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‘Language Background Other Than English’: a problem NAPLAN test category for Australian students of refugee background.

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Abstract

Since 2008 Australia has held the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (known as NAPLAN) for all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Despite the multilingual character of the Australian population, these standardized literacy and numeracy tests are built on an assumption of English as a first language competency. The capacity for monitoring the performance of students who speak languages other than English is achieved through the disaggregation of test data using a category labelled Language Background Other than English (LBOTE). A student is classified as LBOTE if they or their parents speak a language other than English at home. The category definition is so broad that the disaggregated national data suggest that LBOTE students are outperforming English speaking students, on most test domains, though the LBOTE category shows greater variance of results. Drawing on Foucault’s theory of governmentality, this paper explores the possible implications of LBOTE categorisation for English as a Second Language (ESL) students of refugee background. The paper uses a quantitative research project, carried out in Queensland, Australia, to demonstrate the potential inequities resultant from such a poorly constructed data category.

Keywords: categorization; refugees; Language Background Other Than English; governmentality; English as a Second Language; NAPLAN

Introduction

This paper intends a focus on educational inequity in Australia, framed around categories used for identifying and counting groups of students in the education reform movement in Australia. Ford (2013) has identified significant problems in the counting of ethnicities, because, aside from the category of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and within the realm of education, Australia has no categories which identify other ethnicities. Thus, in interpreting government reporting about the performance of Australian students in literacy and numeracy testing, it is impossible to disaggregate and identify factors

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which are associated with ethnicity and test performance. Ford argues that the lack of such categories perpetuates the hiddenness of institutional racism in the Australian education system (2013). This paper will pick up and extend on Ford's discussion, not through a focus specifically on Indigenous students, whose inequitable outcomes are well described in her paper, but by interrogating another related category used in Australia, known as Language Background Other than English (LBOTE), and focussing on the capacity of this category to hide educational disadvantage for Australian students of refugee background. The problem this paper is raising is related to the incapacity of the statistical category LBOTE to identify the heterogeneous performance of Australian students who are language learners, some of whom with powerful intersecting factors of disadvantage. If these students are hidden in statistical data, the policy implications and corresponding funding responses will be dire for a particularly disadvantaged group of Australian students.

Over the preceding decade, peoples of refugee background have been settled in Australia, predominantly from countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. What is unique about this population coming to Australia at this point in time is that there is a commonality defined by significant need: the result of living with war and poverty, sometimes across generations; potentially experiencing multiple migrations; often with limited or nil access to education services. These groups are mostly speakers of languages other than English. Children of refugee background enter school in Australia with complex educational and language needs and this has had significant impact on the ways in which school systems, schools and teachers have needed to respond. Because these students are speakers of other languages, they would be identified as English as a Second language learners. A student is classified as English as a Second Language (ESL) if they are in the process of acquiring English as a second (or additional) language or dialect, and are learning curriculum content through standard Australian English (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment 2012). Provision of support services for refugee students would, in the first instance, be embedded within an ESL program.

Pedagogical response to ESL learner need has been informed, traditionally, by the field of second language acquisition in which there is recognition of key differences in processes of first and second language development. For ESL professionals working with refugee background students, this knowledge has been crucial in recognising the extent of learner need, when literacy has not been developed in a first language other than English (Brown, Miller and Mitchell 2006). However, in Australia, there has been, since the mid-1990s, a hegemonic focus on mainstream English (as first language) literacy, in response to a perceived literacy crisis in Australian education (Masters and Forster 1997; Lo Bianco and Freebody 2001). The momentum in the 'English literacy first ideology' (Lo Bianco 2001) is reflected in Australian education by a movement towards the current monolingual (English) literacy standards which underpin national testing in literacy and numeracy. Following many years of state and territory testing of literacy and numeracy, the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (hereafter, NAPLAN), commenced in Australia in 2008, accompanied by the construction of a federal government website, 'MySchool', launched in 2010, for the purpose of enabling public access to information about each of the 10,000 schools across Australia. The reforms shift the management of schooling to a national level, previously controlled by state and territory governments, and more importantly, create the tools by which reform progress can be monitored and in which education "policy as numbers" (Lingard, Creagh, and Vass 2012) exploit data and statistical categories as key technologies of governmentality.

In the reforms, all ESL students, including those of refugee background, fall into the statistical category known as Language Background Other than English (LBOTE). The category defines students as LBOTE if they or their parents speak a language other than English at home (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2009). The results achieved by students captured in this category indicate that, at a national level, the category is performing *as well as* or *better than* the test norm of English speaking students (ACARA 2009, 2010, 2011a). This result denies and effectively hides any evidence of learner need within the ESL population, both for those ESL students in the early stages of

acquiring English, but particularly for those refugee background students who have experienced limited education backgrounds.

These questionable LBOTE results are challenged when the category is problematised, and this paper will use data gathered in Queensland Australia, to deconstruct the LBOTE category, and show that in fact the category is heterogeneous and contains within it a broad range of educational need, including extreme disadvantage in test performance associated with second language learning need, in combination with other factors of disadvantage. The issues which arise from the LBOTE category will be highlighted through a focus on ESL students of refugee background.

It is the intention that this paper will help to ‘unsilence’ the diversity and extent of need within the ESL learner group in Australia and challenge the problematic ways in which this group is being identified and counted. Appadurai (2001) suggests that globalisation sees a world of movement. Australia is not the only country which resettles refugees; it is not the only country with an education system which must now respond to the linguistic needs of bilingual and multilingual learners, in a climate of standardised testing and data driven education reform. These education practices need to be examined and questioned. These are features of the current political rationalisations and technologies, yet there is a policy silence when consideration is given to the implications of second language and education practices for this global and heterogeneous group, particularly when education reform sees a narrowing of curriculum to standards, which, in Australia’s case assumes a monolingual English language background. In moving forward in educational equity it will be important to ensure that the spotlight is refocussed on whether the reform rationalisation, in this case, equity of outcome (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008), is being actioned for all students, especially those who have experienced the greatest of educational disadvantage.

The paper consists of four sections. The first section outlines the Australian context, and how students of refugee background are counted in a statistical category within the now well established

education reforms. In section two I will apply a Foucauldian lens, applying a governmentality analytic to the construction of statistical counting processes, normalisation and categorisation within the education reforms. The processes which render the language learner invisible will be explored. In section three, the educational needs of students of refugee background will be presented through a review of current literature about this group of students. In section four, the performance of refugee background students on the 2010 NAPLAN test will be presented, both to highlight the heterogeneity of the LBOTE group and to show how students of refugee background are disadvantaged in the test, yet remain well hidden.

The Australian context: The NAPLAN test and the Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) category

This paper will use a Foucauldian lens to explore problems of testing related to measurement, categorisation, and the construction of normality in Australia. To understand how it has come about requires some contextualising in the field of education reform in Australia. There has been a global move towards standardised education measurements, and the comparative data they are able to produce. Tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), administrated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) compare participating countries on the calibre of their education programs, measured in terms of academic quality and equity. Australia achieves well in quality, but is found wanting in equity, with low socio-economic status associated with poor PISA outcomes (Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman and Buckley 2011). These findings, coupled with global imperatives suggesting that economic strength and the changing nature of work require a well-educated workforce have resulted in sweeping education reforms in Australia (MCEETYA 2008). The reforms have seen the introduction of an annual national testing regime in literacy and numeracy as well as the construction of a government website, ‘MySchool’ which, as a kind of Foucauldian panopticon, provides access to statistical academic and financial data about each of the 10,000 schools across Australia. These reforms have generated what Foucault might label an ‘apparatus of writing’ in which numbers, categories and ideas of normality are central (Foucault 1975).

In 2008, the NAPLAN test commenced in Australia. NAPLAN is a literacy and numeracy test occurring over two days annually; students are tested in the domains of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. The test is given to all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, with exemptions only allowed for students who have limited English, who are in their first year of residency in Australia. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is the authority which oversees the administration of NAPLAN. ACARA (2012) advises that in lieu of a national curriculum[1], the NAPLAN tests are "developed using nationally agreed Statements of Learning that reflect the core elements of the curriculum documents used in the different States and Territories".

The Statements (in English and maths) are mapped out in two-year intervals from year 3 to year 9. They are not *minimum* standards; they elaborate a range of "challenging but accessible" skill sets (Curriculum Corporation 2005, 3). For example, in English they itemize capacities: skill sets related to the capacity to read; knowledge and application of structural features of texts; engagement with information and communication technologies; and aesthetical and ethical engagement with texts (Curriculum Corporation 2005).

The Statements of Learning do not include ESL learners in this framework, nor provide information about learning pathway when English is a second or additional language. The statements present English knowledge as a linear process of first language English development only. There is also an assumption, stated in the document that the next year level statements subsume those of the year or years which precede them (Curriculum Corporation 2005, 4). In other words, a student who is in year 9 will be assumed to have experienced the knowledge contained in those statements of learning described for year 3, year 5 and year 7. In short, there is an expectation of English as mother tongue and of continuity of schooling in the Australian context. No recognition or acknowledgement is given for those students who sit outside or do not satisfy these criteria.

The Statements of Learning which underpin the NAPLAN test do not describe 'normality' for all learners and especially not for ESL learners. There are a number of factors which will impact on the performance of ESL learners in standards-based literacy assessment such as NAPLAN. ESL students may not have an understanding of social and cultural assumptions which may underpin test questions. Errors in reading and writing, which are evidence of second language development, will not be measured as such and will be penalized. Students may in fact have highly developed literacy skills in first language but these will not be assessed, reported on or rewarded in English literacy testing (Davison and McKay 2002; Australian Council for TESOL Associations, Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, and Australian Linguistic Society 2010; Lo Bianco 1998). ESL Students with refugee backgrounds who have experienced minimal prior schooling lack first literacy skills on which to base second literacy development; they are unfamiliar with school routine and school culture and are often traumatised by the formal and regimented nature of NAPLAN testing (Multicultural Development Association n.d.; Brown et al. 2006). Wigglesworth, Simpson and Loakes (2011) identify significant problems for Australian Indigenous children who are speakers of languages other than English being underrepresented or not represented in the population sample on which the test has been normed. When this occurs, the implication of test results can be devastating for children, whose performance which is actually influenced by language factors, is interpreted as being cognitively and linguistically deficit (Wigglesworth, Simpson, and Loakes 2011).

The NAPLAN test results are measured on a common scale with a mean score of 500. Numerical scores for large scale testing are often arbitrary and their meaning may not be intuitively clear (Koretz 2008). Koretz (2008) suggests that numbers become associated with notions of performance quality over time, in an informal process of normalization. For each domain of the test, numerical performance is divided into 10 achievement bands[2]. A specific band is defined as the national minimum standard for each year level group. For year 9, a student is performing at the national minimum standard if their numerical score places them in band 6. ACARA (2011b) advise that students below the national

minimum standard require considerable support to achieve success, and students at the national minimum standard may also require targeted interventions as well.

Disaggregated NAPLAN test results provide a framework for comparative reporting across all states and territories on the basis of a number of different categories. In Australia, students are disaggregated on the basis of gender, geo-location, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identification, socio-economic status measured on the basis of parent education and occupation, and Language Background Other than English.

The focus of this paper is on the category used to identify students who have a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). Students are classified as LBOTE if they *or* their parents speak a language other than English at home (ACARA 2009). As the only category which relates to language background, it is logical to assume that this category has been included in recognition that language proficiency could potentially impact on test performance. However, the LBOTE definition fails to include the important construct of identification of English as a second language *proficiency level*. Consequently, the group captured within the LBOTE category is diverse in terms of language capacity and may include native speakers of English whose parents are bilingual, whilst also including all English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, across a continua of English language proficiency. Further, within this group will be ESL students with hugely varied prior educational experiences. Because the category represents such a diverse population, the process of averaging results means that variation resultant from language proficiency, or in combination with other factors of disadvantage is hidden in an average performance in which the category LBOTE is performing as well as or better than the non-LBOTE group.

By way of illustration, Table 1 below presents a comparison of LBOTE and non-LBOTE national means and standard deviations for year 9 students who participated in the test in 2010 (sourced from ACARA 2010). Whilst LBOTE students are slightly behind in reading, they are stronger in writing and grammar and punctuation and much stronger than non-LBOTE in spelling and numeracy. In every

domain of the test, standard deviation[3] is greater for LBOTE students. Students with language learning needs are well hidden in the NAPLAN data showing mean scores, but their presence is evident in the range of performance revealed by the standard deviations. This pattern is similar for each year level, for each year of the NAPLAN test since 2008.

Table 1. National NAPLAN mean scores and standard deviations of LBOTE and non-LBOTE Year 9 students, 2010 (ACARA 2010).

NAPLAN 2010	LBOTE Mean	LBOTE S.D.	Non-LBOTE Mean	Non-LBOTE S.D.
Reading	568.3	72.4	575.6	64.5
Writing	570.2	87.3	567.9	79.9
Spelling	595.3	82.6	575.2	71.1
Grammar and Punctuation	582.2	79.8	578.8	67.8
Numeracy	598.5	84.9	582.5	66.1

Table 1 shows a national average; in fact there is greater variation in LBOTE performance across different state and territory jurisdictions. Currently there is no further disaggregation of data to provide guidance on the provision of appropriate support for students within the very broad LBOTE category.

A worrying outcome of the LBOTE data is related to potential funding issues for ESL programs in Australian schools, related to changed funding arrangements implemented as part of the reform agenda. Federal government funding arrangements with states and territories have seen the implementation of ‘national partnership agreements’ in which substantial lump-sum funding packages are provided to states and territories by the federal government, with the proviso that educational outcomes (NAPLAN results for example) are improved. The national partnership agreements have seen the broad-banding[4] of a number of specific federally targeted education programs, with the assumption that the funds will be allocated to areas of need, as identified by the national testing agenda. Of significance to this study is the broadbanding of the New Arrivals (ESL) funding for newly-arrived immigrant and refugee English

language programs. In government school systems, where most ESL students-especially students of refugee background- are placed, this funding is no longer specifically allocated to these programs, but is included in lump sum payments to states and territories. But what kind of surveillance ensures that the group for whom the funding may be needed is clearly in sight? In NAPLAN terminology, that surveillance tool is the LBOTE category. The LBOTE category data show that LBOTE are performing as well as or better than English speaking students. With no capacity to identity second language learners and their needs in NAPLAN data, and no requirement to be accountable in current partnership agreements for second language development and programs, there is a real danger that the provision of ESL services is undermined and becomes under-resourced. This problem was flagged by Lo Bianco (2002), who suggested that in a climate of literacy testing it would be crucial for educators to disaggregate data around ESL learners, lest students who may be experiencing significant disadvantage become hidden in the statistics of more successful students. He suggested that it would be essential to measure separately socio-economic status and ethnicity so that data did not hide the variability within the ESL population (Lo Bianco 2002).

In terms of maintenance of funding models, and in relation to intervention based on poor test performance, the LBOTE category provides misleading data at the national level. The limitations of the category description mean that policy makers have erroneous data on which to base funding and intervention decisions. Groups such as those ESL students who are in the process of acquiring English, or, are learning English and have limited education backgrounds may well be overlooked in allocation of funding, or be targeted with mainstream literacy programs, which fail to accommodate language learning needs. Addressing this problem requires a rethink of what data are collected and reported on.

In arguing this, I am applying a specific knowledge embedded in applied linguistics, and the pedagogical implications of test data. However, in a separate but related case, concerning the diminished provision of bilingual education in Australia, Lo Bianco (2008) suggests that the analysis of problems associated with education policy and language issues (in my case, a faulty statistical category) does not

lie with applied linguistics, nor with pedagogy, but with power, interests and conflict. I will explore this issue of power through a Foucauldian analysis of governmentality in the next section of this paper.

LBOTE, governmentality and categorisation in the Australian context

Michel Foucault is one of the most significant theorists of the twentieth century. He argued that knowledge is shaped by power and believed that it was necessary to explore the relationship between knowledge and the forces that create and constrain it. Understanding Foucault's theories about power requires a shift in thinking about how power functions in society. In Western traditions, power is often viewed as an instrument of domination, and those who have more power will prevail over those who have less (Hindess 1996). However, Foucault saw the functioning of power achieved through a transformed notion of government. Foucault described government likened to the role of self-government (where the focus is morality), government of family (where the focus is economy) and the science of the state (where government is about politics) and all three function within the notion of governmentality. The focus of governmentality is the population, and the problems of the population can only be determined through statistical counting. Statistics becomes a process of surveillance.

> "...to govern a state will mean, therefore, to apply economy, to set up an economy at the level of the entire state, which means exercising towards its inhabitants, and the wealth and behaviour of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and goods." (Foucault 1978, 234)

Statistics is a way of monitoring the population, of identifying its regularities and its cycles; in short, of capturing data that could be instrumental in enabling the operation of government whose purpose is the welfare of the population and improvement of its condition.

The supremacy of, and the technological capacity to manage large amounts of data has seen an "avalanche of numbers" (Hacking 1990) in the education sphere in Australia. The numbers themselves are generated through school examinations, are publicly displayed, and are integral to education reforms

targetting those students (or categories of students) who deviate from the normal- a normal which is defined in Australia on the assumption of native English speaker competency, and up to nine years of education. Normalisation imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, and to render the differences useful by comparing them to one another. (Foucault 1975, 189)

In the NAPLAN test, one of the ways in which normalization is achieved is the defining of a national minimum standard. ACARA describes the national minimum standard as a level at which students may require assistance to reach their potential. In using the national minimum standard as a point of reference, there is confusion about the normalcy of this level: is it normal to be at the national minimum standard or is it the limit of acceptability, so abnormal? Hacking (1990) suggests that to be normal, is to describe things as they are, or to describe things as they *ought* to be. He suggests that the ambiguity in the idea of normal is a source of great power because it offers a figure of perfection, an inspiration for the conduct of conduct. Foucault saw the discipline of the individual as a type of technology of governmentality, achieved through surveillance and aimed at controlling and improving individual performance (Foucault 1975).

The LBOTE category plays a contradictory role here. It fails to identify who is normal and who is abnormal: the category shows little difference between LBOTE and non-LBOTE groups. It works to hide any "abnormality" which could relate to language capacity. If there is no abnormality, no problem identified in performance, no intervention is required. Because the LBOTE definition only identifies a language background it cannot challenge the normalisation of scores which are built on English-only competency. There is no need to address language difference if it isn't identified, and if the language learner is rendered invisible. The norm of this high achieving category presents no administrative or policy challenge and is becoming, quietly, gently, and pervasively, the norm for *all* students for whom English is a second language.

Categorization implies potential allocation or denial of resources, and the legitimization of bureaucratic power in deciding how resources are allocated (Jenkins 2000). In the situation with the categorisation of students in NAPLAN, and the connection of significant economic reward for improvements in test results, how categories are defined and constructed can potentially impact on particular groups of students, particularly if they become invisible in the process. This carries important ramifications for funding choices around specific intervention, pedagogy, support services, and staffing of schools. Porter (1995) notes that the creation of categories is reliant on contemporary circumstances and is thus potentially weak, but once established, they are "impressively resilient" (Porter 1995, 42). Despite a number of challenges to the definition of the LBOTE category since 2008 (see, for example, Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA), and Australian Linguistic Society 2010), it remains unchanged.

By making the LBOTE category so broad in its scope, it results in what Rose (1999, 204) argues is a simplification of the complexities of measuring characteristics of people and that the processes of simplification are neither "ideologically nor theoretically innocent" and "embody the expectations and beliefs of the responsible technicians and officials". Jenkins (2000) and Rose (1999) both suggest a dual impact of statistical categorisation reflecting the concerns and interests of the categoriser and disempowering those who are categorised.

In 2011, 46% of Australia's population (of approximately 21,500,000) was either born overseas, or had one parent born overseas and approximately 4 million people in the population spoke a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2012). ABS data of these kinds are frequently thematised in academic journal articles, media and government reports, signalling the centrality of the Australian multicultural character and using it as a point of reference. However, the most recent ABS report on cultural diversity also reports language loss in the migrant population. 53% of first generation Australians (living in Australia, but born overseas) speak a language other than English at home, whilst within the population of second generation Australians (overseas born parent/s) this had

reduced to 20% (ABS 2012). For those who are third-plus generation Australians (grandparents/ancestors born overseas), only 1.6% speak a language other than English (ABS 2012). The report states that the data describe a 'richly diverse society', as measured by the varieties of languages, religions, ancestries and birthplaces. However, if the data were viewed as measuring processes over time, the facts contradict this diversity, rather showing that living in Australia results in language loss.

How does this relate to governmentality? There is a dual purpose in recognising diversity: first, there is a counting of a distinct feature of the Australian population, which identifies difference. The other is more complex because it suggests that power and conduct of conduct in Australia is concerned with homogenising this diversity, and the reasons for this may come from intersecting factors: Australia's historical and ongoing racism (see Hage 2000 for example) and more broadly, nation state concerns with the movements of minority groups, in the face of globalisation (Appadurai 2006).

Appadurai (2001) suggests that globalisation means that we are now living in a world of movement: of people, goods, technologies, images and messages and that the movement is one of disjuncture, producing localised problems, whose contexts lie beyond the local, beyond the nation state. This movement sees a growth in hybrid identities that are more difficult for state statistics and policy makers to capture.

> .. . the idea of a sovereign and stable territory, the idea of a containable and countable population, the idea of a reliable census, and the idea of stable and transparent categories- have come unglued in the era of globalisation... the certainty that distinctive and singular peoples grow out of and control well-defined national territories has been decisively unsettled by the global fluidity of wealth, arms, peoples, and images... (Appadurai 2006, 6-7).

In the Australian context, the process of globalisation works against discrete and bounded statistical categories. Globalisation breaks down these boundaries, and mingles groups of students who

have widely varying social, cultural, economic and educational backgrounds. ESL learners arrive into the school system at any year level; their English language knowledge and their prior educational opportunities significantly varied. For NAPLAN, this complexity is simplified into a single statistical category.

In the next section of this paper I will present a review of literature pertaining specifically to one subgroup of the LBOTE category: students of refugee background. My purpose in doing this is to provide some context for the data to follow and to juxtapose the simplicity of the statistical category with the complexity of the student group it is representing. I will then disaggregate the results of the NAPLAN test in 2010, for a sample of LBOTE eligible students. It is my intention to identify the range of performance and the association between high levels of disadvantage within the LBOTE group and NAPLAN attainment, to highlight the necessity of educators and policy makers in Australia to rethink the use of this broad and misleading category.

A category for consideration: students of refugee background

In 2009-2010, 13,770 refugees arrived in Australia through the humanitarian program for the settlement of refugees in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009). This figure varies little from the preceding five years (Refugee Council of Australia n.d.). Refugees come to Australia from many different areas of the world including South and West Asia, North Africa and the Arab states, and from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Both globally and within Australia there has been an increase in academic research pertaining to refugee movement and its impact on the nation state. Recurring themes explore the phenomena of the global movements of displaced peoples, of the perceived challenges these movements raise for the nation-state, the highly disadvantaged status of refugee populations. The popular media in Australia focus on the political ramifications of refugee issues, which are often positioned negatively by politicians and media alike.

Relevant to this paper is research pertaining to the education of refugee students. Within this broad topic, research describes the situation of provision of education services within refugee camps, prior to settlement in new countries (Waters and LeBlanc 2005; Oh and van der Stouwe 2008). Waters and LeBlanc (2005) identify a problematic divide between the embeddedness of education in the state, and its purpose in the construction of citizenship, contrasted against the statelessness of refugees. They describe the provision of education service in refugee camps as being characterised by politically determined curricula which may not represent the source countries of the refugees, complexity regarding language/s of instruction, and an education program often aimed only at repatriation (Waters and LeBlanc 2005). Oh and van der Stouwe (2008) identify the immense difficulties in providing education services in refugee camps with extremely limited resources and multilingual and multicultural refugee populations. For example, language complexity is problematic because of the limited availability of teachers who represent different language groups, English-only text book resources are mismatched with the language/s of instruction, and for some language groups, schooling is only accessible in a language other than mother tongue. These kinds of research present an educational 'starting point' for those refugees who settle in Australia, which is characterised by limited prior schooling, limited curriculum exposure and language complexity in which any exposure to literacy may have been in a language different to both mother tongue and to English. Despite their specific literacy and language needs, once in Australia, refugee students are generally subsumed in the broader category of 'ESL students' (Taylor and Sidhu 2012). Frequent reference is made to the lack of adequate resourcing for refugee education, given the specific and unique education and settlement needs of this group of students (Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Matthews 2008).

Research about refugees focusing on school based issues concerns the provision of adequate, appropriate and socially just services. Whole school approaches to provision of refugee services have also been examined and models of good practice analysed by Keddie (2012), Woods (2009) and Taylor and Sidhu (2012). Recurring themes in these papers identify strong leadership, community networking

and an inclusive school ethos in which the social, emotional and academic needs of refugee students are recognised and catered.

Particular pedagogy issues have been identified as relating to providing education services for refugee students who have had limited exposure to schooling, and who have limited or no literacy skills. These studies explore pedagogical interventions which address the challenges of enabling literacy development for students who are learning in and about school in a second or additional language and have no prior learning in first language. This challenge has been described as unique for the field of ESL, which has traditionally provided language support for students on the basis of prior educational achievement in another language (Matthews 2008). Projects reported on in this emerging ESL/literacy field stress the need for multiple approaches to literacy teaching, professional development for all teachers in both language and literacy, and time allocated in the curriculum for the development of vocabulary and subject and genre specific literacy features (Hammond 2008; Windle and Miller 2012; Miller 2009; Dooley 2009).

Related to high learner need, pre-migration trauma has also been the focus of study predominantly in the United Kingdom, in response to the frequent associations made between trauma, mental health and learning problems. The experience of highly traumatic events has been recognised as impacting on classroom learning (Pinson, Arnot and Candappa 2010), but the research also flags a risk in pathologising refugee student learning issues. Matthews (2008) and Boyden and de Berry (2004) both express concern at the lack of knowledge about the impact of trauma and that it is possible to over extend response to trauma in lieu of other essential and 'holistic' school based support services which target language need, settlement needs and school access needs (Matthews 2008). Sidhu and Taylor (2007, 287) link the developing reliance on school community partnerships (like those required to attend to student trauma issues) as symptomatic of a neoliberal approach to management in which welfare needs are increasingly positioned as the responsibility of the local community and rather than the responsibility of government bureaucracy.

What emerges from this survey of refugee related educational research is an issue of complexity, in recognising and supporting students of refugee background achieve educationally. Much of the research challenges the victimisation of the refugee-background population and serves to identify those factors which have contributed to the situation in which children have had little opportunity for schooling. By identifying education gaps, and shortfalls in classroom provision, the research seeks to find tangible ways to address the needs of the refugee background students. In essence, the extensive literature pertaining to refugee education in Australia identifies refugee background student need *and* a broad scope of responses, for teachers, schools and policy makers. Despite this research, the NAPLAN test and associated data collection practices are such that there is no evidence of recognition of refugee need, and the processes of identifying students of refugee background are non-existent within the statistical systems used by ACARA and the Australian government. A group of learners who are quite clearly disadvantaged are completely hidden.

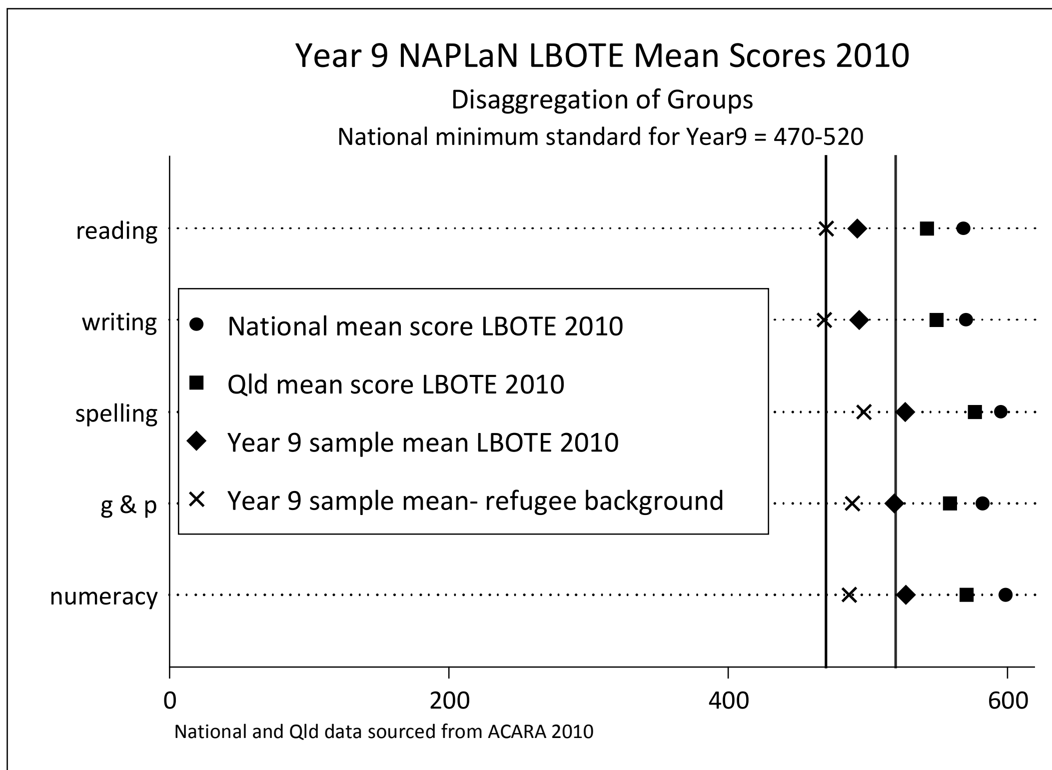
Students of refugee background and NAPLAN attainment

In 2010, NAPLAN data were collected from a range of metropolitan schools in Queensland in order to explore the relationship between performance on the NAPLAN test, LBOTE status and English as a second language proficiency. In order to ensure LBOTE status, data were collected on country of birth, length of time in Australia, visa category, language/s spoken at home, ethnicity of student and parents. Some preliminary findings are presented, of a subset of these LBOTE students who participated in the 2010 NAPLAN test, and who are in grade 9. These data are intended to demonstrate the complexity of performance contained within the category. The recurring leitmotif remains the students hidden in the data: those who are of refugee background.

Data were collected on 110 year 9 students who satisfied the definition of LBOTE for the purposes of the NAPLAN test. The year 9 student group includes 49 students of refugee background who arrived in Australia between 2004 and 2010.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the LBOTE mean scores across the national and Queensland LBOTE groups (ACARA 2010), the whole year 9 sample in the project and the 49 students of refugee background who are a subset of the year 9 sample. The horizontal axis represents NAPLAN numerical scores, and the vertical axis shows each domain of the NAPLAN test. The two vertical lines mark the upper and lower boundaries of the national minimum standard for year 9.

Figure 1. 2010 LBOTE mean scores for Year 9 students: a comparison of National, Queensland, sample group, and students of refugee background in the sample group.



Because they are a subset of the larger groups, the sample group, including the students of refugee background, are also represented by the Queensland LBOTE, and by the national LBOTE mean score, but are performing well below the average of both these larger aggregations of scores. Average results of those students of refugee background place them at the lower boundary or within the national minimum standard band level for year 9 on the NAPLAN test. ACARA (2011b) advises that students

who achieve results at the national minimum standard may require additional levels of support in order to improve literacy and numeracy understandings. It does not provide differentiated pedagogy advice on the *language* support implications of these data, when these results are achieved by ESL students. For the following analysis, the focus will be on reading performance only, for the sample group.

The following three box plots provide a more detailed breakdown of the world regions (Figure 2), visa categories (Figure 3), and age-appropriate schooling years (Figure 4) which characterise the year 9 student sample. These box plots present a description of NAPLAN reading scores which shows both the median of the results and the spread. The median is the middle score (rather than the average) in a group of scores, and can be an alternative to the mean and more representative of typical scores, when data is highly skewed (Agresti and Findlay 2009). In the box plots presented, each box contains the middle 50% of cases, and the white vertical line in the box marks the median (or middle result) of the category. The lines which extend from each side of the box show the upper and lower 25% spread of scores. Outliers are depicted by separate circular marks. The boxes are arranged in ascending order of median score for each of the categories. As a point of reference, and a guide to interpreting the results, the national minimum standard for year 9 is shown on each of the figures as two horizontal lines marking the lower boundary (470) and the upper boundary (520).

Figure 2. NAPLAN reading scores for sample Queensland group, divided according to world region of birth.

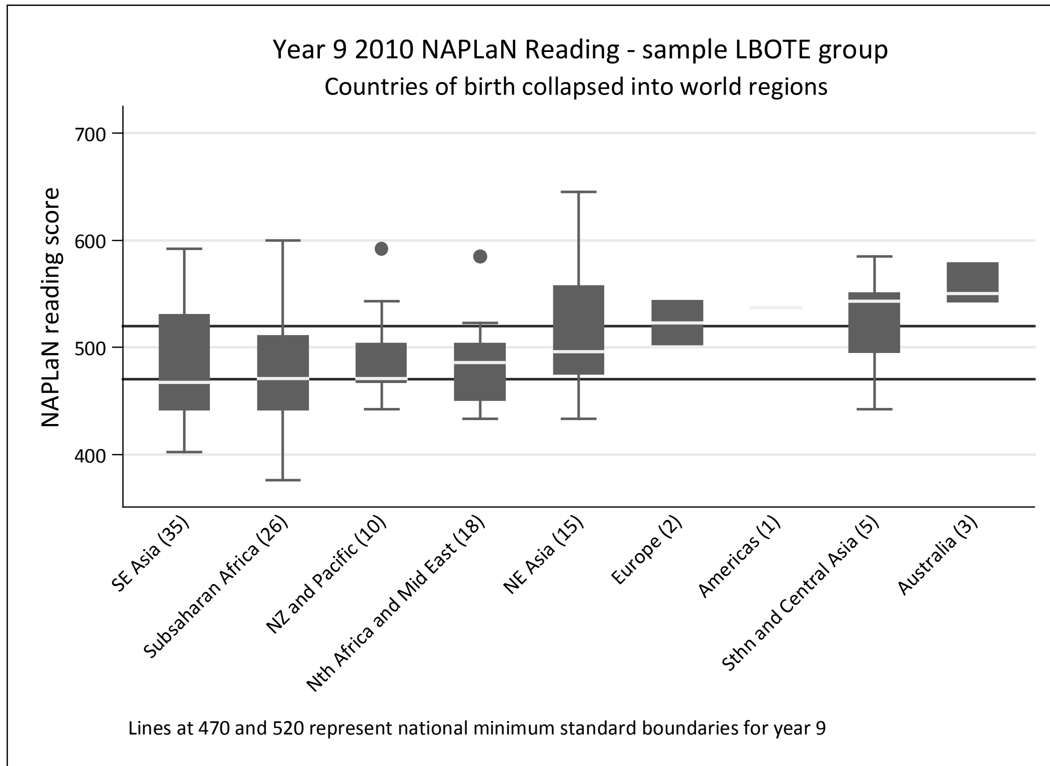


Figure 2 shows the student group with birth countries collapsed into world regions (ABS 2011). In the South East Asian group, 49% are of refugee background, as are 88% of the Subsaharan African group. In the North Africa and Middle East group, 78% are refugees. For students from South East Asia and Subsaharan Africa, half of the group are performing below the national minimum standard for Year 9. This is also the case for almost half of students from North Africa and the Middle East. Amongst the remaining world regions, there is only one other student of refugee background. It should also be noted that students in the lowest performing groups are also achieving test scores well above the national minimum standard. It would be helpful to explore which groups of students are achieving such results and what factors are contributing to these strong outcomes. The interweaving of length of time at school, quality of schooling experience, and access to English language programs would be informative to the data collected around these students.

In Figure 3, the performance of the sample group is presented according to visa status.

Figure 3. NAPLAN reading scores for sample Queensland group, divided according to visa category.

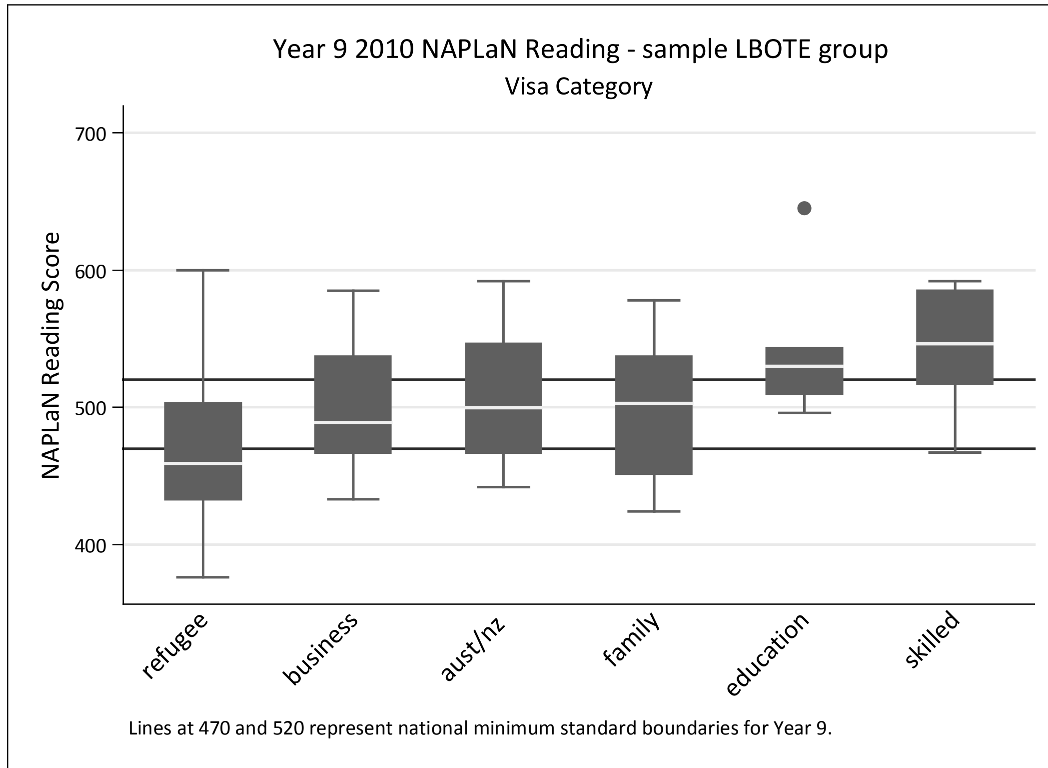
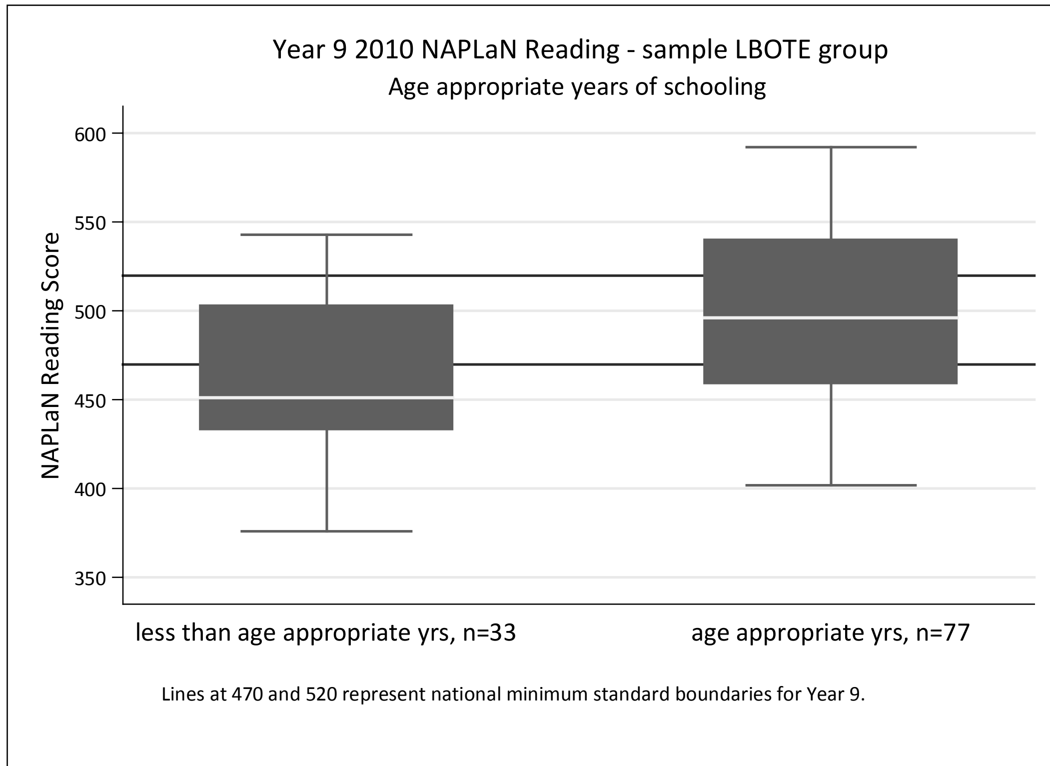


Figure 3 shows that students of refugee background are achieving lowest median scores and broadest range of scores. More than half of the refugee group have results below the national minimum standard, in comparison to the skilled visa category which shows achievement mostly above the national minimum standard. These visa categories in themselves are not specifically educational, but are representative of the human experiences which come of being of refugee or skilled visa status, or coming from countries where educational services are extensive or limited.

Figure 4 presents information about the sample related to years of schooling. The group has been divided into those students who have had 9 years of schooling (minimum) and those who have had less than 9 years of schooling.

Figure 4. NAPLAN reading scores for sample Queensland group, divided according to age appropriate years of schooling.



Unsurprisingly, Figure 4 shows that LBOTE students who have had less than age appropriate years of schooling are achieving lower NAPLAN results. More than half of this group are achieving grades below the national minimum standard. 88% of this group are of refugee background in contrast to 30% in the group who have had appropriate years of schooling.

In summary, the data presented shows that the LBOTE category, in its current form, provides little policy information, and at a national level, may even work against recognition of language learning need, unless direct attention is given to variation, rather than normal (average) performance. The data drawn directly from schools and students suggest that there is the possibility of unpacking the category, and identifying particular needs within the category. Evidence has been provided that suggests that the students from refugee backgrounds are in greatest need of policy support, to ensure that they too, benefit from the rationale of equity underpinning education reforms.

Conclusion

The paper has considered the ongoing failure of the Australian education reforms to recognise and adequately measure a proportion of the school population with extremely high educative needs, despite a commitment to "equity and excellence". The policy technologies which are played out through the NAPLAN test are not only potentially damaging to this group of children, but to their schools, teachers and principals as well, through the possible denial of essential resources.

In particular, the paper has focused on a specific group of students with considerable need for access to equity. However, to attend to this group presents particular challenges for the nation state. Sidhu and Taylor (2007) suggest that understanding refugee issues means moving beyond the nation state to a concept of transnationality. Pinson, Arnot and Candappa (2010) describe a conflict between the protection of the nation state and the rights of the citizen, and a broader global commitment to human rights and the provision of asylum to those who are refugee. There is a cost in providing the services which are the human rights of all people, and that cost is sometimes perceived to be at the expense of the nation-state citizens. It is worth contemplating why this group needs to remain invisible and who benefits from their invisibility. Australian education reforms do not show an expanding of social imaginary in relation to the global, but work to further disempower the very young people who are of greatest need. Perhaps the greatest irony is that, in Australia, the national policy agenda is justified in the name of responding to globalisation. This paper is intended to add to the literature, and to use NAPLAN data to highlight the needs of students who are so well hidden statistically. It is hoped that this empirical approach, will enhance the argument that equitable distribution of resources and support is needed for this group of learners so that they too are able to benefit from the government's priority to remedy equity in the Australian education system.

In the case study of refugee-background students and the LBOTE category to which they are assigned, the misleading data may be consequential in the reduction of resourcing of this particular category, given that there is no capacity to disaggregate to either ethnicity or language proficiency in the current performance results.

If there is not greater consideration given to better identifying the range of performance of the LBOTE group there can be significant negative consequences. At the systemic level it may suggest that English language proficiency is unrelated to NAPLAN performance and consequently that there is no systematic need to address structured group differences in English language proficiency to provide a "level playing field" for different groups with respect to national testing and educational attainment. At the individual student level, lack of informed policy guidance may impede effective diagnosis of the need for ESL assistance for individual learners. In aiming to improve equity for all Australian students, there is considerable work to be done on unpacking the LBOTE category.

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[1] The national Australian curriculum is currently being implemented in stages across Australia.
[2] For reporting purposes, parents receive student results in terms of band levels. Schools receive student results as numerical scores and numerical scores are also used for national reporting.
[3] If results are normally distributed, approximately 68% of results fall within one standard deviation above and below the mean, and approximately 95% of results fall within 2 standard deviations above and below the mean.
[4] Broadbanding involves the collapsing of specific targeted funding into broad and general categories of support, in order to support the government's school priorities.

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