

NAPLAN and the performance regime in Australian Schooling

A review of the policy context

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Abstract

The National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a Federal Government initiative directed at providing parents, teachers, principals, state and federal governments with diagnostic information on student performance. As a national performance measurement system (PMS), its implementation has been swift, although contentious. It sits at the nexus of the Rudd-Gillard education reform efforts and is positioned as the tool for effecting change. This summary attempts to describe the complex policy context from which the Rudd-Gillard education reforms emerged. It reflects on the contested relationship between the commonwealth, state and territory governments, school accountability, the development of a national curriculum, the emergence of the knowledge economy and an international policy agenda as well as teacher professionalism. It then examines the justifications behind NAPLAN and briefly details the strategy employed to ensure its successful implementation as a PMS within a wider performance regime

NAPLAN and the performance regime in Australian schooling: A review of the policy context

Case study: National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

As one of Australia's most developed and high profile performance measurement (PM) system, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy serves as an important case study to better understand the PM phenomenon and its effects. The introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, was touted as the means of establishing “a new level of diagnostic information, not only for teachers and schools, but also for education systems and governments” (Masters, 2010, p. 23). Performance measurement systems are frequently associated within the concept of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, directed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the public sector. Here NPM utilises PM as a tool for reform where quantifiable activity is used to reward and punish good and poor results (Christensen & Laegrid, 2011). It rests on the development of an *accepted* instrument, such as NAPLAN, to be deployed as a strategy to “define performance, direct management attention and induce behavioural change” (Power, 2004, p. 776).

NAPLAN's introduction replaced existing state and territory testing programs to establish “consistent processes and comparable results” (Masters, 2010, p. 22). Australian students are now tested in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, providing an opportunity to measure growth from one year level to the next. Each test is developed in accordance with the National Statements of Learning in English and Mathematics¹ currently informing state and territory curriculums. As yet, NAPLAN is not aligned with the new national curriculum, although this is expected by 2013. Tests are conducted at schools on specified dates in May of every year, administered by classroom teachers and administrators under strict protocols (ACARA, 2011). While every student in Australia is *intended* to participate in NAPLAN testing, special provisions are made for students with disabilities. Students may be exempted from participation on the basis of intellectual or functional disability or if they have been in Australia for less than twelve months and are from a non-English speaking background. In addition, parents may also choose for their child not to participate in NAPLAN. A preliminary NAPLAN Summary report is released in September before individual student reports are sent to parents. The final national report with more detailed literacy and numeracy results across different cohorts of students is released closer to the end of the year by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the independent statutory authority responsible for NAPLAN.

While NAPLAN assesses students in five domains: reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy, profile information is also collected on: gender, indigenous status, language backgrounds, parent education levels and occupations, school financial data as well as geographic location. The objective of NAPLAN has been to establish “a new level of diagnostic information, not only for teachers and schools, but also for education systems and governments”

¹ National Statements are available from http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceecdy/statements_of_learning,22835.html

NAPLAN

(Masters, 2010, p. 23). Accordingly, NAPLAN sits as a communicative device (Broadfoot & Black, 2004) from which to direct school reform. In this light, while NAPLAN is able to provide information on student learning in literacy and numeracy, it is also has the capacity to throw attention to what may or may not be occurring within and across classrooms at a national level. In turn this data brings focus to what and how literacy and numeracy are taught and the type of students who succeed or fail. Significantly, NAPLAN currently serves as the principle source for data for the My School website launched in 2010 to provide the public with information on school performance.

In addition to yearly NAPLAN results, the My School website² provides profiles on approximately 9,500 schools to offer the public statistical and contextual information on individual. Significantly, ACARA developed the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) to enable more nuanced school comparison of NAPLAN across Australia in light of the influence of family backgrounds on student outcomes. Schools are placed on a numerical scale from 500 to 1300 based on their comparative social and educational advantage. The ICSEA score subsequently forms the basis on which a single school is linked to 60 statistically similar schools across Australia via the My School website. As well, NAPLAN results are colour coded³ to provide quick visual indicators of educational advantage and disadvantage. Thus My School serves as reporting system on a national dataset of information on Australian schools where areas of disadvantage can be identified for further assistance and resourcing (Zanderigo, Dowd, & Turner, 2012).

Since its implementation, NAPLAN has generated fierce debate within the media, academic and professional communities suggesting a lack of public confidence in the assessment program and prompting a senate inquiry in 2010 (Senate References Committee on Education Employment & Workplace Relations). While the senate committee reaffirmed the government's commitment to NAPLAN, recommendations indicated problems associated with: how data was directly and indirectly used to evaluate school performance; the discrimination of students with disabilities; its servicing of students from different language backgrounds as well as higher and lower performing students; ACARA's methodology in developing school comparisons; the harm caused by the media's use of data; and its disconnection from the wider curriculum.

Part 1- Policy context

We need to build a culture of high expectations in our schools for students and teachers. This culture must also be matched to effective transparency and accountability mechanisms that meet the needs of parents, policy makers and the broader community. (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5)

In 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard set out the foundations of the education revolution to be built on two principles: the quantity of investment and the quality of outcomes of the education system. Prior to the 2007 federal election Labor positioned education as a catalyst for a third wave of economic

² <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>

³ Greens to indicate performances above or substantially above, reds to indicate below and substantially below statistically similar as well as all other schools

reform. In this respect, Rudd's proposal was promoted as following a strong Labor history of reform initiatives. More specifically, Labor's policy agenda for economic reform was framed as the revolution required for the 21st century (Rudd, 2007, January), focused on investment in human capital as the key driver of productivity growth and the creation of an internationally competitive economy.

The new policy rationale emphasised the social and personal benefits that would be extended by reforms in education.

The Rudd Government is committed to creating an education revolution to build a world class education system, which would establish Australia as one of the most highly educated and skilled nations.

This commitment recognises the central role that education plays in the economic and social strength of our nation. Education not only drives productivity but also empowers individuals to reach their full potential, and helps overcome disadvantage. (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5)

Literacy and numeracy skills were situated as the predictors of educational attainment, social inclusion, employment and productivity. Schools and teaching quality were positioned as the key elements of the education revolution. Major priority was given to improvements in transparent data and reporting on individual student and school performances. This would occur via the pursuit of "a new way of working with the States and Territories" (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 13) to produce a national dataset. This would provide the evidence on which to base future improvement. It was argued that:

Clear accountability helps create a learning environment that encourages innovation and excellence from school leaders, teachers and students. It also means students, parents and teachers have the evidence they need to make informed choices... Access to timely and robust performance information is crucial so that governments can use the information gleaned from high-performing schools to help under-performing schools. Clear reporting about the performance of public services is consistent with the Australian Government's commitment to more open and transparent governance. (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 13)

A key objective was to achieve State and Territory agreement on measures and performance expectations with the aim of producing a national dataset that would allow comparison between like schools beyond State and Territory boundaries. While NAPLAN would provide transparency through data, the creation of the My School website would deliver public accountability. Significantly, Lingard (2010) has argued that like-school comparison, made possible through NAPLAN and My School, flags the beginnings of a national policy field in Australian education.

This paper begins with an examination of the Australian context from which Labor's 2007 policy emerged, then briefly maps how the Education Revolution has been realised. Given the complexity of schooling, five key, interrelated issues will be drawn upon to provide some background to the

Rudd and Gillard government's stance on schooling. The themes of commonwealth-state relations, school accountability, the national curriculum, the knowledge economy and the international policy agenda, and teacher professionalism are closely interwoven and provide some insight into the range of trends and forces at play.

Commonwealth-state relations

Three potential mechanisms or contexts related to the relationship between commonwealth and state governance could be considered influential to the Education Revolution: first the state's constitutional responsibility for schooling and the consequences of this for national strategies; second, the funding arrangements for private and public school systems and finally, the changing policy focus of Liberal and Labor governments.

Responsibility for education

In Australia, state and territory governments have constitutional responsibility for the formation of policy, the management and provision of services and resources as well as the creation, delivery and assessment of their respective curriculums to primary and secondary students. However this responsibility for education was transformed in the early 1970's through the formation of a new commonwealth and state partnership that would allow for recurrent funding for private and public schools (Harrington, 2011).

Following the Karmel report of 1973 revealing the deficiencies of school funding, resources gathered from a national taxation system were, for the first time directed to the states that held constitutional responsibility for education (Lingard, 2000; Reid, 2002). Within two years the commonwealth had increased spending on schools from \$364 to \$1091 million, transforming "the material position of all schools, private and government" (Marginson, 1997, p. 46). Whitlam's government had, for the first time systematised Commonwealth involvement in schooling.

The Commonwealth government had taken over income tax raising powers from the States during World War Two. This created a situation where the Commonwealth had control of revenue, whilst the states had to maintain expensive policy domains. The effect of this was the generation of a 'vertical fiscal imbalance' whereby funding for education was weighted in favour of the commonwealth, but where the policy responsibility lay with the states (Lingard, 2000; Lingard, Porter, Bartlett, & Knight, 1995). Education is thus a shared, but asymmetric responsibility of governance in Australia and this, according to Lingard (2000), holds potential for influence over state compliance with commonwealth policy direction. This intervention in policy is made possible through sections 51 xxiii, 81, 122 and 96 of the Australian constitution with the provision that "the Parliament may grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as the Parliament thinks fit" (Australia, 2008, p. 6).

The Commonwealth government's influence over education policy has been in the form of broad, national policy frameworks, while additional funding for private and public schooling is tied to particular purposes or initiatives deemed to be in the national interest. The development of a national

education agenda received particular momentum during the Hawke-Keating era with the establishment the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (Carroll & Head, 2010) and the Ministerial Council of Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 1993 (Lingard et al., 1995). This has been argued to have heralded a new set of intergovernmental relations (Carroll & Head, 2010), driven in turn by a combination “economic rationalism and corporate managerialism” (Lingard et al., 1995, p. 14).

In 1984, in preparation for more efficient use of existing resourcing, a subsequent Karmel report was commissioned by the Quality of Education Review Committee (QERC) to evaluate the commonwealth’s funding of schools. The committee stated at the time (Karmel, 1984) that as many of the deficiencies in funding identified by the 1973 report had been overcome, it would be appropriate for the Commonwealth to now consider the outcomes of funding. Accordingly the report served to reconstruct the funding of Australian schools from an input to an output model, where outcomes were defined in terms of student competencies and where the emphasis would be “placed on the results of learning, which should be purposeful and have demonstrable effects” (Karmel, 1984, p. 70). The shifting policy rationale behind the Karmel reports of 1973 and 1984 has been argued to indicate the establishment of corporate federalism and its particular attention to the efficient use of resources to deliver results (Lingard, 1993), where “specified outputs related to principal policy areas of government concern” (Bartlett, 1993, p. 287).

More recently, it has been proposed that Australia’s particular variant of federalism, as it applies to the funding of government and non-government funding of schools, has set the conditions for “rigidities that are influencing the patterns of access to, participation in and outcomes of schooling in Australia” (Keating, 2011, p. 7). In addition, the models of federalism to service national agendas have been the source of ongoing debate within political (Howard, 2005, April; Rudd, 2005, July) and academic arenas, whilst community associations have voiced their concerns with commonwealth-state relations (Business Council of Australia, 2006; Connors, 2007). Accordingly, federalism has been alternatively located at centre of the of the policy formation problematic (Lingard et al., 1995) while also being positioned as the site at which education reform could be realised (Connors, 2007; Keating, 2009).

Upon taking power in 2007, Rudd strengthened the status of COAG as a strategy directed at forging new, cooperative, commonwealth- state relations (Rudd, 2005, July). Rudd’s objective was to establish “COAG as a key institution of national government” (Anderson & Parkin, 2010, p. 100). However, the education reforms planned by the Labor government faced challenges by the states and territories and so placed Rudd’s model of federalism to the test. As argued by Anderson and Parkin the education reform initiatives “marked the first time that the Prime Minister – facing a situation in which agreement was likely to be difficult – embellished the rhetoric of cooperation with a threat of fiscal coercion” (2010, p. 106). In this respect, the initiatives and programs that form the education revolution has been the site in which cooperative federalism has been enacted. They go on to propose that it “could turn out to be the most penetrating intervention yet by the Commonwealth into a policy

domain otherwise unambiguously within the jurisdiction of the states” (Anderson & Parkin, 2010, p. 107).

Funding education

Until 2009, commonwealth government funding was provided four yearly and came in the form of specific purpose grants (SPPs) for general recurrent grants (GRGs) on a per student basis (Harrington, 2011). Different systems existed for government and non-government schools while grants were provided for specific initiatives. Here commonwealth funding to non-government schools was calculated on the basis of an Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC) and a Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding formula (Dowling, 2007). Funding of non-government schools was calculated on the average amount states and territories spent per student and adjusted for SES (Dowling, 2007). In light of this involved process, the funding of Australian schools has been characterised as “complex and opaque”, has “obscured realities (Connors, 2007, p. 7) is “inefficient” (Vickers, 2005, p. 274) and an example of federalism’s failure (Caldwell, 2007).

Prior to the 2007 election, education unions and organisations had expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration with education via a number of commissioned reports and inquiry submissions into the state of funding for Australian schools (Angus & Olney, 2001; Australian Education Union, 2007; Cobbold, 2007; Martin, 1999; Vinson, Esson, & Johnston, 2002). Major themes throughout these reports point to a lack of comparable data and transparency in funding, inconsistencies across states, calls for national coordination, and the establishment of means to link funding to student outcomes. In this respect, the issue of school funding was gathering some momentum. The Howard governments’ response was to set a context in which funding for education initiatives was contingent on the states complying with commonwealth requirements. Caldwell (2007) points to a number of pressures occurring during this era, namely perceptions that the states and territories struggled to implement reforms in areas such as the curriculum and continued to neglect their investment in infrastructure.

However, there has remained disquiet that fluctuations in Commonwealth funding to government and non-government schools appears to be closely connected to election promises (Campbell, 2005; Dowling, 2007). This may provide some sense of justification for greater transparency and the use of student performance data as a strategy to distance Federal school funding from the politics of parent vote catching.

Liberal-Labor policy focus

Finally, consideration should be given to the changing focus of policy directions, underpinned by shifts in understanding of the purpose and nature of education and the willingness of governments to invest and support that purpose. Importantly this brings attention to the value that is placed on the public education system, the consequences this can have for the institution itself as well as wider economic and social imperatives. Education can be considered to serve both public and private goals and the decision by parents to withdraw from public education out of self-interest, has been argued to have implications for the ways in which education is able to benefit society and the economy at large

(Labaree, 2000). The significance *of*, and difficulty *in*, achieving some degree of balance between public and private goals in education appears to be an issue faced by many education systems (Levin, 1999; Whitty & Power, 2000).

Whitty and Power (2000) argue that policy reforms that shift away from a single system of state funded education, create quasi-markets underpinned by notions of school autonomy and parental choice. In Australia, this move towards the marketisation and degrees of privatisation of education is most clearly evident in the funding policies of the Howard government (Caldwell, 2007; Marginson, 1997; McMorrow, 2008). However it has also been argued that the issue of state aid to private schools had been key concerns for successive governments since the Whitlam government's redistribution of education funding (Smart, 1986). Here Smart (1986) suggests that subsequent education policy was economically conservative even during the Hawke-Keating era. Even so, while both Labor and Coalition governments aligned education to the economy (Marginson, 1993), the Howard government's attention to private school funding was a clear shift from prior Labor policies focused on greater equity between government and non-government schools (Marginson, 1993; Smart, 1986). Marginson (1997) argued that the Howard government, in their attempt "to cultivate a middle Australia" (p. 3) focused attention on the education system and its *perceived failings* in maintaining Australian values (see national framework). In addition the coalition increased grants to private schools and set the contexts that generated a surge in new private schools by reducing the restrictions on development of new non-government schools (Kemp, May 11, 1999 ; Nelson, June 22, 2004). While this was argued to provide parents with a new level of choice, it could also explain, in part, the loss of trust in Australia's public education system (Campbell, 2005; Labaree, 2000) whereby private schooling is perceived as a means to protect children from the 'uncertainties of life in post-welfare Australia" (Campbell, 2005, p. 8).

School accountability

Accountability for the quality of education is a slippery concept with a number of dimensions (Kuchapski, 1998). It has come to serve as a tool for the transformation of schools (Gurr, 2007). Important elements of accountability include the development of the curriculum, its connection to student assessment (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Klenowski, 2011; Lingard, 1990; Smeed, 2010), and teacher quality (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005). However, these elements can serve as sites for ideological debate and as a consequence, school accountability as a concept has a strong political focus (Kuchapski, 1998).

There has been growing international recognition that evaluations of school performance have been problematic in effecting change (ANTRIEP, 2002). The research literature has documented substantive problems, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States (Hursh, 2005) of school accountability structures that have negative effects on school reform efforts. However, Australia's approach to school accountability has focused on state and territory policies with each producing their own approaches for the review of schools with varying degrees of independent or external verification and systems of reporting (Gurr, 2007). Accordingly, it has been argued that up until the election of the Rudd government, Australia had managed to avoid or escape centralised

school accountability trends based on testing and ranking as a consequence of the “peculiarities of Australian federalism” (Cuttance, Harman, Macperson, Pritchard, & Smart, 1998, p. 138). Cuttance et al. (1998) attribute this resistance to federal accountability and performance measures to the unwanted scrutiny on the part of education bureaucrats and pressure from teachers unions. In this respect, the author’s position the “Australian blend of fiscal federalism and state education traditions of centralised administration” (1998, p. 158) in the 1990’s as suppressing discussion on, and movement towards, stronger accountability measures in schools.

However by 2004, the Howard government announced that funding for the following four years would be contingent on states and territories agreeing to: schools reporting student’s literacy and numeracy performance against national benchmarks; the public reporting of school information; a move towards greater national consistency with regards to common testing standards; and a commitment to reach performance targets in literacy and numeracy, information technology, science, civics and vocational education training (Nelson, 2004). At the time, policy announcements were targeted at parents and their concerns for the quality of education in uncertain times. Accordingly, in the run up to the 2007 federal election, unions and parent association had become increasingly concerned about the strategies being put in place to support high-stakes testing and school ranking (ACOSS, 1996; Bundy, 2004, February 9; Harris, 2007; 2004, April 23).

National curriculum

Given constitutional responsibility for schooling, the states and territories have maintained their own curriculums that reflect their unique history, geography, demography and cultures (Yates, 2011)⁴. This has been argued to constrain possible approaches to developing a national curriculum. Here Reid (2005) proposed “that national curriculum collaboration is largely a political process, involving the engineering of consent by the States/Territories through the carrot and stick of Commonwealth funding, or through the identification of areas of curriculum commonality” (p. 10). Accordingly, despite ongoing calls for a common curriculum and the implementation of a number of enabling initiatives, progress towards a national curriculum has historically been slow.

By the late 1980s the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, released a statement that has been recognised as the point from which the federal government confronted the states and territories on the economic imperatives of a national curriculum (Harris-Hart, 2010; Reid, 2005). Frustrated at the lack of progress, Dawkins intended to pressure the states and territories into the development of a curriculum complemented by “a common approach to assessment” (Dawkins, 1988, p. 5). Following from the QERC, the development of a national curriculum was to have “all the attributes of being agreed, compatible, streamlined and accountable” (Bartlett, 1993, p. 287). The Australian Education Council met the subsequent year where state, territories and the federal government agreed upon common national goals resulting in The Hobart Declaration (MCEETYA,

⁴ While it is beyond the scope of this summary to map out the curriculum policy across all states and territories, detailed accounts and chronologies are available from the Curriculum Policies Project at the University of Melbourne and accessible on <http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/states.html>

1989). This provided an initial framework for intergovernmental relations in education targeted at the social and economic needs of the country (see Bartlett, 1993).

However, the development of a national curriculum at this time was hampered by the states and territories attempts to maintain control over their own curriculum (Harris-Hart, 2010; Reid, 2005; Yates, 2011). As a result the government returned to its prior, indirect approach to influencing curriculum policy reform through funded projects as inducements to change (Harris-Hart, 2010; Reid, 2005). In 2003, once again frustrated by a lack of progress, the Minister for Education, Science and Training Brendan Nelson (June 26, 2003) raised the issue of a national curriculum when he stated that:

The Commonwealth Government this year will invest \$6.9 billion in school education and I think it is our responsibility to see that we start to use the leverage of that money to help work with the states to develop national consistency in education. (¶ 3)

Accordingly, the Coalition government indicated that the Commonwealth would once again be taking leadership in delivering a national curriculum (Harris-Hart, 2010).

Knowledge economy and an international policy agenda

As discussed earlier, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) focus on education policy and its alignment to economic growth has come to serve as a significant source for international benchmarking of student performance. While Australia has taken part in international surveys (PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS) of students since 1994, it has also been argued that the OECD has played a noticeable role in Australia's education policy-making since the late 1980s (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Taylor & Henry, 2007).

The implications of this have been an increased endorsement (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009) of a particular model of governance for education (see OECD, 2004a), the cementing of the knowledge economy as a policy driver (see OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006) and the use of comparative international testing as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of education systems (see OECD, 2010). Accordingly Australia, in line with the international trend (Grek, 2009), treats its performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) as a measure of schooling's health (Masters, 2005, 2007) and as evidence for new policy and professional foci (Masters, 2005; Rowe, 2006). The availability of, and currency given to, international comparative data on education policy has emerged as a key driver of domestic policy decision making on a global scale (see Grek et al., 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Wiseman & Baker, 2005). Accordingly, Australia functions within a global context where world-wide norms for schooling are established by institutions such as the OECD (2011) and the World Bank (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2011).

Wiseman et al. (2010) argue that the availability of international data-sets, such as those provided from Australian students' performances in the PISA, TIMSS and Progress in International Reading

Literacy Study (PIRLS) establishes the conditions for global sharing and transference of educational policies. Of particular interest is the orientation of international education policy that is directed at systemic concerns rather than lower level problems of instruction and learning at the coal face (Wiseman & Baker, 2005). These comparative data-sets provide a context in which governments can apportion blame to the system of education, in light of poor or reduced international performance. Wiseman and Baker argue that this blame game “makes international educational policy a powerful tool in the implementation of educational change. It is powerful because it is used as a way to target schooling through accountability programs and incentives that rely on empirical performance indicators” (2005, p. 11).

In the OECD’s report on Australia’s efforts in achieving national reporting via My School, it was commented that:

The federal distribution of responsibility for schooling, and the Australian Government’s role in this, historically, has imposed significant limitations on the supply by government of genuinely national data about Australian schools to ministers and to the community. (Zanderigo et al., 2012, p. 3)

In this respect, the absence of national, comparative data is viewed as a constraint on Australian education reform and policy design as it relates to the governance of schools. The report goes on to comment that:

A number of key policy reforms can now be informed by this new data, including...efforts to implement in schools the kind of governance arrangements and teaching practices that international analysis like that from PISA shows makes a difference including school autonomy and school evaluation practices. (Zanderigo et al., 2012, p. 40)

National data, made possible by NAPLAN and made accessible by My School, allows for a subsequent policy focus on international comparative organisational performance. Accordingly, the context for potential international *policy borrowing* (Lingard, 2010) is set.

Teacher professionalism

With increased international comparison of Australian student performances, there has been escalating unease as to the influence of teacher quality and training (Dinham, Ingvarsen, & Kleinhenz, 2008; Gale, 2006; Rowe, 2006). Evidence provided by PISA and TIMSS results were argued to demonstrate systemic problems in the effectiveness of the teaching profession (OECD, 2004b). By the late 1990s and with the new millennium, teacher accountability for student outcomes was evident in increased attention to performance evaluation and the development of state based professional standards (Kleinhenz & Ingvarsen, 2004).

The consequence has been to throw close scrutiny on the teaching profession and its possible role in the perceived decline of the public education system. Gonczi (2008) argues that over a hundred reports were undertaken in the area of teacher education in a twenty year period, each providing recommendations for reform. In line with OECD concerns for the quantity and quality of the

teaching workforce, organisations such as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP) have produced reports investigating professional standards and the challenges in maintaining a workforce (DEEWR, 2007; Goodrum, Hackling, & Rennie, 2000; MCEETYA, 2004; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). Accordingly, teaching as a profession has been perceived to be problematic and complex and resistant to accountability for student outcomes. Towards the end of the Howard government, the AGQTP sponsored an econometric study of the decline of teacher quality (Leigh & Ryan, 2006) the results of which questioned arguments that teacher aptitude, as an indicator of teacher quality, could not be evaluated against student outcomes. This led the Minister for Education, Julie Bishop to comment that “the results made a mockery of claims by the Australian Education Union and Labor that a teacher's performance could not be measured” (Ferrari, 2007).

Part 2 – Justification and Rationale: Quality education: The case for an education revolution in our schools

This section provides a brief description of the rationale behind the implementation of NAPLAN and the strategy employed to embed it within a wider performance regime.

In 2007, Kevin Rudd as leader of the opposition, and Stephen Smith as Shadow Minister for Education and Training announced Labor’s policy focus for the upcoming general election. Here it was argued that education was key to the future of growth of Australia’s economy and under a Labor government the nation would become “the most educated country, the most skilled economy and the best trained workforce in the world” (Rudd & Smith, 2007, p. 27).

Following Labor’s election, Rudd and Gillard set out three priorities for reform:

1. Raising the quality of teaching in our schools.
 2. Ensuring all students benefit from schooling through strategies based on high expectations of attainment, engagement and transitions for every student, especially in disadvantaged school communities.
 3. Improving transparency and accountability of schools and school systems at all levels.
- (2008, p. 19)

COAG and its Reform Council would sit at the nexus of the reform efforts, assisted by MCEETYA (now Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA)) and the establishment of a new statutory body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). By 2010, this also included the newly formed Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning (AITSL) given responsibility for developing a national set of professional standards as well as national accreditation based on those standards. The rationale behind the establishment of AITSL being that national standards would enhance teacher quality which in turn would lead to improved educational outcomes.

The Council of Australian Governments

The Council of Australian Governments is an intergovernmental forum for policy formation. Chaired by the Prime Minister, the council is comprised of State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association. Although the council usually meets annually or biannually, following the 2007 election sessions were held in quick succession reflective of Prime Minister Rudd's attempts to garner national consensus on his education reforms.

December 2007

COAG's first meeting following the change of government "recognised that there was a unique opportunity for Commonwealth-State cooperation, to end the blame game and buck passing, and to take major steps forward for the Australian community" (COAG, 2007, p. 1). Working groups, headed by Commonwealth Ministers assisted by senior public servants from the states and territories, were established and given the responsibility for developing national frameworks for reform. Significantly, a decision was made to change the nature of Commonwealth and State funding relationships "to focus more on outputs and outcomes, underpinned by a commitment from the Commonwealth Government to provide incentive payments to drive reforms" (COAG, 2007, p. 1).

March 2008

At the following meeting in March, it was announced that the structure of the new funding relationships would mean a rationalisation of specific purpose payments, a substantial component of funding for government and non-government schools. Narrower, national partnership agreements to support the delivery of services targeted at specific problems of joint government responsibility. For each of the new arrangements "a new performance and assessment framework [would] be developed to support public reporting against performance measures and milestones" (COAG, 2008a, p. 3). As well and in relation to education, a priority would be development of a national partnership agreement focused on the needs of low-socioeconomic schools.

October 2008

In October, COAG (2008c) had an agreement to establish the National Curriculum Board to bring together national curriculum, assessment, data management, analysis and reporting functions under one national statutory authority⁵.

November 2008

By the end of the year, the new financial funding arrangements had been outlined in greater detail. The new restructured funding relationship implemented in 2009 (see COAG, 2009a) provides funding for government and non-government schools under the National Schools Specific Purpose Payments (National Schools SPPs) as well as additional funds made available through National Partnerships (Harrington, 2011). With respect to government schools, the funding relationship was detailed by the National Education agreement (COAG, 2008b, 2009b) setting objectives, outcomes, performance indicators, benchmarks, reporting as well as the roles and responsibilities of all levels of

⁵ This authority eventually became the Australian Curriculum Reporting Agency.

government. Funding for non-government schools is provided through the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2008c, 2008d) which makes available grants not only for capital and recurrent expenditures, but also for targeted programs such as literacy and numeracy.

Government and non-government schools could also access additional funding from National Partnerships. In education, these are Building the Education Revolution, Digital Education Revolution, Trade Training Centres in Schools Program and Youth Attainments and Transitions and finally Smarter Schools (DEEWR, 2009). This latter program is divided into three targets: quality teaching, low socio-economic status school communities and literacy and numeracy.

The national partnership on quality teaching is targeted at “improved school leadership by principals and new approaches to teacher recruitments, retention and reward” (COAG, 2008b, p. 23). At the November COAG meeting, it was agreed that this partnership would aide reforms on:

- new professional standards to underpin national reforms;
- recognition and reward for quality teaching;
- a framework to guide professional learning for teachers and school leaders;
- national accreditation of pre-service teacher education courses;
- national consistency in teacher registration;
- national consistency in accreditation/certification of Accomplished and Leading Teachers;
- improved mobility of the Australian teaching workforce;
- joint engagement with higher education to provide improved pre-service teacher education; new pathways into teaching; and, data collection to inform continuing reform action and workforce planning; and
- improved performance management in schools. (COAG, 2008b, p. 23)

The national partnership on low socio-economic status school communities is directed at providing additional funding support to improve educational outcomes (DEEWR, 2009). At the time, COAG indicated that this *might* include:

- incentives to attract high-performing principals and teachers;
- adoption of best-practice performance management and staffing arrangements that articulate a clear role for principals;
- school operational arrangements which encourage innovation and flexibility;
- provision of innovative and tailored learning opportunities;
- strengthened school accountability; and
- external partnerships with parents, other schools, businesses and communities and provision of access to extended services (including through brokering arrangements). (COAG, 2008b, pp. 21-22)

The national partnership on literacy and numeracy focuses on:

- achieving sustainable improvements in literacy and numeracy, as a key indicator of the ability to go on and complete Year 12 for all students;
- improving literacy and numeracy for primary school students, especially Indigenous students; and
- developing a national understanding of what works and a shared accountability for the achievement of Australian students. (COAG, 2008b, p. 22)

More specifically federal funding would now be directed at facilitating reform efforts, rewarding “measurable and ambitious improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes” (COAG, 2008b, p. 22) as well as nationally focused research and data collection. At this COAG meeting the states agreed to match the commonwealth’s funding of facilitation initiatives.

In addition COAG agreed that greater transparency and accountability was necessary to ensure the delivery of a higher quality of education. Agreement was reached on new performance framework to include reporting on individual schools that would allow for national comparisons. Accordingly a new reporting authority (ACARA) was endorsed.

MCEETYA (now MCEECDYA)

The Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) is comprised of Australian State, Territory and Federal and New Zealand ministers of education to serve as a forum for national policy development. While COAG set the foundations for policy reform, MCEECDYA was given responsibility for identifying how they were to be achieved (Zanderigo et al., 2012).

In April 2008 a joint meeting of MCEETYA and the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE) was heralded as a new collaborative era for Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers (MCEETYA, 2008a). A key outcome of this meeting was an agreement to develop a new declaration on the national goals of schooling to cement the significance of national collaboration for quality schooling.

The Melbourne declaration (MCEETYA, 2008b) set out the intention of states, territories and Commonwealth governments to establish a national curriculum and assessment program. In addition, the declaration expected to strengthen accountability and transparency as an improvement or decision making tool for schools, parents, communities and governments.

In aligning the Melbourne Declaration and the work of COAG’s national agreements for education, MCEETYA (2009) set out a four year plan as a framework for federalist activities. This included the establishment of ACARA as a statutory authority of MCEETYA in order to deliver curriculum and assessment reforms. Accordingly, MCEETYA would be given responsibility for the “extent and nature of work” (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 15) being undertaken on curriculum and assessment as well as

the realisation of the national curriculum. In addition MCEETYA would “lead work” (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 19) on school reporting and performance.

ACARA- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Agency- 2008

ACARA is an independent statutory authority, established under the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2008a). The agency superseded the interim National Curriculum Board (a Labor election promise in 2007) and the National Schools Assessment and Data Centre (NSADC), established in 2008. The NSADC had been proposed as an independent source for advice on performance measurement as well as centralising the collection of school data (Zanderigo et al., 2012) to deliver greater transparency and accountability (Harrington, 2008).

Consequently, the emergent agency is responsible for the development and management of the national curriculum, NAPLAN and for the collection and reporting of data on Australian schools. As such it holds responsibility for the My School website launched in 2010 (see The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b). The organisation has been established as separate and independent body from the Federal government to reassure states, territories and non-governments schools as providers of data sets on school performance. It is jointly funded by Commonwealth, state and territory governments and is overseen by MCEETYA. In relation to reporting, information on school performance is made publicly available through the *My School* website, a *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, a *NAPLAN Summary Report* and a *NAPLAN National Report*. In addition, ACARA produces the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* defining national key performance measures, their data sources and reporting cycles (ACARA, 2012).

The foundations of the ACARA are embedded in long running debates in Australia’s schooling policy concerned with the development of a national curriculum, student assessment, the reporting of student and school performance and conditional funding (Harrington, 2008).⁶ While the agency is representative of a culmination of policy drivers over several decades, it is distinguished by its role in establishing new arrangements for individual and comparative reporting of school performances. It sits at an important nexus between Federal efforts to establish national frameworks in curriculum and assessment and the States who have responsibility for their implementation.

AITSL- Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning – 2009

Julia Gillard (2009), then Minister for Education, set out AITSL’s responsibility in a letter of expectation. The pursuit of improved teacher quality was to be achieved through the development of a national set of professional standards for teaching and school leadership and an agreed upon system of national accreditation. National standards for teachers and principals were subsequently delivered by AITSL in 2011.

During the 2010 re-election campaign, the Gillard government proposed the implementation of a pay-for-performance initiative to reward high performing teachers (ALP, 2010). AITSL was asked to

⁶ Each of these points of focus has a considerable policy history, beyond the scope of this paper.

NAPLAN

develop a performance management system on which to base an annual bonus payment for the top 10% of high performing teachers.⁷ High performing teachers were expected to be identified through a compulsory annual appraisal that would, *in part*, draw on an “analysis of student performance data (including NAPLAN and school based information that can show the value added by particular teachers)” (ALP, 2010, p. 3). Ingvarsen (2011) has argued that this pay-for-performance initiative will place AITSL in a contentious position by virtue of the organisation’s relationship with the profession.

Is its main role to engage the profession in establishing a voluntary profession-wide system of portable certification, or is it to provide school managers with procedures for their performance management and annual bonus pay schemes? (p. 40)

Accordingly, the role of AITSL and its relationship to the teaching profession appears to be in a state of flux.

My School - 2010

Established in 2010, the My School website has been regularly updated to provide additional information on school profiles, finances and vocational courses. In addition the website⁸ provides the public with fact sheets and guidance on how to interpret and utilise the data. Accordingly, it is positioned as an important source of information for schools, teachers and parents to assist in school reforms and capacity building. Significantly it has been argued that My School presupposes market like mechanisms will drive behavioural change to enhance school performance for the public good (Redden & Low, 2012; Vandenberg, 2012).

In 2012, Prime Minister Gillard announced a new National Plan for School Improvement to be phased in over six years from 2014 and directed at advancing Australia’s OECD world ranking in reading and mathematics. During her speech she commented that:

I fought a ferocious battle as Education Minister to create My School and to get each of us, all of us, more information that we have ever had before on the education of our children. On my first day in Government, no one in this nation could have given you the list of our best performing schools or our worst performing schools. I was told that couldn’t be fixed. I was faced with political resistance on all sides. But you can get more information than our nation has ever had before on Australian schools on your smart phone.

I was determined to win the My School battle because I always believed that the more we knew about our children’s education, the more we would be driven to improve it. (Gillard, 2012, September 3rd).

Thus a national data set, made possible by NAPLAN has been subsequently made visible via the My School website. Significantly, My School provides an opportunity to compare schools across state,

⁷ AITSL delivered the Australian Performance and Development Framework in 2012

⁸ http://www.acara.edu.au/myschool/more_information.html

territory, and public/private lines to create a national system of schooling directed at a global presence. This is further evident in the conclusions of the recent OECD report on My School:

A number of key policy reforms can now be informed by this new data, including a major review of Australian Government funding that is underway and efforts to implement in schools the kinds of governance arrangements and teaching practices that international analysis like that from PISA shows makes a difference including school autonomy and school evaluation practices. (Zanderigo et al., 2012, p. 40)

Reflection

Since the Whitlam period (1972-1975), there has been a strong and systematised presence of the federal government in schooling policy. The Whitlam motivation was about achieving more equity through schooling in a needs-based funding approach for schools (especially non-government schools) and through a number of targeted redistributive policies, including the Disadvantaged Schools Program. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments (1983-1996) strengthened the federal presence in the context of globalization and the related move to strengthen Australia's human capital in both quality and quantity terms. There was also the first concerted move towards a national curriculum framed by the Hobart Declaration on agreed goals for all Australians schools. Here we had the development of National Statements and Profiles to frame curriculum across Australia.

The federal position in relation to schooling during the Howard years (1996-2007) saw emphasis switch to school choice with *ad hoc* changes to the funding of non-government schools, which in many ways saw a redistribution of funding towards better off students and schools. In the latter stages of the Howard era there was the beginning of a move towards a national curriculum.

When Rudd was elected in 2007, he set about establishing an Australian curriculum, formalising national testing for accountability through NAPLAN and introduced the *My School* website. Politically there is at the Federal level now bipartisan support for an Australian curriculum and for NAPLAN. NAPLAN and My School have functioned as technologies of governance, which are helping to constitute a national system of schooling in Australia, as is the Australian curriculum in a different way. Interestingly, NAPLAN data is now used in conjunction with international comparative school system performance data from studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS for accountability purposes.

Accordingly, the Rudd-Gillard government initiatives have rapidly expanded Federal levers for educational reform despite having no constitutional responsibility for schooling. Here NAPLAN serves as the instrument of change from which good and poor performances are open to rewards and punishments. As a tool, NAPLAN holds the potential to generate, circulate and deploy performance information across multiple levels of audience. The data's subsequent representation forms the basis on which political action across these levels is justified (Lemke, 2007).

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NAPLAN has a real presence and impact in Australian schooling stretching from the political through the media to state systems, schools, teachers and students in classrooms. These technologies have strengthened the national presence in schooling and are helping to constitute a more national system framed by an emergent global policy field. They have also become central to the governing of performance at system, school, principal and teacher levels.

Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning
AGQTP	Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme
AGSRC	Average Government School Recurrent Costs
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
GRGs	General recurrent grants
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council of Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MCVTE	Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy
NPM	New Public Management
NSADC	National Schools Assessment and Data Centre
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PMS	Performance measurement system
QERC	Quality of Education Review Committee
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SPPs	Specific purpose grants
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

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