

THE CONVERSATION

NAPLAN's tale of two territories: why ACT and NT are on opposite ends of the spectrum

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Stewart Riddle

Senior Lecturer at University of Southern Queensland



Isolation affects ability to perform on national standardised tests. AAP/Neda Vanovac

The preliminary results for this year's national literacy and numeracy tests were released yesterday and the media went into the usual clamour of panic and education-in-crisis. Nationally, literacy and numeracy results are **stagnating** and **stalling**. Results across the board have **flatlined**.

The most improved award goes to Queensland and the Northern Territory continues to lag well behind the Australian Capital Territory, which consistently **tops the pack**. But is this the full story of NAPLAN?

A tale of two territories

One way to tell the story a little differently is to look at the two Australian territories, the NT and the ACT.

Demographically, they are quite distinct. The ACT has a population of approximately 387,600 located in a geographical area of 2,358 square kilometres, whereas the NT has a population of approximately 244,300 in an area of 1,349,129 sq. km.

Over 40% of students in the NT are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, of whom nearly nine out of ten live in very remote communities. This is in stark contrast to the mainly urban students in the ACT, where only 1.7% of the population are Indigenous.



Geolocation, Indigeneity, language, access to internet, parental income and education levels affect test results.

AAP/Neda Vanovac

The Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage was developed to assist test result comparisons by taking into account socio-economic context.

A cursory glance at the My School website shows the huge gap between many schools in the NT and those in the ACT. For example, Maningrida College in the NT has an index of 603, compared to 1128 at Alfred Deakin High School in the ACT. Both are government schools.

You get a compounding effect of educational disadvantage when combining geolocation (urban, rural, remote and very remote), Indigeneity and other factors such as language, access to internet, parental income and education levels.

It should be no surprise then that while the NT consistently performs lowest on national and international tests, with a long tail of low achievement, the ACT consistently performs highest.

The long tail of low achievement is also reflected in Australia's performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In the 2012 results the difference between the top and bottom SES quartiles was equal to two-and-a-half years of schooling. This is reflected in the results of the ACT and the NT.

In these latest preliminary NAPLAN results, the 2015 percentage of students at or above the Year 9 reading benchmark in the ACT is 94%. Only 66.3% of Year 9 students in the NT are meeting the same benchmark.

In other words, nearly one in three Year 9 students in the NT cannot read at a level suitable for their schooling. The more isolated the student, the lower the performance.

Indigeneity is also a significant factor. Data from the full 2014 NAPLAN report show that less than one in ten remote Indigenous Year 9 students in the NT met the reading benchmark, compared to nine out of ten non-Indigenous NT students. At the same time, 79.4% of Indigenous and 94.3% of non-Indigenous Year 9 students in the ACT met or exceeded the benchmark.

The picture is slightly better for students living in Darwin, where 68.7% of Indigenous Year 9 students met the benchmark. Yet this is still well below the national average. These results

have been fairly consistent since 2008, so when the final report is released in December, expect to see little change.

The low rates of participation are also worth noting. Only 68.4% of Indigenous Year 9 students in NT sat the 2014 reading test, compared to 94.8% of non-Indigenous NT students. Similarly, there were 72.3% Indigenous and 90.1% non-Indigenous Year 9 students in ACT who sat the test. It is difficult to know what effect the withdrawals, exemptions and absenteeism have on the results.

What can be done?

Evidently, the data from the NT and ACT point to an issue of educational disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as the impacts of geolocation and other socio-economic factors on learning success.

Improving educational outcomes is a complex issue and is not helped by calls for a return to basics or by sensationalist headlines. Simple policy strategies, such as attendance measures, funding for Indigenous boarding and direct instruction packages, will not in themselves produce much that is lasting and meaningful.

A more nuanced approach is needed. The NT Department of Education's Indigenous Education Strategy 2015-2024 has some promise with its commitment to engage communities, focus on strengths-based teaching and learning programs, along with a clear focus on early childhood, primary and secondary education pathways. Of course, time will show how this policy plays out in the lives of NT learners.



Indigenous education
northern territory
NAPLAN
indigenous education participation
NT