

# *The Impacts of Standardised Testing on Teachers in Australian Secondary Schools*

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**Abstract:** In Australian schools, there are two main terms of assessments-- assessment for educational accountability and assessment for learning. The assessment for accountability mainly refers to the standardised test which concerns students academic performance rather than students' learning. As a main term of assessment in Australia, standardised testing has some disadvantages which will be less beneficial for teachers' teaching and then lead to low academic achievement of students. Besides that, the teacher is a crucial part to enact the policy to improve students' learning. Also, the complex situation of Australian secondary schools will influence the policy enactment. Therefore, it is significant to have a better understanding of the limitations of the standardised testing on teachers to improve students' learning not only in academic area but in other important areas. The author will argue that the negative impacts of standardised assessments on teachers in Australian secondary schools outweigh the positive impacts. In order to support the argument, the author will take NAPLAN as an example to first analyse the negative effects of standardised assessments on teachers and then explore the negative impacts on teaching practice before making a conclusion and presenting some recommendations in the final part.

## 1. Introduction

As a written form of assessment task, standardised testing provides all the learners with the same questions which ask for the same answers. It could be traced back to twenties century and became popular in 1980s. The increasing usage of the form of test led to a period of accountability. In Australian schools, there are two main terms of assessments-- assessment for educational accountability and assessment for learning (Cumming, Fabienne, Kleij, & Adie, 2019) [1]. The assessment for accountability mainly refers to the standardised test which concerns students academic performance rather than students' learning. Taking NAPLAN as an example, it is a national standardised assessment on literacy and numeracy for students from Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Australia. It is noted that NAPLAN aims to provide information about students to help them get assistance for improvement (Polesel, Rice, & Dulfer, 2014) [2]. However, many Australian educators made negative comments on the test like narrowing curriculum (Polesel et al., 2014)[2]. In other words, standardised testing impedes teachers' teaching and students' learning to some extent. In order to improve the policy, the knowledge of the negative impacts is important. What's

more, teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of the educational policy. In order to make sense of the policy enactment, teachers may act as ‘narrators, entrepreneurs, outsiders or partners, transactors, enthusiasts, translators, critics and receivers’ (Hardy, 2014, p. 3)[3] to explain, report, investigate and deal with the policy. Therefore, it is significant to analyse the negative impacts of standardised testing on teachers in Australian schools to improve the policy and better implement it with the help of educators to improve students’ learning.

Overall, as a main term of assessment in Australia, standardised testing has some disadvantages which will be less beneficial for teachers’ teaching and then lead to low academic achievement of students. Besides that, the teacher is a crucial part to enact the policy to improve students’ learning. Also, the complex situation of Australian secondary schools will influence the policy enactment. Therefore, it is significant to have a better understanding of the limitations of the standardised testing on teachers to improve students’ learning not only in academic area but in other important areas. The author will argue that the negative impacts of standardised assessments on teachers in Australian secondary schools outweigh the positive impacts. In order to support the argument, the author will take NAPLAN as an example to first analyse the negative effects of standardised assessments on teachers and then explore the negative impacts on teaching practice before making a conclusion and presenting some recommendations in the final part.

## **2. Negative Impacts on Teachers in Australian secondary schools**

On the one hand, the policy of standardised testing has negative impacts on Teachers themselves. Firstly, it may impose much pressure on teachers which would be harmful to their mental health. In the Western Australian newspaper, teachers are described as someone who resist to the standardised testing and many reports in the paper critiques that the decline in educational standards is attributed to teachers. What’s worse, few articles praise teachers for their positive practice in the process of standardised testing. Shine and Donoghue (2013) state that the new media coverage may affect public opinions [4]. Therefore, teachers may feel frustrated to be regarded as such a negative image. Then teachers will be stressful as their results of the test would lead to bad comments on the coverage. Beyond distorted images in the new media coverage, teachers may get overloaded due to the standardised testing. The post-test activities like marking, collecting and distributing NAPLAN reports to parents will be added to additional workloads of teachers in secondary schools expect independent schools (Carter et al, 2016)[5]. Sometimes they even have to sacrifice their own leisure time to complete the additional work loads (Carter et al, 2016) [5]. As a result, these excessive workloads tend to make teachers stressful.

Also, teachers’ pressure may come from threats on their reputation and future employment. Carter, Klenowski and Chalmers (2016) point out that when schools are evaluated through the outcome of the standardised test, much emphasis will be placed on the test results [5]. That is, once teachers fail to help students to get high scores in the test, their reputation and career prospects will be threatened because people emphasize the test results but not the non-academic area of students learning. What’s worse, teachers may suffer from top-down pressure imposed by the policy. More than teachers’ reputation, schools’ reputation would also be threatened. Principles are exerted pressure by line managers to improve students’ results of the test to a certain level, otherwise their jobs may be on line and this pressure will be moved to teachers (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012) [6]. In a word, the policy of standardised testing increase pressure on teachers through negative comments on teachers from new media coverage, additional workloads, threats to employment prospects as well as pressure from line managers to principles.

Secondly, the pressure on the teachers caused by the standardised testing will contribute to unethical behavior like cheating in the test. Carter, Klenowski and Chalmers (2016) argue that because of the pressure on teachers, their behavior will be distorted and they will put the improvement of the scores of the test in the first place [5]. Also, Amreni-Beardsley, Berliner and

Rideau (2010) claim that when the test scores become the only measurement of education or school quality and would lead to threats to teachers' reputation or an increase of salary, corruption would occur in the system [7]. In other words, too much emphasis placed on the standardised test scores may lead to the unintended consequences- cheating of teachers. Teachers intend to cheat, for example, as investigated by Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012)[6], some teachers convince students with low capability not to attend the NAPLAN test or even assist students when sitting an exam. As a result, teachers may misbehave in order to avoid punishments or get rewards from the policy of standardised testing in Australia.

Thirdly, the standardised assessment may spoil teachers' social relationships including relationship with school community and parents. One of the negative impacts will be on teachers' relationship with school community. Teachers' professional judgment can be underestimated because the results of the NAPLAN test become the only authoritative evaluation for school and teaching quality which may make teachers lose their confidence and raise rivalry or competition among teachers (Thompson, 2013)[8]. Like a year 7 teacher said in the survey of Thompson (2013), teachers and schools may be labeled as bad or good by the result of NAPLAN. Another negative impact from teachers' perspective is on the relationship with parents [8]. For one thing, misunderstanding of parents on the NAPLAN results may increase pressure on teachers. Thompson (2013) surveys that parents are likely to blame teachers for students low academic performance on the NAPLAN test [8]. For another thing, strained communication will take place between teachers and parents. Because teachers have to spend time explaining the results of NAPLAN to parents and few parents are informed about the NAPLAN. This makes parents really anxious as they have no idea what should be evaluated in their children's education (Thompson, 2013) [8]. More than the damage in relationships with school community and parents, teachers' relationship with students will be negatively influenced which may impede students' learning. As mentioned before, there are three socio-economic kinds of secondary schools in Australia and there is an imbalance of access to academic curriculum (Perry & Southwell, 2014) [9]. For schools in low socio-economic status, teachers fail to give students substantial support to improve their results in the NAPLAN but they have to encourage their students to work hard for the test, which may erode the trust between teachers and students (Macqueen, et al., 2019)[10], thereby spoiling the relationship between teachers and students.

### 3. Negative impacts on teachers' teaching practice

On the other hand, the standardised test may distort teachers' teaching practice in teaching content as well as teaching approaches. It has been shown that increasingly policy pressure on students performance on standardised test has impacts on teaching practice in a school in Australia(Hardy, 2018)[11]. First, it may lead to boring and shallow contents in teaching. The NAPLAN test will contribute to shallow teaching content instead of deep learning of skills and knowledge required in modern society. Due to the test, teaching content will be designed mainly on numeracy and literacy skills without contexts of these skills (Polesel et al., 2014) [2]. That is, teachers may mainly teach students the relative contents to the test. Thus, as Polesel, Rice and Dulfer (2014) state, the depth of learning will be influenced as the purpose of the course is to pass the exam and the breadth of learning will also be affected because only a narrow range of subjects will be taught due to the test [2]. Beside the depth and breath of learning content, Thompson (2013) argues that the content which is related to the test is not relevant to social life in modern society [8]. In other words, the curriculum on the test fails to help students' social development.

Next, teaching approaches will be distorted by the standardised testing. As mentioned before, there are three levels of secondary schools in Australia. They are in different socio-economic compositions. The three schools have different methods to NAPLAN test. The government school regarded the results of NAPLAN as an indicator of education, while the Catholic and independent schools put less emphasis on the test. However, some teachers misunderstand that no attention is

paid to the test, the independent schools also present their expectations on the test (Carter et al., 2016)[5]. Therefore, all the three schools use bolt-on preparation for the test in class. In other words, teachers in class make students do NAPLAN preparation tests to rehearsal the real test. That is, teachers only teach to the test. Apart from that, the pressures imposed by the standardised testing tend to result in teacher-centered approach which fails to support students' creative thinking skills (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013)[12]. What's worse, the teacher-centered approach may make teachers become less self-efficacy as their various professional strategies are marginalized and undermined. Besides, teachers' pedagogy is limited as what they only need is to explain the test contents other than students' needs (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013)[12]. In some Australian studies, it is found that teachers may provide more assistance to students who are likely to achieve success in NAPLAN test other than those who really need help (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013)[12].

Overall, due to the standardised testing, teachers may only teach to the test and they will lose creativity in pedagogy. Also, they are likely to ignore students who are less capable but need most help.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the negative effects of the standardised testing outweigh its benefits. On the one hand, the policy of standardised testing may lead to an increase of teachers' pressure, teachers' cheating behavior and a damage for teachers' relationship with school community, parents and students. On the other hand, teachers' pedagogies will be negatively influenced like boring teaching content, insufficient teaching time and ineffective teaching approaches. Although it is beneficial for teachers' personal development and teaching practice to some extent, it makes teachers' work more stressful and data from it loses its validity due to the long time after testing. Therefore, much attention should be paid to the assessment policy in Australian, and less importance should be attached to students' scores in standardised testing which may limit their learning.

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