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Governing by Numbers: local effects on students' experiences of writing

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ABSTRACT This article is an extract from a longer research article originally published in the journal *English in Education*. It describes a parallel situation in Australia where high-stakes assessment led to stereotyped writing, endless test practice and widespread student disengagement.

The idea that their work was now coordinated by numbers rather than by students and curriculum was worrying. As principals talked, it became clear that the United in Our Pursuit of Excellence strategy to differentiate supervision of schools based on NAPLAN results was being experienced at the local level. One described his experience when school NAPLAN results declined in 2013, and he was no longer a 'free' principal:

> We [have a goal to] improve NAPLAN outcomes. So if you've got [above the national mean] ... in NAPLAN, then you are free. You are what they call a 'free principal'.… If you're ... less than that ... Well then you're supervised with different levels of supervision.

Principals were well aware that their own jobs were on the line, and also reported that their regional directors' contracts were tied to NAPLAN improvement. Unsurprisingly, one thing that the principals agreed on – even those at schools that performed well on NAPLAN – was that NAPLAN was the 'only game in town'. In other words, the cascade of policies into their schools via regional offices meant that their leadership (and that of their regional supervisors) was now focused squarely on improving NAPLAN data. The six principals responded by mandating policies at the school level that would deliver 'fast boat' improvements. These responses included mandating the collection of additional literacy data that measured the same kinds of literacy

skills tested on NAPLAN (such as spelling, reading and grammar). The principals also mandated curriculum, pedagogy and assessment changes in which explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy tested on NAPLAN was a focus. Many of these decisions were tied to regional programmes of improvement. These were sometimes known as 'high-yield' strategies, intended to bring about quick improvements to school NAPLAN data. They included requiring teachers to undertake practices such as spending a set amount of time on 'NAPLAN-style questions' in every lesson, changing the curriculum to ensure a strong focus on NAPLAN content, and ensuring that assessment tested NAPLAN content.

The Reorganisation of Teachers' Work and Student Writing

Teachers confirmed that a great deal of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and homework was now directed towards basic skills literacy. Time in class was being reallocated towards additional testing and data collection, particularly at the primary school. Outside the classroom, teachers reported spending extensive amounts of time – often on nights and at weekends – recording and analysing data, as well as engaging in new forms of work such as preparing for 'data conversations' with the school leadership team.

It was clear that teachers made decisions to alter curriculum choices across a range of subjects to teach the generic structure tested by NAPLAN, persuasive writing. This work occurred in similar ways at a number of schools, which elucidates the operation of translocal effects, achieved via ruling relations. A number of teachers at both schools referred to this work as 'doing persuasives'. Yandell & Brady (2016) recently described the 'PEE (point, evidence, explanation) paragraph' as the 'almost ubiquitous building blocks of literary critical essays in English schools' (p. 48). In Australia, the similarly ubiquitous 'PEEL (point, evidence, explanation, link) paragraph' was used by many teachers as the building block for teaching persuasive writing. This work began from Grade 2, when students are seven years old. The emphasis on teaching the persuasive structure led one of the secondary school teachers to note that after six years of 'doing persuasives', students found it very difficult to write using any other generic structure. In her words, students are 'trying to persuade you every step of the way'.

Although the focus groups were held to ascertain (among other things) whether students believed that they were provided with regular opportunities to demonstrate creativity, the issue of teaching that was focused around the demands of standardised assessment was raised by students themselves. Rather than describing the arts programme (as we had anticipated), a number of students said that creative opportunities were limited by the repetitive teaching of creative writing over the year. One said that:

> with narratives, sometimes we don't want to write them, but it's like ... you have to write them. Which is good, because I guess it is an opportunity to show our creativity, but ... it is like a disadvantage

> too ... because we do them ... every week. And then we have to write a whole new one! It's hard to be creative like that.

The students' responses were particularly striking given that the school has attempted to resist at least some of the pressure to standardise and limit curricular and pedagogic choices by including creativity and the arts as part of its strategic focus. Nevertheless, the teaching and assessment focus on the technicalities of writing using a particular generic style meant that creativity was now difficult for students. As another student said, 'it [the technical approach to teaching creative writing] takes the fun out of it'. Another added: 'The thing is we have to do this every week, and it's like ... dude can we just stop for a bit and focus on something else!? Literally! We do it every single day!' Although the students had been asked to comment on creativity, they continued to have a lively discussion about how assessment was indeed restructuring their school weeks. After a few minutes of conversation, one student said:

> I hate Mondays and Tuesdays because all we do is English and math ... English and math ... And like we have spelling tests on a Monday morning, but it's like, no wonder people don't do well on these pre-tests, because it's like, 'Get up, wake up and do tests, no matter how bad you're feeling.' It's a slap in the face. It's even if people are sick.

In a report to the Australian Senate's inquiry into the effectiveness of NAPLAN (2014) an assistant principal similarly attested:

> Children sit many [NAPLAN] practice tests. In some classrooms they write each week in the NAPLAN test condition of 40 minutes with no assistance during this time. (p. 23)

The policies linking funding, performance management and data may place poorer-performing schools at greater risk of being organised by numbers. A recent (Luke et al, 2013) review of an Indigenous Education programme in Australian schools (n = 775) found that schools with more than 15% Indigenous students and schools in lower socio-economic areas were more likely to report a stronger emphasis on basic skills pedagogies. McCallum's (2016, p. 82) recent research has corroborated that creativity and self-expression are less likely to be present in schools with working-class children, 'while they flourish in schools where they are not present' (p. 82).

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