Navigating Datascapes: Mapping the ethical landscapes of data

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of Australia’s national standardised literacy and numeracy test (NAPLAN), while in Singapore, special consideration was given to sitting the national tests. In Bangladesh, the decision was made to cancel national tests, resulting in the ‘auto-promotion’ (or auto passing) of a whole final year of students. And in the UK, the Office of Qualifications (Ofqual) employed a controversial algorithm to compute students’ scores based on historical data as a replacement for the scrapped national GCE/A levels. This eventually led to a disastrous policy reversal as well as political and media backlash. All of these controversies played out differently in each context, but all were deeply ethical and linked to the use of data-informed policy and practice. As researchers working in these jurisdictions, we have had difficult conversations – grounded in ethical questions – including with school practitioners, about how data-driven, evidence-informed decisions have and should be undertaken. Should decisions stemming from the nature of such standardized data be focused on the supposed ‘good’ that they provide regardless of possible social consequences (a more deontological ethical position focused on existing processes)? Or should such data be challenged more overtly for a more just ‘common good’ that seeks to disrupt the inherent prejudices that characterize standardized forms of assessment more generally (a more teleological ethical position reflecting concern for the actual outcomes of decisions)?

We describe the co-existence of these contrasting viewpoints as features of an emerging education datascape (the interplay of space, time and sociality in data contexts). We believe that it is important to map the global cultural flows of data and to identify moments where education is reconfigured and reshaped, particularly in these difficult moments of ethical decision-making. Drawing upon Actor Network Theory (ANT), we seek to trace the social, relational and ethical interactions that occur in the national and global interconnections of data to help us as educational researchers and practitioners make sense of incessant transformations in these education datascapes – particularly in moments of tumult (such as COVID-19). Mapping the actor-networks, translations and drifts becomes indispensable to arriving at a greater understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the ethical spaces in these education datascapes. Our presentation presents preliminary findings of our early contextual work in Australia, Singapore, Bangladesh and the UK as part of a larger 3.5 year Australian Research Council funded investigation into possibilities of ethical storying of school datafication processes.