

## Competing pressures in practice: Teachers' pedagogies and work under complex policy conditions

**Abstract:** Engaged and engaging teaching require teacher pedagogies and work which encourage respect for students and families, the ability to adapt curricula and policy reforms to contextual needs, and a willingness to learn on-the-job, on an ongoing basis. Arguably, current national and state curricula and testing policies in Australia seek to promote such capacity and complexity. However, such policies do not necessarily promote truly productive pedagogical practices. To elaborate this discrepancy, this paper draws upon Bourdieu's notion of the world as comprising competing social spaces or 'fields' characterised by contestation, and applies this conception of practice to the effects of current national Australian and state policies upon teachers' pedagogies, work and learning. To exemplify these effects, the paper draws upon the experiences and practices of two Special Education teachers working in a remote rural community in the state of Queensland, under policy conditions which encourage a strong focus upon prescribed curricula, and constant concerns about numeric/quantifiable measures of students' literacy and numeracy. The paper contrasts the context-responsiveness of these teachers' pedagogies and work with a more generic curriculum and data-centric policy setting which makes it difficult to focus upon more genuinely student-centred teaching and learning practices. Such an approach implies the need to revisit policy efforts to enact standardised tests and curricula, and that the teaching profession would be better served if, at the very least, more attention were given to teachers' own pedagogies, work and learning, in specific settings.

**Keywords:** standardised testing; national curriculum; pedagogies; teachers' work; teacher learning; Bourdieu

### Introduction: Contesting current policy conditions, in practice

In the introductory chapter of their book *Teacher professional learning in an age of compliance: Mind the gap*, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) refer to teachers' pedagogies and learning under current schooling conditions as characterised by increased forms of compliance. Such compliance is associated with a myriad of educational reform initiatives aimed at securing education within the ambit of 'safer, more measurable and quantifiable territory' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p. 3). Opening their volume with a quote from John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) lament the way in which more progressive, inclusive and actively democratic practices in schooling settings have been challenged by a myriad of policy reforms which encourage the standardisation and auditing of education.

This paper grapples with schooling practices under these conditions, and like Groundwater-Smith and Mockler's (2009) work, seeks to provide insights into how teachers also engage in alternative pedagogies, work and learning practices. These alternative pedagogies are not narrowly confined to a generic set of teaching 'methods',

but focus upon cultivating understandings of the socio-political and cultural context in which teachers work and students learn, and the subsequent values which underpin teaching. It is through understandings of culture, social structure and agency that educational *meaning* is enabled (Alexander, 2004, p. 10; emphasis original). Such pedagogies respect the cultural capitals of students and families, recognise the importance of contextual needs and adapt curricula and policy prescriptions accordingly. Such actions indicate important learnings on the part of teachers, and are reflected in their pedagogical practices.

Drawing upon the experiences of two Special Education teachers in a rural/remote community in the northern region of the state of Queensland, Australia, the paper reveals how two relatively young and inexperienced teachers drew upon their learnings about their students to inform and improve their pedagogical practices under current, challenging policy conditions. To make sense of these practices, the paper draws upon Bourdieu's concepts, including his notion of 'fields' and 'logics of practice'. For Bourdieu, fields are social spaces characterised by contestation between individuals and groups over the practices considered of most value. The resulting dominant practices come to exhibit their own particular 'logics', or ways of being, which, in turn, characterise particular fields.

Specifically, this contestation relates to how teachers' work and pedagogies are influenced by both rationalities of teacher practice which construe learning as the outcome of teachers' engagement with data and heavily regulated curricula, as well as more holistic conceptions of the capacities, experiences and knowledges of students' circumstances. In this way, the paper elaborates what it describes as the 'field of pedagogical and work practices' to better understand these multiple and competing influences. This is in keeping with Alexander's (2004) focus upon pedagogies as relating to not simply generic conceptions of 'what' and 'how' to teach, but as also informed by understandings of schools as institutions, current policy influences, and the broader cultural and historical conditions which influence students' lives and learning. This article seeks to make sense of the pedagogies unfolding in one schooling setting in relation to the broader policy and social context within which a particular community of teachers and students lived.

### **Teachers' pedagogies, work and learning under standardised policy conditions**

Teachers' pedagogies, work and learning are heavily influenced by the conditions within which they are undertaken. In Anglo-American settings, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) refer to the influence of an audit culture upon all areas of social service provision, including education. These practices are part of a broader culture of risk averseness in which risk has become construed as a key part of social life (Arnoldi, 2008). To try to ameliorate risks, and as part of a broader 'audit culture' or 'audit society' (Power, 2007; Strathern, 2000), various audit tools have become increasingly favoured as administrative technologies to shape all aspects of teacher and student practices. Such technologies are evident in the form of various standardised curricula and

testing instruments. Such technologies have significant repercussions for the pedagogies which become enacted.

The emphasis upon standardised, often 'national', curriculum development and enactment reflects broader processes of more closely and coherently determining what constitutes 'official knowledge'. Apple (1993) describes how the interest in a national curriculum in the US is part of a broader process of 'conservative restoration' (p. 2). Such a curriculum is aligned with a strong pedagogical focus upon basic skills instruction, as opposed to the more explicitly rigorous 'thinking curriculum' which should characterise students' schooling experiences (Resnick, 2010). In the English context, the implementation of the national curriculum has also been a source of consternation because of the limited engagement of teachers and other educational experts in its development (Hughes, 1997).

At the same time, the use of standardized tests has become increasingly prevalent in western nation-states, and constitutes part of a general global policy process of the abstraction and quantification of education aimed at addressing accountability concerns about the nature and extent of students' learning (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The production of such indicators also constructs teachers as passive consumers of such data, and whose pedagogical practices will be responsive to such indicators. In Australia, the reporting of national literacy and numeracy test results through the *MySchool* website has led to strong pressures to improve these results. As part of the effort to improve results, all resources, including those allocated to teachers' learning, are oriented towards this work. This includes valorising efforts on the part of individual teachers to redress low results in their own classrooms. Such valorisation of individual teacher learning marginalises alternative, more collective teacher learning approaches to inform teachers' pedagogies for substantive student understanding over the long-term, and can foster a more short-term focus upon results for the sake of results (Hardy & Boyle, 2011).

Emerging research into the nature of teachers' pedagogies in the context of these new national curriculum and national testing practices in Australia reveal a strong focus upon basic decoding and an emphasis upon basic skill acquisition to the detriment of higher order processing (Luke, 2010). Luke (2010) argues early research into the nature of teachers' pedagogic practices in the context of increased focus upon a national curriculum, and the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN), reveals teachers spend relatively little time engaging in specialized field and disciplinary knowledge associated with the sciences, social sciences and humanities, or community-focused knowledges. Instead, the enacted curriculum is characterised by an emphasis upon comprehension and skill development in the hope of improving results on the standardised national literacy and numeracy tests. These tests encourage short-form (multiple-choice, short answer) responses focused upon literacy and numeracy skills, and emphasise specific genres and writing styles to the exclusion of others in more extended writing pieces. A focus upon such approaches has come to significantly influence teaching practices in classroom settings, often to the detriment of alternative practices. Such concerns reflect conservative approaches to teaching on the part of teachers, and limited opportunities for robust and rich professional learning experiences.

However, alongside these influences, alternative discourses around the nature and culture of teachers' work and learning continue to play out and influence teachers' pedagogies. In the Australian context, longer-term support for various 'turn around pedagogies' (Kamler & Comber, 2005) represent alternative approaches to narrow responses to curriculum and testing processes. More explicitly place-based pedagogies also suggest the possibility for more localised approaches which not only serve as alternatives to standardised curricula but have the potential to improve school-community relations and taken-for-granted assumptions about identity more generally (Thomson, 2006). Such pedagogies are also framed around the capacity to care (Noddings, 1992), and the product of various forms of collective and collaborative learning on the part of teachers (see Hardy, 2012).

Also, there is recognition that any form of testing requires teacher judgement. Standardised approaches, including assessment criteria, are necessarily interpreted by teachers, with judgements being central to pedagogical and assessment practices (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn, 2010). In the state of Queensland, there is evidence of teachers engaging in moderation practices to improve teachers' pedagogies, even as such approaches are under increasing pressure from more standardised approaches to assessment and learning (Klenowski, 2011). Queensland has a long history of school-based moderation and teacher judgment of student assessment in the secondary years, and more recently in primary schooling. This profession-oriented approach is a form of accountability which helps to build teacher judgement about the standard of students' work. This is in contrast with higher stakes national testing practices which adopt more nation-wide, standardised approaches to delineating the quality of students' work, and which are focused upon more external systems of accountability. Increased pressures for improved performance upon more high stakes, national standardised tests serve to undermine more capacity-building approaches based on informing teachers about the nature of their students' work. Nevertheless, these more profession-building approaches continue to be important practices in Queensland.

Consequently, at the same time as there are strong policy pressures for standardised curriculum, teaching and testing practices, richer repertoires of teaching and learning practices exist as productive alternatives.

### **The policy context: Teaching and learning in Queensland, Australia**

Despite the seeming decentralisation of schools through advocacy for school-based management, current policy settings in Australia are increasingly national in orientation. During the past five years in particular, there has been rapid development of national assessment (*National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)*), curriculum (*Australian Curriculum*) and reporting practices along an A to E grading scale. This simplified A to E scale has been supported in opposition to earlier state-based and more descriptive indicators of student achievement/attainment – for example, through the use of terms such as 'developing', 'satisfactory', 'outstanding'. It is now

difficult to ‘think’ substantive educational reform in Australia in ways other than nationally, and in terms of more generic and generalist practices.

The development of the *Australian Curriculum* is a key plank of this nationalisation process. First implemented in 2012, the ‘national curriculum’ as it is more commonly and colloquially referred by teachers, has been taken up strongly in Queensland. Not only has the state embraced the national curriculum while other states (most notably, New South Wales) have resisted, the state educational authority (Education Queensland) has developed a battery of detailed lesson plans and resources – the ‘Curriculum to the Classroom’ (C2C). The state-wide mandating of the ‘C2C’ has meant the C2C has become a pervasive part of the educational landscape throughout the state. No other state has engaged with the *Australian Curriculum* in this way (although the Northern Territory has since purchased these resources from Education Queensland).

This prescriptive approach to curriculum is, in large part, a result of concerns about perceptions of teaching quality in the state more broadly. These concerns arose out of the state’s relatively low attainment levels in inaugural NAPLAN tests in 2008. Alongside the new curriculum, continued concerns about Queensland’s performance in NAPLAN have led to a wide range of practices to assist with the continued focus upon national testing. In response to low test results, a state-commissioned report, the ‘Master’s Report’<sup>1</sup>, recommended, *inter alia*, a stronger emphasis upon literacy and numeracy skill development, and an increased focus upon test-readiness activities for Queensland students. In keeping with the focus upon literacy and numeracy, this also included the reallocation of Special Needs/Support Teachers (Learning Difficulties) to the role of Special Needs/Support Teachers (Literacy and Numeracy).

### **Theoretical resources: Understanding practice in context, and as contest**

To make sense of competing teacher pedagogies and work practices under these policy conditions, this paper draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of practices as ‘relational’. That is, any practices or activities can only be understood in relation to other possibilities:

At every moment and in every society we are faced with a set of social positions bound through a relation of homology to a set of activities ... and goods ... that can themselves be characterized only relationally (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 273).

The result of this relational thinking is an understanding of the social world as comprising actors taking various positions in relation to the broader conditions which influence them, and in relation to one another. As a consequence, it becomes possible to identify homologous social spaces, or ‘fields’. For Bourdieu (1990), this homology means that each field is characterised by its own particular way-of-being, or ‘logic’. Importantly, fields are not static, but are the product of both internal and external influences upon those who occupy them. The broader ‘field of power’, with its emphasis upon and propensity towards economic influences, is the most obvious evidence of an external

---

<sup>1</sup> Named after the principal author, Professor Geoff Masters, CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

influence, and making sense of how particular practices play out in relation to this field is an important part of any analytical endeavour.

However, and at the same time, even as fields may be subject to external influences, they are strongly subject to internal contestation between key players and influences within them:

A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and others who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40, 41).

Seeking to make sense of dominant, residual and emergent practices amongst the individuals and groups who occupy any given field, and their inter-relations, is essential.

This work is assisted by identification of the individual proclivities, or 'habitus', of those involved, and which help to produce the field of which they are a part. This habitus is a product of exposure to particular experiences, giving rise to a specific 'disposition' – a tendency to behave in particular ways, or to engage with the self, others and the world from specific stand-points. That is, individuals and groups are a product of engagement with any given field of practice within which they are located, and which exercises influence over them. Consequently, the habitus is both 'product' and 'producer' of the conditions within which it arises, and to which it is more or less disposed. It is the nature of these conditions of and for practice which Bourdieu's approach seeks to understand, and how these conditions influence and are influenced by those to whom they pertain.

The subsequent contestation which characterises any given field is enabled by the particular resources, or 'capitals,' which different actors bring to this contest, and which are recognised differently in different fields. Bourdieu uses the term capital to accord the same force of motivation to his understanding of the world which the broader world confers upon notions of economic capital. While capital may exist in economic forms, the logics of practice which come to characterise a field are the product of accumulation of various forms of social, cultural and/or economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Such capitals may also be symbolic, that is, forms of capital which enable agents to alter or appropriate other forms of capital. There is also evidence in Bourdieu's later work of forms of 'statist capital' which focus upon the influence of the state within various fields (Schwartz, 1997). In this paper, the influence of the state upon the field of teachers' pedagogical and work practices is of particular interest. Specifically, this relates to particular forms of capital which are valued by the state in the form of improved test scores, and fidelity to curriculum implementation. In the data presented, these statist pressures constitute the broader field of power, influenced as they are by broader concerns about how education can effect improved economic productivity.

Importantly, while fields may be characterised by dominant practices, these practices are constantly subject to alteration and influence by those within them. Through a process of ‘socio-analysis’ – active interrogation of the social circumstances influencing individuals and groups (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) – dominant practices may be contested. In this way, even as they are identifiable by dominant practices, fields are also subject to change.

The various analytical resources which Bourdieu developed – particularly the ‘thinking tools’ (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989, p. 50), of field, habitus and capitals – will be deployed to make sense of the practices of two Special Education teachers in one school setting in Queensland during a period of significant educational policy reform. In keeping with Bourdieu’s approach to understanding practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), this paper seeks to explore how a particular policy ensemble played out in practice in relation to broader pressures and demands upon teachers (emanating from the field of power), the nature of the relations between those within what is described as the field of teachers’ pedagogies and work, and the habitus and dispositions of those affected.

### **Policy, teaching, and learning in ‘Suntown’ school**

To shed light upon the complexity of pedagogical practices, and to put into relief the issue of whether and how national and state policies in Queensland have influenced teachers’ pedagogies and work more generally, this paper draws upon empirical research into the teaching practices and broader work and learning experiences of two Special Education teachers in a complex schooling setting in the northern regions of the state. The school, ‘Suntown’<sup>2</sup>, was situated in a relatively remote community, serving 200 students from Prep to Year 10. 85% of students identify as Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander. ‘Sarah’ and ‘Natalie’ were the focus in this research because they were in the unique situation of being able to work with many students and classes across the school. In this sense, their pedagogies, work and learning were informed by a broader range of experiences than is perhaps often the case for many teachers. As relatively young but capable Special Education teachers in a rural/remote community in Queensland, they embodied the complexity which characterises teachers’ pedagogies in such settings. Natalie had been a teacher for 10 ½ years, and had taught in England for most of this time; this included experience of the national curriculum in that country. Although Sarah had been teaching for only eighteen months, she was respected by students and colleagues, and valued for her ability to engage productively with all members of her school community. In this way, the paper seeks to explore the nature of the pedagogical practices of two proactive and developing teachers who had experiences across all year levels in the context of a multifaceted, complex school environment, and significant policy pressure for centralised and standardised teaching and testing.

The data presented are part of a broader data set involving interviews with 18 teachers and support staff at this particular school, which is itself part of a larger study under way into how current policy conditions are influencing teachers’ learning practices in varied schooling settings across the state. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes

---

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

duration, undertaken at the school site, and transcribed remotely. Ethics approval was sought and granted from both the researcher's institution, and Education Queensland, the educational authority for which these teachers worked. In keeping with Education Queensland guidelines for ethical research practice, the principal's permission to conduct the research was sought and approved at the outset of the research. All participants gave their active consent to be involved, were provided with a report into key findings of the research, and their responses sought.

The transcripts from which data were drawn were analysed using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capitals to make sense of these teachers' practices, particularly in light of whether and how broader policy conditions influenced and resonated with teachers' pedagogies, work and learning. More broadly, the analysis seeks to make sense of how policy is enacted in practice in the context of rich and varied circumstances which influence teachers' pedagogical practices, and the contested practices which characterise these circumstances.

Finally, in keeping with Bourdieu *et al.*'s (1999, p. 608) stance against 'epistemological innocence', it is also recognised that as with all forms of research, the knowledge and understandings developed are always necessarily influenced by the focus and practices of the researcher, and the academic disposition more generally. This includes, for example, the way in which the data was generated by one-on-one interviews in which, in many ways, the researcher occupied a position of relative power in relation to interviewees. It is also recognised that additional insights from associated personnel, such as regional and state educational bureaucrats, policy-makers and politicians would provide important additional insights into the foci of the research; budgetary and time constraints inhibited the collection of such material. The findings are also presented in light of the exigencies, constraints and affordances associated with academic labour, including the more 'scholastic' interests which characterise the academic milieu (Bourdieu, 1998b).

### **Findings: Teachers' pedagogies and work as an effect of policy and practice**

While the C2C as Queensland's iteration of the national curriculum seeks to unify teaching practices across the state, detailed curriculum lesson plans and resources, seemed remote from the variety and complexity which characterised the field of pedagogical and work practices, as experienced by these teachers:

I think my role's basically broken up into 3 components. The first part is working with those key students with the higher needs disabilities. So I'll withdraw those students, and do a lot of functional literacy and numeracy programs, life skills, that kind of thing. ... The second role is kind of working with the teachers and integrating these students in the class but also literacy and numeracy support. So I'm helping the teachers with their curriculum implementation, how they differentiate that for all learners, not just those key [students]. ... And then the other part is what I kind of consider the 'paperwork side' of things. So I'm having to do verification reviews of the disabilities, a lot of negotiating when specialists are coming into the school (Sarah).



This teachers' pedagogical practice entailed working with individual students, working with teachers and teaching students in 'mainstream' classes, negotiating with specialist external staff, and various administrative tasks to ensure the smooth-flow of personnel and resources to assist students with special needs. Sarah's work was also not limited to just these 'key' students. Such responses reflect a more collaborative teacher habitus, influenced by a broader culture of care about all students' learning and support for teachers (cf. Noddings, 1992). This is in contrast with a more technicist habitus, focused upon a prescribed curriculum and increases in literacy and numeracy results. It also reflects a focus upon a substantive conception of quality – not dominated by concerns about 'quality assurance,' or 'quality control', but instead emphasising care, support and engagement with staff and students (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009).

Broader conceptions of practice within national curricula also don't effectively capture a teaching habitus fashioned through exposure to the knowledge of professionals constantly visiting the school because of its remote status and the specific needs of its students:

Because we are a remote school, we have a lot of people flying in, flying out, including Advisory Visiting Teachers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists. We have optometrists come in; we have 'Hearing Australia' come in. So I negotiate and work out which students are to be seen ....

Working with the specialists and a lot of their expertise, I've just been learning. [I've also been learning from] a lot of the Advisory Visiting Teachers. Just different strategies with students with intellectual impairments, ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], all of that sort of thing. So it's been a huge learning curve with working with people (Sarah).

Exposure to these experts, and on-the-job learning were primary opportunities for this teacher to hone her pedagogical practices. While broader testing and curricula may foreground more general and generic (and typically individualistic) approaches to teachers' learning, this teacher's habitus was forged through experiences gleaned from her everyday work as a Special Needs teacher. A more complex collaborative logic was clearly evident through working extensively with expert others in the field.

Nevertheless, and reflecting the broader field of power in relation to testing, the capitals which were valued within the state were those associated with improved NAPLAN results. This was reflected in the strong pedagogical focus of Learning Support teachers upon enhancing literacy and numeracy skills of students, particularly in areas tested in NAPLAN, such as persuasive writing:

I was specifically put on the class to help the teacher with NAPLAN support, so I was specifically taking groups out, working with mainly numeracy. We have done some literacy as well around the persuasive writing task. Having said that, though, this year I'm working with the English teacher. She does [Years] 7, 8, 9 English, and I take a rotation. So we do a lot of rotations in the class, especially in high

school. It seems to work, and because there's so much content to cover, I was responsible for the comprehension for Year 7 and 8. So we would actually have examples of NAPLAN style comprehension tasks. So reading through them - just the explicit strategies of how to attack a reading task; how to answer comprehension questions; what they're looking for; how they're trying to trick you, that sort of thing. Just those explicit strategies on how to actually complete the task, with a few of the lower students (Sarah).

The pervasive logic of NAPLAN testing was evident in sometimes extreme forms, including such technicalities as teachers assisting students to fill out the test sheets properly. This included ensuring students knew to select one answer only in response to multiple choice tests, to shade fully inside a single bubble, and not to shade outside the lines. NAPLAN-related activities also permeated a multitude of literacy learning activities:

I even just helped out with filling out the form, this is how you do it, this is how you correctly shade in a bubble, because it sounds easy but it's not always done. And with Year 9, I did their spelling. So, [Year] 7 and [Year] 8, I did the reading comprehension. Year 9, I was responsible for spelling. So I took the spelling rotation. Similar thing - we focussed on past NAPLAN words, just getting them to have a look at, 'This is the level of words you're expected to know at Year 9,' [and] some spelling strategies around those words. And then they're all tested in NAPLAN style, either dictation or a 'cloze' [activity] where you've got to put in the missing word, or circle the misspelt word, [or] spell it correctly. So just trying to prepare them the best [for the test] (Sarah).

In this way, even as teachers' pedagogies were clearly more complex, and focused on concerns beyond testing, the field of pedagogical and work practices was simultaneously heavily influenced by policy pressure for increased emphasis upon NAPLAN and improvements in outcomes. Such a focus is evidence of a very specific form of valued 'statist' capital (Schwartz, 1997), and evidence of the broader field of power upon teachers' practices.

Similarly, the strong focus upon implementing the national curriculum through heavily prescribed C2C lesson plans also influenced the field. There was explicit recognition that teachers' pedagogies would be fully informed by the C2C resources, exactly as they were set out:

At this school, it [the expectation] is that we will teach C2C by the C2C lessons that we have (Natalie).

The capitals which were symbolically valued were lesson plans and pedagogical practices explicitly associated with the C2C. This was not a simple process. It involved teachers having to juggle tight timelines to fulfil expectations that all lessons would be taught as outlined in the C2C. That the national curriculum in the form of C2C had pervasive effects was evident in how the more experienced teacher grappled with the difficulty of

teaching such a heavily prescribed curriculum which didn't account for the regular school calendar:

But I think the people who look at C2C need to look at different areas. I mean, I've taught in Year 5, and then I've been doing Year 6 while the Year 6 teacher's away. And I kind of look at the lesson and think what I have to teach them before I can get to that lesson within the lesson! And you can't miss a lesson because there's the twenty five lessons of English that you need to do in that term... And so if you miss one, you kind of can't catch up. You have to teach - you know. So like the public holiday - there's two coming up on a Friday and a Monday here. Well, that's two days of English that are 'out', that you have to try and catch up (Natalie).

This prescriptiveness was further evident in the challenges of trying to teach the curriculum as expected, even if students did not possess the requisite knowledge to make sense of it:

But if the children don't have the prior knowledge beforehand, which some of them don't here, it's hard to even teach it. So that's what I've found with the C2C, is the children's prior knowledge and their ability; that's been the hardest to grasp (Natalie).

Such efforts and challenges reflect a professional habitus struggling to engage with pedagogical expectations surrounding a heavily prescribed curriculum in the context of complex realities.

However, this teacher also displayed a more explicitly socio-analytic approach to her situation, as she sought to proffer ways in which the curriculum could be taught more productively:

So I don't know - I know that it's in trial stages, C2C this year but I don't know whether people will - it'll be scrapped or not. Or whether we could just say, 'These are the C2C objectives for Year Two, and these are some ideas in some resources. But as long as you teach to these objectives, you can have free rein to teach it how you like' (Natalie).

Similarly, there was also more explicit recognition that standardised testing and curricula regimes were problematic. This included understanding that the raft of testing processes used to determine students' capacities prior to NAPLAN were not fool-proof, or necessarily useful for informing subsequent teaching practices:

At the beginning of the year they definitely have to do the running records or the 'PROBE' reading tests; we also have 'Waddington' reading tests. There's a spelling test which gives a spelling age, and the teachers all have to enter this data onto internal monitoring, which can be accessed by anyone in the school ... I can get on and have a look and see coming into the class ... But I think it's also

important to keep in mind that kids have their ways about getting around these tests. Some of them are multiple choice; some of them can remember doing them last term or last semester; some of them may not actually show what the student is capable of (Sarah).

Also, and reflecting contestation within the field, this teacher simultaneously recognised the limitations of the NAPLAN testing regime, the problems it raised for informing teaching, and the difficulties it failed to address:

I find that a lot of teachers, especially in the context that we are, in this environment, they don't see it as relevant to our students up here in Suntown, so they don't see it as a true reflection of what the kids can do. I actually took the Year Five kids last week on the Wednesday and Thursday; it was for their NAPLAN tests<sup>3</sup>. And I was a little disheartened looking at the students, and because they know it's a big test, there's so much talk in the media and they hear everyone saying 'NAPLAN's coming up, it's coming up.' And then it arrives and they're just that overwhelmed that they're just colouring in bubbles left, right and centre. They're trying their best but they're not. They're not reading the questions; they're not looking through the maths questions. I think it's all very daunting for them and I was looking at some questions and from my experience with this child, I'm sure that if they were to sit down and look at this question they would be able to get the right answer. But I think with the whole hype of NAPLAN, they just seemed a little [overwhelmed by the test conditions, and subsequently were not focusing upon answering to the best of their ability]; they weren't actually giving it their best work. So I think it is a little bit difficult to gauge that as an indication of the student's level (Sarah).

Again, experience of students' capacities in ordinary teaching environments within the school revealed a much more context-responsive habitus on the part of this teacher.

Finally, these teachers' pedagogies were also influenced by learning about their students more generally, beyond formal testing and curricula issues. A more holistic, caring teacher habitus, shaped by engagement with these particular students, and an increased understanding about their learning needs, was evident. This learning was apparent in relation to kinship structures within the community:

I think it wasn't until I actually came to Suntown that I got a bit of an insight into the – I suppose the structure and of how the different kinships [worked]... There are some fantastic families ... who are very supportive of their kids, make sure the kids are always at school, a lot of interest in how they're going, supporting them. And not just the mother and father figure, but the aunties and the extended family who are also taking a keen interest in how their kids are going. And I think that's one thing to get around; it's not [just] the Mum and Dad, 'This is my

---

<sup>3</sup> Serendipitously, the interviews for this particular school were conducted the week following NAPLAN testing in Australian schools.

kid.’ It’s like ‘an our’. It’s very: ‘These are our children,’ I find is how the community sees it – which is, I think, a great way to see it (Sarah)!

In these ways, even as the field of pedagogical and work practices was heavily influenced by the broader field of power in the form of prescribed curricula and testing, a teaching habitus was evident which was explicitly context-responsive, and which sought to instantiate conditions for more engaged student learning. Teachers’ understandings of broader cultures of teachers’ work and learning practices reflected a habitus characterised by a nuanced appreciation of the specific needs and situations of students in teachers’ care.

### **Discussion: The complexity of teachers’ pedagogical and work practices**

This brief account of two teacher’s pedagogies and work in relation to national testing and national curriculum, as part of a push for increased uniformity over teaching practice, reveals how the field of pedagogical and work practices is heavily dominated by a logic of standardised testing and curricula policy processes. That is, there is significant evidence of the influence of the broader field of power, with its concerns about these more generic forms of education, upon the field of teachers’ pedagogies and work. As Support Teachers, these teachers taught across the school, and were key vehicles for the increased emphasis upon literacy and numeracy as part of a broader educational reform agenda. The strong and explicit emphasis upon tightly scripted curricula, and conceptions of literacy and numeracy within the school, reflects the sort of risk averseness (Arnoldi, 2008) which characterises current social settings – in this case, the field of pedagogical and work practices as evident at one school site. As Alexander (2004) indicates, policy is an important contextual factor in schools, and just as policy can enable, it also potentially ‘inhibits what is taught and how’ (p. 12).

The strong focus upon the national testing regime, and the explicit preparation of students to sit the test, reflects how policy pressure for improved test results, and increased time on test preparation activities, also influence pedagogical practices in narrow and reductive ways. Again, these pressures emanate from a broader field of power rendered as national and state pressure for improved test results. Under these circumstances, the capitals most valued are improved test results. A test-focused habitus, dominated by such concerns, is reflected in the way in which so many of the pedagogical tasks which students engaged were oriented towards NAPLAN. A strong focus upon persuasive writing tasks – a favoured genre within the test – was indicative of test-centric logics. Relatively unproblematised engagement with examples of NAPLAN style questions during comprehension activities across grade levels, and NAPLAN-like spelling words also reflect the dominance of more standardised test-logics. Perhaps the most extreme example of pervasiveness of an audit, risk averse pedagogical culture was the act of a teacher sitting with students to assist in the technical task of filling in their responses during test practice activities (‘shading in bubbles’). Given the explicit emphasis upon test-readiness activities within the Masters’ Report, perhaps it is not that surprising that teachers’ pedagogies reflected strong and ongoing engagement with such activities. Teachers’ experiences of a policy setting which foregrounded improved NAPLAN results

as valued capitals played out in the form of strong and ongoing engagement with the test; it also played out in responsiveness to students' outcomes on trial tests. The pedagogical work and learning foregrounded under these circumstances is the sort of quick, superficial practice associated with engaging in tests for the sake of improving test results. Such responses are evidence of an enumerative disposition within the field of pedagogical and work practices, and the quantification of education more generally (Hardy & Boyle, 2011).

Similarly, in relation to the Queensland version of the Australian Curriculum, C2C, there was an explicit understanding that schools should engage with the teaching of the C2C exactly as outlined in the resources provided to the school<sup>4</sup>. In this instance, the influence of the broader field of power was expressed in the form of state pressures for fidelity to implementation of the C2C as the Queensland iteration of the Australian Curriculum. These pressures played out in the form of a conservative logic of enactment which circumscribed the professional judgment so necessary for substantive teaching and assessment practices (cf. Klenowski, 2011). That concerns were expressed about potentially missing parts of the curriculum because of public holidays, reveals a teacher habitus forged from a level of policy prescription which can only have deleterious effects upon pedagogical practices. The influence of the broader field of power, and the logics of standardisation – through support for standardised curricula (C2C) and testing (NAPLAN) – are summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1 below. The arrows indicate the forces emanating from the field of power upon these teachers' pedagogies, work and learning, and how more professionally oriented logics (the field of teachers' pedagogies and work') are influenced as a result.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

However, and as this diagram also clearly indicates, teachers such as Sarah and Natalie were simultaneously influenced by these more professionally focused logics more typically associated with teachers' work in specific schooling settings, even as more standardised logics exerted influence. Even as they were influenced by more reductive concerns about improved test results, and issues of curriculum coverage, these teachers simultaneously sought to challenge more restrictive pedagogical logics associated with 'teaching to the test' and a narrow focus upon the national curriculum in the form of the C2C alone. With its focus upon more localised concerns, the field of teachers' pedagogical and work practices is simultaneously revealed as a site in which national testing practices are recognised as problematic, even as they are enacted by teachers and students. This was evident in recognition that the C2C was excessively restrictive in the

---

<sup>4</sup> This approach was altered during the course of the first semester of the implementation of the C2C, but, tellingly, these teachers were not aware of this increased flexibility at the time of the interview (even though this was relatively late into the semester). In part, this may have been because the region within which they worked had performed poorly in earlier NAPLAN results relative to the state as a whole, and a culture of compliance and close scrutiny had become established, which led to teachers being expected to comply with all departmental policy requirements – including trying to follow the scripted C2C lesson plans without alteration, well after it became apparent that this was not possible.

way it was organised and taught, and didn't always relate to the needs of *these* students in *this* school. A socio-analytic capacity was evident in the way in which Natalie suggested that rather than following C2C lesson plans and resources as originally intended, teachers could teach to the objectives which characterised the units, and draw upon resources selectively in the pursuit of these objectives.

Similarly, a teacher habitus forged from detailed knowledge of individual students' abilities in regular pedagogical situations was evident in recognition that the raft of assessment practices put in place to inform and bolster preparation for NAPLAN did not necessarily provide accurate insights into students' capabilities. Even as improved test results on NAPLAN were capitals which were highly valued, teachers simultaneously recognised the limitations of such tests, including how students could circumvent test preparation and test readiness activities. Such site-based understandings, grounded in knowledge of students' capabilities and aptitudes, indicates a professional pedagogical logic which seeks to contest more audit-oriented logics with their emphasis upon generic articulations of students' learning. Such responses also reflect the importance of teachers having opportunities to develop sound professional judgement over time (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn, 2011).

Furthermore, a caring disposition was evident in how teachers' pedagogies were informed by valuable context-specific information about their students, including the nature, character and complexity of their lives. A caring habitus, the product of a culture of care (Nodding, 1992), was evident alongside more administrative and bureaucratic logics. This caring disposition was reflected in recognition that some students' experiences meant they did not possess prior knowledge to engage with standardised curricula, but that they did possess other knowledges and valuable experiences (cf. Thomson, 2006; Kamler & Comber, 2005). Teachers' understandings of a broader network of kin relationships were recognised as valued capitals which contributed to improved student outcomes. A teacher habitus was evident which had clearly been influenced by exposure to positive instances of engagement, and which subsequently validated the familial capitals available to some students. Such stances are also clearly in opposition to more deficit discourses often associated with communities such as Suntown.

### **Conclusion: Working with and beyond standardised policy processes**

This paper reveals that standardised policy solutions – regimented curricula, and standardised tests – have strong and sometimes problematic effects on teachers' pedagogical and work practices. They constitute particular logics in opposition to the specificity and nuanced nature of teachers' actual teaching and learning practices. While it is recognised that teachers' practices are not unproblematic, and that they may themselves restrict students' educational development, the pedagogical practices and work of these two Special Needs teachers seem to bring into sharp relief the challenges faced by teachers striving to do their best under challenging circumstances. Importantly, they also reveal how policy support for more reductive approaches to curriculum and testing contribute substantively to these challenges. Policy support for standardised

curriculum and testing practices need to be treated cautiously for the potentially narrowing and confining effects they may have upon the field of pedagogical and work practices, and the narrow conception of valued capitals they foster. The complexity of teachers' actual pedagogies and work highlight why more standardised approaches to curriculum development and testing may inhibit more productive responses.

However, more reductive applications of testing and curricula processes were clearly not the only practices which characterised the field of teachers' work and learning, as evident in this schooling site. A more context-responsive teacher habitus was also evident which had developed through exposure to working and learning in a particular community with particular needs, and the development and recognition of embodied and social capitals not always recognised in schooling settings. In spite of strong policy support for national curricula and testing at the discursive level, there was also evidence of how logics of care, collaboration and context-responsiveness have influenced the pedagogies, and work more generally, of teachers. The variety and richness of practice relating to these teachers, and their knowledge of their students and families, all shaped their pedagogical habitus.

A Bourdieuan approach reveals how more productive practices are always in tension with more reductive pressures under challenging policy conditions, such as those evident in the Queensland context. Not adequately recognising such contestation and its socially-constituted nature, could serve to deflect attention away from important contextual conditions which influence teachers' work and learning. The result could be an erroneous sense of individual proclivities and capacities as solely responsible for more problematic outcomes. The research therefore reveals the need to further interrogate the nature of teachers' pedagogical practices in light of their particular circumstances and the broader policy and political conditions which influence their work. It is only by revealing the dominant and competing logics of practice which characterise the field of teachers' pedagogies and work that clearer insights can be gleaned into how policy support for more centralised and standardised curricula and testing play out in practice. Arguably, more work needs to be done to build professional capacity amongst teachers to better respond to the pressures surrounding NAPLAN, and the introduction of the C2C in Queensland; recognising the capacities and capabilities of teachers to engage productively with their students and communities is a first step in this process. However, such work will be for nought if the actual policy conditions within which teachers work are not also simultaneously scrutinised, and altered. More productive and professional capacity on the part of teachers can only occur under conditions of increased capacity-building and trust. These conditions are antithetical to conditions which foster unquestioned faith in standardised testing and curriculum practices and processes.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was made possible through the ARC funded (DE120100086) *Teachers' learning in complex times* project. The author thanks Education Queensland central and regional office staff, principals, teachers and other school personnel for their participation



in this project. Thank you to the two anonymous referees for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## References

- Alexander, R. (2004). Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34(1), 7-33.
- Apple, M. (1993). The politics of official knowledge: Does a national curriculum make sense? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 14(1), 1-16
- Arnoldi, J. (2009). *Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. E. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory of research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-58). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). Concluding remarks: For a sociogenetic understanding of intellectual works. In C. Calhoun, E. LiPuma, & M. Postone (Eds.), *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives* (pp. 263-275). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998a). *On television and journalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998b) *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Stanford: Stanford, CA University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., Balazs, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, L. et al. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & L. Wacquant. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Groundwater-Smith, S. & Mockler, N. (2009). *Teacher professional learning in an age of compliance: Mind the gap*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hardy, I. (2012). *The politics of teacher professional development: Policy, research and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Hardy, I., & Boyle, C. (2011). My School? Critiquing the abstraction and quantification of Education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(3), 211-222.
- Hughes, M. (1997). The national curriculum in England and Wales: A lesson in externally imposed reform? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 33(2), 183-197.

Kamler, B., & Comber, B. (2005). Turn-around pedagogies: Improving the education of at-risk students. *Improving Schools*, 8(2), 121-131.

Klenowski, V. (2011). Assessment reform and educational change in Australia. In R. Berry, & B. Adamson (Eds.), *Assessment Reform in Education* (pp. 63-74). Springer Dordrecht, 63-74.

Luke, A. (2010). Will the Australian Curriculum up the intellectual ante in primary schools? *Curriculum Perspectives*, 30(3), 59-64.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Power, M. (2007). *Organized uncertainty: Designing a world of risk management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Resnick, L. (2010). Nested learning systems for the thinking curriculum. *Educational Researcher*, 39(3), 183-197.

Rizvi, F. & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. London: Routledge.

Strathern, M. (2000). New accountabilities: Anthropological studies in audit, ethics and accountability (pp. 1-18). London: Routledge.

Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Thomson, P. (2006). Miners, diggers, ferrets and show-men: School-community projects that affirm and unsettle identities and place? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(1), 81-96.

Wyatt-Smith, C., Klenowski, V., & Gunn, S. (2010). The centrality of teachers' judgement practice in assessment: A study of standards in moderation. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 17(1), 59-75.

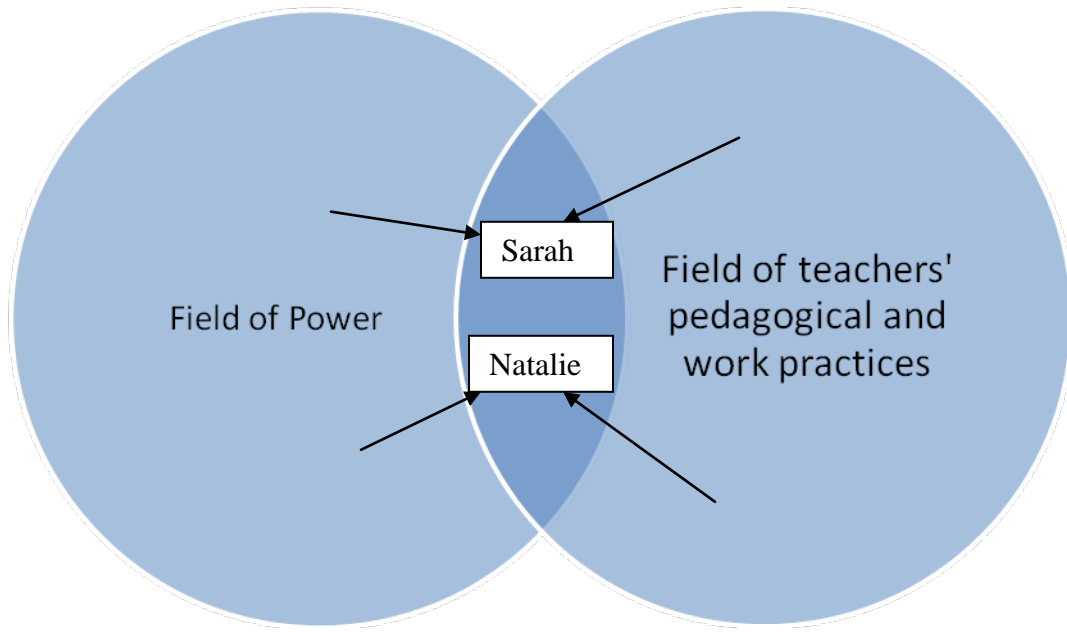


Figure 1