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## **My School? Critiquing the abstraction and quantification of Education**

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## **My School? Critiquing the abstraction and quantification of Education**

*Abstract:* This paper draws upon and critiques the Australian federal government's website *My School* as an archetypal example of the current tendency to abstract and quantify educational practice. Arguing in favour of a moral philosophical account of educational practice, the paper reveals how the *My School* website reduces complex educational practices to simple, supposedly objective, measures of student attainment, reflecting the broader 'audit' society/culture within which it is located. By revealing just how extensively the *My School* website reduces educational practices to numbers, the paper argues that we are in danger of losing sight of the 'internal' goods of Education which cannot be readily and simply codified, and that the teacher learning encouraged by the site marginalises more active and collective approaches. While having the potential to serve some beneficial diagnostic purposes, the *My School* website reinforces a view of teachers as passive consumers of information generated beyond their everyday practice.

*Keywords:* *My School*; Educational philosophy; audit culture; teacher accountability; teacher learning.

## **Introduction**

This article critiques the Australian government's *My School* website, a recently developed publicly accessible website designed to report on student attainment on standardised nationwide literacy and numeracy tests. The paper provides a philosophical critique of the website, exploring the extent to which it is genuinely educational in intent. To do so, the paper proceeds through several steps. It firstly provides a philosophical account of Education, drawing upon the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), and applications of MacIntyre's work to Education. It then argues that such a conception of Education has been challenged by a broader shift towards scientific rationality, evidenced recently in the strong reliance upon numerical representations of practice to manage societies as part of the 'audit society' (Power, 1997). In Education, this is manifest in an emphasis upon standardised tests. The paper then provides a summary of the recently instituted Australian government's *My School* website before analysing the extent to which this website is more audit-oriented or educational in its intent, and the nature of the ongoing teacher learning which the website encourages.

## **Understanding Education as a practice**

In order to analyse the nature of the *My School* website, it is firstly necessary to understand the nature of Education as a practice. This section provides an overview of Education as a practice, beginning with a philosophical account of the nature of social practices more generally.

Drawing upon his analysis of the nature of the virtues in classical antiquity, MacIntyre (2007) argues that a practice can only be critiqued on the basis of the specific 'goods' internal to that practice. A practice is:

... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 186)

Practices only make sense in light of the desire to secure the particular goods intrinsic to the activity, rather than simply external goods (such as money and power (Habermas, 1984)) associated with the practice, but not inherent to it. MacIntyre draws on the example of a child playing chess for candy rather than for the enjoyment of the game itself. For the child, chess becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The game represents a vehicle for the attainment of external goods such as candy, but is not in itself recognised as a practice worth engaging in, in and of its own accord. Such external goods may be attained by engaging in other sorts of practices, and do not necessarily arise from participation in the given practice at hand. However, the only way to achieve goods internal to the practice is to participate in the practice itself. These goods cannot be attained vicariously, but are instead a product of sometimes considerable effort and engagement on the part of those involved. Furthermore, it is only by participating in the practice that it is possible to understand the nature of these goods, and to thereby critique the extent to which they have been attained (or not) by those participating in the practice. As a result, MacIntyre (2007) argues, 'those who

lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods' (p. 189).

Engagement in a practice entails participation in a particular kind of life. It is only by participating or being open to better understanding the nature of the particular practice from those involved themselves that it is possible to make any form of judgment about the validity or otherwise of the practice.

Efforts to attain the goods internal to a practice also entail an understanding of practice as possessing its own 'standards of excellence' and rules which guide the practice. It is against these rules and standards that individual performances are to be judged. The development of these collective standards and individual performances are made possible by a process of constant critique against the best standards attained so far in relation to the practice.

Importantly, these revised standards, and improved performances, become available for others associated with the practice, and are not simply available to individuals, unlike external goods. Rather, the internal goods of a practice are available to the whole community associated with that particular practice. It is this feature of practices which leads to an enrichment of the practice for all those involved in it, and reveals participation as an inherently social, not individual, activity.

In the context of Education, Carr (2004) takes up MacIntyre's position, arguing that an educational practice is a practice characterised by its own intrinsic 'educational' criteria. The value or otherwise of Education cannot be measured beyond the particular traditions which characterise Education *per se*. In an associated critique of educational research as a practical science, Carr (2007) delineates Education as 'an intentional human activity that can only be made intelligible by reference to its overall purpose' (p. 274). Education can only be understood as such by those engaged in and influenced by its practice, who genuinely seek to

attain standards of excellence in Education, and who are therefore capable of trying to articulate the nature of the practice in which they are engaged, and the extent to which they have been successful. It is a form of what Aristotle (1953) described as ‘praxis’ – a mode of ethical activity which makes sense insofar as it entails the attainment of a particular set of internal goods associated with that particular activity. Consequently, to act educationally is to acquire a disposition to act educationally, and the only way to do this is to engage in educational practice *per se* (Carr, 2007). Such engagement may involve students, teachers and parents. While acknowledging the obvious and key role played by students and parents in educational practices, this paper focuses particularly on the place of teachers as principal practitioners in schooling settings.

In the case of teachers, such enactment is an intrinsic part of the broader process of teachers’ own learning and development, and constitutes an integral part of what Carr (2007) refers to as an Aristotelian practical science. Such an approach entails construing educational research as a key part of teachers’ practice rather than something which should provide ‘answers’ to educational problems to then be implemented by teachers; as Elliott (2007) argues, ‘teachers need to be involved in prioritising their educational aims in a given situation’ (p. 140). This notion of researching from within educational practice stands in contrast to research undertaken external to educators’ practice. The former necessitates involving teachers in determining the priorities for educational improvement, and the nature of the evidence which will provide evidence of attainment or otherwise of these priorities. The latter involves external agencies providing ‘evidence-based’ (Biesta, 2007) information to teachers, and upon which teachers are expected to respond. The end result of this latter process is reinforcement of a traditional epistemic and ontological position which simply construes teachers as the implementers of knowledge generated elsewhere.

## **The abstraction and quantification of Education**

Under current conditions in Education, there is increased pressure upon educators to respond to broader 'system' pressures for improvements in particular types of educational outcomes, particularly large-scale quantitative measures. This process has its antecedents in changing patterns of educational provision over time. Carr (2004) argues that the rapid expansion of the public education sector during the first half of the Twentieth Century led to a rearticulation of Education away from something considered as a practical discipline requiring teacher education informed by a more in-depth understanding of the history and philosophy of educational practice, to Education as a 'system' which entailed the careful monitoring and management of students and teachers to ensure compliance with the demands of the modern economic nation-state. Scientific rationality dominated over practical philosophy to guide teachers' learning and educational decision-making for and within schooling systems.

Scientific rationality has been expressed recently as part of a broader 'audit culture' or 'audit society' (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). Such a culture/society is characterised by conditions typically associated with financial audit mechanisms, but in situations remote from financial practices and processes (Shore, 2008). The emphasis upon quantification has a distancing effect upon social practices, and produces knowledge separate from those engaged in a particular practice; it is also most likely to arise within communities seen as less able to resist its impost from the outside (Porter, 1995). The adoption of such mechanisms entails new approaches to the management of professional practice, in which both traditional values and accepted wisdom are critiqued and challenged.

Shore (2008) asks an important question in relation to the shift towards an audit culture with its interest in relatively mundane and routinised work, such as checking budgets, and ensuring compliance with specified guidelines, rules and administrative checklists: ‘Why, therefore, should we be interested in something as prosaic and dull as a “method of accounting”?’ (p. 279). In response to this question, he argues that small, seemingly technical changes and routines are the forebears of much more substantive and significant change; Taylorist approaches to managing the work practices of assembly line workers extended well beyond the factory processes they were originally intended to influence and improve. That is, the notions of scientific management which grew out of Frederick Taylor’s earlier analyses of work processes at the Midvale Steel works in the early 1900s in the US, with their emphasis upon efficiency, standardisation of work processes, and identification of ‘best practices’ as a means to increase productivity, have been taken up in various audit processes in settings and ways quite different from those in which they originated. The result is a rearticulation in professional practice away from internal mechanisms of control to what are construed as more ‘objective’, external mechanisms which are less subject to provider-capture, and in which the public can therefore have greater confidence. As part of this process, rather than encouraging those engaged in a profession to inquire into the nature of their work to improve practice, practitioners are encouraged to respond to research arising from these more ‘objective’ foci.

As risk management has become a dominant concern of public service provision (Power, 2004), this process of audit also entails increasing self-regulation on the part of those affected. As part of the ‘audit society’ (Power, 1997), individuals and groups increasingly police themselves, and are seen to police themselves, in an effort to prove their worth. Again,



this worth is measured against external benchmarks. This process is not necessarily problematic, in and of itself, and could potentially assist with revealing processes and approaches requiring further development or improvement. That is, it could serve as a useful vehicle for developmental purposes (including, in the context of the argument presented in this paper, teacher learning for student learning). However, concerns arise because applications of these benchmarks lead to confusion between ‘accountancy’ and ‘accountability’ (Shore, 2008). Research resulting in narrow measures of productivity is unproblematically applied to complex practices. Accountancy, with its emphasis upon monitoring quantified measures of business performance differs from a necessarily broader conception of professional accountability, which, on Aristotle, MacIntyre and Carr’s argument, must necessarily be undertaken on the basis of the best known approaches to professional (in this case, educational) practice.

This obsession with accountancy practices is part of a broader deference to statistical reasoning which permeates our understanding of social practices, such as Education. In this context, Desrosières (1998) makes the point about the often unspoken tension between what is being measured, and how the measuring process is undertaken. It is one thing to critique the way in which the measurement is undertaken. However, this already assumes that there is something, a ‘social fact’ in Durkheim’s terms, to be measured. As Desrosières (1998, p. 1) points out, it is difficult to treat phenomena under investigation as objects which exist (a necessary prerequisite to determining how to ‘measure’ them) at the same time as it is also necessary to recognize that such objects are actually arbitrary artefacts (‘conventions’) of the society which produces them.

By extension, to conceptualise Education as something which can be attained by participation in a standardised test is to advocate an arbitrary position which promulgates a limited conception of the nature of Education. Furthermore, to assume that the results of such tests should then automatically inform teacher learning is to further narrow understandings of both student and teacher learning. Yet this is the view currently advocated in relation to schooling practices where one of the principal means of ensuring ‘accountability’ (actually, accountancy,) is via standardised tests of student attainment. These tests take various forms, and are typically undertaken in response to concerns to raise standards in response to a broader, competitive global context in which individual nation-states strive to improve their economic competitiveness (Stobart, 2008). As a result, there is concern that teaching has been reduced to an abstracted process of assessment practices, and that a series of numbers are capable of providing access to the complexity of actual teaching and learning practices (Taubman, 2009). Under these conditions, the ongoing teacher learning most valued is that which will lead to improvements in this specific set of markers of achievement.

In the context of the United States, Hursh (2008) argues Education has become the premise of others, rather than educators, students and parents. He laments the way in which high-stakes testing and more reductionist accountability strategies have been promulgated at the same time as there is evidence that alternative assessment and learning processes lead to better student learning practices. Drawing upon the National Research Council’s (2001) report *Knowing what students know: The science and design of Educational assessment*, Hursh (2008) argues in favour of policy-makers using multiple measures of student understanding, particularly if such tests are used for high stakes purposes. The alternative is what occurs in Texas, New York and Florida, where state mandated tests serve as vehicles for determining the curriculum offered to students, leading to the gradual disenfranchisement of teachers and

those close to the schools, and a centralisation of authority over Education at state/national bureaucratic-legislative levels (Hursh, 2008).

In a similar vein, Ravitch (2010) argues that it is not tests *per se* which are problematic, but rather the way in which such tests are derived and utilised which needs to be critiqued. On the one hand, information from tests can be useful for determining what students have understood, what they have not, and areas for improvement. However, when used as a vehicle to effect structural changes, such as closing schools and making decisions about staffing, and assuming that such changes will of themselves lead to improved student outcomes, testing cultures prove problematic:

Tests can be designed and used well or badly. The problem was the misuse of testing for high-stakes purposes, the beliefs that tests could identify with certainty which students should be held back, which teachers and principals should be fired or rewarded, and which schools should be closed – and the idea that these changes would inevitably produce better education. Policy decisions that were momentous for students and educators came down from elected officials who did not understand the limitations of testing (Ravitch, 2010, p. 151).

While the nature of high-stakes testing in the US context, and England, differs markedly from that associated with Australian schools and schooling, and global policy borrowing processes are always mediated at the level of the state (Lingard, 2010), increased interest in national measures of student literacy and numeracy attainment at the national level represent a fundamental political change to the Australian schooling landscape. The implications of this shift for ongoing teacher education are profound as teachers' learning is increasingly focused

upon consideration of high-stakes test results. The form of teacher learning which is foregrounded under these conditions is one which ascribes greatest value to evidence provided external to teachers, students, and parents' efforts to improve educational practices. That is, this emphasis upon testing and quantitative measurement of academic performance reflects dominant approaches to teachers' learning which sees such learning as enabled by information provided by test providers. While teachers' learning should be both research informed and research productive – what Lingard and Renshaw (2009) refer to as 'research informed' and 'research informing' – the teacher learning which is most valued in relation to such testing regimes is research informed only, and then on the basis of a conception of research emphasising one very specific measure of educational attainment, which reinforces a traditional mind/body epistemic divide. In Australia, the extent of this emphasis upon narrowly conceived 'data driven,' or 'evidence-based' approaches (Biesta, 2007) can be usefully explored through a federal-government supported website, *My School*.

### **The *My School* website**

The Australian federal government *My School* website reports on standardised, nation-wide literacy and numeracy tests undertaken since 2008 in every state in Australia. Each year, every child in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sits an assortment of tests which are aggregated at the individual school level.

Since January 2010, the results of these tests have been publicly available through the *My School* website. The site is an outcome of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, a policy statement agreed to by Australian Education ministers as part of a 2008 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement. The agreement gave rise

to a number of objectives for Australian schooling for the next ten years. To achieve some of these objectives, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established in May 2009, and included in its ambit responsibility for orchestrating and developing a national curriculum, implementing national assessment programmes – particularly the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) – and publicly reporting on school performance. *My School* addresses this final function.

The introductory ‘Welcome’ message and ‘Note from ACARA’ on the initial *My School* portal website reveals this as a resource firmly focused on the dissemination of numeric measures of student attainment:

*My School* enables you to search the profiles of almost 10, 000 Australian schools. You can quickly locate statistical and contextual information about schools in your community and compare them with statistically similar schools across the country.

(DEEWR, 2010)

The website is described as having been developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent authority responsible, ‘... among other things, for publishing nationally comparable data on Australian schools’ (DEEWR, 2010). This section then goes on to describe how ACARA drew upon a new index, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) as a vehicle for enabling comparisons across schools in what are described as ‘... a fair and meaningful way’ (DEEWR, 2010). Ongoing teacher education is construed as central to this comparative process, as the use of the index is seen as a means of enabling schools ‘... to learn from other schools with statistically similar populations’ (DEEWR, 2010). The introductory page

concludes with a statement about how the *My School* website provides ‘...a new level of transparency and accountability...’ (DEEWR, 2010). The first page of the *My School* site enables a search to be undertaken by school name, or suburb. Information about up to twenty nearby schools may also be drawn upon for each school.

The website also includes a number of tabs with more detailed information about *My School*, including information about assessment and reporting processes used in developing the site. The ‘Assessment and reporting: Improving student performance’ sub-link provides a justification of the assessment practices adopted by ACARA in response to the COAG agreement (DEEWR, 2010). It elaborates how the Kindergarten to Year 12 Australian curriculum, the ‘national curriculum’, is the responsibility of ACARA, and how it is firstly focusing upon English, mathematics, science and history, followed by languages, geography and the arts, and remaining discipline areas outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration*. This sub-link also provides details about the levels of achievement to be attained at each year level in these subjects. The ‘Assessment and reporting: Improving student performance’ paper also refers to the National Assessment Program (NAP) which is designed to monitor progress in national literacy and numeracy tests; select sample assessments in the domains of science, civics and citizenship and ICTs, and; collect information from international assessments, including PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. These international measures are described explicitly as informing educational policy-making in Australia: ‘International assessment information helps guide Education policy development and review, both in Australia and overseas’ (DEEWR, 2010).

The National literacy and numeracy tests referred to in the NAP take the form of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), an annual assessment regime

undertaken at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in the areas of literacy and numeracy, across all Australian schools. As part of this assessment process, NAPLAN results are reported via the *My School* website, and constitute the primary content of the site. Reflecting the key areas tested, the NAPLAN results are separated into the following categories or ‘domains’: Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation, and Numeracy. These results are presented together with the results from what are described as ‘statistically similar’ schools (up to 60), as well as ‘all’ schools in Australia (almost 10, 000 schools). It is these comparisons which are construed as informing teachers about those areas in which further teacher learning needs to occur, and relatively similar schools which could serve as a potential resource for such learning. Importantly, a colour-coded series of bars is also presented on the website for each school, showing whether the selected school’s results are above (green) or below (red) the average results for ‘similar’ schools, and ‘all’ schools. These coloured bars are further differentiated tonally to indicate whether the selected school’s results are significantly above or below the results of ‘similar’ schools, and ‘all’ schools in Australia. Additional pages also show the percentage of students achieving at each band on the NAPLAN tests in the chosen school, and in comparison with the proportion of students achieving each band in ‘similar’ schools, and nationally.

Specifically in relation to teachers’ learning, the site also includes some information about how to use *My School* to support improvements in school and student learning. The ‘Using *My School* to support school and student improvement’ ‘fact sheet’ provided on the website frames the NAPLAN results as information to be used by teachers and schools to improve professional practice:

Effective teachers need quality information about how and what their students are learning in order to diagnose student learning needs, monitor progress and make sure their students are being taught the right things in the right ways. Effective schools collect quality information from student assessment to evaluate themselves and examine where they need to improve and how they can use experience of success and failure to generate that improvement (DEEWR, 2010).

In this way, ongoing teacher education is construed as intrinsically informed by NAPLAN results reported on the website.

### **Discussion: My School?**

This section analyses the extent to which the *My School* website is influenced by broader audit demands to abstract and quantify educational practice, with some emphasis upon ongoing teacher education. The very name ‘My School’ implies an individualism antithetical to MacIntyre’s (2007) conception of a practice as enriching the whole community, involved in the practice in question – in this case, Education – and of the sort of professional community building essential for substantive teacher learning. Rather than appealing to a conception of Education as a collective undertaking, the preferred audience is each individual parent, teacher or student. In relation to teachers’ learning specifically, and in contravention of what Hawley and Valli (1999) refer to as the ‘consensus position’ which finds teacher learning to be most effective when undertaken collaboratively, any learning gained from the site is itself construed as an individual rather than a collective undertaking. Teachers are framed as individuals who, by implication, learn in isolation.



The introductory statements on the website provide evidence of the dominance of numeric measures of student/school outcomes from the outset, and how such measures are the preferred mode of communication. Notwithstanding a brief reference to ‘contextual information’ in the two-sentence ‘Welcome’ at the beginning of the first page of the *My School* website, these introductory statements immediately prioritise statistical information about each school over any other forms of information; there is little controversy over whether the object of study can be understood in this way, or of the nature of the statistical measures employed to do so (Desrosières, 1998). The student learning considered of most value is that which can be derived from numeric information of a statistical nature. By implication, the teacher learning which is advocated does not involve teachers establishing the aims of any inquiry into educational practice (Elliott, 2007), but instead involves responding to statistical information provided by technicians not intimately acquainted with the practical implications of their findings for students, teachers, parents and communities affected.

The invitation for users to ‘quickly locate’ statistical information about local schools in their communities, and to ‘compare’ the information provided with that provided with ‘statistically similar’ schools reinforces the propensity to treat measurable, numeric school outcomes as the indicators of most value. Educational practices undertaken at the local school, or ‘similar’ schools, cannot be captured by the website in its current form, and a set of criteria necessarily intrinsic to educational processes themselves (Carr, 2004) seems lacking. The teacher learning which is valued is the capacity to respond to statistical information, and to do so in ways likely to result in a higher set of numeric scores on the NAPLAN scores than rival schools. Under these circumstances, there is the risk of educational practices becoming

reduced to a number, a number which struggles to capture the potentially educational nature of specific schooling practices.

The 'Note from ACARA' on the first page of the *My School* website also provides evidence of the reification of numeric measures of educational attainment and of a research process which actively excludes those immediately affected by such findings. While ACARA is described as responsible for 'other things' as well, the site deliberately foregrounds one particular responsibility – 'publishing nationally comparable data on Australian schools' (DEEWR, 2010). Data, the capacity to compare data across Australian schools, and the ability to publish this data are all construed as valuable in and of themselves. On the one hand, such data may be seen as potentially useful by 'insiders' other than teachers (e.g. parents) because it provides information about some specific aspects of students' learning not previously available. This could be seen as useful for diagnostic purposes in particular areas of skill development, for example. The provision of such information could also be seen as a necessary response to concerns about 'provider capture' on the part of teachers. However, at the same time, strong promotion of this data serves as a mechanism to marginalise alternative approaches to knowledge development about teaching which could resolve these, and more substantive concerns about schooling practices, which is, as Elliott (2007) argues, 'where the action is'. These include more sustained practitioner-led research approaches likely to be able to address potential areas of concern amongst parents and other concerned citizens which the *My School* site can only reveal, rather than resolve.

That the site goes to some lengths, via a separate 'fact sheet', to describe how it provides data specifically for comparison purposes, through its Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), and in the form of a more detailed 'Technical paper' which outlines

how the ICSEA was derived, reveals the extent of the valuing of this desire to provide comparative statistical data, and to justify the approach adopted. Alternative approaches struggle for recognition. Just as there is no concern about the epistemological and ontological tensions between objects of study (in this case, Education,) and statistical instruments purporting to measure these objects (Desrosières, 1998), there is no concern to consider alternative more teacher-led approaches which could assist in providing a more rounded conception of schooling practices.

The 'fact sheet' entitled 'Using *My School* to support school and student improvement' also gestures towards broader issues of teacher learning by foregrounding the use of information provided to inform teachers' efforts to improve their practice. While the single-paragraph length 'school statement' which prefaces details of individual schools' NAPLAN results does provide some contextual information about each school, schools are still always described in relation to 'statistically similar schools', and this single paragraph also often includes references to the specific school having achieved well, or satisfactorily, at NAPLAN or other generic tests. Again, numbers are valued above more nuanced understandings of the complexity of educational practices as vehicles for teacher learning, even when efforts are made to capture (or at least acknowledge) the latter.

This valuing of improved test scores is further reinforced by the provision of websites devoted to providing resources and activities to enable students to practise and prepare for the tests. In New South Wales, teachers are able to click on questions students answered incorrectly in the test, and select from a series of activities students can use to practise the particular 'skill' in question. In Queensland and the Northern Territory, readily accessible public education websites openly provide and advocate the use of sample tests to prepare for

formal NAPLAN assessment (see Queensland Studies Authority, 2011; Northern Territory Government of Australia, 2009). The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority provides an extensive list of websites outlining each of the elements of NAPLAN at each relevant year level (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2010). These publicly provided materials are complemented by a raft of commercially available materials, including detailed answers to each element of the test at each year level (e.g. see resources provided by Kilbaha Multimedia Publishing, 2011). Such models and associated materials serve as technologies which unquestioningly and unproblematically reinforce taken-for-granted practices about the benefits and valuing of test scores as indicators of student learning. The teacher learning of most value are the insights and knowledges teachers elicit from these results, and the success of teachers' learning can itself be measured by the extent to which students' subsequent results improve upon earlier outcomes. Again, the mode of teacher learning which is foregrounded is a technicist one; teacher learning is simply a matter of analysing and interpreting current test scores to ensure improvement in corresponding tests in the future. As a result, and while the specific mechanisms to effect change in students' test results are not the same in Australia as in other jurisdictions, there is the real chance, as has occurred in the US (Hursh, 2008; Ravitch, 2010), that the tests serve as a *de facto* curriculum, further reinforcing instrumental approaches to both student and teacher learning.

## **Conclusion**

While concerns about professional accountability appear to have informed the Australian federal government's decision to establish the *My School* website, its presentation and enactment betray a bias towards accountancy. Measures of student attainment provided through the collection of national literacy and numeracy assessment data could be useful for

informing student and teacher learning, when used in conjunction with other evidence of student attainment. Such measures could also assist in determining those schools and localities requiring additional material or cultural resources, such as targeted professional development, specialist personnel to address specific needs, physical plant, learning resources etc. That is, such measures could be beneficial when used for educational purposes.

However, there appears to be considerable evidence that *MySchool* website reinforces a conception of learning focused too strongly on specific, measurable outcomes. This approach erases the complexity of a broader conception of educational practices, and ignores the challenges of attending to the diverse needs of real learners, in real-time, and in real places. Rather, what seems to be more valued is a generic measure of educational attainment which can be sufficiently abstracted to be able to generate any number of comparisons of students, schools and communities. The teacher learning valued under these conditions is that which responds directly to these specific measures. This is in contrast with a broader articulation of Education as a practice characterised by its own specific criteria of enactment, as a social good in and of itself, and of teachers' learning as an integral and intricate part of this broader set of practices. While the *My School* site is purported to serve as a vehicle to potentially assist teachers to inform their practice, thereby contributing to ongoing teacher education, in its current instantiation, the site reinforces a conception of teacher learning which encourages passivity on the part of teachers, rather than more active and activist engagement. Such an approach makes it difficult to generate information of educational value about your's, or, my school.

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