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# The teacher as double agent: performative compliance, allegiance and survival in the contemporary classroom

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## ABSTRACT

In a context of increasing complexity and with serious challenges facing contemporary schooling, teachers regularly make strategic decisions about how they engage with policy reforms and system mandates. In this paper, we deploy the notion of the teacher as a 'double agent'. The double agent is required to performatively demonstrate allegiance to education policies and practices, which sometimes sit at odds with the teacher's professional commitment and responsibility to students. The teacher as double agent is produced through the contradictions of subjectivity, which are always present in the enactment of teacher agency. The reflective accounts from Australian teachers shared in this paper illustrate how their enactment of double agency can be deployed as an important survival strategy, which enables them to meet the policy demands of schooling systems, while also meaningfully engaging in curriculum and relational work with the students in their care. However, the tactics of compliance, allegiance and survival used by teachers also comes at a professional and personal cost, which need to be countered by more responsive and supportive education policy reforms.

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Agency; teacher wellbeing; performativity; subjectivity; education policy

## Introduction: the double agent

As contemporary schooling becomes increasingly complex, teachers must regularly make strategic decisions about how they engage with policy reforms and system mandates through the particular strategies and tactics used to navigate the challenges of teaching (de Certeau, 1984; Hickey & Riddle, 2023a). One survival strategy involves teachers acting as 'double agents', through the tactical deployment of performative techniques including *compliance*, *allegiance* and *survival*. In this paper, we work with the productive concept of the teacher as double agent—one who is required to performatively comply with and enact education policies and practices, which often contradict what they believe to be good teaching that serves student learning.

The double agent is produced through the 'contradictory and dialectical elements of subjectivity' (Smith, 1988, p. 37) that are always present in the enactment of agency made

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possible within the discursive formation of schools and teachers' work (Salton et al., 2022; Youdell, 2011). Foucault (1972) described a discursive formation as that which arises within a given relation of power and language—such as the school—which can be observed through the objects, statements, and ways of being and relating that are permitted or otherwise. The double agent's subjectivity is marked by what Foucault (1997) has described as *games of truth*, in response to the 'institutions or practices of control' (p. 281), such as those encountered by teachers in their daily professional lives. Importantly, Foucault (1986) argued that truth is 'central to the formation of the ethical subject' (p. 68). Therefore, the subjectivity of teachers within the discursive frames available to them in schools is absolutely bound up with questions of power, ethics and truth.

Additionally, Foucault (1997) argued that games of truth are not 'just concealed power relations' (p. 296) but are intimately connected to the structural power relations of practices and institutions, in which 'it is always possible to discover something different and to more or less modify this or that rule, and sometimes even the entire game of truth' (p. 297). As such, there remains the potential for both agency and further oppression through the subjectivity of the teacher, who acts as double agent within the discursive power regimes of schooling, using the tactics of compliance, allegiance and survival (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1986).

In this paper, we share accounts of the work and lives of a group of Australian teachers to illustrate how they articulate the performance of double agency as a survival strategy within a challenging context of contemporary schooling (Gavin et al., 2021; Hickey et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2024; Thompson & Hogan, 2024). We contend that the double agent is able to comply with policy demands mandated by schooling systems, while also meaningfully engaging in rich curriculum work and the support of authentic relational engagement (Riddle & Hickey, 2025) with the young people in their care. The teacher as double agent undertakes their work as a practice of working within and against the grain of contemporary schooling policy and practice (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017; Thomson et al., 2012).

## Teachers' work and lives in contemporary schooling

Hardy (2021) has pointed to the complexities that teachers face in their lives and work as a struggle between data and practice—conflicting and contested positions in a state of 'suspended animation'. In this paper, we conceptualise this tension as the teacher playing the role of a double agent, whose allegiance shifts between two masters: the schooling system and their students. Teachers resort to covert forms of teaching and learning, while creating the impression of adhering to contradictory policy mandates inherent within the schooling system. In so doing, double agency involves the mobilisation of teachers' beliefs about what constitutes the core of teaching and learning. The double agent needs to simultaneously take advantage of contradictory subject positions—the compliant subject of policy reform and the pedagogical activist—to survive the performative tensions of working as a teacher in contemporary schooling systems.

While the accounts shared in this paper are anchored in the experience of Australian school teachers, we suggest that the performative 'terrors' (Ball, 2003) of the vocation are experienced in similar ways by teachers working within

various metricated and hyper-rationalised contemporary schooling systems. These terrors include increased assessment and measurement via reductive tools that regulate teacher quality and manage teacher performance (Hardy, 2022; Mockler, 2020). The performative agenda dictates what is to be measured, how, when, where and by whom. Education reform demands teachers document evidence of their work, which further intensifies their workload. Teachers have described their experience under the guise of the relentless pressure to enhance student results, and to measure learning in ‘numbers’ that can be compared, audited and published (Ball, 2012; Hardy, 2022). Consequently, teachers are buried under a ‘tsunami of paperwork’, layers of prescriptive curriculum and scripted pedagogies, oppressive testing regimes and inspections (Biesta, 2015; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Hickey et al., 2022). Meanwhile, public discourse of teaching blames regressive student, school, and system performance on teachers, making it a problem of teacher quality (Mockler, 2020). It is our contention that the discourse of education at this moment in time, the datafication of teachers’ work and learning, no longer aligns with teachers’ individual beliefs and values (Biesta, 2015; Hardy, 2022). To protect themselves and their students, teachers must therefore work as double agents, who filter policy mandates and, where possible, subvert policies and procedures that do not benefit students.

We contend that behind the classroom door and in staffrooms, teachers make decisions about learning with students front of mind, rather than policy mandates. This is the enactment of teacher agency in an ‘intolerable institution’ (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022, p. 985). This paper extends Hardy’s (2021) suggestion that teachers are torn between systemic pressure to improve outcomes through reductive means, and the craft of teaching, which is developed through experience over time (Biesta et al., 2017). It is at this intersection, where policy meets practice, that teachers resort to being double agents to survive the contradictory tensions of teaching—choosing between data production and harvesting or nurturing students in their care.

Recent policy shifts have transferred responsibility for educational performance to teachers and the perceived value they add to student results. System architecture monitors and measures their performance, requiring teachers to document their work and track the outcomes. This intensification of the volume and complexity of administration is unsustainable (Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Gallop et al., 2021; Gavin et al., 2022). The working lives of teachers have been accelerated, with unprecedented levels of work-related stress, anxiety, depression and burnout (Heffernan et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2022; Tsang & Qin, 2020). Consequently, Australia is facing a teacher shortage, which is compounded by an ageing teacher workforce, fewer people applying for and completing teaching degrees, and one in three teachers leaving the profession during the first five years (AITSL, 2022; Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2019). To stave off burnout and survive the barrage of reform, teachers selectively resist, adapt and edit the administrative demands of educational reform. It is within this context of increasing complexity and challenge that teachers work as double agents. In doing so, double agent teachers master the *impression* of compliance to harmful systemic demands,

while their allegiance remains with the students they nurture and protect from the antagonisms of the system.

## Research design

This paper explores the accounts of 20 high school teachers who work in secondary schools in Queensland, Australia. We present their accounts as a genealogical expression of a *history of the present* (Foucault, 1995), through which hidden conflicts and contradictions are examined to understand the power and truth of contemporary institutions and practices. The accounts of teachers' double agency demonstrate how games of truth (Foucault, 1997) work within and through tactical (de Certeau, 1984) deployments of compliance, allegiance and survival in the work and lives of the teachers in our study. Teachers participated in a series of open-ended interviews during the 2023 school year. A denaturalised transcription process was employed (Davidson, 2009; Oliver et al., 2005), which was followed by selective coding (Cohen et al., 2017), with pseudonyms provided for each participant to ensure anonymity. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was provided by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (ref#ETH2023-0028).

The participants worked in various government (public), Catholic and non-government (independent) schools in urban and suburban schools in Brisbane and the surrounding area of South-East Queensland, with teaching experience ranging from early career teachers (3–4 years following graduation) to very experienced teachers (>20 years), including teachers with additional curriculum and leadership responsibilities. The first author, who is a teacher in a suburban school at the Sunshine Coast, recruited teacher participants through professional networks and teacher groups on social media. The teachers shared their teaching experiences, giving up significant time in their working week to talk at length about their teaching work and lives.

A recursive exploration of the phenomena was conducted using Spradley's (1979) developmental research sequence, which was informed by Seidman's (2006) iterative interview series. The first interview in this cascading design explored the context of the participants' early education experiences making comparisons with the contemporary climate of schooling. The second interview moved beyond the life histories to a reconstruction of day-to-day experiences and conventional assumptions about teaching practice to generate insights from the perspectives of teachers. There was a planned third interview to connect the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the profession and the impact it has on teachers' work and life (Seidman, 2006), which was negated by participants' rich narrative responses during the second round of interviews.

The open-ended nature of the questions produced unexpected insights into the tensions, contradictions and complexities of the teachers' games of truth (Foucault, 1997) in their professional teaching lives, which were further explored with prompts, probes and functional remarks to clarify, extend and elaborate on the experiences and perspectives of the teachers (Cohen et al., 2017; Denscombe, 2014; Priede et al., 2014). The lead author's teaching experience and conversational approach helped to quickly establish trust, which allowed the research team to 'unfold' the layers of

detail and explore the core responses and reactions of participants (Ricoeur & Thompson, 2016).

### Accounts of teachers as double agents

The iterative, recursive analysis of teacher interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Seidman, 2006; Spradley, 1979) highlighted an emphasis on considerations of *teachers, then and now*, which engaged with the changing perceptions of teachers and teaching; *data harvesting, performance and fear*, which examined the impacts of the intensification and datafication of teachers' work; *a 'tsunami' of paperwork and unsustainable hours of work*, which further considered how workload affected teachers; and *allegiance and performance management*, which interrogated the double agency required of teachers to sustain themselves.

Teachers described themselves as 'double agents' in that they deliberately engaged in tactical enactments of compliance, allegiance and survival as part of a strategy to work with and against the grain of policy mandates (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017; Thomson et al., 2012). Teachers expressed that they often did not agree with the education reform and policies they were charged with enacting, and instead their allegiance was always with the needs of the students in their care. Where the double agent teachers were overtly compliant with policy reform, this was expressed as being out of fear of reprisal and performance management concerns. The teachers often referred to reforms as redundant and policies and procedures being realistically untenable, yet they developed methods that gave the impression that they supported school agendas, while simultaneously engaging in covert acts of subversion (de Certeau, 1984; Smith, 1988). Teachers suggested that reforms created more work for teachers and became meaningless data collection exercises that were not valued by students or staff because they did not contribute to student learning:

I just make it look like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing from a policy perspective, but I don't. We need double agents in the system who say, no stuff you and your stupid policy, we know what's right for the kids, and we will get the best results we can for them. (Kristy, 19 September 2023)

In addition to planning and lesson preparation, teachers' work involves multiple layers of compliance, reporting, and data production, which demands considerable hours outside of required school time (Gavin et al., 2021). The teachers in our study often referred to 'box ticking', and providing 'proof' and 'evidence' of their professionalism. The focus on data was at the expense of what teachers considered to be genuine teaching, learning and collaboration. They realised that it was important to give the impression they were supportive of school reform agendas, while covertly subverting them:

There was a big focus on data, but I would not say that it was authentic. They were very happy to twist it because they wanted really good data. I'd say, 'We're going to do this little bit and nothing else' and just lie because nothing was ever sustained. It was very reactionary. (Kim, 13 October 2023)

### ***Teachers, then and now***

Participants were asked to reflect on their earliest experience of education and made notable observations that teachers from their past did not have to reconcile data and practice but were seen to be trusted as competent professionals by the school system and parents. The teachers they remembered were practitioners who were genuine, nurturing, and innovative, whereas contemporary teachers are required to mask instinctive welfare responses and operate in a climate of workload intensification, stress, fear and mistrust (Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Thompson, 2022). For example, Cathy explained that teachers today are worried about the repercussions of even doing a fist pump or high five because ‘in a moment of kindness, your career’s gone’ (Cathy, 26 June 2023).

Teachers during less performative, metricated times were recalled by our participants as being able to be non-conformists when it came to the rules of school, which was a choice made by teachers. In contrast, they expressed that contemporary teachers are unable to enact their agency in such ways because it may lead to performance management conversations with school leadership. For example, Cathy explained that documenting evidence of her planning, teaching, differentiation and behaviour management was used by the school leadership team when evaluating her work:

It also impacts teachers’ performance conversations with the Head of Special Education and the Deputy Principal around ‘Why? What are you doing? . . . It’s your job as the classroom teacher to differentiate for this child’. (Cathy, 26 June 2023)

Additionally, Tammy noted that there was so much mandated curriculum content to be covered in lessons that one must resist the instinct to connect with students or sacrifice the loaded curriculum to nurture the relational dimension of classroom teaching (Hickey & Riddle, 2023b):

It’s about what you need to teach. I feel restrained in how much of a relationship I can have with my students . . . am I spending too much time invested in them as a person and not just getting on with the loaded curriculum? (Tammy, 8 July 2023)

Bree blamed the loss of innovation on the rules that teachers feel obliged to obey even when they don’t agree with them. She explained that ‘eventually I realised that I’m just a number and I need to follow the rules because I need to provide for my daughter and my home and my cats and my mum who is now in aged care’ (Bree, 25 June 2023). Based on our conversations with the 20 teachers in this study, it was evident that conforming to system prerogatives and reform agendas appeared to have a detrimental impact on their professional and personal wellbeing, which led to the playing of strategic games of truth and the deployment of various tactics in response to the contradictory demands on their subjective agency (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1997).

### ***Data harvesting, performance and fear***

Teachers identified a common pressure from school administrators to develop assessments that generated particular types of metricated data, which would then be used to evaluate teacher and school performance (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022; Hardy, 2021). Teachers in the study argued that such assessment mandates failed to measure authentic student learning, instead serving a bureaucratic purpose of box ticking for system

compliance (Duarte & Brewer, 2022). For example, Kristy explained that ‘I honestly feel like we are just collecting data for the sake of collecting data’ (Kristy, 28 June 2023). Similarly, Jason expressed distain for the procedures and the gap between what assessment instruments measure and what he considers to be real learning. He felt an obligation to administer the assessment as per the policy, yet diminished its curriculum value when discussing the task requirement with students:

In Grade 8 Math, the hoops and steps and processes that I go through, that we all go through, to set one test is just ridiculous . . . It is garbage, it’s not maths! You can tell the kids and explain the stupidity of it, and I say I hate this stuff but just do it, write it up and I’ll go tick, tick, tick. (Jason, 27 June 2023)

Jason explained that his role is to help the students within the confines of the educational architecture and success in this system equates to high test scores: ‘I want them to get a good mark and there’s no maths in there, just get the marks’ (Jason, 27 June 2023). This is a notable example of double agency being performed as a game of truth (Foucault, 1997), in which Jason presents the impression of compliance, while he continues to work towards what he perceives as the best interest his students (de Certeau, 1984; Duarte & Brewer, 2022).

Teachers detailed data harvesting practices in schools at a classroom level that included pre-assessment and post-assessment testing of students, teaching to the test, drafting procedures that required the same task to essentially be marked twice, alongside formative and summative assessment. It was the consensus of participants that data generated from these instruments does not lead to improvement in student learning, but boosts test scores and levels of achievement, which can then be promoted as positive school performance data (Daliri-Ngametua et al., 2022). For example, Chris explained that ‘the way that we assess has only one real value and that is gathering data, data that does not help the education of young people’ (Chris, 11 July 2023).

The participants in the study noted that the pressure to increase the volume of assessment and generate measurable numbers that can be tracked and compared, is matched by pressure to improve student results. For example, Kristy told us that the school administration ‘want 80–85% of kids to get an A–C and I’m like, good luck, I could barely get Year 10s to understand the quadratic formula, how the hell am I supposed to get Year 9s to understand it?’ (Kristy, 28 June 2023). Additionally, Kristy explained the fear she experiences knowing her classroom data will be compared to data benchmarks and what administrators deem to be ‘stretch targets’ for performance: ‘If I don’t meet that data point, what does that mean? Am I going to be put on Managing Unsatisfactory Performance?’ (Kristy, 28 June 2023)

The regular evaluation of teachers’ classroom data and their fear of disciplinary action means teachers try to help students negotiate the curriculum and assessment reform by working out ‘how to tick the box without causing too much disruption to the learning’ (Kate, 2 July 2023). Sonja suggested that resisting the prescriptive educational reform:

Kind of takes a little bit of guts. You have to be able to go, this is what the kids need, this is what the document says and now I need to mesh the two together. Sometimes you’ll look at the kids and know what the system tells us to do isn’t going to work. (Sonja, 29 June 2023)



Sonja's account above is a salient example of the ways in which teachers resort to covert strategies, appearing to be compliant to the policy regime, while simultaneously adapting, filtering or resisting policy mandates in order to meet the needs of the students. A recurrent observation made by the teachers in the study was their common experience of time poverty, specifically, the release time for preparation and correction being grossly inadequate to meet the demands expected by curriculum reform and increased data collection (Creagh et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2022).

Teachers exist in a perpetual state of procedural obligation, in which they cannot comply with the data entry demands because there is not enough time to complete the volume of work. Policies that require teachers to record their classroom adjustments and differentiation means that important but not immediate planning, preparation and correction work, takes place in the teacher's own time or is not completed at all (Thompson & Hogan, 2024). Teachers are required to triage their compliance to policy in various ways:

It never ends and I have to triage and deal with it but that's the thing that eats away at you because you never get to the bottom of the list and you never get everything done and you're thinking, oh god, should I have dealt with that? Like I've dealt with three really super important urgent things after school today, but should I have dealt with that fourth thing? Is that fourth thing going to come and bite me? Is that the thing that's going to flare up tomorrow? Psychologically it's exhausting. (Chris, 1 July 2023)

Teachers in the study explained that they must always be ready to prove they are meeting the needs of all students in an inclusive environment with documentary evidence. This increase in the expectation of teachers' work and the evidence required to prove successful performance, was not matched by an increase in time to complete those tasks:

In my Year 8 class for example, I have nine students that have a disability ranging from ADHD, physical disabilities, Autism, other learning difficulties including dyslexia, and mental health challenges including anxiety. I'm expected to differentiate for all of those students as well as the usual differentiation for students in my class who just struggle with the literacy demands of English. If I was authentically differentiating the curriculum, one student could take up three entire spares for them to then not even engage with the curriculum I have had to separately design for them. (Cathy, 26 September 2023)

Further, the threat of potential backlash and abuse by parents facilitates coercive compliance among teachers who fear parent complaints because it can leave teachers vulnerable to unwarranted criticism and defamation. On this matter, Tim described the power parents have to threaten his professionalism, aspiration and employment when he failed to reply to a parent email during the school break. The parent did not accept the teacher's mark for an assessment task and escalated the complaint to the leadership team. When Tim returned to school for the beginning of term, he was 'called in' for what he describes as 'a de-facto performance management meeting' (Tim, 8 October 2023). He described his 'significant failing' in his responsibilities and explained that teachers at his school feel a relentless burden to meet every need of demanding parents because as teachers, they are vulnerable and their job is always on the line.

Similarly, Fran detailed the palpable fear of parent attacks as a result of increased assessment and data production. She explained that the simple act of returning assignment work can make teachers feel like 'some sort of moronic underclass':

You're almost scared to hit the send button and give them their assignment work back because you know that within 24 hours you're going to have four or five parents who are going to dispute the mark and then you've got to go back and remark it and then you've got to email the parents and they want a phone call and that's the best-case scenario. Some just go straight to the principal or the Head of Department and you don't even know about it. You're just terrified—what are they going to do or say to you as the car park mafia gathers every afternoon to tell tales about teachers and denigrate teachers? I'm just living in fear. (Fran, 1 July 2023)

### ***A 'tsunami' of paperwork and unsustainable hours of work***

Teachers in our study described relentless schedules outside of rostered work hours to cope with the workload of curriculum reform and documentation. Teachers were concerned about the impact of the curriculum on their students' learning and the paperwork required to prove the planning and execution of the curriculum, differentiation and behaviour management is never finished (Creagh et al., 2023; Thompson & Hogan, 2024). For example, Kristy explained that 'I literally have rewritten curriculum every year that I've been teaching, which is now five years' (Kristy, 28 June 2023). Along with her staffroom colleagues, she had reached a point of resistance when it came to education reform and policy directives: 'We just tear shreds off whatever admin has said. "Did you see the latest email from this deputy? What a joke, no one's doing that". Nope, screw that, we aren't doing that' (Kristy, 28 June 2023). Kate had a similar attitude and explained that most of the time, she does not tick the box when it comes to conforming to policies and procedures: 'I think that the most important thing is that the kids trust me, like every kid in my class trust and believe that I know what I'm doing' (Kate, 2 July 2023). According to Steve, an industrial science teacher with extensive experience in public education and in trade training:

They waste our time with stuff that's so unimportant. We've got ACARA [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority], risk assessments, there's safety stuff on our machinery that needs to be done, and they go, 'Oh we want to do ... TLAPs [Teaching, Learning and Assessment Plans]' and shit like this. (Steve, 3 July 2023)

Likewise, Cathy felt the pressure to document her differentiation because it directly affected school funding, and she feared that her failure to comply will result in legal liability. The 2022 Education Queensland policy document, the *Curriculum Assessment Reporting Framework* (CARF) states that schools have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments for all students. This policy implements the Australian Government initiative, the *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability* (NCCD), which provides information about the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they receive. Schools are required to report the data collected on students with a disability to the Australian Government on an annual basis and this involves producing evidence of classroom adjustments for students, which involves an additional layer of data entry delegated to teachers:

Gone are the days when I had 1–2 students, now I have 7–8 students in each class that require a differentiated approach because CARF says so. These are kids that we need NCCD evidence of so we do have to capture the evidence of what we are doing to ensure that those

kids can be verified for the NCCD, which is where all the money comes from. (Cathy, 26 June 2023)

Cathy explained that a full-time teacher can have six separate classes with 7–8 NCCD students, whom they teach three times a week, which equates to 48 adjustments that need to be recorded each week and up to 144 adjustments if differentiation is required in each of the lessons. Given the release time teachers are provided (i.e. 210 minutes per week), that is 1.5–4 minutes per student to design individual responses for their learning needs and ensure the evidence of this differentiation is entered in the system. Cathy elaborated that this approach to adjustments meant that parents now expect a personalised learning program for every student. Tim shared similar concerns, explaining ‘that’s the other thing I get stressed out about . . . differential learning . . . so I’m making sure that I record that and make sure I’ve done it. I’ve noticed that there’s a big increased number of students like that and also increased class sizes’ (Tim, 5 July 2023).

Teachers shared experiences of school policies designed to create ‘consistency’ in teaching practice. In one case, PowerPoint documents were created by curriculum leaders and distributed to faculty staff. The slides are filled with ‘mandatory’ content that staff understand, will be assessed on exams. Tim described how it creates ‘another layer now on top of everything so we’ve got to kind of conform to that and you get anxious about it, worry about covering this and that’ (Tim, 5 July 2023). He explained that this was standard practice for all subjects in all year levels in his school: ‘You try to have those moments of fun and interaction but that’s sometimes difficult because of the pressure of getting through the curriculum and all this content’ (Tim, 5 July 2023). Tim reconciled the policy expectation with his own practice by moving through the PowerPoint content as quickly as possible, even emailing the document to students and their parents to make sure students were not disadvantaged by his preference for more engaged and responsive modes of teaching and learning. Chris had also struggled with what Freire (2000) termed the ‘banking-system’ of curriculum delivery, which is enacted through online learning systems and repository architecture: ‘I just find it’s a great shame that we’re encouraging kids to see education as being synonymous with assessment. It implies that things are a lot more prescriptive’ (Chris, 11 July 2023).

### ***Allegiance and performance management***

Teachers felt that their performance was constantly being evaluated by administration through student results displayed on walls, through ‘pedagogy check-ins and consultations’ or through student responses to questions they were asked during ‘learning walk and talks’ (Kristy, 28 June 2023). Additionally, Kristy explained that there was an unspoken pact between teachers and students to protect one another during these inspections: ‘My kids, literally, look at me when school leaders are in the middle of these learning walks and talks and they’ll give me a little wink, like a little, ‘I got your back, Miss’ (28 June 2023). Teachers confessed to investing time preparing students for inspection and surveillance rounds. For example, Tammy described her approach in the following way:

Getting them all in and writing these Learning Goals to a point where they’re able to parrot them back to some of the Admin that walk in and interrogate them on that stuff. We’re all

doing it because we're scared that someone's going to come in, and you know, ask our kids to sort of parrot something back. (Tammy, 8 July 2023)

Kristy (28 June 2023) outlined a process in which 'marker students' are selected and their results are tracked and compared to other students, to their performance in other classes, to their historical performance in the same subject and to their performance on high-stakes testing, including national standardised literacy and numeracy tests. The experience was not unique. Similarly, Kenna participated as a school leader in the learning walks and talks, which she found conflicting:

We did learning walks and talks, we have to do all this stuff that sometimes I don't agree with. We grabbed five kids from every classroom and said, what are you learning. I interviewed 200 kids in Year 7, 8, 9 and all different subjects so we could compare subjects. (Kenna, 3 July 2023)

One of the participants referred to the room where the data was on display as 'the war room', in which there were 'stretch targets' and 'marker students' being monitored to determine who the good teachers were, and which teachers were underperforming based on those publicly displayed metrics. These decisions were informed solely by student results in classes even when those classes were streamed by ability (i.e. ability as determined by results by the aforementioned standardised, prescriptive and performative assessments). Further, Kenna described the surveillance as a burden for the teacher who takes responsibility for every individual student's result because those results reflect the teacher's value to the organisation. She explained how she 'felt that if I could push a kid over the edge to get them where they need to be, that will get *me* the results that I need and that's really a compliance thing' (Kenna, 3 July 2023, emphasis added).

## Conclusion

Across the interviews conducted with the teachers in our study, there was a shared sense of frustration with the current formulation of contemporary schooling as one in which students and teachers are measured by narrowly conceived assessment metrics and performative practices; metrics and practices that are often at odds with the values, lived experiences, hopes and interests of students and teachers. Conversely, we also noted a strong, collective commitment to students and their wellbeing among the teachers interviewed for this study, in which teachers described their willingness to engage in subversive acts of deception and duplicity against policy mandates and regimes of power that they considered to be harmful to students and themselves. We suggest that these teachers have clearly positioned themselves as double agents within a schooling system that rewards compliance and punishes nonconformity.

Additionally, we found that teachers were recounting to us their experiences of being narrators and outsiders (Ball, 2012) to the policy mandates that flowed through the discursive regimes in which they were required to work (Foucault, 1986, 1995). Teachers shared with us the various ways in which they deployed a range of tactical responses, including compliance, allegiance and survival (de Certeau, 1984) through the practice of various games of truth (Foucault, 1972, 1997), underwritten by a sense of alterity and 'outsiderness' to the performativity and metrification of their work. Teachers were thus required to engage in different games of truth to negotiate the

institutional power relations of their schools, so that they could both comply with the mandates and provide rich, meaningful learning experiences for their students (Foucault, 1986, 1997).

However, the teacher as double agent comes with considerable risk, including the professional and personal costs of sustaining the tactics of double agency. There are real effects on teachers' wellbeing that are directly connected to their work intensification, deprofessionalisation and increasing pressure to comply to narrowly conceived measures of performative success. We contend that schools should be places in which there is no need for teachers to play games of truth that work outside of the institutional power frames and logics of practice but are instead deeply connected in both meaningful and sustainable ways to the policies and practices of schooling. That is, schools need to change to better support the work and lives of teachers, rather than the other way around. Until such time as there exists the political will to address teacher burnout and deprofessionalisation in ways that go beyond the current neoliberal education policy settings, it will be no surprise to see teachers continue to engage as double agents, who seek to balance compliance, allegiance and survival.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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### Ethics

Ethical clearance to conduct the research was provided by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (ref#ETH2023-0028).

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