LITERACY TEACHERS AS REFLEXIVE AGENTS?: ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS

Keywords: literacy, teachers, agency, reflexivity

Literacy is high on the agenda for educational leaders and teachers, particularly given the extremely visible accountability agendas related to standardised testing and publishing of results[1] (Thompson, 2016; Wu, 2016). Teachers must manage the implications of this agenda alongside other complex demands such as increasingly diverse student groups, regulated curriculum and new professional requirements and evidence to be adopted regularly. This work intensification (Hardy, 2015) created through ongoing demands means that leaders and teachers often look for solutions that are 'quick fixes' generated via deficit discourses (AUTHORS). Indeed Sailors, Martinez, Davis, Goatley and Willis (2017) highlight the dominant discourses prevalent in literacy education as "hostile towards minoritised people" and that teachers need to challenge these. Such languaging of students of minority including those with learning difficulties may also sit outside teachers' professional philosophies and values (Rice, Dulfer, Polesel & O'Hanlon, 2016). Such solutions may include the well documented strategy of 'teaching to the test' (Comber, 2011a; AUTHORS; Hardy, 2015); narrowing the curriculum to focus on basic skills and areas that are systematically tested (Alvermann, 2002; Comber, 2011a); and a reliance on commercial programs to deliver the necessary content and processes for the 'right' kinds of success (Redden & Low, 2012) within the new logic of enumeration and comparison (Hardy, 2015).

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[1] In Australia there is a National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). School NAPLAN results are publicly available and news media regularly create league tables comparing schools.

The recasting of education as an economic rather than a social good (Thompson, 2016) means that governments will continue to pursue these agendas to show that schooling systems are effective and they are proactive and in control of publicly funded endeavours. The rhetoric of control includes improving the ranking of students on the world stage (Wu, 2016), managing perceived deficits in teacher performance (AUTHORS) and enabling parents as consumers of education (and voters) to have a greater say in their child's education (Gorur, 2016).

A robust and effective teaching profession must address the above issues by focusing on how teachers can reflexively adapt to and manage these enduring conditions, how they take back responsibility for their professional goals and practices. It also requires an investigation of what enables or constrains educators to achieve both professional autonomy and high quality outcomes for themselves and their students. This paper argues this position using Margaret Archer's (2000, 2007, 2012) critical realist social theory of reflexivity. It outlines the concept of emergent properties that work to enable or constrain leaders and teachers across a range of contexts (e.g. schools and district offices), including the roles they take up as agents or actors in their teaching of literacy. This theory of reflexivity applied to data from Australian teachers is generative in offering useful new insights into the nuances of what and how teachers negotiate their work and how emerging conditions can be experienced as enabling rather than constraining.

The Argument for Adaptive and Reflexive Teachers

Archer (2012) suggests that in every aspect of life we are faced with contextual incongruity and therefore there is no blueprint for how to make decisions and move forward in sustainable and satisfying ways. In relation to teaching as a profession, change is constant

and the influence on practice can be unpredictable (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2014). Such uncertain conditions mean that the ability to reflect on what is before us, weigh up the contingencies of the context and our level of investment, and reflexively choose a way forward, is imperative. Dialogic and collaborative reflective learning is well supported in the literature as a form of professional identity building (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi 2014; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges 2012), and more so in education (Loughran, 2014). In positioning ourselves in relation to people, concepts and issues from the field, and by sharing these personal considerations, we open ourselves to deeper self-critical analysis of our identities as a professional in the field (Yancey 2015, Moffatt, AUTHORS; Bowe & Gore, 2016). In this way, individuals can start to take intellectual and emotional risks in their engagement with the discourses and official knowledges of education (Christie et al. 2014; Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh 2008). These types of learning and identity building are not isolated events, that is, they cannot happen in single workshops or professional development events (Redden & Low, 2012). Rather, these shaping practices both influence, and are influenced by, multiple intersections of knowledge, people and contexts beginning in teacher preparation programs and extending throughout one's teaching career. Critical and active engagement with colleagues, with researchers, with the literature, with students and parents, and with the school and broader community, can provide the necessary foundations for long-term analysis and shaping of self as a professional in uncertain conditions (AUTHORS).

Learning disciplinary content is recognised as an important aspect of developing professional identities, as is the ability to articulate this knowledge and apply it in classroom contexts (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges 2012) for active learning. These elements of professional identity building form the basis of most teacher preparation programs. What is less well developed for many teachers is the sense-making or degree to which internal frames

of reference are drawn upon to understand self in relation to the profession (Eliot & Turns 2011). As Bulman, Lathlean and Gobbi (2014) point out, theory and content knowledge cannot be applied 'off the shelf'; it needs to be thought through and used in particular ways in practice. It is the individual's understanding, belief in, and mediation of this knowledge in practice with their own desires and motivations that positions educators as professionals in that context. Moreover, such deliberations do not happen without relationship building, emotion and value judgement (Hancock & Walsh 2014) over time. Teachers who take up active roles in developing adaptive and reflexive professional identities are more likely to have a sustainable and sustaining teaching career. For this reason this paper explores leaders and teachers' perspectives, as literacy educators, about how literacy education is shaped in their own teaching and learning contexts.

Reflexivity as a Generative Theory for Teacher Agency

Margaret Archer's (2007, 1995) morphogenetic approach to realist social theory provides a useful framework to understand the ways in which teachers manage competing influences and deliberate about pedagogic action in the classroom. She argues that social structures or contextual forms are always transformable but always constrained as they take shape from, and are formed by, agents. In proposing an analytical dualism whereby structure and agency are seen as separate rather than conflated, she argues for their complementarity rather than their counteraction. In other words, while agential powers and actions are conditioned by social structures, these structures are not considered by Archer to be 'forces', but rather as 'reasons for acting in particular ways' (Archer, 1995 p. 209). These actions can be transformative (morphogenetic), in that they transform the social structures or cultural systems within which they operate, or they can be reproductive (morphostatic) as they

maintain structural and cultural forms. So even though some ways of being become normalised, they are always shaped rather than pre-determined.

According to Archer's (2000) realist account, the self-aware human emerges and gradually comes to acquire a social identity as they become enmeshed in society's structural and cultural properties. She explains different roles that may emerge in this process of continuous selfhood. The first role happens involuntarily and therefore, in this realist account, we are all 'Primary Agents' (p. 260) of the socio-cultural system into which we are born. She suggests that everyone is a 'Primary Agent' simply because they occupy a place in society's distribution of resources. 'Corporate Agency', on the other hand, occurs when 'Primary Agents' collectively transform themselves in seeking to transform society. Such agents are necessarily aware of what they want, can articulate to self and others, and engage in concreted action to reshape or retain structural and/or cultural features. The role of 'Social Actor' is one in which individuals emerge from the collective 'Agency' to actively and reflectively personify their roles. The individual as a 'Social Actor' invests in the kind of friend or daughter or teacher they want to be. They sort through and make decisions about personal investment always in relation to social conditions.

This interplay between humans and society is constituted by the emergence of human properties and powers in relation to society's properties and powers. Selfhood is always emerging in the mutual interaction between humans and the world (Archer, 2000). Thus, Archer suggests three distinct, yet related, emergent properties that contribute to our being human in the world. These emergent properties are personal, structural and cultural. Personal emergent properties (PEPs) relate to personal identity: emotions, beliefs, worldviews, efficacy and capabilities. Structural emergent properties (SEPs) are orders of society:

systems, practices, resources and language. Cultural emergent properties (CEPs) are the prevailing beliefs, norms, ideologies and expectations of a societal group. Each of these properties is always emerging in relation to the others and can be experienced as enabling or constraining as one moves through the reflexive cycle.

Reflexivity involves deliberating about possible courses of action, deciding what might be feasible at this time in this situation and then choosing a way forward. Reflexive processes might include planning, rehearsing, mulling over, imagining, deciding, prioritising, clarifying, and holding internal conversations (Archer, 2012). Effective teachers are seen as active decision-makers who mediate their *subjective considerations and agency* (interests, emotions, beliefs, creativity, priorities, language and cultural resources and capabilities) and their particular *objective circumstances* (for example, curriculum and assessment requirements, school structures, political agendas, student relationships) to act in certain ways (AUTHOR). Archer suggests that we have 'internal conversations' in which we reflect upon and weigh up (multiple) possible options, taking *agency and structure* into account. The causal powers of these external or *objective structures* are exercised as enablements and constraints, and even the anticipation or perception of particular enablements or constraints can serve as a deterrent or an encouragement (Archer, 2007). Previous research has identified a range of personal, structural and cultural properties that influence literacy teachers. These include changes in teacher knowledge, skills and ethical interpretations (PEPs); new culture of competition or evidence mindsets (CEPs); and changing practices for more focused outcomes (SEPs). These properties can have both enabling and constraining effects (see Table 1 for further elaboration). The conditions that teacher educators create or promote can have an enormous and differential effect on teacher education students' engagement with the profession (Lacina & Collins Block, 2011).

The courses of pedagogic action that teachers take are a result of their reflexive deliberations (similar to Evans' (2011) internalisation process) about their knowledge base, pedagogic know-how, and ontological positions in relation to the complex interplay of contextual structures in place around the teaching of different discipline areas. Unless teachers examine and articulate their internal conversations and deliberations, their professional actions may remain morphostatic, even in cases where change or transformation is necessary for improved outcomes. Thus, it is crucial to include the element of reflexivity in representations of professional identity to foreground the importance of understanding the ways in which teachers mediate their subjective and objective circumstances and make the decisions that they do. Table 1 shows a brief summary of literature related to PEPs, SEPs and CEPs.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

Context and Methods

This study was initiated by a team of literacy education experts working in higher education, and in particular teacher education programs. Members observed concerning practices in schools across a range of unrelated research and evidence-based projects; leading to a targeted project titled "Reclaiming agency as literacy educators: Investigating the teaching and learning of literacy in complex spaces". Exploring literacy educators' views across experience levels and contexts, we aimed to identify what factors influence teachers' and leaders' educational and pedagogical choices regarding literacy education. Therefore the research question was:

What enables and inhibits teachers' and leaders' educational and pedagogical choices regarding literacy education?

The authors of this paper investigated the data by applying an innovative framework of reflexivity and emergent properties for considering teachers' work in climates of accountability and standardisation. Given that previous research has indicated the strong influence of teachers' contextual conditions on their teaching practices and job satisfaction, it is important to investigate these conditions in a more nuanced way. The aim was to identify the ways in which teachers experience these conditions as enabling and/or constraining as they emerge personally, structurally and culturally. According to Archer (2012) these conditions relate to teachers' identities and capabilities (personal); the immediate context within which they work including teacher knowledge and pedagogy (structural); and the broader socio-cultural expectations of literacy, schooling and education (cultural). Unpacking the interviewees' experiences through such a framework is innovative and significant as it can potentially provide insights into the ways teachers can reflexively harness the enabling conditions within their work space and context. Conversely, teachers may continue to feel disempowered and have low self-worth and belief in their capacities to be professionally agentic.

It is highly likely that current conditions of accountability, standardisation and visible student outcomes will remain for the foreseeable future. The framework we are using posits teaching as a reflexive pursuit that is always emerging. That is, teachers need to take a reflexive approach in understanding how to manage and negotiate the unique emergent conditions that influence their classroom practices. This reflexive awareness will enable

them to support students in attaining excellent outcomes and will also ensure that they have a sustaining and sustainable career.

Participants for this study were invited to participate via email and included district office staff, principals/deputy principals, literacy leaders and teachers (n=9). Participants' details feature in the following Table 2:

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

All participants were interviewed for approximately 1 hour about literacy education at their school including influences from policy, practice and programs (see Appendix A for questions). Interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for verification.

Analtyical Framework

The analytical approach taken in this project was guided by Archer's (2012) critical realist theory of reflexivity across the lifespan, which has been innovatively applied to the work of teachers. Theoretical constructs (Archer, 2012) of primary agents, corporate agents and social actors, along with emergent properties (personal (PEPs), cultural (CEPs), structural (SEPs)) guided a template analysis (King, 2004). This involved building a coding template built on these constructs in which to summarize and organise broad themes in the data. Template analysis sessions with the team were conducted using Zoom (a secure video conferencing and file sharing platform).

These theorietical constructs were identified through particular indicators in the talk of these participants. Indicators of the 'Primary Agent' role included language that suggested

an acceptance of the social order (the way things are), passive talk about self and one's role in education and schooling. Indicators of 'corporate agency', on the other hand, included clear articulation of goals and expectations and recount of concrete action to reshape or retain structural and/or cultural features in their own or others' practices. The role of 'Social Actor' included active and reflective talk which suggested a personification of their role – a clear investment in the kind of teacher they wanted to be and strived to be. They spoke about decisions around personal investment always in relation to social conditions. Emergent properties were indicated by talk related to personal identity: emotions, beliefs, worldviews, self-efficacy and own capabilities (PEPs); talk related to systems, practices and resources (SEPs); and talk related to prevailing beliefs, norms, ideologies and expectations of the school, Education Department, parents, community (CEPs). These indicators identified through the template analysis provided insights into reasoning, prioritising and justifying of decisions and actions as a reflexive process in teaching and leading.

The final step of analysis was coding the emergent properties in terms of how they were experienced as enabling or constraining: the former indicating a more agentic role through corporate agency or social actor role, and the latter indicating a more passive primary agent role. The analysis enabled us to interrogate literacy teachers' and leaders' roles as agents or actors at a time when there are tensions between catering for diversity and being accountable for reductive tests that drive the curriculum (Kerkham & Comber 2016; Morrell, 2017).

Constraining and Enabling Discourses for Literacy Teachers

There were a number of discourses of constraint and enablement represented throughout the interview data. Constraining discourses highlighted the pressures and

expectations placed upon teachers that they may not agree with or feel they have the capacity to overcome. Enabling discourses, on the other hand, included opportunities and perceived opportunities for creativity, meaning making, agency in making decisions and possibilities to 'reclaim' their professionalism through individual judgements.

Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs)

In relation to the personal emergent properties, enabling properties such as taking the pressure off oneself and reflective practice are identified. Constraining properties include managing challenging behaviour and a lack of knowledge about how to manage different learning needs.

> *I'm finding a massive challenge in my class is the massive difference between the ability groups. I've got quite a range of some kids who can barely use a pencil to some kids who are writing full page stories. I find that quite difficult. Even with the differentiated groups it does make it more difficult and that's definitely challenging. Because with those different ability groups there comes the same level of engagement and behavioural problems and that sort of thing and that affects everything.* (Sacha)

Sacha experiences these different learning needs as a constraint through her use of the negative terms 'massive challenge', 'massive difference', 'difficult', 'challenging'. 'problems'. She seems overwhelmed by this challenge (see similar findings by Bousfield & Ragusa, 2014) 'that affects everything'. Sacha is working as a primary agent in this space and has not mobilised with her colleagues as corporate agents to instigate change in deficit discourses or as a social actor to define her role in satisfying and sustainable ways (Archer, 2000).

In the quote below Rachel, a principal of a small school, espouses her personal philosophy to teaching; an approach that is not traditional 'chalk and talk' bur rather one that encourages students to self-monitor and regulate their own learning. This motivation of students to learn is enabling as it motivates teachers to want them to learn (see Alvermann, 2002).

> *I think self-monitoring, self-regulating their learning - we get to be the conductors of the audience. We don't get to be that traditional teacher, which I love. This school is not for traditional chalk and talk, whiteboard, flick, flick, flick, PowerPoints. It's not about that.* (Rachel)

Peter, also in a leadership role, reflects on his past experiences and how he is still gauging what is developmentally appropriate for his class as he has not taught this year level for some time. He feels that his own skills in special education helps particularly given his class has a diverse range of abilities.

> *This is my third year at the school. The first year I was in the special education class, so this is only the second year that I've done mainstream teaching like in the last 12 years…But I'm still, I guess, learning what's normal at this regular age of development, because it's a new year level to me... knowing what are appropriate expectations is a challenge* (Peter)

He also displays reflexive characteristics by acknowledging the fact that although the teachers are expected to implement an assortment of programs by having their 'fingers in a

few pies', it is also important to take the pressure off oneself and be satisfied if the children are improving learning outcomes.

Peter is able to show professional and personal agency (Lasky, 2005) and is demonstrating some evidence of taking on a role as a social actor (Archer, 2000) by recognising the challenging role as a teacher and knowing that they can do a good job even in this pressure environment.

I would like to see it all drawn together. I think we've got our finger in a few pies at the moment and it's not embedded yet. We just need more time. So we're on the starting block at the moment, but we haven't jumped off. I think it's about taking the pressure off yourself as a teacher and knowing that as long as that child is developing, then that's okay.

Similarly, Melissa talks about how the approach at her school does match her personal philosophy to the teaching of literacy.

Our principal trusts us…That's why I'm a teacher…I run my own classroom and I'm very proud of what happens in there because you see the success in the kids every day. (Melissa)

Like Peter, Melissa is trying to personify her role as social actor (Archer, 2000) by knowing that what she does as a teacher makes a difference. She has conviction to make her own decisions related to curriculum by saying that "*we run the classroom, we're professionals…*

communication is really important because if you get stuck, the support is there also"
(Melissa).

Structural Emergent Properties (SEPS)

A number of structural emergent properties were also identified including constraining discourses of mandated programs; public accountability; teachers' practices being driven by big data and the pressure to have to raise standards in limited time; and enabling discourses of teacher professional learning, provision of new resources and new uses of technologies. Susan expresses her concern about how practices in her school might be compromising appropriate pedagogies for early years' children.

> *I do feel especially with the early years, I feel there is a lack of enquiry and play-based learning. Because of the content that needs to be covered, teachers feel—I think actually pedagogy can sometimes be sacrificed in order—because, well, I've got to get this covered.* (Susan)

Susan's tentative language and taking on a voice for all teachers through terms like 'I feel', 'I think actually…', 'teachers feel' indicate a lack of corporate agency in disrupting what she saw as detrimental practices, similar to Hardy's (2015) assertions in this climate of accountability. Such concerns can be ultimately overcome if teachers display reflexivity and corporate agency (Archer, 2000) in pushing back to SEPs that are constraining as suggested by Rogers and Wetzel (2013), or by sharing ideas and resources (Thompson, 2016). This applies to Sacha's description below, where her whole school was focusing on National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) improvements as a driving force rather than adopting a holistic approach to learning (also see Comber, 2011a). She was

unsure, shown through language such as 'I guess' and 'I suppose', about the emphases on technical skills of reading and writing but she objectified learning by accepting results as *where we are* (Hardy, 2015).

> *I guess it depends on the individual, an improvement in success for a child but I guess as a whole school we're looking at improving in our NAPLAN results. I suppose that's a driving force. But yeah, I think it's good to see an improvement for just an individual child if they can see that they've improved in their writing or their reading levels have gone up, yeah, that sort of thing.* (Sacha)

Susan, as the Head of the Early Years Department, also talked about her school's Annual Improvement Plan (AIP) that hones in on reading and in particular phonics. On the one hand, Susan experienced this focus as constraining in that it only targets those skills that are tested in NAPLAN, a reductive approach as reported by Hardy (2015). A focus on data shows that only students' outcomes in reading comprehension and levelled reading (PM Benchmark) are important when much research in the early years provides evidence that it is much more than this, for example, physical development, play-based learning such as imaginative play, oral language and creativity (Barblett, Knaus, & Barratt-Pugh, 2016). On the other hand, Susan comments on her teachers having a lack of skill in the teaching of reading and how the AIP dictates what she needs to implement '… something we need to work on'. This use of data for targeted professional development and action on their 'data day' meant that teachers were more informed about data and assessment (see Gorur, 2016).

> *Well, our AIP has indicated that inference with our reading is something that we need to work on. Phonics is definitely something with regards to the teachers. They had a lack of*

skill base which is why those two areas are I'm working on because I have to link those back to our school AIP plan. So I'm kind of dictated a little bit by that. We had a data day this term when we were having a look at analysing all of the information that we had and I think the biggest one was actually children being able to retell, which we got from our PM benchmark data, was a little bit poor and also the inferential work. (Susan)

Beth discussed a mandated approach known as Curriculum to the Classroom (C2C), a highly structured curriculum approach adopted by schools across Queensland, Australia. She also mentioned NAPLAN. She was challenged by not knowing what the writing task on NAPLAN would be prior to the event, indicating her desire to prepare her students for this test (in line with Comber, 2011a; Hardy, 2015). The idea of adopting multiple approaches and programs that teachers must use in each classroom across a school can cause confusion and a 'one size fits all' mentality. Such pressure on teachers causes stress (Bousfield & Ragusa, 2014) and also prioritises particular measures of success (Redden & Low, 2012) rather than addressing students' individual learning needs across all areas. Reflexive teachers are able to select what they think works best for their students at this time and in this context (AUTHORS) as opposed to an 'allocated amount of time' to focus on test-related skills. Beth is operating as a primary agent who is not mobilising to change these practices.

It's difficult too because of the - how fast-tracked C2C is. That's what I'm finding and it's very challenging leading up to NAPLAN now where you know we're not - it's not guaranteed to be either a narrative or persuasive we're not sure but we're trying to make that effective. It's really hard to do that when you're focusing so much time on reading and comprehension yet - and you've got to try to fit in every other subject. So writing is probably a big area…It's a whole school focus, the school improvement agenda. So it has

> *been…that there's an allocated amount of time that will be set to teach comprehension*
>
> *using the STARs program, we use that.* (Beth)

However, Beth describes the school's Literacy Enhancement Achievement Program as a positive approach for classes and students. This program was enabling in that it improved teacher knowledge (see Hardy, 2015) and used evidence to improve literacy outcomes (also reported by Wu, 2016). However the acceptance of a particular form of evidence and a standardised strategy of the 'modelled PowerPoint' means that Beth is not taking up a role as a social actor (Archer, 2000) to embody teaching in critical and creative ways as a confident professional.

> *We call it Literacy Enhancement Achievement Program within the class - is the*
>
> *modelled PowerPoint. There's a modelled PowerPoint every day from the*
>
> *Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday, that goes for about 15 minutes, then also following the*
>
> *Gradual Release of Responsibility in the pedagogical process* (Melissa)

A response to children who need further learning support in Sacha's school was intervention that saw the children taken away from the general class to receive further attention from a teacher aide. So rather than enabling a learning support teacher to target individual needs (Thompson, 2016), the strategy was to use untrained personnel to practice lower order skills (Rice, Dulfer, Polesel & O'Hanlon, 2016); an example of a constraining strategy. Sacha commented that she was 'not sure if I really notice a difference' but indicated a lack of corporate agency (see also Hardy, 2016) to change such practices.

> *The really lower kids they're getting put on individual learning plans. They're taken out*
>
> *for small group intervention time to work with the teacher aide in small groups. I feel*
>
> *like, I'm not sure if I really notice the difference in that. They go out once or twice a week*
>
> *and they work in their small groups but I'm yeah, not really seeing much of a change.*
>
> (Sacha)

In contrast, Rachel explained that at her school the children were responsible for their own goals as a democratic approach to learning, for example, 'their ownership', 'the vision that they have'. Staff and students collectively identified the gaps and reflexively devised ways in which to move forward; an enabling strategy of sharing ideas and resources (Thompson, 2016). Rachel's staff have taken up roles as corporate agents (archer, 2000) to re-focus their teaching in line with students' visions for their learning.

> *The children set their goals, so success is bound by their ownership and the value of -*
>
> *and the vision that they have with their writing. Then we look at what we need and*
>
> *what's missing, so we unpack it with them, so it's not in isolation of one thing, it's*
>
> *actually done across the whole school.* (Rachel)

Sacha explained how extra support in the actual classroom space, in the form of teacher aides, allowed her to work more closely with small groups of children. Structural resourcing is often seen to be important for students who need learning support in literacy (Thompson, 2016), and in this case, Sacha experienced this support as enabling in that she was using it to free up her time for focused teaching time and 'a bit more attention' for students rather than sending students out with a teacher aide and no indication of better outcomes.

With our writing program they have given us more teacher aide and teacher support. So for half an hour a day I get another teacher and a teacher aide and we group the kids into their levels. You get another - it's just having an extra person in the room, I know that helps. That's really helpful to even make the groups smaller to give them a bit more attention. (Sacha)

She also mentions a particular program—*Structured Tier-Two Robust Instruction Vocabulary Experiences* (STRIVE)—that has been adopted across the entire school. Even though mandated approaches can be constraining, as illustrated earlier, Sacha comments on how this particular program has been enabling for the students; improving engagement and enjoyment related to vocabulary extension.

My kids they're really enjoying vocabulary so we've got - I should have mentioned STRIVE words, our STRIVE program; they're learning the higher level words. They're really quite enjoying learning those sorts of words and including them into their vocabulary thing, they're taking that on board as well. (Sacha)

There is a danger, however that commercial programs such as STRIVE can be constraining if they replace rich teaching in context (Redden & Low, 2012) and remove opportunities for teachers to personify their roles as social actors (Archer, 2000) and invest in their own capabilities to teach these concepts.

Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPS)

The cultural emergent properties that were revealed as constraining discourse include a perspective of 'one size fits all' and 'quick fixes' for education and learning outcomes

including the use of commercial programs and the latest trends. Enabling discourses include motivation to help students to learn, and an evidence mindset to improve outcomes for all students.

Many schools in Queensland have adopted an approach call the 'walk through'. This means that administration and leaders often walk around the school and into classrooms, without prior notice, and observe classrooms. A context of surveillance and inspection can result where teachers feel the pressure to perform on task at all times. Test results are used invalidly as a measure of teacher performance (Hardy, 2015; Wu, 2016) in a constraining climate such as this. Geoff also commented on this climate of surveillance (AUTHORS) posited as a strategy to ensure ongoing improvement. A more enabling strategy would be to engage in peer to peer professional review and dialogue for sustainable improvement and corporate agency (Archer, 2000), as shown by Bowe and Gore (2016).

We are observed by admin as well as coaches and master teacher and then provide feedback to improve our teaching all the time. (Geoff)

Jenny commented on how students needing learning support have 'behavioural difficulties'. In inclusive approaches to education such views blame the victim rather than exploring strengths that each learner may have (Riele, 2006).

With the learning support students that we are working with there is definitely more behavioural difficulties with those students and I suppose it's that very difficult question, is it the behaviour that is leading to the learning difficulties or is it the learning difficulties that lead to the behaviour or actually does the child have both difficulties at

the same time? Do they have co-occurring difficulties or [unclear] - it's very difficult to

tell. Unfortunately with our school with the size of the school that we have, a lot of the

students, unless they are really quite significant, do not get, I suppose, personalised

management for those behaviours. (Jenny)

Jenny experienced constraining conditions as she suggested that the school did not cater for students considered 'difficult' to manage. Deficit views of student achievement (Comber, 2011a) prevail if expert knowledge is not accessed to ensure all students are engaged and learning. Jenny is a primary agent who accepts this distribution of professional and social resources (Archer, 2000) at the school.

Rachel, on the other hand, provided an example of a student who entered the school with limited ability in literate practices such as reading and writing and prompted enabling and motivated practices of working together to solve the problem (see Alvermann, 2002). Rachel's own educational beliefs showed her willingness to work together with the student towards success rather than seeing the challenges as something to fix and something related to her own capacities. She used terms such as 'empowered', 'success' and 'we' to show this ideology of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the classroom. Rachel is a social actor (Archer, 2000) personifying her role as a caring teacher who enables children to drive their own learning.

I think because the children are empowered by value and vision and making their

learning visible, I think that's an extremely important part. An example of success is

we've had one person, I will say, came into the school and could not read or write.

I'm not talking about a younger, I'm talking about middle ground of schooling

> *between P and 6, and quite openly said I can't do this. So the success for that little*
>
> *person was I'd like to do this, okay, how are we going to do it? It's not about what I*
>
> *want, it's how we are going to do it together. It is that philosophy of allowing the*
>
> *children to take that approach and understand where they're at and what they need to*
>
> *get to.* (Rachel)

Madelyn talked about another enabling discourse in teachers becoming 'assessment literate' in a culture of emphasising standardized tests (Wu, 2016). This relates to implementing effective feedback strategies to improve students' learning outcomes with a focus on assessment. While this logic of enumeration (Hardy, 2015) could be experienced as a constraining discourse in education, Madelyn noted it as an enabling practice with students' results showing improvement with 'quality teaching and learning'.

> *It's based around the work of Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan. I don't know whether*
>
> *you've heard of them, the Realisation: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-*
>
> *Wide Reform and also the Putting Faces on the Data. Just quickly I guess that's about*
>
> *creating assessment literate teachers and leaders who know what they are learning,*
>
> *how to successfully demonstrate their learning and then how to use feedback to*
>
> *improve and set learning goals about quality teaching and learning. Then that filters*
>
> *down to the kids who in turn become assessment literate learners.* (Madelyn)

A culture of accountability and highly visible results reporting has both a constraining and an enabling effect on teachers and schools. Teachers are more informed about indicators used for performance and remediation, and strategies for improvement, while communities and parents are empowered by information (Gorur, 2016). The danger is when such a culture also

leads to de-professionalisation of teachers (constraining them as primary agents), invalid uses of data (Wu, 2016) and reductive approaches to curriculum in the contradictions of diversity and standardisation (Comber & Nixon, 2010).

Conclusion

The enduring conditions of teaching have been recast over the past decade. Teaching is no longer an individual pursuit with a lone teacher behind the classroom door, striving to engage students and provide stimulating classroom learning opportunities. Teaching and schooling has been datafied (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016) and the spotlight is firmly on student performance in specific skill areas on the national and global stage. With this change in the profession of teaching, there comes both enabling and constraining conditions for teachers and school leaders to manage. These conditions are not static, but rather are always emerging, which suggests that teachers and leaders need reflexive skills in negotiating complex and changing demands.

In this paper we have used Archer's (2000, 2012) social realist theory of reflexivity to argue that three key types of emergent properties - personal, structural and cultural – are important to consider when interrogating the ways in which literacy teachers and leaders experience this new work order as both enabling and constraining. Further, we investigated the extent to which teachers remain as primary agents, simply occupying a place in society's distribution of resources (Archer, 2000); their mobilisation as corporate agents, articulating what needs to change and making it happen; and/or their embodiment of their roles as social actors, investing in the kind of teacher or leader they believe in and want to be. We reject a common strategy of vilifying all practices in this new accountable and visible work order in education, or what Comber refers to as 'audit cultures' (Comber, 2011b), but instead have

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attempted to unpick the complexities to understand how particular practices enable or constrain teachers and leaders in taking up these roles.

The teachers and leaders in this study experienced constraining discourses related to an inability to critique practices and a lack of knowledge about how address student diversity (PEPs); reductive curriculum practices and the use of prescribed or commercial programs to reduce teacher decision-making (SEPs); a narrow focus on what counts as success, and working in a climate of surveillance with teacher performance tied to test results (CEPs). They also experienced enabling discourses of improved knowledge about using evidence to improve learning outcomes (PEPs); a greater focus on closing the achievement gap, provision of new resources and goal setting for success (SEPs); and a culture of assessment literate teachers and students, with children setting their own learning goals and teachers empowered to have an impact (CEPs).

Most of these participants, according to their accounts, operated as primary agents (Archer, 2000). They accepted things as they were, and even though they may have questioned particular practices, did not critique or mobilise as corporate agents (Archer, 2000) to enact change. Rachel's school is one example of corporate agency in action. They took on a culture of improvement, focusing on better outcomes for every individual, yet they did this, not by de-professionalising teachers, but by empowering learners to understand and set their own learning goals. Their approach was empowering for teachers and students as they negotiated their needs in context. The use of data was enabling for them because they used small data (classroom assessment) alongside big data of standardised tests, to understand the needs of individuals and the reasons why they were not succeeding in specific areas. Rachel also demonstrated her role as a social actor (Archer, 2000) in personifying the

type of leader she wanted to be, prioritising what was important for individual students and teachers, rather than being driven by a logic of enumeration and comparison (Hardy, 2015).

We argue that literacy teachers and school leaders can reclaim their professional power and autonomy by harnessing the enabling properties of the datafication and performance agenda. This agenda can be recast to focus on improving school outcomes for diverse individuals through empowering their understandings of their own learning needs. Data and test results should not be driving (and reducing) curriculum, but with increased teacher knowledge about evidence-based practice, more opportunities for professional dialogue, and sharing ideas and skills in using data to help students succeed, there is an opportunity to transform education into the high status profession it once was.

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Appendix A

We are here to talk to you about your educational and pedagogical approaches to literacy learning at your school.

1. Can you explain your understanding of literacy as per your school's philosophy?

2. Can you tell me about the programs or activities you currently have in relation to literacy learning?

3. What areas of literacy learning are your students generally good at? Need to improve?

4. How would you define 'success' in literacy learning at your school?

5. Thinking about some success at your school in regard to literacy learning:

    a. Why do you think this is successful?

    b. Has this happened before?

    c. What are some strategies the school has implemented to enable this?

6. Thinking about a challenge in terms of literacy at your school:

    a. Why do you think this is a challenge?

    b. Has this happened before?

    c. What are some strategies the school has used/tried to fix this?

    d. What do you think would improve it further?

7. Can you identify any specific groups/clusters/cohorts of students in your school who tend to academically outperform/underperform when compared to others?

    a. Have you noticed any links between students' literacy performances and other schooling performances? (e.g. behaviour, attendance)

    b. What is your understanding of why these performances/underperformances might be manifesting/occurring?

8. How would you define curriculum literacies?

       a. What are some examples at your school of developing literacy skills across the curriculum?

9. How much choice do you feel that you have in regard to literacy learning and teaching at your school?

       a. What impacts on these choices?

10. Are there any aspects of your literacy programs or practices that you would like to have more choice about? (If yes) What are they? How would you do it differently?

11. Are there mandated policies or practices around literacy learning at your school? Why are they mandated?

12. Does this match your philosophy?

Any other comments?