

Closing the Gap Refresh: Submission

Executive Summary

This submission addresses the question How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?

Measurement methods which are used to monitor and bring about 'Closing the Gap' targets, reduce complex issues to simple, but powerful, numerical data. Such reduction is not innocuous in the case of NAPLAN. Although NAPLAN scores are intended to monitor the literacy and numeracy achievement of Indigenous children and bring about improvement and accountability, the uses of NAPLAN scores have detrimental effects at individual, school, community and jurisdictional levels. These negative effects are the result of a combination of three aspects of the NAPLAN instruments and NAPLAN data use:

- 1) The focus of the tests is extremely narrow and biased towards urban, native-English-speaking children.
- 2) The categorical separation and analysis of the scores of Indigenous children simultaneously belies the complexity of this group and singles out Indigenous children for public attention.
- 3) The sustained public emphasis on the 'gap' or the deficit in the 'achievement' of Indigenous children enforces a public understanding of failure which is felt throughout the education system and ultimately absorbed by teachers and students.

Since the implementation of NAPLAN, a growing body of research in educational policy and measurement has called into question the use and effects of NAPLAN scores. The research has pointed to various effects of NAPLAN which directly counteract the Closing the Gap policy to 'enable and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live healthy and prosperous lives'.¹ These effects include the insensitivity of NAPLAN data to the fact that English is an additional (i.e. second or foreign) language for some Indigenous children, the devastating impact of NAPLAN on educational programs which teach through Indigenous children's first languages as well as English, the high-level of pressure to improve NAPLAN scores, the narrowing and derailing effects of the tests on curriculum and classroom practice, and the gaming of state-level target setting, among other things. In addition to these direct impacts, the NAPLAN scoring system has come to be generally understood as co-extensive with the 'gap', resulting in attention to score improvement at the expense of attention to the many factors which make educational achievement possible.

The submission proposes an expansion of targets to capture important commitments including:

- language learning as an educational variable in literacy and numeracy assessment; contextualisation of learning sites;

¹ <http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2018.pdf?a=1>, p. 8

- provision to schools of example processes for working with their community about their local language ecologies, for understanding local community educational aspirations and for developing a map of how to achieve this.

Targets need to be accompanied by clear statements of intent. Meaningful community engagement and involvement needs to be a priority as should the long term view versus the quick fix. There should be a mapping of the aspirations and strengths of students, community and school.

How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?

Educational measurement

Educational measurement is fundamentally different from measurement in the natural and physical sciences because in education, the act of measuring involves 'building' the thing that is to be measured through building the test. Importantly, whatever ends up being 'built' through the test (e.g. 'literacy') actually impacts what is measured over time at an individual level and well beyond, to classrooms, institutions, and governance at regional, state and national levels. One well-documented effect of standardized tests, for instance, is the narrowing effect they have on curriculum as a result of teaching to the test and not to the broader curriculum (for example, Dulfer et al., 2012, David, 2011, Menken, 2008).

In contrast, measuring blood pressure, for example, does not require 'blood pressure' to be defined for each national health system. Doctors are not held accountable for the patients' blood pressure results and states are not judged on the average blood pressures of their constituents. So, although both blood pressure and literacy are judged through tests, the impact of the measurement process is very different.

The language structure of NAPLAN

NAPLAN was developed for the purposes of increasing accountability and providing good quality data, particularly on the literacy and numeracy achievement of Indigenous children (MCEETYA, , 2008). It is extremely prominent in schools, states and the media in the *Closing the Gap* agenda.

In making tests such as NAPLAN, many decisions are made in order to 'build' the object to be measured (e.g. 'literacy', 'numeracy'). The most fundamental of these is the language of measurement, which in the case of NAPLAN, is *Standard Australian English*. The language is known as *Standard Australian English* to distinguish it from other types of English widely used in Australia outside of the school curriculum. Not everyone speaks English at home and if they do, not everyone speaks the standard variety at home. Those children for whom Standard Australian English is not their mother tongue are English Language Learners and they will have different amounts (i.e. proficiency levels) depending on their learning contexts and access to English language teaching.

In remote Indigenous communities, many children speak languages other than English at home. In Indigenous contexts, language contact and shift processes are changing the face of Indigenous language ecologies, with contemporary Indigenous languages those with the largest speakership. However, naming the language that students speak is not part of the taught mainstream curriculum, which impacts on the visibility in data collection systems of Indigenous speakers of newly developing/developed contact languages. This means that even if Indigenous children's home language is indicated as English in the NAPLAN data, they may or may not speak Standard Australian English at home. A different process is required to ascertain this.

For all children, whether their home languages are contact languages historically related to English (e.g. Roper River Kriol or Fitzroy Valley Kriol, Yarrie Lingo, Yumplatok, Alyawarre English, or from overseas Tok Pisin or Bislama), or languages completely unrelated

to English (e.g. Wik Mungkan, Yolngu Matha, Kala Kawaw Ya, or from overseas Tongan or Mandarin), their mother tongues are powerful in children's identity and their cognitive and social development.

One major impact of the decision to test literacy and numeracy and not take into account the role that *Standard Australian English* proficiency plays in students' achievements has been to undervalue initiatives which recognise and celebrate students' home languages and target the explicit teaching of *Standard Australian English* as a second or foreign language (see below). This has had impacts in policy, as well as public perception, disrupting children's opportunities to develop cognitively, academically and socially through their first languages as well as in *Standard Australian English*, where bilingual education programs had historically been implemented. The 'first four hours in English' policy was a response to the first NAPLAN administration in 2008 which effectively saw the end of many bilingual programs in the Northern Territory (Simpson et al., 2009, Devlin et al., 2017). This is despite the fact that research has shown that development in first and second languages leads to better long-term educational outcomes (Thomas and Collier, 1997). Impacts such as the dismantling of bilingual education do the opposite of enabling and empowering Indigenous people.

While "Four hours of English" might seem a helpful initiative, it resulted in a mainstream curriculum delivery, i.e. as if the students already spoke English and not in any planned and staged specialised English language teaching program suitable for English Language Learners in a foreign language learning context in a remote community. It is important to note also, that there is no national curriculum for English as a foreign language or as a second language. Thus, the result of English-only initiatives is the impossible situation in which students have to learn new academic content through an unknown language. We can see then, that the building of an educational measure for Closing the Gap targets is not just a matter of measuring, as it is in taking someone's blood pressure. Rather it has far-reaching impacts which may counteract the aims of the policy guiding the measurement.

[The need to recognise language learning as an educational variable in measurement](#)

We are not suggesting that Indigenous students should not be assessed in *Standard Australian English*. We are suggesting that any measurement needs to take language proficiency into account and that the impacts of the testing also need to be monitored to ensure they do not negatively impact learning and enablement.

The problem with NAPLAN is that a significant proportion of Indigenous learners do not speak the language of the tests as their first language and that **the status of these children as language learners is routinely ignored in the data analysis and subsequently constructed as a matter of academic deficit in the media**. A further misunderstanding which underpins the legitimacy of NAPLAN testing is the belief that once the children get to school, they are immersed in *Standard Australian English* which they will simply pick up in the sponge-like way children are perceived to pick up language. This may be true in situations where there is good second language learning support provided in the school and where the language of school (in this case, *Standard Australian English*) is spoken in the classroom, the playground and the surrounding community (although even in such circumstances, becoming proficient enough to manage school content takes many years (Collier, 1989, Slama, 2012)). However, when the target 'school' language is only regularly spoken by the teachers and a few other people in the community, as is the case in many remote Indigenous communities, the learning situation is quite different. In research on second language acquisition, this kind of situation is known

as a ‘foreign language learning situation’ and the language proficiency outcomes, even for young children, are different from situations in which children are surrounded by the language of school (Muñoz, 2008). Being a foreign language learner is a fact which relates to the probability of encountering the target language in the environment; it is not connected to cognitive development or academic ability. However, separating Indigenous children from all other children as an analytic group AND ignoring this fact about some members of this group creates the illusion that the only variable being tested is academic ability. In fact, multiple variables are implicated, especially second language/dialect and first language literacy practices in the home and broader community.

Although the NAPLAN reporting includes in the analysis a LBOTE category (Language Background Other Than English), this category is an extremely broad one which includes a very great range of English language proficiencies and learner types. It is a common misunderstanding that the LBOTE category serves to disaggregate English Language Learners from mother tongue English speakers and is therefore able to provide accurate data on Indigenous students *who are also English Language Learners*. In fact, LBOTE covers a wide range of students, from those who speak English with a caregiver who speaks another language at least to some extent, through to students who are in fact English language learners. Of this category—English Language Learners—some are learning English in schools with specialised ESL support and English exposure in the playground and wider community. Others, such as Indigenous children in many remote contexts, are learning English as a foreign language, which, as mentioned above, entails little exposure to English beyond interaction with a teacher and virtually no English language teaching support. Thus, LBOTE data serves as a general indicator of cultural and linguistic diversity, rather than an indicator of English Language Learner status. What is generally lost in this vast aggregation of learner types is the most pertinent factor: the amount of English an English Language Learner knows (i.e. their proficiency) (Dixon and Angelo, 2014, Angelo, 2013). The problematic impact of this is that the LBOTE data collected via NAPLAN and used in its reporting and analysis, is unable to show a meaningful link between language proficiency and NAPLAN scores, thereby promoting institutional and policy ignorance of how language proficiency is embedded in NAPLAN performance and potentially derailing English language support in the classroom where such support is available (Creagh, 2016).

Students’ proficiency in *Standard Australian English* is not just a consideration in the measurement of literacy. In the building of ‘numeracy’, the test developers have prioritized word-based numeracy. This means that students can only answer most of the numeracy questions *if they are literate in English*. For example, only two questions were composed only of numerical symbols or shapes across the four Year 3 numeracy tests from 2008 to 2011. Further, many of the questions are complex English structures such as ‘What is the least number of packets that Shelley needs?’ (NAPLAN Year 3 Numeracy Test, 2010). While it is reasonable to include word-based problems as representative of the Australian curriculum, interpretation of results about ‘numeracy’ must be cautious since a large component of the ‘numeracy’, as it is built through the test questions, depends on a sophisticated understanding of written English.

Measurement of language learning needs to be prioritised as an educational variable. There are assessment frameworks in Australia to measure such proficiency which are inclusive of Indigenous English language learners (see, for example, Hudson and Angelo, 2014). Australia has been at the forefront of such developments. Data which describes the level of listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency of English Language Learners

provides critical explanatory data about the performances of Indigenous children on NAPLAN. Language underlies literacy. Measuring reading and writing on NAPLAN alone will not explain what the priorities and the action plan should be for Indigenous English Language Learners. Why not measure the SAE language factor if it means that the data will be richer, more explanatory and thus tell us more?

Impact of targeting literacy skills separated from curriculum content

In constructing 'literacy', the test developers have decided to target literacy skills and not curriculum content. For example, *punctuation* is tested as a skill that is measurable in any sentence and not, for example, a part of the study of a taught science strand topic such as 'Living things have life cycles'. *Persuasive writing* is tested as a skill and not connected to a taught curriculum topic such as 'the importance of environments to animals and people'. While it is reasonable to view these aspects of written language as skills, they are extremely narrow conceptualisations of language and literacy. Best practice incorporates both language and literacy skills in the learning of subject content. However, a 'content-empty' skills test has a tendency to promote content-empty test practice in the classroom (as exemplified in Angelo, 2012). Teachers and principals with experience teaching in remote Indigenous communities report that a great emphasis is placed on 'filling in bubbles' on the multiple choice answer sheet since, for a proportion of their students, this is the extent of their engagement with the tests (Macqueen et al., in press). Such empty practices are surely detrimental to children's learning as well as the integrity of the NAPLAN data.

In deciding not to tie the literacy test to particular taught curriculum content, the test developers have decided to use subject matter that might be considered generally familiar. Related to this issue of non-curricular content is the use of subject matter in the test which is assumed to be familiar outside the school curriculum, e.g. going to the cinema, ten-pin bowling, but which is unfamiliar in non-urban contexts (Wigglesworth et al., 2011, Unsworth, 2013). Such topics add a layer of impenetrability to the test content when first language is not *Standard Australian English*.

Education policy is language policy

Education is carried out through language. It is important to recognise that educational policies and their associated measurements are also language policies and measurements (Menken, 2009). Therefore, the development of new targets must take into account that any educational measure is impactful, and some impacts of measurement may in fact derail the aims of the policy. Given enough public and bureaucratic scrutiny, tests such as NAPLAN, designed to monitor performance and inform policy, can become much more powerful, even generating negative consequences through i) narrowing educational focus such as narrowing curriculum, teaching culture and institutional attention, and ii) directing and reinforcing public perception of Indigenous children's NAPLAN failure.

Public talk about Indigenous children's achievement NAPLAN

Indigenous children have been made highly visible by the annual NAPLAN measurements. From the first administration, their achievement has been pored over and in particular, their

'failure' in relation to all other children has been headlined, e.g. *One in Three Indigenous Kids Fail Test* (Ferrari, 2008) and *Indigenous Students Falling Further Behind* (Adlam, 2008). Public attention to the underachievement of Indigenous children is roused annually by the media coverage when NAPLAN results are front-page news in each state media outlet with each state's performance highlighted. Public attention is also sustained through the MySchool website in various data formulations (by school, by state, etc.) that include the category 'Indigenous'. The fact that 'Indigenous' students are the only ethnic-cultural group to be disaggregated in NAPLAN data increases unsophisticated and pernicious perceptions of Indigenous students as both a homogenous and under-achieving group.

The public emphasis on the achievement of Indigenous children is a strong social force which is felt from state level to schools to classrooms. Although the intention of NAPLAN was to simply monitor achievement, the discourse emanating from the test has become absorbed by the education system, including the people in it. Thus, the danger of public accountability programs such as NAPLAN is that an understanding of 'failure' of one ethno-cultural group (extremely diverse though that group is) becomes an accepted fact—both by people who are identified within the group as well as those who are identified as outside it.

Standardized targets invite standardized interventions

How to manage students' language proficiencies for optimal learning in a way that fulfils their family and local and broader community expectations for their education is a complex matter. Reducing this complexity to dependence on an educational measure such as NAPLAN, which appears equitable because it treats everyone the same, is a seductive solution. However, ignoring complexity and the expectations of the community comes at great social and educational cost. In particular, standardized numerical data invites standardized interventions. The logic is that if *Intervention A* improves *Target X* in *Place T*, *Intervention A* will also improve *Target X* in *Place Q*. As we've outlined above, however, the language situation for students in *Place T*, a regional city, and *Place Q*, a remote community, may be vastly different yet *Target X* as measured by NAPLAN is insensitive to these differences. There are so many unknown variables in such data between individuals, local circumstances and on-the-ground implementation that extreme caution should be exercised in interpreting the achievement or non-achievement of targets. Contextual information is vital yet discouraged by *Closing the Gap* reporting which seeks simple results, and by and large collects failure and encourages problematic interventions.

Contextualised targets

Targets must be long range, locally contextualised and participatory. CTG efforts should purposefully include examples of schools and community responding together towards goals that they have purposefully identified. Example practical, real-world processes should be provided for schools about working with their community to understand their local language ecologies, for discussing local community educational aspirations and for developing a map of how to achieve this.

To work towards Closing the Gap, schools would benefit from considering the points below.

- how do schools work with community?

- what participation would community members like to have in the school? (employment? training? governance? interviewing prospective teachers...)
- what language(s) are spoken by students and the broader community?
- what languages does the community aspire for students to learn at school (e.g. Standard Australian English, a traditional heritage language...)
- what levels of proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE) do students have?
- what measures best assist students to communicate with their teachers and vice versa?
- what arrangements are in place to assist students with augmenting their proficiency in SAE?
- how to develop a map of achieving student and community aspirations for education?

CTG Targets must re-engage with their intent

Closing the Gap targets can be separated from their rationale, in which case efforts can be skewed to achieving the targets as opposed to tackling their root causes. Attendance at pre-school and school are examples: Children can be rounded up and coralled in pre-school settings or at school, a horrifying thought that clearly does not equate to accessing the benefits and opportunities for attendees that inspired attendance targets in the first place. The gaming of CTG targets for their own sake needs to be curtailed and serious endeavours to address long-term and systemic Indigenous disadvantage need to be encouraged.

One useful measure would be for Closing the Gap targets to be accompanied by clear statements of intent: “pre-school attendance is intended to be a bridge from home into a rich, supportive learning environment where an expectation is that young children experience cultural and linguistic continuity”. Entities reporting on Closing the Gap targets should be held to account for their efforts to achieve the intent, not to game the numbers.

Further vital information that should be provided upfront.

- What is the intent of the target? (What is the vision? What does this look like?)
- How would schools/pre-schools know they are on a useful trajectory to achieving the intent?

Meaningful community engagement and involvement

An extremely unfortunate effect of education Closing the Gap targets is that “community” is not mentioned. As a result of not being one of the significant factors included in the data collected for CTG targets, Indigenous communities have been sidelined. Historically, Australia’s policies have a terrible legacy of “inflicting” policies on Indigenous Australians, and this is something we eschew in the post-colonial era. CTG targets must reflect this.

Additional targets:

- schools establish and provide evidence of a functioning community/parent body;
- schools collect evidence of discussions with local community, e.g. learning about local families (e.g. languages spoken at home)

- schools invest in real training for local community members and in real positions in schools
- local Indigenous staff are mentored to support their longterm employment aspirations
- revisiting national standards for Indigenous community teachers (they seem to have had a punitive, inhibitory effect on remote Indigenous teacher training.)

Long-term view versus quick fix

There is no doubting the goodwill behind CTG policy, and the need for accountability. However, SMART targets and narrow data encourage a blinkered (both very narrow and short term) view of “progress”.

- mapping aspirations for a school (e.g. writer in residence, sport, arts, touring science visit, language events each year)
- strengths based: what are the strengths of the students, the community, the school

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