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Data driven accountability in Australia: An unfolding story with lessons for leaders

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Throughout the world, state and national standardised testing of children and teenagers has become a part of the educational landscape. Yet, it has only been in the last three years that national testing and the publication of national testing results have become a significant part of the national agenda in Australia. This makes a significant shift in policy and practice towards performance-driven accountability regimes and has created particular types of implications for school leaders. In this paper we refer to some recent research and literature that provides important messages for school principals in Australia to help them think about their work in times of data driven accountability.

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Introduction

Throughout the world, state and national standardised testing of children has become a "huge industry" (English, 2002). Although English is referring to the American system which has been involved in standardised testing for over half a century, the same could be said of many other countries, including Australia. It has been only in recent years that Australia has embraced national testing as part of a wider reform effort to bring about increased accountability in schooling. The results of high-stakes tests in Australia are now published in newspapers and electronically on the Australian Federal Government's *My School* (www.myschool.edu.au) website. *My School* provides results on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Data are available that compare schools to statistically similar schools. This more recent publication of national testing results in Australia is a visible example of "contractual accountability", described by Mulford, Edmunds, Kendall, Kendall and Bishop (2008) as "the degree to which [actors] are fulfilling the expectations of particular audiences in terms of standards, outcomes and results" (p.20).

In this paper we argue that Australia is a case study in the making when it comes to data driven accountability. This case lies in contrast to the United States where data-driven decision making has been used for many years by school and system leaders to interpret and analyse data across a range of areas in education including professional development and student learning outcomes (Park & Datnow, 2009). It seems to us that school leaders in Australia have a real opportunity to learn from the experiences of their colleagues in other countries regarding data driven accountability. In the paper, then, we distil some key messages from the literature and research for school leaders regarding the ways they can establish data cultures within schools that work towards improving learning for all students. We see that improved learning is more than simply improvement via test scores; our view is holistic as it holds that schools should provide rich and valuable learning opportunities for all students (regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, gender or ethnicity), that improve their life chances so that they can live productive and fulfilling lives. We also recognise that not all learning is measurable. The next part of the discussion puts forward eight messages for the consideration of school leaders in regard to improving student learning.

Message 1: Leaders to have a good knowledge of data-driven accountability

Given the inescapable current educational context characterised by data-driven accountability, it becomes increasingly important for leaders to have a good understanding of core concepts such as accountability, high-stakes testing and the elements that constitute school data. This is seen to be important for a couple of reasons. Firstly, having a good understanding is necessary if leaders are going to fulfil their contractual accountability obligations to the school and to the system. This type of accountability domain is an ever increasing part of school principals' role (Perry, 2007). Secondly, there is some research that suggests there is a link between the effective use of data in decision making and improved student performance outcomes (Alwin 2002, in Park & Datnow, 2009). Thirdly, using data from high stakes testing is likely to hold great potential for diagnostic purposes as it provides educators with valuable information on how to plan for improvements in student learning at the classroom and school level. All of these reasons lend support for leaders (and others) to have a good knowledge of data and data-driven accountability.

Message 2: Leaders to provide learning opportunities for teachers to understand and interpret data

Mandinach and Honey (2008) make the strong claim that interpreting and acting on data must become "routine" across all levels of education such as the classroom, school and district level. It requires educators, both teachers and school and district leaders, to learn new competencies. Both Luke et al. (2004) and Earl (2005) make the argument that teachers need to be learners and successful users of the ever-increasing amount of test data and therefore able to track student performance over time. Such skills relate to the ability to interpret statistical data and perform statistical operations, organise and re-organise data. Along with these statistical skills, teachers need to be able to analyse and interpret educational data, identify trends, and spot anomalies. Yet teachers have not been traditionally equipped with the skills to undertake such activities. Not surprisingly, some research studies (see, Pettit, 2010; Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2009) have shown that teachers tend not to use data well if at all.

For example, in an Australian study of 55 primary and secondary Catholic schools within one diocese in Australia, Petit (2010) found that schools were not using data effectively. Pettit found that "much analysis had been undertaken by a select few members of staff often in isolation from other teachers and with little involvement of the majority of staff" (p. 99). In contrast, recent findings from an OFSTED Report (2009) entitled, *20 outstanding primary schools – excelling against the odds* reported on 20 schools in the United Kingdom that received outstanding student performance. These were primary and infant schools that were located in highly disadvantaged communities. Common to all the schools was that teachers were able to assess accurately where students fell on a learning sequence and were competent in making judgements about what was needed to move these students to the next level (OFSTED, 2009). A message that the OFSTED report provides is that teachers need the skills to interpret and understand data and when they do there can be some real and tangible improvement in terms of student achievement. Thus, the need for teachers to have access to ongoing quality professional development in data driven decision making becomes imperative (Park & Datnow, 2009; Schildkam & Kuiper, 2009).

Message 3: Leaders to create an ethos of improvement

A key message that is apparent in a number of research studies (OFSTED, 2009; Park & Datnow, 2009; Pettit, 2009) is the critical role of leadership not only in underscoring the purpose and value of using data effectively (Pettit, 2009) but also in creating an ethos of continuous improvement. For example, in their United States case study research, Park and Datnow (2009) indicated that both schools and school systems worked together to ensure that data were discussed in an open way without blame. For example, the researchers referred to superintendents who worked closely with principals in a non-evaluative manner to help them understand the data so that they could make some important decisions about moving forward. By the same token, the researchers referred to a similar way that principals then worked with teachers to help them understand data and to deal with it in a trustful and supportive manner. In this way, the data were used "as a resource for asking questions and making improvements" (Park & Datnow, 2009, p. 484) not as an exercise in blaming others. Park and Datnow (2009) maintained that this approach helped to develop support and trust between the various levels within the school and district.

Message 4: Leaders to create a climate of sharing and knowledge brokering

Another important finding from Park and Datnow's (2009) research was that time was set aside for teachers to learn from other teachers and from other school sites. Leaders in the case study schools saw themselves as "knowledge brokers" (p. 488) who helped to link teachers to other teachers with whom they could share knowledge and expertise and learn from each other regarding making sense of data. For example, leaders in these schools set time aside for teachers to work together to discuss data and approaches they were using to improve their instruction. Schildkamp and Kuiper (2009) argue that teacher collaboration is likely to enhance the effective use of data. They suggest setting up teams of teachers and leaders to work together and learn from each other.

Message 5: Leaders to harness newly graduated teachers' expertise

Based on our observations and knowledge of the skill sets of newly graduated teachers in Australia, we believe that school leaders would do well to harness new teachers' expertise as they are more likely to be data savvy than current teachers who have become used to a previous model of education. Students studying to become teachers in some Australian universities now undertake units of study in their program that cover high stakes testing, assessment, interpretation and analysis of data. As an illustration, at the university with which all four authors are involved all final year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students undertake a compulsory subject entitled *Using Education Data.* They leave the university confident and competent in analysing and interpreting a variety of school-based and high-stakes test data. With such experiences, these recent graduates could be considered a valuable resource in the current data-driven education milieu and could make a strong contribution to the learning of other teachers and staff.

Message 6: Leaders to build capacity through modelling and setting high expectations

Another finding from Park and Datnow's (2009) research was that both central office and school leaders became instructional leaders for the staff via their modelling of effective use of the data. This modelling helped to build capacity in teachers. Capacity building, according to Crowther (2010), refers to mobilising school resources intentionally to sustainably enhance a set outcome. If school leaders use educational data as evidence to set and focus on specific school improved outcomes, they are challenging the capacity building potential of the community. In fact, Schildkamp and Kuiper (2009) found that enthusiastic leaders who stressed the value and purpose of data use, and provided an approach for data usage, were more likely to use data effectively.

Message 7: Leaders to encourage staff ownership and commitment to mutual accountability

Encouraging staff ownership and commitment to mutual accountability were findings that emerged from the OFSTED report where it was found that schools which turned around their performance were those where teachers felt ownership towards improving student outcomes. In Pettit's study (2010) principals and teachers indicated that all staff should be involved in using test feedback and planning so that they feel ownership and commitment. It led him to argue there is a strong role for leadership to engage staff in a reflective process so that results of tests can be fed back into classroom practices.

Message 8: Leaders to set an example of moral integrity

Since the introduction of NAPLAN, the media have reported on a number of cases whereby teachers and leaders throughout Australia have used unethical measures to ensure better school performance. For example there have been reports that some schools have given students extra time to complete exams; allegations that some schools have insisted that low performing students should stay away on the day of the tests so as not to pull down the grades of the class; and other reports of interference taking place during invigilation. These sorts of practices undermine the integrity of tests and raise questions about the validity of data. We concur with Newhouse-Maiden (2010) who says that there is a need for moral integrity on the part of leaders and other stakeholders in education to prevent these types of practices from occurring. Leaders should take the lead and set an example for staff in this matter.

Conclusion

In the current climate of data driven accountability, school leaders need to embrace the contractual requirements of their job. At the same time, we believe that school principals should take this opportunity to create school-based learning cultures that utilise data to enhance the multi-faced nature of student learning.

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