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**Education as a ‘risky business’:
Theorising student and teacher learning in complex times**

Abstract:

This paper employs sociological literature on risk and the commodification of education to explain current schooling practices in a context of increased concerns about students’ behaviour and results on standardised tests of achievement. Drawing upon teacher and student learning practices in three school sites in south-east Queensland, Australia, the article reveals how specific tests, packages and programmes have been employed as technologies of governance to minimise the risk of adverse student behaviour, maximise student outcomes on standardised tests, and provide teachers with discrete learning experiences construed as improving such outcomes. The sum total of these foci is the construction of education as an increasingly ‘risky business’ which employs a myriad of products and tests to manage perceived and actual risks. The paper also reveals how these products and processes constitute student misbehaviour and inadequate teacher and student learning as ‘risk objects’ requiring constant intervention, but which also inhibit inclusion in schooling settings, and challenge teachers’ professionalism.

Keywords: risk; commodification of education; student behaviour; testing; teacher learning

Introduction

In a broad social context of seemingly incessant concerns about educational outcomes in schooling settings, schools are portrayed as sites in need of constant vigilance and considerable intervention. Such intervention and vigilance are construed in terms of both students’ social and academic learning. Schools are often portrayed, particularly in the popular press, as sites in which student behaviour is inherently problematic. At the same time, and in the context of global policy conditions, there are concurrent concerns about the nature and quality of student academic outcomes, often expressed in relation to results on standardised tests of achievement (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Such outcomes are the object of particular scrutiny because of their status as proxies of individual nation-states’

competitiveness within a broad and increasingly global context. Under circumstances of strong policy support for improved social and academic outcomes, including on standardised assessment measures, and increased attention to the behaviour of students, this paper construes student behaviours and academic outcomes as risks to be actively managed.

To make this case, the research reports on a small number of schools in south-east Queensland, Australia, a state which has been subject to particularly stringent scrutiny in light of media-reports of concerns about bullying and allegedly poor student behaviour, and poor outcomes on national literacy and numeracy tests compared with other Australian states. As a consequence, an array of practices and technologies have been employed to maximise student behavioural and academic outcomes, and minimise risks of failure.

To make sense of schools' responses to this scrutiny, the paper draws upon recent research into the sociology of risk, particularly Foucauldian-inspired approaches to how the 'technology' of risk has been employed to govern social conduct. While such approaches are part of a broader tapestry of risk-related theorising and research, it is the way in which various educational 'products' – tests, programmes and other educational products and 'commodities' – have been employed to minimise the risk of poor student behaviour, maximise outcomes on standardised tests, and as vehicles for teacher learning, which seem particularly productive for understanding how schools in Queensland have responded to policy concerns about students' social and academic outcomes. Exploring

how these various educational programmes and products are enacted is worthy of further scrutiny, and relatively unexplored within the sociology of education literature.

Risk, commodification and education

While some researchers have drawn links between notions of risk and inquiries into educational settings (e.g. Archer and Hutchings' (2000) explorations of ethnically diverse working class non-participant students' constructions of higher education settings in relation to British universities), there appears to be relatively little literature which explicitly explores educational practices as risks. Some research (see Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick, 2010) is indicative of the significant body of work focused upon issues of youth characterised as 'at-risk'. There are also criticisms of policy constructions of youth at-risk as focusing too heavily upon individual characteristics of young people rather than the social processes in society which contribute to youth marginalisation (Te Riele, 2006). However, such literature does not tend to draw out the nature and effects of specific programmes and testing regimes adopted more generally in schools *as* risks, and, simultaneously, as 'commodities' which have arisen in response to notions *of* risk.

The research presented in this paper seeks to explore and make sense of these practices *as* and *of* risks by drawing upon the comments and self-described experiences of teachers.

The analysis presented is grounded in the relevant literature on the sociology of risk and the commodification of education; the term 'risk' itself is not overtly stated in

participants' conceptions of their practices. However, the way in which teachers describe their practices within the case study schools provides strong evidence of concerns about risk reflected in much of this literature. Consequently, even though specific references are not made to particular programmes and packages as responses to specific 'risks' by teachers, teachers' comments and experiences provide a cogent account of how many educational practices are construed as problematic – as 'risks' to be managed – and how particular programmes and initiatives – educational commodities – have been developed, promoted and implemented to manage these risks.

In relation to the relevant literature more generally, Beck (1998) argues risk is an inherent part of the contemporary condition, the price society pays for usurping traditional practices and approaches. For Arnoldi (2009), the sociality of risk can be understood in three ways: as social and political problems; as the cultural product of peoples' varied social and cultural backgrounds, and; as particular types of practices and knowledge employed to govern people's practices (p. 2). In keeping with Arnoldi's (2009) third categorisation of Foucauldian-inspired conceptions of risk, Rothstein (2006) argues concerns about risk are a product of the challenges of governing risk; managing risk seems more concerned with issues of governance than actual or potential risks within society. For Power (2007), while there is an increased focus upon issues of risk because in some instances, risks have increased, this is generally not an adequate explanation. Rather, the management of risk, and risk itself, have become vehicles or technologies of governance which make it possible to foster a 'rational organizational design' (p. vii).

Power (2007) seeks to understand how this managerial conception of risk has arisen, and the principles which underpin it. Of particular note are the specific ways in which social institutions constitute approaches to risk, including what should be considered appropriate objects of risk, or 'risk objects' (p. 3). Power (2007), drawing upon Hilgartner (1992) refers to various risk objects – ideas associated with harm, and which are implicitly considered responsible for creating harm – to describe the nature of the risks which characterize modern practices. That is, there is a focus upon the particular administrative and management practices which are operationalised to constitute and respond to the specific objects of risk. As a result, '... managing risk depends critically on management *systems of representation*, and on instruments for framing objects for the purpose of action and intervention (Power, 2007, p. 4; emphasis original).' Indeed, '[t]he emergence of new categories of risk object ... and their implied causality, go hand in hand with efforts at regulatory and managerial reform and design' (p. 26).

Power (2007) makes the point that organizations must seem to be in control of their conditions, even when this may not be the case. This necessitates the production and enactment of particular programmes, initiatives and strategies to manage uncertainty in order to generate this perception. Specific technologies are employed as part of this process, including various forms of guidelines, standards, tests and programmes. As such guidelines and programmes become more dominant, they foster particular types of normative responses which shape the very organisations in which they are enacted. The production of data about particular practices, resulting in what Hacking describes as an 'avalanche of numbers' (1990, p. 5), is a pervasive part of this governing process,

influencing how risks are perceived. Such governance processes are also construed in terms of opportunity for improved practice, as well as potential harm.

Within schooling settings, and in the context of increasing demands upon teachers' time as they seek to implement and respond to myriad initiatives and foci created by educational bureaucracies seeking to manage educational risks, this management process has resulted in a plethora of teaching, curriculum and assessment programmes and initiatives, as well as increased attention to quantitative measures of student attainment, particularly standardised tests. Drawing upon policy sociology work, Luke (2004) argues this myriad of initiatives and prepackaged programmes are instances of the 'commodification of knowledge,' and the sheer volume of reforms causes teachers and those in schools to behave as 'commodity fetishists' as they grasp for specific initiatives and programmes as a means of complying with multiple, sometimes contradictory reforms.

This commodification of education is also evident in the way in which business-oriented models are employed to govern education, and the selling and purchasing of educational products more generally. Ball (2012) uses network analysis to make sense of some of the governance processes currently employed in education policy making and enactment, revealing a variety of private sector influences in the management and governance of schooling practices. He argues business is involved in providing 'policy solutions' to particular problems – educational risks – and new opportunities for growth. Various post-bureaucratic governance models are employed, involving an emphasis upon

networks and looser, often short-term contractual arrangements for the delivery of various facets of educational practice, including teachers' learning. This "enterprising up" of public organizations' involves the contracting out of services and other processes more typically associated with private enterprise (Ball, 2012, p. 15). The result is an autonomous individual and organisation created via various performative technologies including 'audits, inspections, appraisals, self-reviews, quality assurance, ... output indicators and so on' (p. 31-2). Furthermore, private enterprise can enter educational practices through 'the selling of CPD (continuing professional development), consultancy, training, support and 'improvement' and management services, as well as a whole variety of technical, support and back-office services' (p. 95).

It is through such technologies that the management of risk and effects of performativity can be seen to inter-relate. The concerns about performance - what Ball (2003) refers to as the 'terrors of performativity' - which characterise these concerns can be construed as contributing to the creation of specific risk objects, as a means of responding to perceived problematic outcomes. In the research presented, the specific risk objects presented can be seen as fabrications of various kinds to 'manage' performance, such as, for example, the risk of declining achievement.

Under conditions of increased risk identification and management, the institutional construction of risk management and the development and use of guidelines and various standards of practice, and a focus upon good governance, in education, such pre-packaged programmes, tests and professional development initiatives take on increasing

significance. The research presented in this paper seeks to make sense of various programmes and packages in schooling settings, and associated data, in light of this literature on risks as technologies for the governance of schooling practices under current policy conditions.

Contextualising risk: Schooling practices in Queensland

This paper reflects upon the nature of problematic student behaviours and teacher and student learning practices as risk management objects subject to these commodification processes during a tumultuous period of educational reform in the state of Queensland, Australia.

The research was undertaken in the context of concerns expressed about Queensland students' poor results, relative to students in other states, on national standardised literacy and numeracy tests, the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN), undertaken nationally since 2008. Following the initial, annual publication of all Australian students' results in 2010, and Queensland's low ranking relative to other Australian states and territories, there has been significant political pressure upon the state government for improved outcomes. As a result, the Queensland state government commissioned, Professor Geoff Masters, head of the Australian Council for Educational Research – the body responsible for orchestrating NAPLAN testing in Australia – to review Queensland's performance. The subsequent report argued there was a need to ensure students were more familiar with the nature of the tests (through exposure to

previous papers), and that teachers and students spend time analyzing responses to trial tests (Masters, 2009). In spite of improvements in 2009 results, and subsequent years, (registered across all states, not just Queensland), this pressure has continued unabated. As per Masters' (2009) recommendations, this has resulted in a variety of strategies and approaches, including testing students' literacy and numeracy capacities more frequently, and spending more time on test-readiness activities.

A national Labor government has also made considerable additional funding available to schools, subject to improved NAPLAN results, with a focus upon supporting poorer communities/low socio-economic status (SES) schools through the *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* programme. This initiative has three components: the provision of significant additional funding to low SES schools (*National Partnership on Low Socio-Economic Status School communities*); the provision of funding for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes (*National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy*), and; the provision of funding to assist with teacher professional development (*National Partnership on Quality Teaching*). This funding is not insignificant, with the focus upon low SES school communities, for example, involving the allocation of \$1.1 billion.

At the same time, there has been a concomitant focus upon students' behaviour in the state's public schools. This is evidenced in the collection and collation of student 'behaviour incidents' on the public education authority's – Education Queensland – new centralised data base, 'One-School,' as well as publication of league tables of expulsion rates as indicators of Education Queensland's response to perceptions of increased poor

student behaviour in schools. Increased expulsion rates have been construed as evidence of a necessary ‘no-nonsense’, ‘hard-line’ approach to improving standards and practices in Queensland public schools, particularly within the popular media. In this way, conditions have been cultivated which encourage an intensity of focus upon students’ results and behaviour in schools in ways which have not previously been the case.

All situated within low SES communities, the three schools reported in this article were subject to the broader national and state-wide conditions outlined above. As recipients of *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* funding, and in keeping with recommendations within the Masters’ Report, these schools employed staff as literacy and numeracy coaches to assist teachers to focus upon improving results in these areas. Some principals also used this funding to employ additional teacher aides, and to establish additional classes to focus upon the needs of students struggling to learn in mainstream classroom settings. Principals of schools involved in the National Partnerships programme were also placed on contracts, with the potential for bonuses for improved NAPLAN results, but also possible termination of these contracts, subject to 6-monthly reviews of performance, should results not improve sufficiently. The research provides insights into the nature of these circumstances, and how, subsequently, academic results and improved student behaviour became high-stakes activities in Queensland schools.

Methods

To understand schooling practices under these policy conditions, research was conducted into the nature of student and teacher learning within three different schools in south-east Queensland. A limited number of sites was chosen to provide more specific detail into the nature of the schooling practices under current policy conditions, as expressed by teachers. Also, different types of schools were chosen to ascertain whether and how broader contextual policy conditions influenced schooling practices across school sites more generally. One school was located in a rural area, serving a community of approximately 4000 people, and had a student population of almost 360 students. Another school in an urban area was a similar size, with approximately 340 students, while a second urban school was large by Australian primary school standards, with almost 1000 students. Each school had a relatively stable staff. The rural school tended to have a larger proportion of more mature and experienced teachers, while the urban schools tended to have a broader range of staff across age and experience profiles. Schools were selected in conjunction with senior Education Queensland staff, and were deemed to be sites in which teachers were engaging in substantive, ongoing learning, and striving to improve student learning opportunities. While certainly not aiming to be representative of schooling settings in Queensland, and while the differences between schools as sites of enactment of broader policy conditions are recognised as important, it is the similarities between these varied sites under current policy conditions which is the focus of attention in the research presented.

Data were derived from a series of individual interviews with 55 staff drawn from across the three school sites. Participants included a selection of teachers from across year

levels, as well as teachers in positions of additional responsibility – such as literacy and numeracy coaches, and year level co-ordinators. Principals and deputy principals were also interviewed, as well as staff in more specialised roles, but who had a broad sense of the schooling practices within the schools sites as a whole; this included a teacher-librarian at one site, as well as teachers with responsibility for managing problematic student behaviours, and teachers in charge of special education, and special education teachers at all sites. Participants were interviewed once only during the data collection phase, and each interview was between approximately 40 minutes and one hour. Participation was voluntary and opportunities were provided throughout the data collection process, and at the end of the data collection phase, for feedback upon findings. While initial questions focused upon teachers' learning practices, participants' responses quickly revealed a need to consider issues relating to schooling and student learning practices more generally. Questions related to the role of data about student behaviour and academic results in informing teachers' learning and teaching, the influence and impact of NAPLAN more generally, how additional funding provided through the National Partnerships programme influenced teacher and student learning and behaviour management practices, and a variety of questions focused upon particular initiatives and programmes employed at individual school sites. The data indicated that the collection of information and focus upon student behaviours and academic results placed these schools under scrutiny in ways not previously experienced. While a professional development workshop during an afternoon staff meeting at the small urban school site was observed, the lack of time to undertake more observations, and the richness of the preliminary interviews, led to the decision to interview as many teachers

within each of the school sites as possible, rather than to undertake additional observations. While additional observations would have been beneficial, the data in their entirety – all 55 interview transcripts – do provide useful and very rich insights into the nature and variety of schooling practices, and perhaps a fuller account of the nature of particular practices than could be derived from additional observations within the relatively limited time available to conduct interviews (one week per school). It was also only after considering the interview data across the three school sites in full that it became possible to more clearly delineate more common schooling practices across the school sites. Again, this argument is made cautiously, in light of the relatively small data set. Nevertheless, and in keeping with Evers and Wu's (2006) argument for generalising from single cases through a process of 'inductive inferencing', it is still possible to identify commonalities and patterns within (and in this case, across,) small data sets which can serve as stimuli for broader theorising, including, as in the research presented, in relation to existing understandings of practice.

Transcripts of interviews were transcribed remotely, and broad themes distilled through a detailed process of in-depth reading and re-reading of transcripts (Shank, 2002), and in light of current conceptions of risk as portrayed within the sociology of risk literature and the commodification of education. Key findings are presented in the next section, followed by a more detailed analysis of data in relation to the sociology of risk and commodification of education.

Managing Risk

Under these conditions, specific themes were evident across the school sites. These related to programmes to manage student behaviour, processes for maximising student learning by streaming students according to academic achievement – particularly in relation to national literacy and numeracy benchmarks – and various programmes and approaches to orchestrate teacher learning to redress specific teacher deficits isolated through the testing process. These themes are presented in this section as they emerged from the data, and analysed in light of the sociology of risk and commodification of education in the subsequent discussion section.

Risky Behaviours

A key focus of attention for teachers' learning was in the area of student behaviour. Each of the schools subscribed to a centrally-endorsed initiative, the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support programme (SWPBS), and the maintenance of intricate records of student misbehaviour through the systemic 'One-School' database. At the rural primary school, this programme was implemented alongside another behaviour programme, 'You Can Do It,' and a detailed, management-focused series of steps to increase pressure upon students to change problematic behaviour patterns. A dedicated 'Behaviour Management Support Teacher' assisted in the implementation of these initiatives, carefully recording various behaviours and steps taken by school authorities:

We usually use the responsible behaviour plan put out by the Department. And we have various things that we use. We're using the 'You Can Do It' programme... And, also, we implemented here earlier this year what we call the '3 strike system' for students who were constantly offending and weren't showing very much remorse for getting referrals to the RTR.¹ And basically I send a letter home on 2 strikes, which is probably after say 7 or 8 RTRs and then 3 strikes after 12 RTRs to say then they will be excluded from a class excursion (Behaviour Management Support Teacher, Oleander Primary).

At the small urban school, the SWPBS was a significant management intervention which involved developing a set of school rules, establishing a committee involving members of the school community to oversee the enactment of the plan, and a dedicated coach to work with teachers on improving their responses to student behaviour:

Well we're setting up processes within the school. So, since the beginning of, or just before our *National Partnership* agreement started, we had taken on the School-Wide PBS. So, that was a matter of developing a set of three school rules, which we went through a process to develop. We have a coach; we have an outside coach from the behaviour team that comes and helps with us. We have representatives on the team from all different aspects of the staff. So, we have a teacher-aide, teacher, admin²., our behaviour teacher, parents are on that

¹ RTR – Responsible Thinking Room – a separate room to which students were sent to reflect upon their behaviour, and determine how to improve problematic behaviours.

² Administration staff – typically a deputy principal within the school.

committee as well, and we meet once every couple of months to sort of determine the direction (Deputy-Principal, Elsemier).

Teachers were actively encouraged to access the One-School database to check and enter any information about students' behaviours.

So if I have a new student or I need a contact number I can actually log on [to One-School]; I can access the records, but mostly I use it for reporting incidents, or our behaviour management teacher, Liliana³, she records any incidents – behaviour incidents on there. From the behaviour management incidents, we've been able to use the data then in our staff meetings or to focus on certain areas (Year 5-6 Teacher, Elsemier).

In these ways, and with the assistance of specific systemic and individual programmes, students' behaviours became observable, governable, manageable in ways not previously envisaged. The very term 'behaviour management' and the employment of dedicated 'behaviour' teachers in some schools betrayed the technology of management at play, and the substantial resourcing which underpinned these activities.

Streaming risk

Much governing of practice also occurred through ability grouping on the basis of results from a battery of local and national tests. Each of the schools employed ability grouping,

³ All names are pseudonyms.

(more typically described as ‘streaming’), as a means of further improving student learning, and increasing results in NAPLAN tests. Ability grouping was seen as a means of reducing the range of abilities within individual classrooms, thereby enabling teachers to target teaching strategies and resources to a narrower band of students than would otherwise be the case. This necessitated some strategising on the part of teachers to ensure coherence between the streamed literacy and numeracy classes, and regular classroom activities:

It’s around making sure that the plan they are doing for the blocks is transitioning well into the classroom because they do have different classes for their literacy and numeracy blocks and then they’ve got their own students again, so it was very important that the literacy and numeracy that is going on in those blocks can easily translate then or transition into the classroom work ... So it’s keeping a check on how that’s all going for them (Principal, Elsemier Primary).

This grouping of students according to ability was openly acknowledged as a streaming process by one teacher:

We have 3 days a week, where we stream the kids, so like a – for English it’s Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday where, in the middle session when we do the literacy block, I’ll have the kids for my group, they all come to me. And I send my class to whichever teacher has them in their group, and they do their literacy stuff like that. And then on the Thursday and Friday we do just our own class

stuff, which always feeds off what we've done for the first few days anyway
(Year 6 Teacher, Elsemier Primary).

Streaming was tightly implicated with testing, made possible via a battery of external and internal tests, with the internal testing undertaken through specific packaged programmes purchased by schools:

Right up to NAPLAN, on a Thursday, we did rotations ...and we broke them into ability groups. We had too. ... We touched everything that they're going to have in NAPLAN, and they rotated around over two weeks doing all those activities.
(Year 7 Teacher, Oleander Primary).

Within the school we have our own data internal monitoring as far as – as well as the external data⁴ too. But the internal monitoring data is very important for us and that includes the 'TORCH'⁵ data plus other literacy and numeracy tests that we use (Principal, Elsemier Primary).

Some of the 'other tests' referred to by teachers, and paid for by the schools, included a raft of Progressive Assessment Tests (PAT)⁶ in reading and mathematics (provided by ACER, the body also responsible for supplying NAPLAN tests):

⁴ Teachers and principals typically referred to NAPLAN results as 'external data' during the course of the project.

⁵ Test of Reading Comprehension.

⁶ Progressive Assessment Tests – a range of tests produced and sold by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

And we do the PAT Maths and the PAT Reading tests⁷ and because we – they put extra money into – we got learning support, and we are sort of accountable for the results (Year 2-3 Teacher, Montesquieu Primary).

We learnt about recording data for spelling ages and for the BERT reading ... We were all trained on how to do our PM Reading, and we were all trained on our BERT spelling, we were all trained on our South Australian Spelling Test (Deputy Principal, Montesquieu Primary).⁸

We do the PAT Maths, the PAT Vocab, I think it's the PAT Spelling now. They changed the spelling one on us so yeah; there's a number of tests that we do. (Year 6 Teacher, Oleander Primary).

And we do the PAT Maths and the PAT Reading tests ... – they put extra money into [that] (Year 2-3 Teacher Elsemier Primary).

However, and at the same time, participants were at pains to point out that these groupings were not permanent, and only related to classes associated with literacy and numeracy, and that movement between groups was possible and ongoing:

And those students are only in those groups say for literacy three times a week.

The rest of the time they are in their classAnd also too there is a lot of

⁷ Typically referred to as 'PAT-M' and 'PAT-R' tests by teachers.

⁸ A raft of commercially produced literacy resources.

movement across those groups. So a student in one particular group – there’s assessment with the maths every three weeks – and so the teachers, as part of their cohort too, they’re discussing which kids are moving across groups, so they are not set in stone either. ... (Principal, Elsemier Primary)

A different mode of governing was employed at the rural primary school, which involved creating separate classes for those students who struggled the most. These ‘Transition’ classes were actively created and described as designed to assist students who may not be verified as requiring additional assistance under Special Education legislation, but who were considered to require more active, ongoing intervention:

We found that some mainstream classes actually had children in them, that were really, really finding it difficult to keep up, get their work done, but they didn’t have this verification label, so they weren’t eligible to be in the SEP⁹. So we made them ‘Transition’ classes – so the funding obviously, for the teacher aides comes from the verified children, who benefit, as well as extra children in those classes. So essentially the Transition classes are for children who need either one-on-one, or a lot of extra support, or a lot of adjustments to a regular classroom. They each have a fulltime teacher aide support (Year 1-3 Transitions Class Teacher, Oleander Primary)

⁹ Special Education Programme – A dedicated programme for students ascertained as requiring additional support because of identified learning needs and disabilities.

Such classes also enabled teachers in ‘mainstream’ classes to sustain a more rapid rate of learning with their students:

There’s so many kids in our schools that are 1 or 2% over being verified ... or are just struggling in the classroom and the mainstream teachers are frustrated because they can’t get along with the core business. Or they can but it’s often – there’s a challenge there, and I felt that we would have something to offer them (Head of Special Education, Oleander Primary).

As potentially discriminating technologies of governing, the Transitions classes presented as potential problems – further risks – because they were seen to be in opposition to inclusive educational practices supported systemically:

... when we decided on the Transition classes, at first a few people that did come from EQ¹⁰, thought, ‘No, this is not – we’re all about inclusion; you can’t have these kids separate!’ And you can’t this, and you can’t that. And it took, it actually took us to say, you need to come here, you need to see (Head of Special Education, Oleander Primary)!

The Transitions classes presented as risky propositions within the school more generally because they were construed as not moving very far along more standardised continua of students’ learning:

¹⁰ Education Queensland.

Sometimes, being in the class that I'm in, and in the situation and the context there, it's very difficult with some of these tests, because my children don't move very far, in a short period of time (Year 1-3 Transitions Class teacher, Oleander Primary).

The Transitions classes represented the careful management of part of the student body as part of a broader process of governing the use of resources, with a view to assisting these students, but also efficiently and effectively improving low test scores in the context of strong pressures for improved literacy and numeracy test results in the school more generally.

Risky learning

Under these circumstances, ineffectual teacher professional development was another risk object identified and engaged with on an ongoing basis in each of the three schools. As well as the focus upon working with teachers/coaches dedicated to improving teaching related specifically to literacy and numeracy, there was a strong focus upon various individual programmes as vehicles to respond to teachers' immediate learning needs. For a young teacher in his fifth year of teaching, such technologies were construed as a means of making sense of a seemingly endless array of new initiatives:

I think it's very important, being a young, new teacher I suppose it's, like I found even since I've left [university], there's so many new things that start. And it

seems to be there's a roll through of different things happening, at different times. When I was at 'uni', they were talking about this 'New Basics'. And then that had changed. That had finished by the time I started teaching – it was 'outcomes'. And then it was – what is it now? I can't even remember. And now it's changing to the National Curriculum, which is going to be different again. So if you don't have PD¹¹, you really, you'd fall behind very quickly, it's pretty important (Year 6 Teacher, Elsemier Primary).

For teachers, the technology of one-off workshops was a common practice, often involving teachers attending courses paid for during school time, and offered off-site:

I did a professional development course last year for three days at [suburb], which is on the Sunshine Coast, and it was all based around ICTs (Year 7 Teacher, Oleander Primary).

A: Well we did the '7 Steps to Writing' PD a few weeks ago and I went on a PD last Thursday after school about comprehension – in expecting comprehension in young readers... and that was at a different school (Year 2 Teacher, Elsemier Primary).

These workshops were sometimes specifically associated with testing:

¹¹ Professional development/continuing professional development.

I've done the 'Science Sparks'; I've also done a couple of PDs on 'QCATS'¹²; obviously because we've got QCATS coming up (Year 4 Teacher, Montesquieu Primary).

Such technologies were employed in conjunction with other ways of ameliorating risk of poor performance. This included how a learning support teacher in the large urban school was actively involved in training teachers and teacher aides in the use of a particular reading programme:

Like last year we had a 'Rainbow Reading Programme' running where children were withdrawn for an intensive reading programme ... That was with a teacher aide ... [I was involved] in the training of the teacher and setting it up and maintaining it (Learning Support Teacher, Montesquieu Primary).

Observation of an on-site literacy workshop at the small urban primary school (Elsiemier) provided an instance of more disjunctive approaches to PD workshops. Even though the university-based literacy educator presenting the workshop had a schedule to visit the school more than once, the large gaps between visits (several months), and pressures on her time which prevented her visiting more frequently, reinforced how efforts to move beyond one-off, external workshops were difficult in practice, even when supported in principle.

¹² Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks (QCATs) – a state-wide initiative in Queensland to help promote improved assessment practices through focused teacher discussions about the quality of student work-samples across school sites. QCATs were undertaken in Years 4, 6 and 8 in Queensland – alternate year levels to those engaged in NAPLAN testing (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9).

Further reflecting concerns about literacy, another specific reading programme, 'First Steps in Reading', was evident, as was a complementary 'First Steps in Mathematics' programme:

Yeah, our school's focussing on reading ... so we've done the 'First Steps in Reading' so that was 18 hours. I also went and did the Facilitator's Course for 'First Steps in Maths' and then I presented it to the whole school here (Year 6 Teacher, Oleander Primary).

At the moment, well there's been a very big focus on literacy and the teaching of reading and writing and we've had 'First Steps in Reading' professional development, as well as some functional grammar. ... (Teacher-librarian, Oleander Primary).

The whole school – the 'First Steps Maths' programme was one that ...that went for quite a while last year (Year 7 Teacher, Elsemier Primary)

We've done a few at school professional developments which I have been a part of and really enjoyed. ... Then we did one on – there's a 'First Steps in Reading' which is another one in our planning day. (Year 1 Teacher, Oleander Primary).

Clearly, specific programmes and approaches to teachers' learning served as powerful technologies to govern teachers' learning practices.

Education as a risky business

The data reveal problematic student behaviour, low academic results, and ineffectual teacher professional development/learning (professional development which does not lead to improved student learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy) are all constructed as domains to be governed under complex conditions. The strong focus upon each of these entities by participants across different school sites is evidence of a common framing around particular 'risk objects' – of specific phenomena capable and worthy of being subjected to intervention and risk management practices more generally, under current policy conditions. Furthermore, not only are these arena identified as sites which the state has decreed are worthy of increased attention, they are also areas which are subject to specific modes and means of management to achieve desired ends. These management practices are enacted and govern conduct in myriad ways in relation to each area, and often employ particular educational products – packages, programmes and tests – and personnel, to do so.

For student behaviour, potential and actual risks were managed and monitored across school sites through rigorous guidelines, and, at least as portrayed, unflinching application of particular system-wide programmes and initiatives. The School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support programme was a centrally orchestrated technology of governance to

which these schools all responded. This governing of teacher as well as student behaviour was enabled by requirements to formally report various behaviour ‘incidents’ through the One-School portal maintained by Education Queensland (and the mandatory publication of such data on school websites as part of a broader accountability process). This process was generally considered beneficial by teachers who had internalised the requirement to report various behaviour incidents as part of their work, and to ensure relevant data about such incidents was entered into the centralised data system. In part, the reporting of such incidents was part of a broader governance process which enabled an opportunity to rectify problematic behaviour. That this process informed regular discussions amongst teachers (e.g. through regular behaviour management committee meetings) further reveals how student behaviour as a risk was not only identified as such, but that it was subject to an ongoing process which constituted such data as part of teachers’ ongoing learning. As a costly and systemically supported database, the One-School site is a pre-packaged model which reflects commodification processes as it frames and fashions the nature of the student behaviour data collected. Teachers’ discussions, accounts of practice, and reflections on behaviour not only revealed how student behaviour was constituted as a risk, but how behaviours could be neatly calibrated and presented. Furthermore, and in relation to the delineation of risk objects as presenting opportunities, the strong focus upon student behaviour was also seen as providing a focus for improved social outcomes, as evident in how some teachers referred to the series of steps through which students progressed in efforts to modify problematic behaviours.

At the same time, much, perhaps most, of the focus of teacher and student learning across all school sites was oriented towards improving standardised measures of student learning. In a context of broader competitive global conditions which have been construed as necessitating continuous educational reform (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), these standardised measures in Queensland took the form of nationally sanctioned literacy and numeracy tests. Significant policy pressure and additional funding support led to specific governance strategies, particularly the division of students into ability groupings in each of the schools to target specific areas of need, and maximise test outcomes. This was justified in various ways, including to ensure students were able to reach their full potential. This governance process was complex, with some teachers denying that it entailed streaming, while others were at pains to point out that the ability grouping was not enacted for all school experiences, and that students had the opportunity to interact with members of the same year level, across cohorts. Furthermore, these groupings were described as dynamic; while students may have been allocated to a particular group on the basis of their NAPLAN and other test results, this could change over time, depending upon evidence of students' learning.

Significantly, and across all school sites regardless of individual school differences – again reflecting the particularly powerful policy conditions within which schooling practices were framed – a multitude of forms of data were also employed to manage the risk of low performance on standardised tests, and contributed to these elaborate streaming processes within schools. This included PAT Maths and PAT Reading tests – pre-packaged test programmes purchased by schools from ACER, the same company

responsible for conducting NAPLAN testing. Significantly, the CEO of ACER, Geoff Masters, who undertook the review into Queensland students' low literacy and numeracy results in 2009, also recommended the need for increased test-readiness activities (such as those provided by the PAT tests) for Queensland students. The avalanche of numbers (Hacking, 1990) provided through the tests, and the 'retailing of policy solutions' (Ball, 2012, p. 94) which these tests represent, made it possible to classify problematic student learning as a risk object in the first place, and then to provide specific resources to redress constructed concerns.

At the same time, the use of this battery of commercial tests enabled the identification of risk objects within discourses of opportunity (Power 2007). Notions of opportunity were evident in how students streamed into classrooms enabled teachers to address specific student learning needs more explicitly, thereby providing more targeted and beneficial learning options for students. Indeed, the opportunity construed was three-fold: the opportunity for students to receive more focused attention upon their specific needs; the opportunity for teachers to focus their attentions more fully upon a narrower range of abilities, and; the opportunity for those students in 'regular' classrooms to engage in work at a pace commensurate with their capacities. And these opportunities were all enabled by a set of educational resources – PAT-R and PAT-M tests, and a variety of other test packages (as well as NAPLAN itself) – sold commercially to schools, or purchased systemically through educational systems, such as Education Queensland. In these ways, low literacy and numeracy test results were construed as risk objects well worth delineating, made possible by a raft of educational tests, programmes and products,

which themselves served as intricate governance technologies strategically employed to help maximise desired outcomes.

There was also evidence of a plethora of different foci in relation to teachers' learning more explicitly across all school sites, and exposure of teachers to a broad range of different workshops. Specific 'pull-out' programmes (Luke, 2004), such as 'First Steps' in literacy and mathematics, and particularly in relation to reading, were important technologies of governance referred to repeatedly by teachers, across school contexts – again reflecting how stringent policy conditions can encourage a level of homogeneity across very different schooling settings in response to demands for significant improvements over short time-frames. Similarly, workshops on functional grammar, science programmes (such as 'Science Sparks') and ICTs were all construed as parts of teachers' learning repertoire. Such commodified learning initiatives, often undertaken off-site and orchestrated by external personnel for a fee - the 'selling of CPD' (Ball, 2012, p. 95) – were sometimes seen as beneficial by teachers, and were sometimes framed as part of more ongoing, long-term foci at the individual school levels. Regardless of perceptions of their usefulness, these individual workshops on specific aspects of particular programmes were technologies which were a key part of the tapestry of schooling practices in general and teacher learning practices in particular. As for student learning, ineffectual teacher learning also constitutes a compelling risk object, inciting broad-ranging management approaches by relying upon commodified packages. While such packages and personnel constituted problematic teacher learning as a risk object providing opportunities to guide and inform teachers – to redress deficits in their

understanding and knowledge – such learning seemed strongly framed by particular foci deemed important systemically, and typically in relation to improved outcomes in the domains of literacy and numeracy.

Conclusion

Under conditions of increased pressure for ever improved outcomes on standardised testing, and in a context of public discourses about poor student behaviours, and criticisms of teachers' knowledge and capacity to effect better results, not only are specific elements of schooling construed as risk objects, as 'risky', but such risks are also framed as being able to be managed. This management occurs via a plethora of information networks, whole-school programmes, teaching and assessment programmes, and specific testing and professional development packages – commodities to be purchased by educational systems, schools and/or teachers. Through such managerial technologies, education has itself become a 'risky business' whose governance processes both reflect and produce a range of specific, and arguably relatively narrow, outcomes for those caught up in these webs of intervention.

From a normative position, in the context of strong faith in more managerial technologies to effectively govern educational practices, and because such technologies can be construed as mechanisms to manage the performance of education – thereby contributing to processes of performativity – what may be required are more 'intelligent forms' of accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sahlberg, 2007) which actually temper testing

and other performative practices, thereby challenging, at least some of the time, those pre-packaged risk management processes which are construed as vehicles for ‘managing’ improved learning and engagement. While the various programmes, tests and PD activities outlined may have been useful for establishing the nature of teacher and student learning practices, and for improving some aspects of learning – as risk objects for enhancing opportunities – such learning may not be promoted by such specific programmes and initiatives, but instead require more substantive, open-ended and ongoing inquiries into learning practices. Research in Queensland has revealed, for example, how many ‘behaviour’ issues seem less pronounced, and academic outcomes higher, in those schoolings settings characterised by teachers steadily identifying and improving pedagogies, rather than those focused upon constructions of problematic behaviours or teacher deficits (QSRLS, 2001). And, as the research presented reveals, more managerial approaches are problematic in relation to matters of inclusion, and teacher professionalism. Notwithstanding potential opportunities presented as part of risk management processes, inherent within discourses of risk are issues of trust. Consequently, at the same time as particular schooling practices constitute particular types of risks to be managed, the identification and constitution of such risks may also highlight the need for opportunities for more progressive, contextually-specific and academically rigorous approaches to the governance of student and teacher learning.

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