

Performative practices and ‘authentic accountabilities’: Targeting students, targeting learning?

Ian Hardy

University of Queensland, Australia: i.hardy@uq.edu.au

Vincente Reyes

University of Queensland, Australia: vicente.reyes@uq.edu.au

M. Obaidul Hamid

University of Queensland, Australia: m.hamid@uq.edu.au

This paper critiques recent practices in schooling, particularly efforts to enhance student learning outcomes for more performative purposes. Such practices have become increasingly prevalent as part of a broader trend towards results-oriented accountability practices, with concomitant pressures upon teachers and students to achieve particular outcomes as evidence of improvement—and often in relation to various forms of local, national, and international standardized tests. The research draws upon experiences of teachers in one school in Australia as they grappled with various reform initiatives as part of their overall School Improvement Plan to enhance educational outcomes for students. This paper draws upon theorizing and research into specific practices of performativity, particularly how children, data and teachers’ learning processes are all constituted as “targets” for continuous intervention. As well as revealing the problematic effects of more performative accountabilities, the research also shows how alternative more “authentic” forms of accountability were in evidence and enacted by those constituted through these processes. This paper seeks to provide insights into how teachers’ work and learning are heavily influenced by performative pressures, but also how teachers might contest the more instrumental and technicist influences of such practices.

Keywords: accountability; performativity; standardized tests; data; teacher learning

INTRODUCTION

This paper critiques recent practices in schooling, particularly efforts to enhance student learning outcomes for more performative purposes. Such practices have become increasingly prevalent as part of a broader trend towards results-oriented accountability practices, with concomitant pressures upon teachers and students to achieve outcomes as evidence of improvement—and often in relation to various forms of local, national, and international standardized tests. The research draws upon experiences of teachers in one school in northern Queensland, Australia, as they grappled with various reform initiatives as part of an overall School Improvement Plan to enhance educational outcomes for students. While much has been written about performative practices in schooling settings around the world, particularly in relation to various high-stakes testing regimes, the

specificity of how such practices play out in practice in teachers' work and learning is an area for ongoing inquiry. Furthermore, the way in which such practices are not simply homogenizing but how they might be open to challenge requires investigation and interrogation. This paper draws upon theorizing and research into specific practices of performativity, particularly how children, data, and teachers' learning processes are all constituted as "targets" for continuous intervention. As well as revealing the problematic effects of more performative accountabilities, the research also shows how alternative more "authentic" forms of accountability were in evidence and enacted by those constituted through these processes. In this way, the paper seeks to provide insights into how teachers' work and learning are heavily influenced by performative pressures and also how teachers can contest the more instrumental and technicist influences of such practices.

PERFORMATIVITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Performative practices have had significant effects upon educators' work and learning. In his authoritative account of performativity in educational settings, Ball (2003) referred to performativity as:

[A] new mode of state regulation which makes it possible to govern in an "advanced liberal" way. It requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. To set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation. (p. 215)

Ball (2003) argues performativity, alongside processes of managerialism and the market, operate as the three key policy technologies of educational reform. These approaches sit in tension with and seek to replace earlier professional and bureaucratic approaches that are seen as intrinsically self-serving and/or insufficiently responsive to changing economic, social, and political needs. Performative practices rely upon various "judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change" (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Significantly, performativity hinges on acceptance that various forms of measures, or "displays" of quality are worthy ways to capture the "quality" of that which is under investigation: "As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement" (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Notably for the argument presented in this paper, Ball (2003) also flagged the notion of various "targets" as an example of the sorts of "discursive interventions" introduced into public sector organizations to effect improvement.

Such an approach to performative practices reduces judgement to various input-output relations and means-end logics. As Bartos (1990) argued almost three decades ago, performative practices come to dominate in settings where alternative conceptions of understanding ("other grand narratives of social cohesion" (p. 351)) lose their influence. Jeffrey (2014) flags how a key reason for the lack of professional control in education has been because of the increased influence of market-oriented models that seek to foreground links between education and economic prerogatives. Issues of citizenship, participation and democracy more broadly become attenuated within such debates as the clamour and concern about relative economic competitiveness of nation-states becomes increasingly tied to educational attainments, particularly in relation to international markers of achievement.

Various large-scale assessments at international, national, and provincial/state levels are construed as central to the constitution of necessary forms of educational accountabilities, cultivating what Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, and Sellar (2016) refer to as “globalised educational accountabilities.” This is also part of the intensely comparative processes that have come to characterize educational practices more broadly, including how the “global eye” (via international tests) and the “national eye” (via national tests) govern education in complementary ways (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003). Under these circumstances, performative practices constitute part of a broader “neoliberal cascade” (Connell, 2013) that has afflicted education and that seeks to reposition schooling within the prism of the market.

Such competitive practices are evident in how students make sense of their schooling experiences, including in relation to external markers of success, such as external tests (Keddie, 2016), but also how teachers are similarly constituted through such performative pressures and demands. There is a sense in which those influenced by these demands are constructed through particular mechanisms for measuring, monitoring, and managing student learning, and that, while there may be advantages for some students through such processes, this requires much greater scrutiny (Hardy, 2017). This includes the way in which such mechanisms operate to “make individuals ‘want’ what the system needs to perform well” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 62).

ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITIES

In contrast to these more performative practices and restrictive conceptions of accountability, O’Neill (2013) advocates what she describes as much more “intelligent” forms of accountability. Such an approach acknowledges that various “secondary” uses to which student assessment results are put can be deeply problematic, particularly when used for purposes remote from original intentions, such as to guide or support particular policy arguments.

Drawing explicitly upon Strathern’s (1997) forthright criticism that “when a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a good measure” (p. 308), O’Neill (2013) argues for the importance of trust in professional judgement and decision-making. For O’Neill (2013), “[a]n intelligent form of accountability would need to offer the public, parents and pupils evidence which they can use as a basis for placing or refusing trust in teachers, in exams and in schools” (p. 14). O’Neill (2013) argues against various sorts of “performance indicators” that use what she describes as “bogus units of measurement” (p. 14). Such measures need to be challenged and greater recognition afforded to the position that substantive educational outcomes cannot be counted or ranked. She is also critical of the use of such problematic numbers that encourage various perverse incentives—incentives that have been found in the Australian context to include gaming at the state level and not just within schools (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). Relatedly, rather than assuming some sort of comparability between subjects to “game” accountability metrics, there needs to be much greater attention to the integrity and inherent benefits of particular kinds of knowledge. The result would be more informed and independent judgements that could be communicated intelligibly to the multiple audiences to whom various forms of account should or need to be provided.

Lingard et al. (2016) refer to “rich accountabilities” to capture alternatives to the performative accountabilities encouraged by various national and international testing

regimes. Focusing upon what they describe as the “democratic deficit” inherent in a landscape in which politicians, policy makers, and those engaged in edu-businesses of various sorts seem to be the dominant actors in educational decision-making, and in which educational privatization has become increasingly diffuse (Verger, 2016), they argue for forms of accountability that are context-responsive. Such approaches take into account the perspectives of local community stakeholder groups about the needs of those in their schools and what they value. They also argue for a position that seeks to identify “relationships of complementarity rather than contradiction” (p. 153) regarding these “richer” forms of accountability. Such approaches help reconstitute the relationship between various forms of data collected in schools and schooling systems, the specific practices that constitute teachers’ practices in these settings and the values that underpin the collection of such data, and alternative approaches to accountabilities.

Consequently, even as they have come to exert so much influence over professional practice, there remains scepticism about the worth of more performative approaches to schooling and accountability. From the outset of their widespread use, and again drawing upon Bartos (1990) in relation to performance indicators in school and university settings, “even from the core of the administrative apparatuses responsible for the propagation of performance indicators emerges a remarkable diffidence about their worth” (p. 352). Also, in the context of these globalizing educational accountabilities (Lingard et al., 2016), it is important to consider not only the response of the nation and sub-national bodies with responsibilities for education (particularly important in federated jurisdictions such as Australia where the individual states/provinces have constitutional responsibility for education provision), but also how those “at the coal-face”, teachers and principals in schools, seek to make sense of the increased pressures upon their work and learning. It is these experiences that constitute the substance of this paper.

CONTEXT: POLICY AND PRACTICE

The Australian and Queensland policy contexts

Since 2008, through the National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), national testing has been a key feature of the Australian schooling landscape. Such testing is part of a broader trend towards increased homogenization of schooling practice in Australia. During the past decade, schooling has been arguably reconstituted in dramatic ways through an increasingly national agenda—in curriculum (through the instigation of the Australian Curriculum), in teaching (through development of the National Professional Standards for Teachers), and in assessment (through NAPLAN). These processes have been particularly acute in the Queensland context, where relatively low performance in the inaugural test in 2008 led to increased scrutiny of teachers’ practices. A heightened sense of anxiety was also cultivated through the commissioning of the Australian Council for Educational Research to conduct a review of the state of literacy, numeracy, and science performance in Queensland schools at this time. The resulting report, *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* (Masters, 2009) and subsequent school auditing processes arising out of the report, helped set the scene for much closer scrutiny of schooling practices in Queensland.

The school

All schools in Queensland felt the pressure occasioned by the focus upon students' results at this time. Schools were subject to various "Teaching and Learning Audits" as part of quadrennial school reviews as well as when a new principal was appointed or when schools requested such reviews. Even "Independent Public Schools", that is, schools deemed capable of taking greater control over budgeting and staffing, such as the school reported upon in this paper, were subject to scrutiny—however, this was considered more "light touch" than in other public/state schools. While these schools had less formalized relationships with their local regional/district education authority, pressures and demands from the "centre," as expressed through the regional educational authority, continued to be exert influence.

Serving a lower to middle class community in the northern half of the state, the school referred to in this paper had approximately 850 students, 10% of whom identified as Indigenous, and was relatively large by Queensland standards. As part of its efforts to foster ongoing teacher learning and school reform, the school encouraged teacher learning through what it described as various "Inquiry Cycle"—"Spirals of Inquiry." However, this was only one initiative among several stimuli, including various "short-term data cycles" and "data conversations," to encourage teachers to consider the nature of their practices vis-à-vis student learning. This paper explores the nature of these practices in relation to how they constituted teachers' work under these broader policy conditions of ongoing scrutiny of data as evidence of student and teachers' teaching.

The data

Data comprised interviews with 23 teachers (approximately half the teaching staff) from Prep to Grade 6, undertaken in the first half of 2017. These interviews were the latest in a series of data collection processes, including ongoing observations of professional development meetings, and interviews with teachers about the nature of their work and learning. The interviews focused on the nature of teacher and student practices in the context of efforts to enhance teachers' learning and school reform practices more generally, including various short-term data cycles and data conversations. To better understand these practices, an emergent thematic analysis approach (Shank, 2002) was undertaken, involving reading and re-reading interview data, in light of existing understandings about the performative nature of schooling practices.

This analytical process revealed three key themes pertaining to: the targeting of specific students, especially those deemed likely to be moved from just below failing to passing grades; a focus upon particular kinds of "target data" deemed important for "keeping track" of student progress, and; a focus upon the short-term data cycles as vehicles for "tracking" these students.

TARGETING STUDENTS: "KIDS THAT TEACHERS THINK THEY CAN SHIFT"

There was a clear sense in which targeted students were those students just below a C or pass level. As in other international contexts (e.g., US, see Booher-Jennings, 2005, and UK see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), these were students who, with a little extra attention, were deemed to be able to attain a passing grade. This was also very much a "targeted

intervention” in that a strategic approach was deemed necessary to affect the sorts of improvement demanded by broader system imperatives:

You usually aim for a child who’s around the D mark because some of those poor little darlings in the E—it’s quite possible they’re always going to be an E for whatever their story is. (Celeste, Prep teacher, May 2017)

I’ve got four sitting on a D, so we only sort of targeted two or three from each class... [The 4th person] has other learning difficulties that, yeah . . . I guess in a way she’s, she’s receiving support anyway. So, the other ones are less targeted in a way. (Jacinta, Year 5 Teacher, May 2017)

As part of this process, there was recognition that while other students could be targeted, there was some sense of justification in trying to “get . . . those low kids up to standard.” Targeted students were those students who were deemed to be just below a pass level in English and who, with additional assistance, were construed as able to improve their results:

Because they’re the ones that they’re not quite at the level, like they are a bit lower, and so we’re identifying what they need to increase their knowledge base. (Margot, Year 1, May 2017)

They’re just sort of sitting below where they need to be. (Jacinta, Year 5, May 2017)

These target students are students that, I would say are just below a passing level in English, and that could be in all areas... So, my aim for those target children is to get them to a C level. (Corinna, Prep Teacher, May 2017)

Reflecting the constitutive power of these performative pressures (Ball, 2003), some teachers engaged in elaborate categorizing processes as a result of this targeting, and sought to promulgate how they were seeking to give attention to other students, not just those immediately below the benchmark:

My “Smarties” would be the ones that are really close to a C if you gave them that extra target area. And then the “Skittles” would definitely be that D student that you really hope that you can shift to a C. (Larna, Prep, May 2017)

Importantly, these students were perceived as those “who could be shifted”:

So, in the majority of the cases it’s Ds to C—kids that teachers think they can shift with a bit of focused intervention. (Sonia, Head of Curriculum, March 2017)

However, there was also recognition that this was not straightforward, and that attention needed to be given to other students as well:

We are trying to give equal amounts of attention to most groups and differentiating for most groups... the others deserve just as much attention to try and get their grades up. (Larna, Prep, May 2017)

That this process of responding to students’ needs was challenging was evident in recognition that students’ results were not stable, but always subject to change. In a sense, they were “shifting targets.” and this notion of targeting only made sense in relation to closer scrutiny of their actual work:

And see, even now, I could probably change some of my kids... because the Cs... depending on the task, they might not be any good at—a lot of them, they do lack the comprehension. (Faith, Year 4 Teacher, May 2017)

There were challenges in relation to this work of fostering these students’ improvement:

Performative practices and ‘authentic accountabilities’

Um not all of them, not all of them [are improving at satisfactory rate]... two out of the three have definitely moved up, whether it would be to a solid C; we’re still, I’m still hopeful... Yep, work in progress. (Jacinta, Year 5 Teacher, May 2017)

There was also hesitation around recognizing students’ improvement if there were concerns about the consistency of their responses:

Because I don’t want—in a way, I don’t want to give her a C and then all of a sudden, she dives, it’s not as good. She has improved, but whether it’s enough to be a C. (Faith, Year 4 Teacher, May 2017)

Teachers also expressed reservations about only targeting specific students more broadly, leading to an intensification of focus upon all students:

Each group becomes a targeted group rather than just your one . . . I like to target all of my students. (Felicia, Prep teacher, May 2017)

As for her colleague mentioned earlier, for this teacher all students were explicitly acknowledged as worthy of attention, not just those targeted for additional interventions. The conception of accountability at play was somewhat broader, more “intelligent” (O’Neill, 2013), than that characterized by more performative concerns alone.

TARGET DATA: ‘IT LOOKS BETTER’

Students were targeted because of concerns about their performance and because this performance was seen as amenable to intervention and, ultimately, enhanced results, particularly in relation to regionally sanctioned data. There was a considerable focus upon targeting these students as a way to ensure the data “looks better,” and even as it was acknowledged that these students would not always be the ones who were “targeted”:

Because it looks better in the data. It’s data-driven. (Leila, Year 3 Teacher, May 2017)

I guess it’s always been a bit of a focus and I guess the idea is if you push those Ds to Cs, your LoA data looks better. But I know that there’s talk that perhaps in the next cycle it might be a focus on how do we get those Cs up. So, it won’t always be that. (Kelsey, Year 4 Coach, March 2017)

There was speculation among some teachers that this pressure to ensure the data “looks better” was seen as a regional directive, influenced by broader national (NAPLAN) data outcomes. Pressure “from above” was seen as influential:

I don’t know whether it’s pressure from [the region]—I know it’s . . . talked about the triangulation of the data . . . our NAPLAN results say, last year, were showing that our students were doing better than what we were giving them on their [A-E] achievement. (Leila, Year 3 Teacher, May 2017)

I think personally it’s pressure from “above” on admin to get the results lifted. So, kind of filters down to us where it’s our job to get them lifted. It’s all about data . . . I think [principal] is probably getting a, “Why have you got so many Ds? What are you doing?”. (Linda, Year 4, March 2017)

However, there were no such hesitations in relation to understanding the source of the focus upon enhancing data within the school more broadly among other teachers. That the principal had to meet specified targets himself in relation to regional targets was explicit for some teachers. These targets placed increased pressure on teachers, even as they recognized that different cohorts of students performed differently from year to year,

and meant it was not practical to automatically push for ever increasing school-wide attainment targets:

[Principal] tries not—as far as possible—he tries not to put the pressure on. But in his role, he has to meet targets from the ARD [Assistant Regional Director] and above for what regional directives are. So, if we have a target of—and it was—80 per cent of students would have a C or B or A . . . And then it was, “Well, you’re nearly there, so why not make it 85!” . . . Okay so now, oh my goodness you’ve killed yourself to get to 83 per cent, so now let’s raise it to 87 per cent! And as much as [principal] tries not to make that a pressure, it is a pressure! When you look at your year level and each, each group is different. So, my group of students this year, the results, the percentage results this year, will be different from last year. (Felicia, Prep teacher, May 2017)

However, while there was a sense that there was much attention on data for the sake of data within the administration team within the school, teachers resisted such characterizations:

They [administration team] want to improve their data . . . But that’s not what it’s about. It’s about trying to improve the academics about that child, the learning of that child. But for them [administration team], it’s about the improvement in their data . . . they have their little graphs and their little walls. (Celeste, Prep, May 2017)

In a sense, this teacher sought to resist more performative pressures around the data as she critiqued the nature of the relations to data among members of the administration team.

At the same time, and in spite of these pressures, there was also a sense in which teachers were striving to improve the educational experiences for these students, to help them attain age-appropriate benchmarks:

We’ve got the target students that we’re trying to really make a difference. I think we targeted about five students each, some four, some six . . . To try and get them to a level where they are at age-appropriate. (Eric, Year 6, May 2017)

Teachers also seemed to take up this agenda themselves. This included helping students to express themselves in their written expression, as well as orally:

I feel that if I can sort of put a bit extra into them and just sort of consolidate—like I feel that they’ve got the skills there; they just need that extra bit of a push to build upon their knowledge and build their confidence so that they can be sort of moving up, and just sort of consolidating their understanding . . . Orally, they can answer any questions I give them and stuff like that, but it’s getting it into writing. (Frances, Year 1 Teacher, March 2017)

For a colleague, the capacity to “measure” learning was not considered the most important aspect of teaching and learning (cf. Hardy, 2017). It was the actual work students produced that mattered, rather than numeric renderings of such work. The “numbers” were also explicitly recognized as problematic, and a function of the variability within standardized resources, rather than a reflection of students’ actual capacities:

Work samples that the children have produced mean a lot more to me than a number or a letter. So, a writing sample or a speaking sample where they’re showing exactly what they can do is far more informative than, “They’re reading level 3” . . . As far as reading is concerned, that number doesn’t mean anything because across a number 3, level 3, there is a range of texts across that that meet the level 3 criteria! And they might be able to read one of them, but it doesn’t mean they can read that other one. (Felicia, Prep teacher, May 2017)

The specificity of practice, and samples of student work as evidence of students’ learning, were the focus of attention—necessitating professional judgement (O’Neill, 2013)—

rather than various letters and numeric grades that purported to serve as proxies for student learning.

SHORT-TERM DATA CYCLES: 'WHICH PLATE DID I DROP?'

As part of the focus on the targeted “D to C students,” and their associated “target data,” teachers engaged in various processes of collecting data about these students’ progress on an ongoing basis. Described as “short-term data cycles,” this entailed teachers collecting data every week as well as at the end of (typically 5-week) units of work and each term on target students’ performance. Short-term data cycles also involved teachers sitting with a dedicated “coach” for that year level and discussing the proportion of children needing to attain a “C level,” and approaches and strategies to achieve this end. The role of the coach was also central to determining the number of “targeted” students likely to achieve this goal:

So, yesterday I was with [Prep Coach] and we made a goal of 18 students out of 25, to at least get a C level. (Corinna, Prep Teacher, May 2017)

Short-term data cycles. So, we’ve got our literacy coach, and each year level will have someone that they work with, and we have time where we sit with them weekly, just for an hour, and that time is usually used to review the work that you’ve been doing over that week. (Beryl, Year 2 Teacher, March 2017)

This also entailed constant checking from week to week to give students the best possible opportunity to attain a passing grade by the end of the current unit:

We’ll focus on work samples I bring from how they’ve gone for the week, to then guide where we then head, what needs to be covered again or focused on for the next week. (Jacinta, Year 5 Teacher, May 2017)

The short-term data cycles were considered valuable for enabling teachers to reflect upon their practice. Again, reflecting the value of professional judgement (O’Neill, 2013), such reflection about targeted children also contributed to moving beyond broad understandings of their work to deeper engagement in relation to teachers’ understandings of their practice:

Yep, so that’s been really helpful this year actually to have that weekly meeting with [Year 5 coach] and just to sort of—you don’t get a lot of time to sort of sit and reflect about what you’re doing, so it does force you to sit and focus on what it is that you are doing on a daily basis, and on a weekly basis. (Jacinta, Year 5 Teacher, May 2017)

There was also a sense that the focus upon these students would not be forever, and that there would be opportunities for other clusters of students to have increased intervention in the future:

Yeah so, the spiral of inquiry—this is what we kind of went with for the moment, but we are looking at shifting it more from your Cs to your Bs or Bs to As later in the year. (Anastacia, Year 3 Coach, March 2017)

For other teachers, however, and reflecting more “triage-like” practices that advantaged some students over others (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), the focus upon D students that could be moved from a D to a C, seemed more long-term:

Well this is my second year here and we have only ever focused on D students. That’s not changed since I have started. (Linda, Year 4 Teacher)

As a school, each year, we have always picked kids that we have felt that if we gave a bit of a focus to, that they could move from that D level to the C, and just sort of broaden and consolidate their understanding of everything. (Frances, year 1, March 2017)

Some teachers expressed concerns about how this focused attention upon these students could affect the learning of other students as well:

They're taking a lot of my time in the classroom, I would say. I'm finding it hard to have one on one conferencing with other students (Dorothy, Year 4, March 2017).

Teachers struggled with what the focus on these "borderline" students meant for the other students in their classroom, even as they were sympathetic to the broader aims of assisting these students:

Sometimes I'm not sure how many students I should be targeting . . . And I don't want anyone to be left behind. So, that's obviously, like a concern . . . It's like I see the value in having target students, but really, I want them, as any teacher does, all to be improving. (Corinna, Prep Teacher, May 2017)

There was also considerable pressure upon students, such that some students were felt not to cope with the increased attention to their performance:

I do find some of them, because you work with them so much . . . they have got the pressure put on them. And because they are those struggling ones, they can't deal with that sort of—they sort of, in a way, just give up . . . Because we've got the pressure to get them up so they've got the pressure of trying to do what we want . . . they struggle still. (Faith, Year 4 teacher, May 2017)

Reflecting a sense of accountability to their students and not just system measures (Lingard et al., 2016), teachers spoke about the challenges of addressing the needs of all students, and the pressures they felt to do the best they could for all students in their care:

I like to target all of my students . . . I have to keep that balance and I don't want them missing out. And that's where it would be really sad to have, Okay I've got my Ds to Cs but you know what? I didn't get any Bs to As! Or my As drop to Bs because I didn't give them what they needed. And that's the spinning plate. Which plate did I drop? And it smashed. And that's the nature of our job. It's just so complex. (Felicia, Prep teacher, May 2017)

That the processes of more performative targeting could be contested was exemplified in the way these educators sought to address the needs of all their students, and how they sought to contest attention to the learning of certain targeted students. However, this was difficult work.

PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES AND 'AUTHENTIC ACCOUNTABILITIES'

As Ball (2003) notes, "what it means to teach and what it means to be a teacher (a researcher, an academic) are subtly but decisively changed in the processes of reform" (p. 218). Language matters in relation to this reworking of professional identity and being (Ball, 2003). In the analysis presented here, the sheer extent to which teachers used the term 'targets' and talked about their work and their students in light of various pressures to ensure attainment of particular outcomes reflects the discursive power of these technologies. Importantly, what these teachers seemed to be learning was that what mattered was the ability to engage with specific 'targeted' students, to ensure that the data of their students reflected year level standard, and to somehow manage as best they could the conflicting demands on their time as they sought to respond to the needs of all their students and more performative demands.

In one sense, there was something seductive about focusing upon the targeted students. These were, after all, under-performing students. These were students that teachers felt that if they 'gave a bit of a focus to,' they could enhance their learning. The short-term data cycles were premised on the assumption that through specific, targeted interventions, it was possible to redress student underperformance quickly, and that because some of these students had been under-performing for some time, the more quickly they attained their respective year levels, the better would be their future opportunities to learn in subsequent years and beyond school more generally. In a way, these teachers felt the weight of responsibility for these struggling students, and a level of professional accountability to do the best they could for these students. Similarly, the way in which teachers valued the opportunity to engage in detailed, regular and structured conversations as part of the short-term data cycles was a form of professional learning that helped them develop a sense of how their students were progressing—part of the logics of professional accountability to their students and colleagues (O'Neill, 2013). Such sustained attention upon students deemed likely to benefit from additional assistance seemed productive.

However, these were also students 'singled out' and 'identified' for specific attention and intervention, and in ways not available (at least at that point) to other students. There was clear evidence of fissures and fractures in relation to more performative renderings of professional practice—and of teachers' conceptions of themselves as teachers and the children as students. That such ruptures played out in concerns on the part of teachers about the ramifications of such targeted interventions reveals the hesitations many teachers had about these processes. The focus on specific students was a recurring concern for teachers as they sought to ensure that they 'targeted' all students, not just those who were somehow construed as "suitable cases for treatment" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 133). This was a different form of 'targeting' however, and more reflective of deep convictions—an authentic remonstrance—about the need to seek to enhance learning opportunities for all students. This included concerns about not only increased pressure upon teachers but also how increased pressure on some of these students was having a deleterious impact upon their sense of well-being, resulting in some students "in a way, just giv[ing] up." Such concerns resonate with Strathern's (1997) argument that "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (p. 308). One teacher's reference to the metaphor of each individual student's learning as a spinning plate and the potential for it to be dropped, to be 'smashed,' reflects the seriousness with which these teachers considered their work and that the focus upon attaining specific targets had reduced significantly the efficacy of such measures in relation to all of their students' learning.

Perhaps what is needed is not only a conception of trust and 'intelligent' accountability that helps give confidence to the public, parents, and pupils as to whether or not they should trust teachers, exams, and schools (O'Neill, 2013), or 'rich' accountabilities focused upon broader social and systemic supports for teachers' learning (Lingard et al., 2016)—essential though these are—but a form of accountability that draws upon teachers' own knowledge, reservations, and hesitations as 'authentic' forms of understanding about whether what they are doing is indeed in the best interests of their students.

More authentic accountabilities foreground the needs of all students in relation to their current learning capacities and capabilities—some of which may be able to be ascertained

from various forms of more standardized data (such as test scores, and various forms of 'levelled' readers, or more generic regional indicators). However, such accountabilities pertain to evidence of the broader social and academic development of students more broadly, cultivating a sense of purpose and positioning as future citizens working for a more equitable, sustainable (ecologically, economically, and politically) world order. Such an approach would help rebuild confidence in the teaching profession and help to recalibrate and reconstitute the forms of professional knowledge needed under current policy conditions of acritical trust in numeric conceptions of schooling attainment as somehow valid proxies of education (Connell, 2013).

These more 'authentic' approaches seemed to be evident in the way teachers flagged how it was actual instances of student work (student work samples) that mattered, rather than 'a number or a letter'. Similarly, criticisms of "admin's . . . little graphs and little walls" reflect a counter to more overtly performative practices, with their foci upon particular measures and data as proxies for student learning. The way in which some students "with other learning difficulties" were perceived as already "on my radar" revealed how processes of keeping account of all students and their needs were crucial, and very much a part of what these teachers were seeking to do.

While recognizing that teachers' professional practice should be subject to scrutiny, much greater trust and respect for the professional capacities and responsibilities of teachers who genuinely seek to foster the best for their students would seem a productive starting point for challenging performative pressures and promoting a sense of professionalism that extends current understandings of intelligent accountability. Such responses seem to complement the sorts of 'rich accountabilities' that draw upon the perspectives and input of a wider range of stakeholders in education (including the broader community) (Lingard et al., 2016). However, given the supposed demise of professional accountability (Ranson, 2003), focused attention upon teachers as active actors and interrogators of more performative practices would seem essential for redressing current concerns in relation to performativity surrounding schooling.

The ways in which teachers interrogated the more reductive approaches to data within the school also reveal more evidence-informed rather than 'data-driven' approaches to teachers' learning. Such approaches entail teachers interrogating and critiquing multiple forms of evidence of their work and learning and gesturing towards a more 'researchly disposition' (Lingard & Renshaw, 2009). Such perspectives challenge more problematic performative practices, even as all forms of data simultaneously constitute opportunities for genuine interrogation of student work; this latter point is in keeping with Lingard et al.'s (2016) argument about the complementarity rather than contradictions that can and should attend various forms of assessment data.

Even as some may argue that we have witnessed the 'demise of the age of professional accountability' (Ranson, 2003, p. 459), the data would suggest that teachers have not simply 'given up' on their professional responsibilities, understood as ongoing, context-responsive approaches to addressing the needs of their students. However, they also struggle to be sufficiently responsive to these needs in the context of more performative practices. What seems to be missing are 'opportunities to contest, discuss, and debate the value and purposes of schooling' (Lingard et al., 2016). Such opportunities would help contribute to a sense of authenticity about educational practice and its outcomes that seems to be missing within more performative discourses. And in the context of complex environments, such as that presented here in which the needs of Indigenous students

continue to require addressing much more substantively (alongside other marginalized students), the focus of standardized measures of achievement present as indicators that effectively inhibit the nature of the dialogue that has to ensue about students' needs. However, even as more performative practices have had significant influence, alternative, more 'authentic' approaches and focuses have sought to focus necessary attention upon the actual practices of students and teachers as they have sought to reorient more reductive demands. Such responses could help fuel productive responses, including at the national level and internationally. Such possibilities are particularly important, given how broader global processes are always and everywhere heavily mediated by the particular histories and political conditions that characterize national policies and contexts (Carnoy, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In a sense, the hesitations expressed by teachers about the focus upon target students, and emphasis upon data for the sake of data, reflect concerns about the authenticity of teachers' work as educators. While more performative practices clearly exerted influence, these teachers' efforts to critique the targeting of specific students, the focus upon data for its own sake, and attention to the short-term data cycles as vehicles for effecting performative improvements also provide clear evidence of concerns about the authenticity of the educational provision of their work and learning. Such responses reflect a form of professional practice that genuinely and 'authentically' seeks to minimize the problematic effects of more performative practices that currently characterize schooling in Queensland, and other national and sub-national settings, even as more performative practices exert influence.

REFERENCES

- Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
- Bartos, M. (1990). Performance and performativity in education. *Journal of Sociology*, 26(3), 351–367.
- Booher-Jennings, J. (2005). Below the bubble: "Educational triage" and the Texas accountability system. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), 231–268.
- Carnoy, M. (2016). Educational policies in the face of globalization: Whither the nation state? In K. Mundy, A. Green, B. Lingard, & A. Verger (Eds.), *The handbook of global education policy* (pp. 27–42). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Connell, R. (2013). The neoliberal cascade and education: An essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 99–112.
- Gillborn, D. & Youdell, D. (2000). *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform and equity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hardy, I. (2017). Measuring, monitoring, and managing for productive learning? Australian insights into the enumeration of education. *Revista de la Asociación de Sociología de la Educación (RASE – Spanish Journal of Sociology of Education)*, 10(2), 192–208.

- Jeffrey, B. (2014). Introduction. In A. Rasmussen, J. Gustafsson, & B. Jeffrey (Eds.), *Performativity in education: An international collection of ethnographic research on learners' experiences* (pp. i–x). Stroud: E&E Publishing.
- Keddie, A. (2016). Children of the market: Performativity, neoliberal responsabilisation and the construction of student identities. *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(1), 108–122.
- Lingard, B., Martino, W., Rezai-Rashti, G., & Sellar, S. (2016). *Globalising educational accountabilities*. New York: Routledge.
- Lingard, B., & Renshaw, P. (2009). Teaching as a research-informed and research-informing profession. In A. Campbell, & S. Groundwater-Smith (Eds.), *Connecting inquiry and professional learning in education: International perspectives and practical solution*. London: Routledge.
- Lingard, B., & Sellar, S. (2013). “Catalyst data”: Perverse systemic effects of audit and accountability in Australian schooling. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(5), 634–656.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1984). *The post-modern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Masters, G. (2009). *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Nóvoa, A., & Yariv-Mashal, T. (2003). Comparative research in education: A mode of governance or a historical journey? *Comparative Education*, 39(4), 423–438.
- O’Neill, O. (2013). Intelligent accountability in education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(1), 4–16.
- Ranson, S. (2003). Public accountability in the age of neo-liberal governance. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(5), 459–480.
- Shank, G. (2002) *Qualitative research: A personal skills approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Strathern, M. (1997). Improving ratings: Audit in the British university system. *European Review*, 5, 305–321.
- Verger, A. (2016) The global diffusion of education privatization: Unpacking and theorizing policy adoption. In K. Mundy, A. Green, B. Lingard, & A. Verger (Eds.), *The handbook of global education policy* (pp. 64–80). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.