

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT - Academic Computing Services- Edith Cowan University

Making Sense of Performance Management in Schools: Official Rhetoric and Teachers' Reality

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INTRODUCTION

Although I agree with performance management in principle and believe that we do need some method of assuring standards within the profession, it is also my greatest fear. I don't think it will be done properly - there just isn't the time. And that Head of Department is still out there - and perhaps many more like him. Don't tell me this is

different because we have choice in who assesses us. I don't believe this will happen - and there will be so much opportunity for the system to be exploited and abused. And in the end the system is us (teacher's comment, 7/97).

In this paper we explore the question of how performance management impacts on teachers' lives and how they make sense of it. In Western Australia performance management refers to compulsory annual appraisal cycles or reviews of teachers' work by a line manager. The Western Australian Education Department (EDWA) Policy Framework for Performance Management (1996) states that performance management is: mandatory and consistent with the Public Sector Standards on Performance Management; directly linked to the Department's goals; managed by supervisory staff; includes a process which demonstrates accountability, opportunities for growth and development; and should provide quality and timely feedback (EDWA, 1996, p.4). The policy assumes that rationally designed structures and practices resting on processes of calculated planning will maximise organisational effectiveness. Regardless of whether these practices are necessary and efficient, it is demonstrably the case that managerialism is exerting greater power and control over teachers' lives (Thompson and McHugh, 1990, p.15).

Following Rees (1995), we want to argue that the current obsession with managerialism in education cannot be divorced from broader social and economic policies nor can it be seen as a set of neutral or scientific practices somehow uncontaminated by power and ideology. Clearly,

performance management is but one part of the broader shift to the market model of education with its emphasis on effective and efficient economic management of human and financial resources (Kenway, et.al., 1994; Marginson, 1993). As economic policies have changed to complement the competitive attributes of large businesses, so the fascination with management has gained momentum. Pollitt (cited in Rees, 1995) gets it pretty well right when he argues that in the current political climate management is deemed to be inherently good, managers are the heroes, managers should be given room and autonomy to manage, and other groups should accept authority.

Within this broader context we want to examine what performance management looks and feels like for those who are being 'performance managed'. Of particular interest to us is what appears to be a large and increasing gulf between the official representation of teachers' work, namely, that which is to be increasingly 'managed' and the "reality" as experienced by classroom teachers. This study investigates the perceptions and experiences of a focus group of nine experienced classroom teachers in relation to the recently introduced EDWA performance management policy. As a counter to the official discourse of managers we wanted to draw on the everyday experiences of teachers.

Drawing on some of Van Manen's (1984) repertoire of strategies, we chose to use teachers' written accounts, whole and small group discussions and transcript analysis to gain a sense of the 'indigenous culture' of teaching (Smyth, 1996). As Hogan notes, accounts of lived experience can generate alternative 'ways of seeing' through their

capacity to hold multiple and contradictory meanings, their potential for irony and humour, their acknowledgment of emotion and their 'locatedness' within real times and places (1997, p. 3).

We met with the focus group of nine teachers on two occasions. Prior to the first meeting we circulated a number of vignettes of teacher experiences related to performance management. This was an attempt to provide a focus for discussion which was more open and invitational than traditional interview questions. This discussion was recorded, transcribed and circulated in preparation for the second meeting. At this second meeting we broke the teachers into groups of three to share written stories and discuss a range of more specific issues that arose from these. We sought to let the teachers' accounts unfold in a way that was responsive to individual and collective experiences and emphasised the meaning making processes in which the teachers engaged. A further stage in the meaning making process involved placing these accounts within a broader critique of managerialism. These theorised accounts of teachers' experiences have yet to be worked through with the focus group, though this will be an important next phase of a project that was conceived as jointly 'owned' and mutually educative.

We find Ball's idea of 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse' as a useful way of thinking about the tension between the official representation of performance management and the lived experiences of teachers. Ball suggests a view of policy which accounts for its 'localised complexity'. He argues that the ways in which policies are

represented and encoded are highly complex and take place via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations. These are then decoded via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context (1993, p.11). The stories provided by the participants in this study, confirm Ball's view that policy is 'not necessarily clear or closed or complete' but open to contestation and change (p.11).

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN CONTEXT

Over the last twenty years or so, Australia's political and economic culture has altered radically as it sought to re-position itself in response to the wider global restructuring of capitalism (Catley, 1996; Frankel, 1995). The process of restructuring, as described by Gee, Hull and Lankshear has seen a transition from "old style" industrial capitalism characterised by standardisation, mass production, mass consumption and the tyranny of the production line, to "fast capitalism", where the defining characteristics are competition, quality, and markets centred around change, flexibility, and distinctive niches (1996, p.26). Economic activity has now become 'globalised', with: a high degree of integration and restructuring within and between transnational corporations and global markets; a more rapid, and more dramatic, than usual process of structural reorganisation within and between the economies of all capitalist countries; and a changing pattern of global relationships between

transnational capital and nation states (Broomhill, 1995, p.27). These developments, according to Pusey, are a new kind of social and psychological 'colonisation' in which "Australian civil society, identity and its cultures are quite explicitly defined as the malleable and consumable environment of a global economy" (1991, p.18).

The consequence for Australia has been the resurgence of nineteenth century economic liberalism which gives priority to the market over the state as the most rational and efficient means for allocating goods and services in society. The advocates of economic rationalism believe that the public interest is best served through the free interplay of individuals competing in the market place (Spoehr, 1995, p.43). Rees and Rodley argue that the drive for greater efficiency and accountability has enabled controlling interests 'to engineer social change on an unprecedented scale'. They claim that, 'managerialism is the bulldozer of market intent, clearing the ground for the takeover to rival even previous threats to humanity' (1995, p.233).

Yeatman's (1990) analysis of Australian public sector reform in the 1980s highlights the significant changes taking place in bureaucratic culture (see also Pusey, 1991). At the heart of these changes, is the adoption of the discourse of management based on the administrative requirements of privately orientated, profit-maximising firms (p.13). Yeatman elaborates the consequences of this managerial culture for the public sector:

... the purposes of public administration and public service tend to be reduced to the effective, efficient and economic management of human and financial resources. This is a technical approach to public administration and public service couched within a broader framework dominated by economic consideration (p.14).

As Rees puts it:

Managers are not neutral technocrats. They derive their cues and their scripts from a set of policies which contend that an economy needs to be run like a market with as little interference as possible, that human effort can be counted a commodity, and that in the conduct of organisations financial accountability is the criterion to measure performance (1995, p.16)

Corporate managerialism as the dominant style seeks to make government more efficient by doing more with less, focussing on outcomes and results and managing change better. One of the major features of managerialism is its apparent ability to define social, cultural and political problems into technical problems. As Buchanan suggests:

One of the hallmarks of contemporary managerialist discourse is its tendency to define social, economic or political issues as management problems. In the field of labour management (i.e. managing people at work) the 'problem' no longer involves addressing the complexities of 'personnel' or 'industrial relations' issues. Rather, labour related

issues are seen as a special case of managing resources to achieve particular outcomes, the only difference being that the resources are human. Unsurprisingly, this branch of management is commonly referred to as 'human resource management' (1995, p.55).

The irony, according to Bates, is that while 'techniques of rationalisation and control may increase the rationality for organisations and bureaucracies, it decreases the possibility of rational purposive action on the part of individuals' (1983, p.32). In modern efficiency, that which is efficient is defined as that which is measurable as efficient. Consequently, whatever, is not measurable is not efficient and does not exist. Efficiency is often administered by a new breed of managers with a fetish for measurement and assessment (Solondz, 1995, p.214).

Unfortunately, the psychological consequences for workers are dramatic, as Solondz explains:

Any new dogma needs to prove its value. In order for managerialism to prove its efficiency, 'inefficiency' must be expelled
Inefficiency as opposed to efficiency procedures are typically 'negotiated' by an employer with an employee. These highly unequal negotiators then jointly oversee the arbitrary efficiency criteria on which the competence of the employee is judged. The psychological consequences of such procedures can be quite extreme, particularly since they are often based on coerced agreement, on arbitrary and

mechanistic criteria, are known by other employees, and place the employee under considerable stress for protracted periods. They have the effect of isolating the employee and increasing the likelihood that he she will make a mistake..... Once the employee begins to produce mistakes.....inefficiency is considered proven This form of systematic psychological terror can be repeated many times in a workplace by managers whose own competence in personnel management could be questioned (p.215).

Solondz claims that the effect of these procedures on teamwork is even more destructive. In this sort of climate, staff morale is low, individualism and alternative views are not easily tolerated, professionalism and quality suffer and job satisfaction is likely to decrease (p.218). The irony, according to Solondz, is that managerial policies are ultimately self-defeating:

Managerialism's unwritten personnel policies contravenes accepted wisdom. They act to reduce staff morale, job security, professionalism and career development. They undermine mutual trust and the social contract between employee and employer. They reduce industrial democracy, destroy working relationships and increase occupational stress. In the last instance, they serve to undermine the stated aims of managerialism, especially the claims to accountability, improved efficiency, quality, cleverness and productivity (p.219).

Gee, Hull and Lankshear in their recent book entitled *The New Work*

Order (1996) suggest a useful way of conceptualising the tension between the rhetoric and reality of workplace reform and why it can create suspicion and even fear among workers. In their view, organisations have adopted a new set of tools and procedures, designed to change social relations in the workplace, a form of socio-technical engineering in the author's language (p.xv). In this new workplace, the values of trust, co-operation, partnerships and team work are the buzz words as people become committed to the corporate vision/culture/mission. The worker is now a 'partner' and the 'boss' is a leader or 'coach', no longer telling people what to do, but giving them a vision and coaching them on a job that they control, understand, and actively seek to improve (Gee & Lankshear, 1996, p.29).

The paradox, according to Gee, Hull and Lankshear, is that humanistic and democratic reforms are being enacted not because they create more humanistic, less hierarchical conditions for workers but because they are a means to creating more and continuing profits. Ultimately, workers do not have the power or freedom to question the 'vision', values, ends, and goals of the new work order itself (1996, p.31). As MacIntyre (in Rees, 1995) concludes, 'claims about effectiveness and efficiency are about means of control, the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour'. In his words, managerial fundamentalism 'is apparent in its dogma, intolerance of critics and gratitude for compliant staff' (1995, p.24-25).

The fundamental problem with corporate managerialism, according to

Stilwell, 'is that it treats people like conventional economic theory treats labour - as a factor of production - as a thing in the service of profits'. In short, every transaction between individuals is regarded as a commodity which only has value according to an economic price of exchange. He believes 'this is ultimately self-defeating because, by denying their essential humanity, the economic system treats people in a manner to which they cannot ultimately lend allegiance' (1995, p.261). Worse, is the way in which 'it legitimates an economic system characterised by increasing economic insecurity and economic inequality' (p.263).

So what are teachers saying about performance management? To what extent is this critique borne out by their experiences and the way these are framed in discussions about their work?

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Some of the teachers brought written accounts with them to the second meeting of the focus group. In the following analysis, quotations from these accounts are referenced as (teacher's written comment). Quotations from the transcripts of the two meetings are referenced as (teacher's taped comment).

Fear and suspicion

'Support not punishment' reads the headline in School Matters, the

official journal of EDWA. This particular article was written to allay fears expressed by some teachers that performance management would result in job losses. It states:

Performance management is not about that: it is more about providing the most appropriate environment whereby staff develop clarity about the role they are employed to undertake, access the support they need to undertake their required duties, look for ways that they can use feedback from a range of resources to enhance their performance and participate in PD activities to help them to find better ways of doing their job (1997, p.7).

A text like this one positions the reader in a particular way by drawing on several familiar discourses: there is the directive to teachers as dutiful employees in phrases like 'the role they are employed to undertake', and 'required duties'; there is the appeal to teachers' ethic of care in phrases like 'appropriate environments' and 'support'; and there is the organisational imperative of efficiency, productivity and accountability. The sum effect is a disarming one: performance management is rendered unproblematic, representing teachers' fears and insecurities as unfounded and irrational. Some of the teachers in our study accepted EDWA's reassurances but were keen to find out for themselves what the processes really involved. Many teachers, however, remained suspicious and unconvinced by the rhetoric. The following comments highlight some of these concerns:

Teachers at our school have been assured there is nothing new in performance management. There is nothing to be afraid of! (The old 'trust me!' line.) We have been told, 'It's what you teachers have been doing all along!' If we have been doing it all along, then why is there such a huge focus on expected implementation time? If we have been doing it all along, why the need for yet another change? If we have been doing it all along, why do teachers feel threatened and under pressure? (teacher's written comment, 7/97).

As I listen to the stories of other teachers going through the process of being performance managed, I feel familiar emotions of bewilderment, anger, and powerlessness that I have experienced many times in my career (teacher's written comment, 7/97).

Performance management evokes so many reactions. Confusion, trepidation, a feeling that it would never get off the ground, and most of all, fear (teacher's written comment, 7/97).

At the heart of teachers' concerns is a suspicion that the processes put in place to facilitate negotiation and consultation are contrived and superficial. One teacher explained her feelings in the following way:

The word negotiation is a most over-used, mis-used word. We are supposed to negotiate performance management, ... practically everything that has to do with the managerial side of schools is

supposed to be negotiated with the staff, and if it was perhaps we wouldn't feel quite so negative about it all, but that's what happens. I guess some sort of negotiation happens, but its a controlled negotiation ... I absolutely hate the word now because whenever I hear it, I'm nervous, it's a trick (teacher's taped comment, 6/97).

Little wonder then, that teachers feel a sense of betrayal when they encounter experiences like the following:

I guess the one [instance] that stands out the most would be last year when we got a piece of paper in our pigeon hole with a timetable on it and our name slotted in to a time telling us that was our interview time and we had to bring all these things with us. And I remember that there was outrage amongst all the staff members because building up to this we had a lot of input about how performance management was supposed to be negotiated. ... As a staff we were supposed to make a collective decision, and that didn't happen, and we were just told a date and a time and what was happening (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Stories such as these reveal the serious mis-match between the rhetoric and reality of performance management practices. Smyth explains this well when he argues that the process of educational re-structuring is 'one of devolving responsibility, but not power, in respect of the way education is organised'. In his view, the 'process is one of 'consultation' with teachers and schools (i.e. of seeking advice, but not necessarily heeding it), rather than 'participation or

collaboration' (i.e. in which the parties affected jointly make a decision)' (1995, p.194-195).

Buchanan, in a more general critique of managerialism, suggests that the rhetoric of worker involvement is hardly matched in practice. He argues that while elements of the rhetoric are seductive, the reality is that unilateral control on the basis of the management prerogative is the prevailing norm (1995, p.55). Buchanan claims that 'in many ways it is simply the reworking of old concepts dressed up in contemporary jargon' (p.65). As one teacher comments:

This is where we feel cheated and threatened, because they don't match, there is a mis-match in what's happening, and what we are being told (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

For teachers, the gap between the rhetoric and reality reflects a more general sense of confusion about the purposes and processes of performance management. Consider the following comments:

I think at the moment there is confusion. The teachers are saying, what are we doing, accountability, what is this stuff? It's the terminology and the jargon (teacher's taped comment, 6/97).

I guess in our school a lot of the teachers still don't really understand what it is all about. They know that they go to an interview with the principal, and they know that sometimes they have to take

things to show him, and they get asked questions, but there is a lot of confusion in our school about what is the difference between accountability and performance management (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

We call them [interviews] either accountability or performance management. We don't know what we are supposed to be calling them, and you call them either/or at any time ... (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Despite numerous efforts by EDWA to sell performance management via school briefings, articles in the departmental journal School Matters, in-servicing of selected staff and compulsory professional development on performance management modules, many teachers are still ambivalent.

Dishonesty and mistrust

A recurrent theme in the teachers' written and oral narratives concerned the way in which performance management can promote misrepresentation, dishonesty and mistrust at all levels. Many examples were offered where the superficial images of "professionalism", "effective teaching" and "improvement" were promoted highly, while authentic instances of these things remained invisible. According to some teachers, for example, school development plans were written to

impress outsiders and had little impact on what actually happened in schools and classrooms. Some felt that performance management at the school level was the same, with arbitrary and subjective judgements being made about their work by principals and superintendents who had never seen it. Teachers felt that looking good on paper counted for more than "just doing your job properly". One teacher was highly critical of her school's efforts at corporate image-making:

...we've been getting that drummed into us, our school image, and we are given all these ways to improve our image and to become more professional. So far we have been told to dress more professionally, we need to have business cards printed up, when we write letters home to parents we need to put all our letters after our name, the more letters , the better. ... But until he [the principal] starts to insist on the things which I think are at the core of being professional, like doing your job properly,... then I'm not going to play this game of "being professional" because I think it's a false thing (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Teachers were not confident that they could trust their managers, or the system generally, to provide a fair and honest reflection of their work with children. Some were sceptical that quality teaching was even a motive for performance management, seeing it as being much more about control:

The testing (ie, EDWA's Monitoring Standards program) is really to

prove that teachers aren't doing anything, and then we find out how bad they are with performance management, so we don't pay them any more, then we just hand them a teacher-proof curriculum ... really is that the hidden agenda? (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Such concerns are hardly surprising in the current hostile economic and political environment where teachers are increasingly being blamed, often without evidence, for Australia's lack of international competitiveness, high levels of youth unemployment and poor literacy rates, to name only a few. When teachers, like most other workers, are being asked to do more with less, work longer hours and accept job insecurity as a fact of life, management inspired reforms can only serve to heighten the sense of mistrust that many teachers feel.

Despite the reassurances from EDWA, all the teachers in our study saw performance management as being a de facto appraisal system. Their feelings about it were shaped profoundly by past experiences of appraisal, in which most of them had felt anxious and powerless to some degree, and many felt that they had been judged falsely or inadequately.

As a result, teachers 'play the game' to satisfy superiors or others charged with performance management. Typical of many teachers are comments like, 'I just write what they want to hear... I don't see any value coming out of it, it doesn't effect my teaching'. This particular problem is reflected in numerous teachers' stories:

You make yourself look like a little bit needing in one area where you are really good anyway and you can suddenly say, here, this is what I am doing now, you don't tell them about the things you are really good at (teacher's taped comment, 6/97).

We tell them and we give them what we know they want to hear, rather than being honest, and I think if you can be honest, you can go a lot further (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

As a way of coping with performance management, teachers will continue only to provide the watered down version - the details and information they feel safe sharing, or the information they feel their managers are seeking (teacher's written comment, 7/97).

This sort of resistance reflects a basic lack of trust in performance management processes. Teachers do not feel that current practices build a spirit of trust, collegiality or respect. One teacher explained the pivotal role of trust in the following account:

So for performance management to be successful there must be trust. Trust in and respect for the person who is managing me. Trust that I will be involved in joint negotiations. Trust that what occurs is relevant to me and my teaching. Trust that all of my peers would be involved in performance management as well, not just a select few as time, resources, and funds are limited. Trust in confidentiality of

information. Trust that I will be provided with the necessary resources and supported to improve my performance once an area of need is established. Trust that I will not be disadvantaged or unfairly treated by exposing an area of weakness. And trust that the whole process is not just some catch phrase that is the hot term for 1997..... Without trust, performance management will have no value to individual teachers, to management, to the Department, or for students (teacher's written comment, 7/97).

Control and resistance

Central to many of the concerns expressed by teachers so far is the loss of control over their work. Teachers believe that performance management has not only been 'imposed by outside agents' but has actively disempowered them by 'taking control and putting it in the hands of others' (teacher's comment, 7/97). Boyett and Conn, in Workplace 2000 support the view that present day management practices are 'vulnerable to abuses of power and the elaborate manipulation of people and values'. They argue that workers 'must cleave to a set of ends - 'superordinate goals', 'corporate culture', whatever - that 'like the basic postulates of a mathematical system', is posited in advance'. In their view, it leads to a 'dangerous corporate conformity' and a kind of 'high touch coercion' (cited in Gee & Lankshear, 1995, pp.8-9). According to Smyth, educational re-structuring is a form of re-centralisation of power and intensification of control over the purposes and direction of teachers' work (1995, p.6).

Nowhere, is the concern about control more apparent than with the role of the school principal. As Bates argues, 'organisations are systems of hierarchically ordered positions in which administrators exercise control through a combination of their formal positional authority and their personal relations in order to enlarge their authority base' (1983, p.8). Teacher comments convey a strong sense of apprehension about the consequences of line management in the performance management process:

... sometimes young principals or principals who want to move up the scale quickly, tend to come into a school and want things done quickly so that they can say, look this was the situation, this was the action, this is the outcome (teacher's taped comment, 6/97).

I think there has been a deliberate move as well, to give them [principals] a lot more money, a different professional association, to basically separate them off from ordinary teachers so that they are managers (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Well in some cases I think people who are doing appraisals have gone through the supervisory system and they are used to being in a position of authority (teacher's taped comment, 7/97).

Of course, managerial intentions to create an obedient and compliant school staff within a bureaucratic authority structure will always

produce oppositional forms of behaviour because teachers are active human agents in their workplaces (Apple, 1980, p.60). According to Leonard (cited in Thompson and McHugh, 1990, p.333) individual responses contain a combination of coping strategies, instrumentally derived tactics and accommodation to the dominant culture, as well as different types of resistance.

We have already mentioned how teachers 'play the game' as one form of resistance to the performance management regime. Teachers also talked about two other significant coping strategies. One teacher indicated that passive resistance was a strategy adopted by many teachers in her school. In this particular school, teachers were refusing to attend interviews as 'their way of coping' (taped comment, 7/97). A second and perhaps more common strategy was simply to 'ignore it'. Many teachers already suffering from information overload tended to 'throw it away or to the side' until they were forced to deal with it.

Resistance to performance management was usually justified for two key reasons. Firstly, teachers did not have the time because of what Huberman describes as the 'classroom press' that exerts daily influences on teachers. This 'classroom press', forces teachers to focus on day to day effects or short term perspectives; it isolates them from their colleagues; it exhausts their energy; and it limits their opportunity for sustained reflective practice (Fullan, 1991, p.33). As one teacher put it:

... how often do we get the time to sit and reflect on ourselves? You would never make time to do that. We verbalise it, but I think in terms of documenting, we don't. Mainly because we are so bogged down with everything else that we are trying to cope with, let alone our own personal lives, and that unfinished feeling everyday. You could take work home every single night, and never get to the end of the tunnel (teacher's taped comment, 6/97).

Secondly, some teachers expressed the view that performance management failed to improve their teaching or benefit the children in their classrooms. What seemed to be missing was a sense of validity in the processes. Teachers felt uncomfortable with managerial practices in their schools. They believed the ethos of the corporate sector was both inappropriate and ineffective when dealing with children. As one teacher explained, 'I can't see how you can relate children, children at the end of schooling, to cars at the end of a production line' (taped comment, 6/97). The desire for quick measures and evidence of the wrong sort was of equal concern to many teachers. They believed principals are looking for 'quick measures and percentage increases' as evidence of improvement. As a result, many schools were going back to standardised tests administered and analysed by outside consultants (taped comment, 7/97).

CONCLUSION

Despite the rhetoric of devolution, collegiality, collaboration and reflection, the teachers in our study believed that schools were becoming far more competitive, divisive and stressful workplaces. There was a common view that increasing efforts to control and manipulate their work were largely responsible for this situation. It seems that as long as teachers continue to experience authoritarian, hierarchical and paternalistic forms of social relations in the workplace, they will remain suspicious of managerial reforms regardless of the positive terms in which these are framed. So are we simply looking at a policy which is being poorly implemented; a case of a new fast corporate culture being superimposed on an old hierarchical one without the change being supported by adequate time and resources? Or are the teachers responding to something deeper? Nias (1993) describes the teachers in her study as "grieving" for imposed changes that subvert their deeply held pedagogical values. Certainly this sense of loss, or potential loss, was evident in the teachers who shared their stories with us.

It is clear that we need to maintain serious critical scrutiny of "educational" reforms that are driven by non-educational interests, and that the question asked by committed teachers themselves - "how will this improve the experience of school for my kids?" - is the question we need to keep asking about performance management.

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