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## **NAPLAN and the commodification of parenting**

### **Abstract**

Examining submissions to the 2010 Senate Inquiry regarding the administration and reporting of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), this research considers the way parenting perceptions and practices towards standardized testing in Australian schools reflects the heightened insecurity and uncertainty pervading modern society. Findings reveal a cultural production of performance expectation leads some parents to contribute and participate in a growing and thriving NAPLAN industry. Qualitative findings demonstrate fear of NAPLAN inadequacy prompted parents to engage in a range of educational consumption practices, such as purchase practice-books, engage private tutors and/or enrol their children in private coaching colleges, in an effort to maximise their child's NAPLAN performance. Findings suggest the commodification of NAPLAN culturally frames parents as consumers who can, and indeed ought, to 'buy' improved NAPLAN results. The commodification of parenting, and moreover schooling, ignores social and structural determinants predictive of educational performance, and thus is argued to feed a market dismissive of recognised sources of ongoing social inequality.

## **Keywords**

NAPLAN, education, standardized testing, commodification, parenting, consumer society

## **Introduction and literature review**

Many prominent social theorists, including Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Jean-François Lyotard, theorized contemporary societies as characterized by uncertainty and individualization prompted by technological change.

Although such theorists offer differing perspectives about if, how and to what degree post-modern/post-structural culture(s) impacts individuals in identifiable and/or patterned ways, a general sense of ‘crisis’ prevails across their works. In particular, there exists a general disillusion with, or dispute of, the traditional legitimation previously accorded to major social institutions, such as science, the State, and education. With traditional legitimacy eroded in societies embodying heightened individualism, the cultural consumption of products to authenticate oneself furthers the ‘death’ of ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard, 1979) prompted by deep reflection and deconstruction of the values that typified modernity (Bauman, 1993). Subsequently, "the fundamental conceptual hypothesis for a sociological analysis of "consumption" is *not* use value, the relation to need, but *symbolic exchange value*, the value of social presentation" (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 30-31). Reflexive analysis of modernity has given rise to an uncertainty which pervades consumer society (Baudrillard, 1970; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Education in postmodern societies exists as one of many social institutions impacted by changes posed by an increasingly global economy, exhibiting a heightened uncertainty and generalized anxiety. Existing within a Westernized culture promoting authenticity and self-identity through consumer products, manifesting an ‘aesthetic of consumption’

(Bauman, 1998), we argue education emerged in a refashioned state whereby degrees, and even test scores, reflect buying power more than aptitude, diligence, or even knowledge.

Education today is foremost a consumer product existing and competing in a global neo-liberal market shaped by a service-sector economy. Historically, lack of initiative and inefficiency were perceived as barriers to the modernization of education, prompting curriculum standardization and mass production of learning materials so neo-colonial Western societies could refashion the purpose and practice of educating (Sullivan, 2009). Standardization and bureaucratization, however, have given way to commodification at every stage in the sector, from primary schools to higher education, fostered by an individual, institutional, and national competition to be 'best' in show, or, score highest on standardised tests to secure optimum market share (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001).

What constitutes well-educated, however, is inevitably implicated with ethics and values which theorists note change in type from universal and traditional to subjective and individualistic as societies become increasingly postmodern (Bauman, 1993). Correspondingly, ethics and values in education accompanied Western society's 'progress'. For example, capitalism's demand for technologically proficient employees continues to globally drive curriculum, as critiques of American (Kirsh et al., 2007) and European (Sahlberg, 2011) school curriculum and the impact of market policy on Australian educational imperatives (McGregor, 2009) demonstrate. Educational policy is increasingly focused on econometrics, whereby national testing is prioritized to measure, standardize and account for educational outcomes (Alexander, 2010, Apple, 2005; Ball, 2008; Thompson & Cook, 2012). This focus revealed performance inequity in a range of key areas, such as language, math and science skills, when standardized test outcomes permitted international comparison (Sahlberg, 2011; US Department of Education, 2004).

Missing, however, from much academic and sector research remains a critical analysis of what impact, if any, market-driven imperatives driving changes in educational purpose, policy and practice have on parenting. Our research commences this task by examining if and how parenting perceptions and practices regarding standardized testing in Australian schools reflect the heightened insecurity/uncertainty foretold in postmodern theory.

The research is contextualized amid changes in Western parenting practices mirroring societal shifts to post-industrialization. Western childhood has come to be associated with a period of happiness, innocence and freedom in contrast with the adult responsibilities commonly assumed by children in pre-industrial and traditional societies (Burton, 2007; Wyness, 2006). American and British research argues the commodification of education, particularly the introduction and escalation of standardized testing priorities, threatens the existing state of Western childhood (Au, 2009; Elkind, 2007). Standardized testing has profoundly impacted pedagogy, curriculum, educators and learners (Alexander, 2010; Lingard, 2010; McGregor, 2009).

Anxiety and pressure are not only induced by test-taking they are facilitated by a consumer-driven culture marketing products to parents to improve children's performance. Fish oils, teddy bears, and practice-books are recent products marketers use to lure Australian parents (Blake, 2013). Since Australia introduced national standardized testing in 2010, more than 70 practice-book titles have been published. In 2013, more than 180,000 practice-books were sold, an increase of 60,000 from 2012 (Topsfield and Hurst, 2013). Marketing success reflects social conditions of 'individualisation' (Beck, 1992) where perceived risk of educational failure sees parents pursuing, via consumption, a competitive advantage for their child. In a risk society Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 129) theorise, "the child itself has become the focus of parental effort...parents must correct as many defects as possible...and

encourage skills” or risk compromising their child’s educational, social and emotional well-being. To further examine if and how broader consumer culture impacts parenting expectations and practice we present findings from a qualitative analysis of submissions to the Senate Inquiry of The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

### **Research methods**

In mid-2010, the Australian Government orchestrated a Senate Inquiry to investigate NAPLAN governance and practice surrounding controversial data reporting (Senate References Committee on Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2010). The Inquiry generated 272 public submissions from academics, government departments, parents, principals, professional associations, schools, teachers and unions. Two submissions were not publically available and thus excluded from the sample. The remaining 270 written submissions formed the complete sample and data for the project. Qualitative thematic analysis of the complete sample produced exploratory insights regarding key lived experiences, perspectives and priorities (Ragusa, 2012; Walter, 2010). By critically analysing NAPLAN submissions, not merely as documents, but rather as social objects existing in a broader socio-cultural context, we closely examined them as cultural products to determine how and if they embodied deeper social issues (Neuman, 2011). While cross data coding was performed to optimize reliability, findings, however, remain limited to representing a single time point and should not be generalized broadly to other populations (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Thus, whilst generalizability cannot be achieved beyond this study, the agenda of qualitative inquiry to convey, “in rich and realistic detail, the experiences and perspectives of those being studied” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 2) deemed it an integral means to understand, illuminate, and report the nuance and complexity of NAPLAN as a social

reality. Multiple readings of submissions revealed education in contemporary Australia today is increasingly a commodified cultural product with educational achievement and performance influenced by stakeholders with competing interests and concerns.

## **Findings**

Two key social changes demonstrated the cultural imperative and hegemony of high NAPLAN achievement specifically and commodification of standardized testing generally: the rise of a NAPLAN coaching industry and the explicit use of NAPLAN to market schools. Widespread acceptance one could, and ought to, 'buy' a better NAPLAN score was revealed across submissions, albeit not without refute. Pressure to improve children's NAPLAN performance was exerted most on and by parents and exhibits what we term the, 'cultural production of performance'. Performance here refers to the cultural expectation that one will achieve a high NAPLAN score, as underscored by one parent's concerns:

*A couple of days before the recent NAPLAN test I was standing at the printer at work when an unusual document came out. An embarrassed colleague came up explaining that it was a practice NAPLAN test. Her son was really worried about the test, in tears and feared he would do poorly. She was going to give him a practice run to make him feel more comfortable (ID24)*

Fear of NAPLAN inadequacy was not restricted to a single parent or child; submissions reflected a general state of anxiety regarding test performance and its importance as a measure of Australian parenting performance. Sociologically, the commodification of NAPLAN largely contributes to this social condition and is reflected in a teacher's quote:

*NAPLAN is no longer about students; it is about adult anxiety, which is then transferred to our young people. They don't know why they need to do well, but they are certainly aware that they need to. This also derives from a burgeoning private industry in NAPLAN preparation, from study guides to coaching colleges, which profit from this anxiety. This is not what education should be about. (ID227)*

To assuage children and parents' performance anxiety, a growing and thriving industry has accompanied NAPLAN. From teachers mentioning the, *...recent growth in coaching colleges offering preparation courses for students so they "do better" in the NAPLAN tests (ID6)* and schools reflecting, *Students are 'coached' in the test. Unfortunately this is a growing issue....where external tutoring is a major business for students to achieve 'better' results in these areas (ID10)*, to professional associations such as a principal's forum noting, *Coaching for NAPLAN is rife. Coaching colleges are flourishing with the promise of improved results on the NAPLAN tests (ID201)*, submissions widely described a private industry ready to sell products to alleviate social anxiety.

Although a primary school principal described, *...children are on special diets and organised sleep patterns in the week leading up to May 11 (ID129)*, coaching was by far the most recognized product selling NAPLAN performance. *In the 2010 Easter school holidays a NAPLAN camp was advertised in the journal "Sydney's Child" (ID266)*, mentioned one teacher. According to another, *Already, in NSW, we can see the 'NAPLAN Industry' taking off. There are commercial coaching schools, websites, textbooks and even NAPLAN camps run to coach and hot-house students in this narrow area of learning. This is not education for a thinking democratic nation. (ID255).*

Level of critique varied and arose both within and outside the educational system. The following parent's dismay with a school's promotion of 'NAPLAN skills day' reveals perceptual inconsistency, *It was to my dismay to find after speaking to some friends in Sydney in the March 2010 school holidays that they were planning to send their children off to NAPLAN skills day. This was promoted at their school...This adds to the afterschool coaching and tutoring available. Already there are crib books for sale targeting improvements in NAPLAN....(ID256).* Nevertheless, whilst confirming, *There is now a thriving business in tutoring and book production aimed at training students in the NAPLAN style assessment,* the Federation of Parents and Citizens of NSW, proclaimed, *There have been reports of the pressure being placed on some students by schools and parents to achieve in NAPLAN testing...the pressure has been so great that it has made some students physically ill (ID268).*

Opinion also differed regarding the source of NAPLAN performance anxiety. According to a school submission, *...some parents place an incredible amount of pressure on the child to perform. There is outside coaching involved. There is pressure on children during the test. There are consequences after by many parents on their children. (ID258).* The Australian Principal's Association noted, *Schools report that some parents have become very anxious and have had their children spend a great deal of time at home practising for the test. (ID228).* Likewise, a teacher identified the diversity of stakeholders implicated in pressuring children to perform well:

*There is strongly evident pressure on students and this is a very real concern thanks to the media/government etc. Pressure on the students also comes from home and the parents are stressed too. They are buying test books and pushing their children at*

*home. Parents have reported that Year 2 children are already dreading Year 3. (ID 196).*

This perspective was shared by another teacher who also applied a holistic perspective, *Pressure will be applied down the chain of command to improve the test results....For example, increases in the amount of time spent practising past tests, lessons on testing techniques, coaching on approaches to multiple choice questions (ID266).* Although parents were not test-taking, as another teacher commented, *Parents are also victims of this form of testing. I was very surprised this year by the test anxiety exhibited by parents (ID56).*

Regardless of anxiety source, whether from parents, teachers, children and/or a newly created industry driving children to perform ‘their best’, it is clear social changes occurring in Australian education reflect much more than the transmission of knowledge and the education of students. The social process has led to a situation where, as a teacher described, *many children become upset and other usually high achievers can shut down (ID56).* As parents observed, *instead of happy, excited parents and children on the first day back this year, I was met at the front of the school with anxious, concerned parents who were doubting their choice of school (ID85).* Such concerns reveal NAPLAN anxiety superseding individual performance by their power to shape perceptions of institutional, namely school, status and collective identity.

## **Discussion & Conclusions**

NAPLAN Senate Inquiry submissions discussing test performance reflected consumer-driven aspirations that a growing segment of goods and services produced and marketed to improve results could solve broader social problems much sociological research reveals

predictive of educational performance. Historically, low standardized test scores have been indicative of socioeconomic inequality and structural inequity (Au, 2009; Ford, 2013). Preoccupation with individualism and responsibilization privileging the performance of the individual and evident of the, “forceful demands of self-determination” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 31) however, characterized educational aspirations with parents actively participating in the cultural production of education as a consumptive process. Contemporary social conditions of individualisation (Beck, 1992) means NAPLAN performance bestows or denies status and identity in an era where parents attempt to ‘buy’ improved performance by consuming new products: practice books, private tutoring, and private coaching. If, however, educational performance remains positively correlated with socioeconomic class, it is deeply problematic for consumption to be marketed as a potential ‘cure’ to a social problem. In a knowledge society, identity and authenticity are deeply connected to individual performance. NAPLAN exists as one of many cultural manifestations where the imperative to consume is driven by anxiety and fear used to sell commodities by markets irreverent to systemic causes of social inequality.

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