



**Senate Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program -
Literacy and Numeracy**

Submission by the Multicultural Development Association (MDA) and

Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG)

7 June 2013

This submission reports under the following terms of reference:

- (c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices;
- (e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment; and
- (g) Other relevant matters

Executive Summary

Education is a pillar of successful settlement for migrants, including people who come to Australia as refugees. The Multicultural Development Association (MDA) and Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG) support the rights of all primary and secondary school students from refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to enjoy accessible, equitable and quality education which addresses their learning and social needs in supportive, responsive and flexible learning environments.

Students of refugee background are particularly vulnerable due to the significant interruptions to schooling and the social and psychological impacts of their refugee journey. Many students may have experienced forced migration, significant loss, violence, and trauma. These experiences impact on students' ability to learn in the school environment and require a whole of school response¹.

Education for children is the number one priority for all newly arrived families we settle across Queensland. The Australian Human Rights Commission states, 'education is a key determinant in predicting health and well-being, longevity, employment, housing and economic stability'.² However, many refugees and migrants continue to experience ongoing barriers to equity and participation in education.

NAPLAN testing is an important mechanism for policy makers and schools to ensure that appropriate access and resources are targeted to the most vulnerable students who require intensive English language support and programs that offer increased participation through connection with peers and the school community.

This submission responds to the following 3 terms of reference for the Inquiry:

- (c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices;
- (e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment; and
- (g) Other relevant matters

The key focus of submission is on students within the Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) cohort who have insufficient English language capacity to participate effectively in NAPLAN testing. The LBOTE population has highly variable English language capacity and experiences of schooling. The small cohort of learners with high needs will benefit from early, intensive support for English language acquisition in a supportive learning environment. Our submission is informed by the settlement work of our organisations; consultation with 6 schools (2 in regional areas) and previous submissions by MDA including:

- I. MDA Education Budget Submission (QLD) 2012-13
- II. Senate Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN 2010
- III. Education Queensland Green Paper: A Flying Start for Queensland Children³

In response to the issues identified, 2 key recommendations are provided that will enhance how Governments and Schools utilise the NAPLAN process to better target resources.

¹ Refugee Youth and the School Environment (2007), The Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth, Broadsheet # 5, December 2007

² Australian Human Rights Commission (2010). *African Australians: human rights and social inclusion issues project. A compendium detailing the outcomes of the community and stakeholder consultations and interviews and public submissions* – (June 2010) 62.

³ MDA Submissions can be found: <http://www.mdainc.org.au/?q=research#submissions>

- 1) LBOTE reporting for NAPLAN requires identification of vulnerable students with low level of English language acquisition and significant disruption to education prior to arrival in Australia. With this data:
 - a. Government resources can be more effectively targeted to students of high need; and
 - b. Schools can invest in ESL professionals as well as best practice programs to improve learning outcomes.
- 2) Increase incentives for Schools to engage effectively with parents of LBOTE background to ensure informed decision making and appropriate parental support for students sitting NAPLAN tests.

Background

The Multicultural Development Association (MDA) is a specialist Queensland-based multicultural agency established in 1998. We work towards an inclusive, united, multicultural society which values and celebrates cultural diversity and which provides welcome, safety and pathways to full participation and equal opportunity for refugees and migrants.

MDA offers a range of community services and support including:

- Settlement services to refugees
- Community assistance for asylum seekers
- Employment services for new arrivals
- Social inclusion programs with new and emerging community groups
- Advocacy to improve economic and social participation
- Training in settlement and cultural competency

From 1 July 2012 to 30 April 2013 MDA assisted 3,455 clients from a diverse range of countries. Key countries include: Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar/Burma, Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Liberia, PNG, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Fiji, Jordan, Nepal, Cuba, Tajikistan, and the Palestinian Authority. MDA has also supported a significant number of State-less people to settle in Queensland.

The Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG) is the settlement service for the Townsville region which is a growing settlement area. In 2012-13, 158 people were settled and 48 of these new arrivals were young people aged between 5 and 18 years. Settlement of refugees in this region is growing.

Young people are heavily represented amongst Australia's refugee population. Just under half of the people who entered the Australian community on a refugee or humanitarian visa during 2011-12 were under 25 years of age. Of these, approximately 47% were in the age band generally accepted as constituting "youth" (i.e. 16 to 25 years of age).⁴

In Queensland, more young males than females settled in the July-March period. Over half of all young people who are newly arrived are from the Middle East region, followed by Africa then Asia.

⁴ Statistics from DIAC Statistical Report; downloaded 17/12/2012

All Arrivals Year to Date (1 July 2012 – end March 2013)

Region	Ages 5-12	Ages 13-17
Brisbane & Central Coast	69	51
South East Qld	81	121
South West Qld	21	13
Far North Qld	4	5
North West Qld	11	5
TOTAL	186	195

Source: DIAC Arrival Statistics- Queensland Humanitarian Settlement Services

Key Challenges to Successful Participation in NAPLAN

Below are 4 key challenges to successful participation in education for migrant and refugee students of high need.

1. **English language proficiency:** English language skills underpin all Australian curriculum and are an essential pre-requisite to all learning and assessment. Proficiency in English language is also essential for students' inclusion and settlement in the School and broader community. For many migrant and refugee students, limited English skills may be a significant barrier to successful learning outcomes. Research indicates that it can take three to five years for second language learners to acquire oral proficiency, and between four to seven years to gain academic English proficiency.⁵
2. **Age appropriate education:** Migrant and refugee students are placed in the schooling system by age which does not reflect their level of English acquisition or learning ability. Without good ESL assessment and intensive support, many students struggle to cope with curriculum requirements impacting on their overall ability to participate and perform in NAPLAN testing.
3. **ESL support available:** There is a diverse range of ESL learners in classrooms including, indigenous students, migrant and refugee students with prior schooling experiences as well as refugee students with disrupted levels of schooling. Refugee students have varying learning needs that require specific pedagogical practices not adopted in traditional ESL programs. Depending on student populations and the flexibility of discretionary funding, not all schools will have an ESL Unit or intensive ESL program and students may be offered intermittent ESL hours per week. Some students may have to travel to multiple schools in a week to receive this support. ESL support is most effective when it is offered intensively as required and integrated flexibly with the mainstream curriculum.
4. **Systemic and community support:** limited cultural competency of the schooling system; lack of parent engagement; racism and social exclusion are also key barriers to successful learning outcomes.

⁵ Miller J *et al*, (2005) African refugees with interrupted schooling in the high school mainstream: Dilemmas for teachers, *Prospect*, Vol 20(2)

Without prior education in Australia migrant and refugee students are challenged by NAPLAN testing in the following ways:

- Insufficient English language acquisition to read and comprehend test questions;

An ESL teacher said that students with limited capacity to sit the test may be encouraged to complete the multi-choice questions to ensure at least 25% of answers will be right

- The Standard Australian English is unfamiliar and may be difficult to comprehend;
- Specific vocabulary and socio-cultural contexts used in NAPLAN test questions may be unfamiliar;

An ESL teacher said that using European fairy tales and extracts from *Johnno a novel* written by Australian author David Malouf, do not provide a suitable context for our students to answer questions successfully

- Testing may be a new experience for newly arrived students and the testing process and methods may not be appropriately explained by teachers;
- Parents are often asked to sign consent forms without understanding the meaning and the NAPLAN testing process.

An ESL teacher said that her School sends letters home to parents of ESL students with the expectation that the form will be signed. This school does not offer the test to students within their first year of arrival if they do not have the capacity to participate, however, parents are not engaged in this process. Parents have limited awareness of the implications of exemption or withdrawal from testing.

The key challenges reported by teachers are provided below.

1. Teachers report diminished capacity and flexibility in how they can support high needs ESL learners for NAPLAN. For example:
 - a. Initially testing procedures allowed for an additional 25 % more time for LBOTE students;
 - b. Practice questions are no longer available for Year 7 and 9 students; and
 - c. Some Teachers have been restricted in how they can adapt classroom curriculum for LBOTE students.
2. Consent forms are issued to all parents and it is expected that parents with no or low levels of English language will complete the consent form and understand the NAPLAN testing process. Often parents complete these forms without understanding the content or implications. Lack of parent engagement by Schools increases the stress experienced by families about their children's education and can impact on the relationship between students, parents and teachers.
3. The social and emotional needs of students needs to be considered in the education services provided to students. For students who have experience significant upheaval and a traumatic refugee experience, welcome, safety, connection with peers and others are important to the successful engagement of students

Solutions

Governments, Schools and the community also need to work together to provide a positive school and classroom environment for our students. Attachment 1 provides a summary of what the 6 Schools consulted do to enhance learning outcomes for refugee students at their schools.

In this submission we have focussed on 3 key solutions to utilise NAPLAN testing to better target resources for students. These solutions are focussed on data collection to inform resource allocation and more effective engagement with parents.

- 1) Annual national NAPLAN reporting should identify students within the LBOTE cohort with high learning needs according to the National ESL Band-scales and an assessment by ESL teachers of the learning needs for individual students. This will ensure that limited resources are directed to the students of highest need. With this data:
 - a. Government resources can be more effectively targeted to students of high need; and
 - b. Schools can invest in ESL professionals as well as best practice programs to improve learning outcomes.

- 2) Increase incentives for Schools to engage effectively with parents of LBOTE background to ensure informed decision making and appropriate parental support for students sitting NAPLAN tests.

Attachment 1

Best practice examples from 6 Schools consulted in Queensland

Research indicates that a whole of school approach to student learning is essential. The Good Starts Longitudinal Research Study highlights some important school context factors to facilitate positive engagement for refugee youth with Schools:

- a school that provides a safe and trusted environment for learning and socialising and the development of future aspirations;
- supportive and attentive teachers who develop strong relationships with students and notice their progress and individual needs;
- a proactive, consistent and fair response by schools to discrimination, bullying and fighting;
- programs that help students develop English literacy while engaging with mainstream subject content;
- programs which enable students to participate in classes where they are likely to succeed and form connections with peers (e.g. music, art, sport, drama);
- school-based after school homework programs that provide additional individual academic support in a familiar environment;
- consideration of pre-arrival schooling experiences that are markedly different in terms of academic, structural and social aspects;
- flexibility to attend ELS for more than 12 months where required
- a well supported transition to mainstream school with good follow-up
- a curriculum which is adapted to the learning need of students with disrupted schooling.

Refugee Youth and the School Environment (2007), The Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth, Broadsheet # 5, December 2007

Below are some of the strategies utilised by the primary and secondary schools consulted for the submission. These schools have a significant population of refugee students and all schools have an intensive ESL program. Two regional schools were interviewed in addition to 4 Brisbane based schools.

NAPLAN support: One-on-one support as well as groups and classroom activities to familiarise newly arrived students with NAPLAN and testing processes is provided in these Schools.

Parent-School-Student engagement: These Schools invest in establishing good communication links with parents and carers at point of enrolment. They understand the importance of using interpreters in communication with parents and employ appropriate and respectful strategies in communicating with families. For example, one school consulted personally invites parents/carers to parent-teacher interviews using a multilingual aide and also send translated invitations home to parents.

Enrolment processes: The education planning process for individual students starts at the point of enrolment. Schools engage with parents and the ESL teacher at the start, and keep parents regularly informed of schooling and assessment processes. Student need for ESL

support is assessed at enrolment by ESL staff and these needs are monitored constantly through the school terms.

Acquisition of language skills and transition to mainstream classes:

- Where intensive support is required over a long period of time to enable student to achieve proficiency, Schools offer a staged approach for transition into mainstream classes. The Secondary Schools consulted offer tailored English, History, Maths and ICT subjects for ESL learners. In Years 8-10 the primary focus of these classes is English acquisition and student performance is assessed each term to determine when, and if, students transition into mainstream classes. Teachers consider English language acquisition according to ESL band scales as well as student confidence and adjustment to the school classroom.
- All schools interviewed employ bicultural teacher aides to facilitate effective student and family engagement.
- Another successful strategy is the clustering of students based on learning needs as opposed to age for intensive group based ESL support.

Professional Development: These Schools (with a significant population of refugee students) are investing in the professional development of ESL professionals to respond to the holistic needs and best practice pedagogy for working with their students. ESL Units are also increasing the skills and capacity of mainstream classroom teachers to respond to the learning needs of ESL students.

School environment: All schools interviewed promote multiculturalism and inclusion through regular events at the school such as Australia Day, Harmony Day, NAIDOC Week and Refugee Week events where diverse cultures are showcased.

Brisbane Primary School example of the benefits of Bilingual teacher aides.

The teacher aides help all of us. For example, to understand a few key phrases in Tigrinya, Somali and Farsi goes a long way to making the students feel welcome and part of the school. The bicultural aides also facilitate effective communication with parents which is a crucial part of the enrolment process as well as approval for NAPLAN testing.

To support students and their parents around NAPLAN, our school contacts parents directly to explain why the school believes testing is important. We have learnt over many years not to bombard students prior to NAPLAN and focus on providing some useful skills they will need on a one-on-one basis. For example learning how to discern key messages from large amounts of text and brainstorming essay writing ideas. However, it is still difficult for students with limited literacy and numeracy skills and the National Curriculum requirements has reduced the flexibility in the Units we provide.