The datafication of assessment and learning across three coalescing timelines in one school year

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This paper explores how the actions and processes of ‘datafication’ (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018) enabled and constrained teachers and school leaders’ practices of assessment and learning in two school sites in Queensland, Australia. This research reports on the perspectives and practices of 27 teachers, 7 school leaders and 2 support staff in two Queensland public schools – a primary school and a secondary school – over the duration of one school year. The study draws upon a theoretically informed ethno-case study of these practices (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), utilising the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) to map, make visible and analyse the daily practices of those in schools. Drawing on interviews with teachers, school leaders and support staff, and observations in classrooms (Year 3 through to Year 9), staff preparation meetings and school ‘Professional Learning Communities’ (PLCs) as well as a range of artefacts and materials collected within these spaces, this paper will explore how teachers and school leaders’ practices unfolded over the school year within contextual circumstances that contributed to the processes of the datafication of assessment and learning.

While the impact of neoliberalism on education within an increasingly globalised world creates conditions of intensifying performative accountability and measurement within increasingly ‘data obsessed’ (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018) schools, the broader phenomenon of ‘datafication’ in schools is having ‘huge impacts on education practices’, much of which have remained ‘under-researched’ (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p.1). Responding to this, this paper explicates how the ‘situated’ practices of teachers and school leaders, understood as constituted by particular ‘sayings’ (talk), ‘doings’ (actions) and ‘relatings’ (relationships), contributed to and were pre-figured by such datafication processes. Specifically, the longitudinal nature of this study revealed how the datafication of assessment and learning played out across three coalescing timelines over the school year, in the two school sites.

As the first timeline, the ‘taken-for-granted’ nature and effects of external standardized national assessment (National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)) dominated the fine-grained practices associated with curriculum enactment, teaching, learning and assessment throughout the year. This emphasis upon standardized testing enabled an intense focus on the production of reductive forms of data, with subsequent consequences for a range of school-based assessment policies and procedures that also played out across the year – the second timeline. During the final phase of this research project, the COVID-19 pandemic - elucidated here as the (third) timeline of unpredictable external exigencies, cut across and disrupted external and school-based assessment practices in powerful ways. Through capturing datafied assessment and learning practices ‘on the move’ (Kemmis, 2019) as they unfolded, this paper demonstrates how the confluence of these three coalescing timelines, prompted a sudden reorientation of assessment and learning practices and priorities. Such disruption presents an opportunity for us to redefine the telos of schools, from emphasis on temporal and
comparative data work, towards the transformation of the purposes of teaching and learning as more ‘morally-oriented action’ in situ (Kemmis et al, 2014).