will help them in life. As a student I was tested during & at end of year & if I did not pass I repeated that year. This prepared me for life” Jim of Penfield (Harvy, 2011). This understanding has been extremely persuasive to many as it speaks of an education form and style that they understand and find comforting. A public comment by Carmel of Melbourne on one of the stories framed it this way:

What is so wrong in finding out whether or not the school your child is attending is teaching effectively? How else do you measure that other than seeing if the school is above or below the national average? Your child's individual ability is tested all the time, but how do you know whether they are being taught effectively and being taught useful things? And guess what parents, your children will be pitted against their peers for their entire lives, they're not all special and unique snowflakes. In their careers not everyone gets an encouragement award, there are winners and losers and by treating them all as special YOU are doing them a disservice and ill-preparing them for life (Harvy, 2011).

Less prevalent, but still visible in these articles was various conceptualisations of NAPLAN as **effect**. Newspaper stories often led with a quote from a politician or policy-maker representing NAPLAN as text, but occasionally followed this up with an alternate view of some of the effects of NAPLAN. These reports, however, tended to sensationalise NAPLAN as effect, focusing on extreme experiences of NAPLAN such as schools asking students with Special Needs to stay home, teachers cheating on tests in 2010, schools using NAPLAN results as a selection criteria, narrowing the curriculum and schools neglecting

subjects not seen as significant for NAPLAN such as HPE, Science and History (Dillon, 2011b; Barry, 2011; Dillon, 2011a). Missing from the debate entirely in these online articles was engagement with NAPLAN as **discourse**, or a sense that education was a more complex policy area than is commonly understood. The significance of this lack of traction in the public domain is significant for the academy and representations of NAPLAN as well. It is one of the ways that the debate has been compartmentalised so that conversation that are being had are largely unconnected – the current approach will never be able to account for the complexity and scope.

### Twitter Comments

<p>Text (14 tweets)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping teachers accountable</li> <li>• Measuring student achievement</li> <li>• Making the process of education transparent</li> <li>• Teachers as technicians</li> </ul>	<p>Discourse (2 tweets)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measuring effective teaching</li> <li>• The impact of SES on test scores</li> <li>• The meritocracy</li> </ul>
<p>Effect (90 tweets)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum/pedagogy comment</li> <li>• Students suggesting NAPLAN has changed their school experience</li> <li>• Parents discussing anxiety etc</li> <li>• Students looking forward to the tests</li> <li>• Not getting test info back in time for it to be diagnostic</li> <li>• Schools asking students to stay home</li> <li>• Cheating in NAPLAN</li> <li>• Parents letting students stay home</li> </ul>	<p>Indeterminate (267 tweets)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions</li> <li>• Good luck/Best wishes</li> <li>• Students generally 'gripping' about tests</li> <li>• Comments on how easy/hard it was</li> <li>• References to other tweets</li> </ul>

**Fig 3: Table Summary of Tweets**

By far the biggest groups of responses were coded as **indeterminate**. Due to the nature of the medium, many tweets that referenced NAPLAN were phrased as questions or were previous comments passed on. Some of the tweets that mentioned NAPLAN seemed quite tangential to the testing itself, focusing more on celebrities such as Justin Bieber rather than experiences/opinions on NAPLAN itself. As well, given the media interest in NAPLAN, there were many tweets from TV and Radio news and current affairs program asking for responses from teachers, students and parents. More than half of the indeterminate tweets were from parents, students and politicians wishing those sitting NAPLAN good luck (yes, there was a tweet from the Federal Education Minister Peter Garrett).

The next biggest category was that of NAPLAN as **effect**. These were largely given over to parents, teachers and students expressing their opinions and experiences of NAPLAN. The vast majority of these were negative, particularly parent comments about student anxiety and concerns about how NAPLAN was impacting on the curriculum and teaching practice of individual classrooms. One parent commented:

Over NAPLAN ridiculous the amount of time teaching to tests. Not a good diagnostic tool & parents think it's accurate coz of a website.

Another parent commented:

Said to the kids to have a good day Mr 11 says "I'll try, but it's hard when you have 2 naplan test your hopeless at." Now I feel bad.

Another significant theme that occurred throughout the tweets was that of NAPLAN forcing young students to engage with competitive and differentiating education systems and practices too early.

I asked son if he wanted his cartoons on - no he said it's #naplan day I need to focus... Grow up too quick these days stupid naplan!!

Another parent commented:

#NAPLAN time for Harriet tomorrow, from there her fate will be decided I guess...

One of the common effects commented on by parents was that of the stress associated with undertaking NAPLAN with a subsequent loss of enjoyment in school, a perceived lack of motivation and heightened anxiety. One parent commented about hearing an upset child being consoled at the end of the school day:

Overheard a mother trying to calm her child down after they thought they did bad in the #Naplan.

For teachers, the general consensus on Twitter was that while they were not opposed to the idea of the tests, they were opposed to the way that the information was being used. A common gripe was that test results were received too late in the year for it to be of any use in helping a child's learning. Another common negative was that because the stakes were perceived to be so high, some schools were spending so much time preparing students for the test that many important elements of learning were being ignored. Teachers commented:

NAPLAN is over, I can get back to teaching not training again...

Over NAPLAN ridiculous the amount of time teaching to the tests. Not a good diagnostic tool & parents think this it's accurate coz of a website.

There were another suite of effects that were commented on such as Year 7 students joining online NAPLAN study groups, parents buying students NAPLAN preparation packs and books, enrolling their children in NAPLAN help classes. Some teachers and schools enacted strategies to best prepare students for a gruelling week:

Well done 'Naplaners' on a fantastic effort & attitude today! Rest tonight and don't forget our Naplan breakfast @ 8am to fight the fuzzies!

One of the most contentious strategies being deployed by schools reported on Twitter was the tactic of asking weaker students to stay home. One teacher commented:

We had one student exempted from sitting the NAPLAN today. Hearing that another school told a dozen+ kids not to attend = flawed testing!

Another teacher commented:

All my students sat the NAPLAN test today... I can't believe the amount of schools telling students not to attend.

Students tended to tweet that they were nervous and not looking forward to NAPLAN and/or questioned its relevance.

Oh how I love NAPLAN. not :\\ on Thursday I have maths, maths, maths and then workshop. whoo. haha why do we have to go to school? TELL MEEEE

oh jesus... NAPLAN tomorrow... GOD HELP ME THROUGH THIS!

There were also tweets after the testing where students felt that they had failed and felt that they were 'stupid' or 'dumb'. As well there were a number of tweets from students who for whatever reason had decided not to engage with the testing:

Stupid naplan I guessed most of the answers ahaha imma fail

NAPLAN was such a waste of my time.==I fell asleep LOL.

What was up with naplan? All we did was colour in bubbles

However, not all the comments were negative. There were two instances where students (or their parents) commented that they were looking forward to the tests.

One of the emergent themes from the data concerns the relative absence of analysis of NAPLAN as **discourse**. Partly this may be explained by the platform itself – it is very difficult to build a subtle and nuanced examination of some of the big issues in education in 140 characters or less. However, there were two tweets that we coded as discourse because of their inferred critique of NAPLAN. The first of these was from a student who wrote:

I did my Naplan guys do I win yet

One of the criticisms of NAPLAN is that it promotes a highly individualised, hierarchical vision of success within the school. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that while it aims to improve equity it may have the opposite effect – enshrining the privilege of those who have traditionally done well in Australian schools. This tweet hints at a critique of the meritocratic assumptions that seem to be at the basis of how NAPLAN is being communicated at the micro-level (Hatton, 1998).

The other tweet that we coded as discourse framed learning and measures of success within sociocultural factors. This tweet linked NAPLAN results with a critique of what those results tell us about the quality of teaching within certain schools. It argues that simply equating NAPLAN results to the quality of the teaching oversimplifies the complex factors that determine achievement.

Higher NAPLAN results does not mean a school has better teachers. Teachers making the most difference could be in the lower performing school.

In the online newspaper articles and subsequent comments the vision of NAPLAN as **text** was the dominant view. Interestingly, in the online world of Twitter this vision was less powerful. Across the 370+ tweets analysed for this paper, only 14 were coded as text. However, these tweets tended to encapsulate much of the key ideas as outlined previously: the importance of competition, the fear of failing standards in education, that it is an accurate and fair measure of student ability and that students today are not as capable as what they were in the past. As well there continues to be a sense that many want education to be performance managed, not because performance management is worthwhile, but because everyone else has to do it therefore so should those involved in education.

One tweet commented that there was merit to the idea that NAPLAN was useful as a diagnostic to allow schools to intervene where children were falling behind.

Don't discount the naplan completely - it is an excellent indicator if a child is falling behind in certain areas.

Another tweet suggested that there was a deeper motive for the dissatisfaction many expressed in regards to NAPLAN:

If people are scared about NAPLAN and/or staging boycotts, then something is seriously wrong with our education system.

Certainly a significant perspective informing representations of NAPLAN as text is the view that education should adopt more business principles and models in order to improve quality:

Why are teachers so scared of the Naplan tests? Every other business is accountable for performance against KPI's.

Lastly there was the repetitive discourse that young people today were somehow deficient when compared with young people in the past.

NAPLAN causing unnecessary pressure? What pressure?! Honestly, kids getting lazier and lazier. You'll explode when you reach the HSC.

NAPLAN as text feeds into dominant paradigms contesting for the soul of education. These comments suggest that this is a powerful way that education (not just NAPLAN) is being conceptualised in the public domain.

## **Discussion**

It is not usual for education research to use new media such as Twitter to provide data. We acknowledge that as our first attempt there were a number of issues with using Twitter. These included the limitations of the platform itself, 140 characters is not a lot to make

complex points. As well, one of our frustrations was the high number of indeterminate responses, many of whom framed their comments as questions rather than statements. Some tweets were so interesting we wanted to follow up with another question as you would in an interview. However, as a raw and largely unperformed medium Twitter gave us the opportunity to gather voluntary, honest and often spontaneous feedback about individual experiences of NAPLAN across Australia. As an open forum this provided a compelling snapshot of how the policy was being played out on the ground at local sites, and gave access to opinions that would not normally have been available. The online articles were themselves very traditional journalistic pieces of writing that placed great emphasis due to the nature of the media on info grabs such as political press releases as evidence by the high level of NAPLAN as text interpretations. What was most interesting was the public comment sections, however different perspectives on NAPLAN seemed to dominate the online articles when compared to those that posted tweets. At the very least the online responses were more polished and conservative – maybe expected given the nature of the media.

It was interesting to see the differing frequency and types of responses the different media generated. The online articles were predominantly coded as text, full of politician and bureaucrat media grabs arguing for NAPLAN as improving accountability, quality and transparency. Much of the implied focus of NAPLAN as text seems to be the role of the teacher; that they are somehow deficient or negligent in teaching literacy and numeracy. The tweets were infinitely more democratic; teacher, parent and student responses far outweighed the professional media grab. Not surprisingly (with the exception of the indeterminate) NAPLAN as effect dominated the tweets. What was also obvious, and concerning, was the lack of traction of NAPLAN as discourse in either forum. While this may be explained by the difficulty of crafting a response in 140 characters, the absence of it in the 22 online articles was astounding.

Ball's "toolkit" approach to policy argues that each of the three layers of policy – text, discourse and effect – are needed to account for the complexity and scope of education policy (Ball, 1994). When these three elements are not informing policy and its analysis we have a series of unconnected conversations. This snapshot data that we have gathered suggests that when Peter Garrett tweets to students wishing them good luck he is not engaging in a two-way reciprocating relationship with the majorly negative responses that are generated. It is very obvious that there were very few tweets that confirm Peter Garret's view of NAPLAN. When the aims and objectives of policy at the macro-level (text) are not being informed by the micro-level experiences and strategies of individuals then the aims of equity and quality will always remain an impossibility. The same is true for NAPLAN as discourse – despite the good work done in both Australia and overseas on standardised education testing, what is most telling is that this remains largely unable to play a part in informing policy debate and therefore policy direction. The exclusion of the academic voice in the public conversation about NAPLAN is an example of this lack of traction. On the one hand it is easy to blame the government for not implementing policy that is informed by evidence. On the other hand it is also true that those voices 'troubling' NAPLAN seem to have had minimal impact on the ways that the public understands the debate, seemingly preferring instead the 'commonsense' understandings found in much mainstream media.

NAPLAN is neither good nor bad. It is a tool, an object, that is used in certain ways to do certain things. The ways that it is used are productive, and what we should be promoting is

connected conversations about what is produced, why (if at all) that which is being produced is necessary or desirable and whether we are happy with the side-effects. Our take in this paper is that the conversations we are having about NAPLAN fail to adequately account for the complexity and scope of aims, analysis and experiences of the policy.

## Conclusion

Education policy is a highly complex and contentious undertaking. NAPLAN is a key education policy in Australia that is currently promoting divisive conversations. In this paper we have attempted a strategy suggested by Ball to undertake policy research through examining it as text, discourse and effect. At the same time we wanted to see what conversations were out there – to tap into the ways that people and the media were conceptualising NAPLAN. What we found was a series of unconnected conversations. It appears that everyone is talking about NAPLAN, but most of those conversations are isolated and divisive. Our suggestion to improve education policy in Australia is to promote a series of connected conversations where text, discourse and effect are equally persuasive in outlining policy direction and, importantly, measuring whether what is produced as a result meets the needs of the wider society.

## References

- Alexa. (2011). Retrieved June 20, 2011, from Alexa: The Web Information Company: <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/twitter.com>
- Ball, S. (1994). *Education Reform: A Critical and Post-structural Approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ball, S. (2008). *The Education Debate*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Barksdale-Ladd, M. A., & Thomas, K. F. (2000). What's at Stake in High-Stakes testing: Teachers and Parents Speak Out. *Journal of teacher Education*, 51 (5), 384-397.
- Barrett, R., & Minus, J. (2010, May 12th). *Students 'told to stay home' from NAPLAN tests*. Retrieved August 1st, 2010, from The Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au>
- Barry, E. (2011, May 4). Geelong East Primary urged parents to keep boy from NAPLAN tests. *Herald Sun*.
- Burnard, P., & White, J. (2008). Creativity and Performativity: Counterpoints in British and Australian Education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34 (5), 667-682.
- Chilcott, T. (2011, May 9). As students prepare to sit tests, debate rages on the benefits of NAPLAN. *Courier Mail*.
- Coorey, P. (2010, January 26th). *Tell off decient teachers: Gillard*. Retrieved September 1st, 2010, from The Sydney Morning Herald: <http://www.smh.com.au>
- Dillon, J. (2011b, May 9). NAPLAN slammed as 'napalm'. *Daily Telegraph*.
- Dillon, J. (2011a, May 20). Results backlash - officials condemn NAPLAN abuse. *Daily Telegraph*.



Dunleavy, P., & O'Leary, B. (1987). *Theories of the State*. London: Sage Publications.

Google Analytics - AdPlanner. (2011). Retrieved June 20, 2011, from Google: <https://www.google.com/accounts/ServiceLogin?service=branding&ltmpl=adplanner&continue=https%3A//www.google.com/adplanner/%3Fpli%3D1>

Google Realtime. (2011, June 16). Retrieved June 16, 2011, from Google: [http://www.google.com.au/search?q=naplan&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=foV&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&prmd=ivns&source=Inms&ei=ofD\\_TeyHNlrXrQfOpMCODQ&sa=X&oi=mode\\_link&ct=mode&cd=9&ved=0CCUQ\\_AUoCA&prmdo=1&tbm=mb1&tbs=mb1\\_hs:1293811200,mb1\\_he:1325347199&ba](http://www.google.com.au/search?q=naplan&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=foV&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&prmd=ivns&source=Inms&ei=ofD_TeyHNlrXrQfOpMCODQ&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&cd=9&ved=0CCUQ_AUoCA&prmdo=1&tbm=mb1&tbs=mb1_hs:1293811200,mb1_he:1325347199&ba)

Harlen, W. (2004). *A systematic review of the evidence of the impact on students, teachers and the curriculum of the process of using assessment by teachers for summative purposes*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Sciences Research Unit, Institute of Education.

Harrison, D. (2010, June 11th). *Principals 'face sack' over test results*. Retrieved August 1st, 2010, from The Age: <http://www.theage.com.au>

Harvy, B. (2011, May 14). Why the NAPLAN test is really a shame. *The Advertiser*.

Hattam, R., Prosser, B., & Brady, K. (2009). Revolution or backlash? The mediatisation of education policy in Australia. *Critical Studies in Education*, 50 (2), 159 — 172.

Hatton, E. (1998). Social and Cultural Influences on Teaching. In E. Hatton (Ed), *Understanding Teaching: Curriculum and the Social Context of Schooling*. Marrickville: Harcourt Brace and Co.

Howells, M. (2010, May 13th). *Teacher caught cheating on NAPLAN test*. Retrieved July 1st, 2010, from ABC: <http://www.abc.net.au>

Hurch, D. (2008). *High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littleman Publishers.

Labarre, D. F. (2007). *Education, Markets and the Common Good*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lingard, B., & Rawolle, S. (2004). Mediatizing educational policy: the journalistic field, science policy, and cross-field effects. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19 (3), 361-380.

Lumby, J. (2009). Performativity and Identity: Mechanisms of Exclusion. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 24 (3), 353-369.

MCEETYA. (2009). *Assessing Student Achievement in Australia in 2009: Information for parents and the community*. Retrieved March 5, 2011, from Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs: [http://www.mceecdy.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/AssessingStudentAchievement2009Brochure.pdf](http://www.mceecdy.edu.au/verve/_resources/AssessingStudentAchievement2009Brochure.pdf)

McGaw, B. (2010, August Tuesday 24th). Driving education reform with curriculum reform and accountability. *Banksia Lecture*. Perth: Murdoch University.

McGregor, G. (2009). Educating for (whose) success? Schooling in an age of neo-liberalism. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30 (3), 345-358.

Reid, A. (2009). Is this a revolution? A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 29 (3), 1-13.

Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing Education Policy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Symes, C., & Preston, N. (1997). *Schools and Classrooms: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Education*. South Melbourne: Longman.

Youdell, D. (2004). Engineering School Markets, Constituting Schools and Subjectivating Students: the Bureaucratic, Institutional and Classroom Dimensions of Educational Triage. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19 (4), 407-431.

---

<sup>i</sup> Trending is the term used to describe the most immediately popular stories as they occur. Unlike other new media (such as internet search engines) Twitter uses an algorithm that updates these topics every minute thus indicating those topics that are immediately of widespread appeal and interest.

<sup>ii</sup> Given that tweets are limited to 140 characters it could be difficult to decode what was meant. As well, there were many tweets phrased as questions or passed on previous comments. Some of the tweets that mentioned NAPLAN were tangential to the testing itself, focusing more on celebrities such as Justin Bieber.

<sup>iii</sup> While there were 22 articles, some articles represented effect and text in the same article.