



## **To NAPLAN or not to NAPLAN? Is it the real question?**

How a clear vision for their son's future helped a family consider for his best interests in the present

*Sharon Williams*

National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a nationwide assessment for all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and it occurs every year in May. It tests skills in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and numeracy. School personnel could not see the worth in our son, George – who was now in year 3 – being involved in the NAPLAN assessment because the accommodations and adjustments available would not cater to George's needs.

So, we asked ourselves what are George's needs? Our vision is for George to be a full and active member of his class and to belong, which is a real human need. We wanted George to have the opportunity to demonstrate his learning, whilst developing new skills.

For us, the most important question was whether George not participating in the NAPLAN assessment would have an adverse effect on his sense of belonging and how his classmates perceived his role of student in the classroom? We understood that the NAPLAN assessment would be something the school and all year 3 students would be preparing and discussing for weeks before and after the event. It was a major part of the students' school experience and if George was to belong, he needed to be part of the experience to the fullest extent possible.

So what should we do? First, we decided to do some research and got onto the NAPLAN website to find out more about it. This is what the website told us:

*'NAPLAN tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy...All students are encouraged to participate in NAPLAN tests. Students with special needs may qualify for special provisions which reflect the support normally provided in the classroom...A formal exemption may be granted for a student who has a severe intellectual disability.'*

From this information we needed to find out more.

- What additional supports were available?
- What were the exemption criteria?

We looked at past papers and sample questions. We found out how NAPLAN was to be carried out at our school and where the children would sit the test. We investigated how students would be prepared for the test and who was responsible for setting it all up.

There were so many things to research and get answers to and all with the knowledge that we had a difficult relationship with the Principal and a new Vice Principal had just started. What kept us going and energised us to find answers and make the right decision for George was the vision we had for his life.

We discussed the situation with other parents who also had children who were facing the NAPLAN assessment and heard about another family who were working with the school to adapt a paper to suit their child. We discussed the issue with the Testing Authority in NSW.

We looked over the advocacy information we had received over the years through attending workshops about people with disability living inclusive lives, to strengthen our resolve and give us the confidence in what we were trying to achieve for George.

We then came to our first decision and we decided to arrange an exemption for George from the NAPLAN test. The test wasn't going to be something that would match George's learning experience and skill development. These things, however, were very important to us. Our vision for George was that he had the opportunity to demonstrate his capabilities and see his development with everybody else.

The key person now was George's classroom teacher. We shared our vision and the goals we had for George being supported in his role as student. Together with the teacher we looked at old papers and worked on writing suitable questions for George. We explored the further learning opportunities that a NAPLAN type experience would provide, such as sitting under test conditions and the independence he could learn.

We came up with questions that followed the NAPLAN format but represented the sorts of things that George was learning in class. The teacher then cut and pasted these questions onto an old NAPLAN paper so that George could do his test at the same time and under the same conditions as his classmates. He wrote his name and class on the paper as everyone else did and had been coached with his classmates that he couldn't talk during the test, or ask for help. If he didn't know something he just had to move on to the next question. This was an important learning experience for George, as he had never had an experience where he could not ask for help before.

After the test experience, George demonstrated that he was keen to be more independent in the classroom. He is now happy to have the teacher help him start his work and then be left to complete it by himself. This obviously, helps the teacher circulate around the room more but it has also raised her expectations of what George is able to accomplish. In fact, the whole NAPLAN experience made her realise that George is more capable than she had first thought. I also hoped that the teacher will be more open to inviting suggestions from us and thinking of creative ways to support George in participating in all the classroom experiences of year 3.

Some of the best feedback came from George's new teacher in year 4. She commented that she observed something unusual about the way that the other children related to George in the classroom. In past years, when she had had a student with developmental disability or learning difficulties, the other students tended to baby them. This was not the case with George. The other students treated him no differently and accepted him for his age and similarity with themselves. These comments are the things that motivate me to keep pushing and putting the effort into finding and adapting ways for George to be part of classroom experiences to the fullest extent possible. The more he shares experiences with other kids the more they see him as a valid and valuable member of the class. To them he's just another student.

So was it important to sit the NAPLAN test? No, it wasn't necessary for George to sit the official NAPLAN test but it was vital he shared in the NAPLAN experience. Being prepared, coached and tested with the whole class confirmed that he belonged.

This experience reinforced to us how important our vision is for guiding decision making around George. By staying true to our vision we believed we reached the best possible outcome. We will be using our vision as a guide into the future.