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Conditions that mediate teacher agency during assessment reform

Jill Willis, Kelli McGraw, Linda Graham

- **Purpose:** A new senior curriculum and assessment policy in Queensland, Australia is changing the conditions for teaching and learning. The purpose of this paper was to consider the personal, structural and cultural conditions that mediated the agency of Senior English teachers as they negotiated these changes. Agency is conceptualised as opportunities for choice in action arising from pedagogic negotiations with students within contexts where teachers' decision making is circumscribed by other pressures.
- **Design:** An action inquiry project was conducted with English teachers and students in two secondary schools as they began to adjust their practices in readiness for changes to Queensland senior assessment. Four English teachers (two per school) designed a 10-week unit of work in Senior English with the aim of enhancing students' critical and creative agency. Five action/reflection cycles occurred over six months with interviews conducted at each stage to trace how teachers were making decisions to prioritise student agency.
- **Findings:** Participating teachers drew on a variety of structural, personal and cultural resources, including previous experiences, time to develop shared understandings, and the responsiveness of students that mediated their teacher agency. Teachers' ability to exert agentic influence beyond their own classroom was affected by the perceived flexibility of established resources and the availability of social support to share student success.
- **Originality/value:** These findings indicate that a range of conditions affected the development of teacher agency when they sought to design assessment to prioritise student agency. The variety of enabling conditions that need to be considered when supporting teacher and student agency is an important contribution to theories of agency in schools, and studies of teacher policy enactment in systems moving away from localised control to more remote and centralised quality assurance processes.

Keywords: assessment; agency; policy reform; assessment policy; English teachers.

Introduction

Assessment policy reforms when they are first designed are products of imagination. Until they are interpreted, interrogated and integrated within the “mangle of practice” by agentic teachers they remain yet-to-be realised ideals (Pickering, 1993). Policies are “epic poems” with heroic agents and problems to be solved that are produced within everyday cultural practices

(Luke, 2011, p. 374). In the daily life of schools these policy stories often overlap one another in their starting points, and implications. There is potential for incoherence but also interconnection. New policy can open up action spaces for reforming educators to reframe the beliefs within a school or system and make connections over time to a broader vision for learning (McDonald, 2014). In order to deliberately and continually align and renew these action spaces, school and system leaders need to understand how teachers are making sense of the policy change. This paper focuses on the everyday practice of teachers preparing for a significant assessment policy reform.

The senior school assessment system in Queensland, Australia is undergoing ‘the biggest change in the last 50 years’ (Queensland Government, 2018, np) and its success depends on the agency of teachers. Teachers are front line policy actors and enactors, living out the powerful proposal that what teachers do in schools with their learners will make the greatest difference to measurable student learning outcomes (Yates & Hattie, 2013). Implementing new policies and processes involves teachers engaging in sense making in their work environments; a complex process that goes beyond mere policy implementation (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The agentic teacher takes hold of the opportunity “to act upon, influence as well as transform activities and circumstances in their lives” (Rajala, Martin & Kumpulainen, 2016, p. 1). Agentic teachers engage with new policies and make informed professional judgments about the design, practice and consequences of classroom curriculum and assessment.

Although the concept of human agency is closely associated with action and choice (Bandura, 2000), teachers’ actions and choices are circumscribed by educational, social and political contexts. In outlining an ecological view of teacher agency, Priestly, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) note that individual teacher capacity is a necessary, although insufficient, conceptualisation of teacher agency, as the conditions of and relationships within each schooling context can both constrain and enable teachers’ professional judgements. Being an agentic teacher is a social role that is negotiated in practice, often in the collective of the classroom, or with peers in the broader collective of schools. For English teachers, agency has deep epistemic roots. Creative agency (to create an innovative intervention in the world that draws on one’s interests, experiences and aspirations), and critical agency (to analyse oneself and others to interrogate and understand interests, motives and relationships of power) are essential to the

practice of English teaching and learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In Australia, the action spaces for teacher and student agency in schools are increasingly governed by policy reform.

The rhetoric that successful improvement of student learning outcomes depends on teachers is ubiquitous in ongoing Australian reform processes. It is a characteristic of the global education reform movement that there is a growing responsabilisation of teachers who are held accountable for expected policy outcomes (Torrance, 2018; Spina, 2017). This logic of large-scale assessment change, where teachers receive training to translate policy intention into action with fidelity, is based on a view of the rational individual as agent where mandated assessment is seen as a powerful lever for aligning curriculum expectations with classroom practice (Barnes, Clarke & Stephens, 2000). However, linear models of policy change do not easily fit with the complexities of classrooms and schools. Similarly, the assumption that teacher agency is a benign and enabling source of change does not reflect the multiple demands on teacher attention or the everyday challenges of enacting new policies and processes. Agentic teachers may productively engage in new policy to amplify student learning through new ways of assessing. Equally, they may actively resist assessment reform, enact only the parts they find easy or compatible, maintain their current practice or be overwhelmed by conflicting demands (Willis & Klenowski, 2018; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013).

In this paper, we draw on sociocultural conceptions of agency to highlight the interdependence of individual agency, social relations and cultural contexts (Archer, 2003; Biesta et al., 2015). In providing a focused analysis of the experiences of teachers as they navigated policy change, this paper offers much needed insight into teacher agency at the micro-level of policy enactment in a time of early system-wide assessment change (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2016; Biesta et al., 2015). We argue that understanding how teachers draw on structural, cultural and personal conditions can help teachers make sense of reform for themselves, for their learners, and for system leaders. Such understanding provides school and system leaders with “good raw material for the construction of a theory of action” (McDonald, 2014. p. 147). The inquiry process and language supports a nuanced navigation of change that extends ideas of teacher agency beyond that of rational individualism and individual blame to be considered as part of a broader ecology of practice.

Teacher agency and policy change

Agentic teachers negotiate the meaning of policy changes. In making decisions about what to prioritise, they actively shape the varied social, political and cultural contexts in which they work (Willis & Klenowski, 2018). As teachers work in interdependent group activity with their students, and with their colleagues in secondary school departments, individual teacher agency also reflects the collective culture (Hokka, Vahasantanen, Mahlakaarto, 2017; Raelin, 2016). Individual, group and structural conditions work in combination to shape the choices that are available (Lyons, Thompson & Timmons, 2016). Structural changes – such as Queensland’s recent senior assessment system reform – alter the established conditions for how teachers negotiate their day-to-day work.

Any disruption within a well-established system will elicit various reactions from agents within. Disruption can prompt reflective dialogue within teams and make new ways of working seem possible (Adie & Willis, 2016). As previous policy implementation studies with Australian English teachers have shown, disruptions can also lead to policy implementation becoming a time of teacher overload (Manuel, 2002) or de-skilling, as teacher judgements and perspectives narrow to reflect a focus on the accountability imperatives of policy makers (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2011). Teachers can restrict their assessment design choices to those that replicate the mandated assessment, as student success in the new system may be used to judge teacher competency (Barnes et al., 2000). Ambitious curriculum and assessment changes in Queensland have faltered in the past due to change fatigue, lack of resourcing, insufficient investment in teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and increasing pressures of national accountability (Lingard & McGregor, 2014). Similar pressures are evident in other contexts of assessment reform.

Studies in the United States identify that reform “accrues in increments” and requires more than individual effort (McDonald, 2014, p. 152) or isolation and assessment of teachers as independent contributors (Johnson, 2012). Scottish studies of teacher agency propose that when systems don’t consider the conditions for teachers to engage in collaborative agency and seek “fool-proof” approaches, there is an assumption that individuals in the system “should not really matter” or even “do not really matter” (Priestly, Biesta & Robinson, 2015, p. 148). In a synthesis of international research about assessment policy reform, Laveault (2016) concluded that successful assessment reform is not about controlling the environment, but rather promoting

teacher professionalism and creating conditions for teacher and student co-regulation to occur. In all of these studies, the complexities of classroom policy implementation is acknowledged, along with the requirement for teachers to feel empowered to make decisions to engage with the purposes of the policy reform, to find synergies between new and existing practices, and reconcile competing priorities. Exploring teacher agency during times of system change is particularly relevant to English teachers, given that “culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy within a climate of standardisation is challenging and complex” (Lopez, 2012, p.90). Consideration of how teachers engage with new curriculum and assessment conditions has importance for the agency of teachers and students, as well as the efficacy and adaptability of the system undergoing change as school context and individual agency are significantly linked (Johnson, 2012). We explore how English teachers in two schools negotiated and enacted their roles as agentic teachers in the context of a changing senior curriculum in Queensland, while maintaining a goal of fostering student agency.

Context of Queensland Senior Curriculum and Assessment policy reform

Since 1972, Queensland secondary school teachers have designed, administered, marked and moderated summative assessment tasks that have led to senior certification. Teachers have had significant agency in both their local practices as assessment designers and as agents in a system of peer accountability through a process of regional social moderation panels (Adie, Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith 2012). The system of teacher designed senior assessment in Queensland emerged in the late 1960s, in part as a result of parent and student dissatisfaction with Senior Physics examination results. Public dissatisfaction with senior science assessment methods also provoked the most recent senior assessment reform, which was implemented in 2019 (Mills & McGregor, 2016). The reform process began with a Parliamentary Inquiry (QGEIC, 2013), which was followed by a review of the Queensland senior certification and assessment system (Matters & Masters, 2014). The Queensland government adopted the recommendations from the review report and the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) was tasked to redesign the state curriculum and assessment systems for the senior schooling years of Year 11 and 12. A wide-ranging consultation process ensued, with teachers expected to be agentic and involved in writing, trialling and giving feedback on new processes. Teacher agency is socially foregrounded as part of the macro policy enactment, with teachers required to volunteer to be

peer reviewers, endorsers and validators of assessment in the quality assurance processes of the new system.

The 2019 Queensland assessment reform changes are far-reaching. Conditions around curriculum and assessment choice have moved from what Luke, Woods and Weir (2013) described as a low-definition curriculum and assessment program (one that outlines broad goals and specific assessment standards and criteria, allowing schools to design a suite of assessment tasks to meet local priorities) to a highly prescribed curriculum (one that has tightly defined curriculum and assessment tasks). Classroom teachers design some assessment tasks, alongside common state-wide assessment tasks that are set and graded by the QCAA. Instead of regionally-based teacher panels developing assessment literacy through face-to-face social moderation, teacher designed assessment tasks are now pre-approved by peer endorsers several months in advance. The number of assessment tasks has decreased from a portfolio of up to eight tasks that contributed to ‘on-balance’ judgments against qualitative descriptive standards, to four assessment tasks that are appraised using objectives-aligned performance criteria and a numerical grading scale. The shift away from portfolio-based marking decreases the number of tasks students completed, while simultaneously increasing the stakes of each assessment item. In English, all 11 syllabus objectives are evaluated in every task. With the increased impact of each assessment task result on a students’ final mark, greater attention to Assessment for Learning practices is relied upon to continuously inform teachers and students of progress and to help students understand how to enhance the quality of their work. This requires teachers to exercise agency by initiating their chosen courses of action, as well as promote the development of student agency. In other contexts, student agency has been framed as epistemic agency (Lai & Campbell, 2018), or as empowerment through multiple and critical literacies (Lopez, 2012), and as with teacher agency it involves having opportunities to initiate action.

Students who learn to become active agents in their learning, are “equipped to navigate an uncertain future and to shape their own lives and contribute to the lives of others” (Schoon, 2018, p. 6). Designing for student agency requires teachers find spaces within the mandated curriculum for their students to experiment, to take risks, and push boundaries. Responsiveness to students is especially important in English, as teachers adapt their pedagogy in response to student questions, perspectives and commentary as part of the discipline (Parr, 2004; Alford & Kettle, 2017). The new Queensland senior English syllabus emphasises agency by requiring

students to develop a critical awareness of cultural discourses and of the language of power, identity and belonging, as well as “to enjoy language and be empowered” (QCAA, 2018, p. 1). To fulfil the expectations for student agency in their curriculum and assessment designs, while preparing for anticipated changes, teachers had to negotiate a range of conditions.

Structural, cultural and personal conditions for teacher agency

Archer’s (2003; 2007) theories of agency propose that people perceive their personal, structural and cultural conditions as enabling or constraining, depending on their histories and circumstances. According to Archer (2003), people exercise agency as they “initiate course[s] of action in the light of their concerns according to the circumstances they confront” (p. 300). There is a continual process of consideration and weighing up what matters and what to do next that enables a person to act reflexively to effect changes to the social and material conditions of their context or to reproduce them (Priestly, 2011). For example, a structural condition within an English department might be that all teachers must follow the same teaching plan and use the same assessment task in a Year level. For some teachers this would be an enabling condition as it saves them time in planning and creating resources. For other teachers, it could be a constraining condition as they would be unable to follow their preference for an inquiry-based unit that responded to student interests. Analysis of teacher agency and how it is mediated is therefore an analysis of how people decide what has importance as they enact their options.

At the time of this study, anticipation of the new Queensland senior assessment changes was inevitably impacting how teachers identified options for themselves and their students. *Structural conditions* that influence teacher agency in making assessment decisions such as existing syllabi, resources and teaching plans, school reporting, timetabling and decision-making processes were all undergoing change. *Cultural conditions* such as student and parental expectations, school priorities and values, professional learning expectations and subject-based approaches, were also being re-examined and re-established. *Personal conditions* for teachers, including habits, histories and beliefs, are also powerful influences in the ways that teachers approach their decision-making, especially in English (Anson, 2017; Looney, Cumming, van Der Kleij & Harris, 2018). This paper focuses on some of the factors that shaped the decisions four English teachers made after they were invited to prioritise how students might be positioned to be agentic within the new senior assessment changes. These design decisions are analysed in the

following sections drawing on Archer’s construct of *structural*, *cultural* and *personal* conditions to move beyond *what* the teachers reported about their planning practice to consider the various personal, structural and cultural properties that influenced *how* teachers made decisions.

Research Design

An action inquiry project was conducted with teachers in two senior secondary schools in 2017, as they began to adjust their practices in readiness for the changes to Queensland senior assessment that were to take effect from 2019. Coastal High School was a regional government high school and City High School was a non-government school. Four English teachers (two per school) worked with the research team in a cycle of inquiries over six months. All four teachers were female, with varying years of experience in teaching. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Table 1

Participant overview

Coastal High School	Mariah Eight years of teaching in two Queensland schools	Angela On short-term contract Three years of teaching in various Queensland schools.
City High School	Rhiannon Two years of teaching, one of which was overseas.	Margaret Six years of teaching in two schools, one of which was overseas.

Research funding from the Queensland Government Education Horizon grant scheme enabled teachers to be released from their classes to meet and engage in collaborative thinking both together and with the researchers in their schools. At the time of the research, participating teachers in both school sites were engaged in writing teaching and assessment plans for Year 11 English units on *The Crucible*. Five action inquiry cycles were designed as a prototype of a process schools might use to support teachers to engage in local inquiries into their assessment practices (Willis, Adie & Klenowski, 2013; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn, 2010; Willis, McGraw & Graham, 2017) (see figure 1).


Inquiry cycles	Inquiry prompts	Sample actions	Data
	<p>1. Preplanning to identify a collective first order purpose</p>	<p>What first order priorities (such as student agency) will be emphasised?</p>	<p>Reflecting on senior assessment changes & research.</p> <p>2 x 40 min focus group between teachers and researchers.</p>
	<p>2. Shared assessment language for team planning</p>	<p>What do we each understand these big ideas to mean?</p>	<p>Sharing ideas of past and possible designs for student agency & validity.</p> <p>4 x 20 min individual teacher interview transcripts.</p>
	<p>3. Equitable summative assessment design</p>	<p>How well is the task aligned to the aims of the learning? Is it accessible to all students?</p>	<p>Refine task using validity checklist. Highlight alignment. Get feedback from research team.</p> <p>Summative task designs and checklists. 2 x 20 min interview transcripts.</p>
	<p>4. Unit design for responsive formative pedagogies</p>	<p>Which learning experiences will give opportunity for students to develop agency?</p>	<p>Students give peer feedback, lead discussions, give feedback to teachers.</p> <p>2 x 30 min student focus group transcripts (1 group per school, n 7 students per school).</p>
	<p>5. Post teaching review of design with peers for local intelligent accountability</p>	<p>What can be learned from the evidence of student learning to inform the next steps for students and the next iteration of the design?</p>	<p>Teacher reflections on student feedback, peer discussion about experiences and outcomes for students.</p> <p>1 x 30 min focus group transcript.</p>

Figure 1. Five inquiry cycles

Together the five inquiries supported the teachers to explore how they were making links in the chain of assessment design decisions (Crooks, Kane & Cohen, 1996), highlighting the validity and alignment of their professional judgment and agentic choices. The researchers proposed the design and selection of student agency as a first order priority after a critical review of the proposed assessment policy change identified this important priority was at risk of being overlooked. Teachers worked with the researchers to design their curriculum, assessment and pedagogy within a broad inquiry frame to reflect their priorities, with ongoing reflection and adaptation occurring as the inquiries progressed (Penuel & DeBarger, 2016). The inquiry dialogues were semi-structured, with questions stemming from the inquiry prompts. The teachers reflected on their design decisions, and gave feedback to the researchers on emerging theoretical

ideas. Ethical permission was granted to audio record the focus group discussions and interviews. With each inquiry cycle, the immediate reflections and qualitative data from participants were inductively analysed for content themes to inform the next cycle. The initial research question informing the study was “How do teachers design curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to enhance learner agency and equitable outcomes?” However in the inquiry process it became clear we needed to first understand how teacher agency in doing this designing work was enabled and constrained by the sociocultural conditions of their work. The transcriptions were revisited and coded using Archer’s (2003) structural, cultural and personal conditions and this paper draws on this analysis.

Teachers in this study all provided evidence of enhanced student agency, such as students making braver choices in their assessment performances, asking more questions both in and out of class, and engaging in self and peer evaluation. However, teacher agency was a pre-condition for student agency in that teachers were required to make formal and informal, deliberate and adaptive decisions to adjust their initial plans. They had to respond to student ideas and contextual issues. They balanced multiple accountabilities to students, their discipline, their school and system priorities, as well as their own wellbeing. In designing and adapting their curriculum plans, they had to integrate formative and summative assessment experiences that would support student agency both in the immediate time frame of a school term, as well as a longer term goal of preparing students and teachers for the newly emerging system with its new demands. All of these complex tasks required teachers to be highly agentic. To understand which conditions supported or constrained their agency, we looked across the data for patterns of how the teachers spoke about personal, structural and cultural resources. To avoid the potential of agency being viewed as an individual capacity that only some teachers have, the analytic focus was sociocultural conditions experienced across the group.

Conditions mediating teacher agency

Personal conditions

In making decisions to plan for student agency in their English curriculum, the teachers drew on their personal experiences, their histories of where they had taught previously, their disciplinary beliefs, reflexivity and their relationships with students. They enabled the teachers to weigh up

their options in their planning and teaching, subjectively determining their courses of action in relation to their objective circumstances (Archer, 2003).

Familiarity. Familiarity with the coming system changes enabled teachers to contemplate experimenting with activities to do with student agency. Margaret, for example, said “I think there is a lot of fear surrounding it [the new syllabus], but for me I think it's great because it's actually asking for mastery, it's asking for depth”. Helping students learn to make their own decisions was seen as an in-depth mastery approach, and an appealing aspect of the new syllabus. Agreement with the ideals behind the new syllabus also enabled teachers to connect the goal of student agency with the intent of the new syllabus. Margaret explained, “because I've had those behind the scenes conversations and because I've spent a lot of time obviously in it and creating it and we had to do a lot of sort of background reading and understanding of where it was coming from”. Teachers who had greater access to the ‘behind the scenes’ development thinking had more resources to draw on as they sought to connect their historical practice to the new requirements.

Experience. The teacher’s previous work history was a significant condition. Teachers who had either had experience in teaching overseas, or in another state that had an assessment component of external examination, felt confident that they would be able to prepare students for a new assessment system without resorting to drilling students in exam practice. These teachers with experience in external assessment saw a connection between preparing students to be self-evaluative and external assessment; “it’s definitely more [a focus on] skills rather than you need to know content and hope that you can regurgitate content”. Little continuous work history was a constraining factor. Being “new to a school” often meant “starting over” and getting to re-learn the norms of the school (Mariah). Angela was on a short-term contract and joined the project halfway through. She shared how “if I had been a part of this from the start, and knowing that I was doing this, then I would have taught them how to give the feedback more appropriately and what kind of things to look for” (Angela). Confidence in the context, familiarity with resources and relationships were all important foundations for new work.

Relationships. All the teachers identified trusting relationships with students as a condition for having confidence to try new approaches. Sometimes this relationship had been established through teaching the students in previous years. Mariah noted, “I’m fortunate that I have taught a lot of these kids either in Grade 9 or 10 already, so they are familiar with my

methods and my madness”. For Rhiannon it was a priority, “my number one thing, is to build trust. To build that relationship where they can come to me with anything”. Similarly Angela felt, “I have a good relationship with my class and they know they can say things”. Where the teachers felt that they knew their students and students were co-operating with them, they were able to try new pedagogic approaches. The positive relationship was seen as a mutually beneficial outcome of prioritising students as agents, “I’m invigorated by the idea of having this partnership. Having this kind of - like a - having them as apprentices, rather than me being the ity, the judge, the juror and the everything. I like this relationship. I like the relationship that it’s going to bring about” (Rhiannon). Personal relationships such as her experience as a parent informed Mariah about what support students might need, “It came about because my son had a persuasive speech... He said, ‘I’ve got to use palm cards and I’ve got to try and use some persuasive devices’. I was saying to him, ‘What have you been shown? Has your teacher stopped and said, this is what a palm card looks like?’” Her drive to explicitly model and teach her expectations was fuelled by her son’s experience where the teacher had not provided models.

Expertise. Disciplinary experience and preferences in teaching English also informed the choices that teachers made. Margaret resisted student requests for more teacher exposition, saying “I didn’t want to do the analysis for them, even though they want me to. Because I really don’t like to read my own words in essays that I’m marking.” Mariah also drew from her previous experience in marking student work to identify that her goal for students was to develop more precise writing as, “I struggle with students not doing precise writing, it really - it’s a bugbear of mine”. Each of these teachers chose to emphasise a skill they personally valued, providing activities for peer discussion of examples, and connecting the skills to summative assessment criteria. These preferences could also be seen as personal reflexivity and adaptability, an enabling resource, with the teachers making constant adjustments to their planning. Mariah reflected, “I was getting up quite early in the mornings to - I’d do a lesson and go, that didn’t really work, let’s try this differently”. Rhiannon noted, “I would take the unit that I was given as such and modify that to accommodate my way of teaching and also the kids that I’ve got”.

Adaptability. Adaptability was essential as the teachers did not have enough time to complete all of what they had planned. Rhiannon and Margaret noted that “we went into it feeling free and oh, we’ve got all this time and we can do all these things”, “Then the term turned

out the way it was and then we got this and I thought oh, wait a minute, there's things that we can't change and there's things that we can't do." Time was a significant structural property.

Structural conditions

Structural conditions are the material conditions that can impede or facilitate projects (Archer, 2007). Documents such as new forms of assessment and checklists, as well as shared planning processes and the way that time was structured in schools shaped how teachers responded.

Team plans. Shared planning requirements within an English department were experienced as a mixture of enabling and constraining conditions. Rhiannon felt "we're very lucky. They've got very well-established resources, units and teachers as resources" that she could adapt. However, these structures were also experienced as constraining. Rhiannon explained, saying:

"it's not really our decision to make [innovations] with the sort of hierarchy structure. It's kind of beyond us and we've been told like this is what we're doing across the whole of the faculty. So that was sort of - we were going with the focus we'd sort of been given and running from there".

Mariah and Angela also had established resources to draw on, however Mariah noted that teachers were still making new resources "to provide for time restrictions, to elicit I suppose what we want to draw out of our students", and this was often "on the run" in response to emerging student needs. Mariah also noted that she did not always have the time she needed to share her learning and achievements through the project with others, saying "I know [my head of faculty] has been trying to sit me down to talk about some rollout of some similar stuff in [other faculties]. But, as yet, I have been elusive [laughs]". Agency included making choices about how to use the resource of time and when to collaborate.

School timetables. Time was apportioned through a process of backwards design in unit plans. Experience in backwards design gave teachers confidence in knowing what to prioritise amongst competing needs. Mariah said "I've been teaching this syllabus for quite some time so I would literally line my 10 weeks up into my three lessons and I'd work backwards, really looking at, within our school context, what does this look like in 11 and 12 and trying to map how this unit is going to build on the skill set". Yet even with experience, she said "there are things on

there I didn't get to because I just didn't have the time. Which is disappointing but... you can't possibly hope to do deep learning tasks all through your term". Such prioritising reflects a typical decision-making tension in school education, between using resources to meet student needs and using them to meet system needs, which can be at odds. Anticipation of more time in the new system as the number of summative assessment tasks in Year 12 would reduce from eight tasks to four tasks, was experienced as an enabling factor. Teachers anticipated that it would resolve their dilemma of "forcing learning time into being a shorter space." The teachers felt pressured in the old system to teach to the assessment task and this pressure was passed on to students; an unintended but perverse outcome that Mariah called "a form of disrespect". Participating teachers perceived their involvement in this research project as helping prepare them to take advantage of more opportunity for deep learning with students and this was something they deeply desired. This was articulated most emphatically by Angela, who said: "we cannot wait for those changes... We're going to have the whole term just on the narrative. Which we almost cry with relief about."

New assessment type – an unseen exam. New structural forms of assessment and difficulties that the teachers anticipated students might have were also significant in shaping the decisions teachers made. The new system requirement of an unseen examination meant that the teachers were interested in preparing students to think flexibly, critically and have a wide range of evidence to draw upon in timed writing scenarios. In both the existing and the new senior assessment system in Queensland, students were perceived as usually having difficulty in demonstrating a high (A or B) standard in aspects of Criteria 3 'making and evaluating meaning' in senior English. Teachers planned to help students recognise and write to show they were "discerning" (A grade standard) versus "effective" (B grade standard) and designed their curriculum activities for student agency to address this anticipated form.

Checklist. New practices were highlighted by the researchers through a checklist for accessible assessment design (Graham, Tancredi, Willis & McGraw, 2018). These were experienced as an enabling condition for Coastal High School. Mariah said, "we found it really good to cut back some of the rubbish out of those [summative assessment] task sheets and just make them just so obvious what the task actually is". Angela agreed; "we felt like it was really important to actually focus on the criteria and make it seem like a more friendly looking thing and talk about it in a way that they can understand." In City Girls School, the checklist was not

considered an enabling condition, as the assessment task had already been designed and approved by the Head of Department, and the teachers did not feel like there would be opportunity or any need for further review.

Cultural conditions

Cultural conditions are ideas, discourses, and accepted ways of social organisation that shape action (Archer, 2007), such as classroom pedagogic patterns and opportunities for peer support.

New forms of social organisation. Student collaborative activities were an enabling condition for the teacher and students. Margaret shared how “I had them in mixed ability groups, go around [and view] their ideas [that] were up on the walls, sort of like a gallery wall... I just scanned all of this and sent it to them, so they all had those notes, because they'd done the work”. Peer feedback activities enabled students to read multiple examples from peers and sharpen their own understanding of criteria as they gave feedback. Students in Rhiannon’s and Mariah’s class commented that online peer feedback was helpful “since it’s online it’s always there, it’s always accessible, so you can go to it anytime you want”. Mariah noted after students engaged with peer feedback, she was able to have shorter, frequent and more targeted feedback conversations with students and adjust her teaching to specific teaching points. More collaboration was a new social organisation of the classroom in both schools, as students noted that they usually just sat in rows and looked at the back of other student’s heads.

Student responsiveness. Student contributions supported the teachers in their ongoing work, especially when students were initially resistant. Margaret noted “they were uncomfortable at first... you're not telling me what's in every paragraph”. She felt confident to continue when she saw that students were producing more varied work, “They're responding in all different ways that are quite amazing... You should see what they can produce. They are so capable when we don't spoon feed them.” She went on to share how she was learning from student contributions, “there were some really out there quotations, and I was sort of like, oh, yeah, I'll write that down for next year, that's a really good one. I hadn't thought about that”. Students were also more confident in meeting the teachers’ expectations where there was a shared history of students working with a teacher. For example, Mariah shared,

“There's one girl who knows me very well. She actually drafts her work; I know you're going to say... I'm like, well, ‘See you don't even need me; look at this, you've just said what I'm what I'm going to say anyway’”.

Perceptions about student capability were challenged by conversations that teachers had with students or the university researchers. All of the teachers used phrases such as “‘A’ students” and “kids who are marginal to pass”. Questions from university researchers about whether this discourse might unhelpfully limit expectations of students was received with uncertainty by the teachers as it was a discourse that was accepted in their schools and in wider professional discussion. More powerful prompts towards teacher agency in raising expectations for students were personal experiences with students. During these discussions with the researchers, Mariah reflected, saying:

“a student I totally didn't think would have looked at the group summary put his hand up and he said, ‘Miss, I actually looked at that and thought where am I not doing well according to those highlighters and that's what I spent time doing on the weekend’. I just about fell over because I don't expect him to care, to do those things”.

Mariah went on to challenge the student to set higher goals and celebrated with him when he achieved much improved summative assessment results. Similarly, questions from the university researchers about other potential equity barriers for all students to achieve agency were neither enabling nor constraining resources. Margaret reflected that some more professional learning might be needed,

“I think we needed to be a bit more clear with this aspect here about the barriers... We were thinking things like some of our girls that do suffer from anxiety... [but] we have individual learning plans and things like that set up for those girls, so it wasn't - we didn't feel the need to create a unit plan for someone that was anxious”.

Rhiannon elaborated further, saying “I've got a couple of girls who have got a couple of issues but it's always just sort of in the back of my mind”. Planning for equity in agency was regarded more as a personal, rather than structural or cultural issue. Professional learning about universal design principles, which negate the need for separate unit plans because teachers anticipate and design out common barriers (Graham, Tancredi, Willis & McGraw, 2018), would help develop conditions supportive of both teacher and student agency.

Peer collaboration. Sharing ideas with colleagues was a supportive condition for teacher agency. Rhiannon valued Margaret’s advice to decide between options in response to student performances. Mariah was finding such success with students that she initiated conversations with colleagues, “I’m just going to build on it and use it across the grades... I said to them, even if we disagree, isn't it the conversation why that's more important?”. She initiated: “culture shift[ing] conversation with other staff in my lunch break about not expecting the same response from all students. I don't want a standard response. I think that I am seeing a little bit of change of culture, certainly in my classrooms, because I am like the fan girl at the moment, for creative agency. My kids know what agency means when I talk about it, in all my classes”.

When teachers were able to share their excitement about student learning or seek support from colleagues, they felt supported in extending their own agency.

Discussion

Assessment reforms that begin as an epic story depend on the actors and agents who bring it to life finding a shared meaning. The policy enactment occurs through many micro-decisions as teachers make sense of the desired changes for themselves, with one another and with their students. An ecological view of agency enabled the often hidden structural and cultural conditions that the teachers worked within, to become more visible. Additionally the variety of personal conditions, experiences and priorities the teachers drew on as they adapted and adjusted their practices were evident as diverse resources, rather than incidental or irrelevant in a purely rational approach to policy change. Identifying conditions that mediate the agency of teachers has the potential to support teachers and students in practice and support effective assessment policy implementation. Sophisticated assessment policy reforms acknowledge and accommodate teachers as agents to engage in sense making (Looney, 2014).

Teachers were able to exercise greater agency to proactively prepare for assessment reforms when they could identify continuities with their work histories and discipline expertise, personal conditions also noted in a study by Tao and Gao (2017). The data also highlighted that too much contextual continuity, such as timetabling structures or planning routines that were seen as not able to be questioned, can constrain teacher agency in preparing for the assessment reforms. Archer (2007) notes that accepted routines with their familiar structural conditions can

be mutually reinforcing and not permit possibilities for adaptation. In this study, new structural materials such as unfamiliar assessment types, checklists or relationships with researchers prompted new opportunities for action. When these new structural and cultural conditions were accompanied by substantive discussions with peers in a subject department with shared discipline expertise there were some new practices such as clarifying summative task sheets, or adapting unit plans in response to student ideas. The subject department culture can enable agency if there is an openness to ambiguity and new ideas rather than rigid requirements (Wong, Leung, Chow & Tang, 2010). Agency requires room for manoeuvre.

The personal, cultural and structural conditions were not separated in practice. Where several enabling conditions came together, there was a chain of agentic action that pointed to the possibility for collective agency and for institutional reform. Mariah, her individual students, student peers, and teacher-peers continued to try new actions to improve learning and to transform and influence others beyond the classroom. For Angela, Rhiannon and Margaret, transformative action stayed within the classroom context as the conditions for collaboration beyond the classroom were not well established, and Angela, as a short-term contract teacher, did not have access to the cultural connections with peers to extend her agency beyond her classroom. These findings align with those in Canadian assessment reform research that highlighted that teachers are often at different levels of understanding, or fluency, and need support within a trusting professional learning environment to take the necessary risks to refine practices (DeLuca, et al, 2016). Ongoing discussions to engage in sense making can be personal and cultural conditions that enable teachers to avoid the known perils of teacher overload (Manuel, 2002) or de-skilling (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2011). Teacher agency was always in negotiation and through interactions of all the conditions, the individual agents were changing the day-to-day collective ecologies of practice. Conditions for collective agency were evident in the dialogue with the researchers and peers as part of the research process, but were more fragile beyond those supported contexts.

Collective development of agency depends on interpersonal trust, opportunity for dialogue and the conditions for collaborative development of ideas (Archer, 2003). Teachers are more able to influence institutional practice where shared understandings are supported by structures that enable peer learning and strong socialization pressures (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2016), however more understanding is needed about how groups turn individual agency into meso-level

collaborative agency (Tuominen & Lehtonen, 2018). Discussions with others in this study supported the teachers to balance competing concerns and to identify additional social and material resources (Willis & Klenowski, 2018; Archer, 2007). The inquiry cycle was designed to be able to support schools to engage in this kind of evidence informed discussion beyond the research project, however it remains to be seen whether it is sustainable in the busy-ness of a significant assessment reform change. Perhaps there is an ongoing role as McDonald (2012) proposes for researchers as dialogic storytellers, working alongside reformers who are running furiously downhill. This article includes “rich, evidence-based pictures of the places on the hill that they had just passed” so the policy reformers can check “Is *this* what you mean to do?” (p. 154). Identifying structural or cultural conditions that operate as barriers or enablers can potentially help leaders amplify good practice and generate practical momentum for assessment reform. This study indicates a beginning point can be attending to the supporting conditions for collective teacher agency.

Conclusion

The inquiry cycles undertaken in this research provided teachers with a structure for reflection and action that focused on how the teachers prioritised student agency in their curriculum and assessment designs. This was an imperative in a time of system change where conditions for teacher agency were moving away from localised control to more remote and centralised quality assurances processes. This research indicates that teachers draw on a range of personal, cultural and structural conditions. Importantly knowledge gained from their early engagement in the processes of reform provided confidence in their preparation for new system changes. It must be acknowledged however that a recurring theme in the research was the importance of the teachers to have the structural resource of *time* provided to participate in the action research cycles, including the extended planning meetings. Greater understanding of the interplay between personal, structural and cultural resources can inform ongoing support for teacher and student agency in times of assessment reform. Additionally there is the potential for policy reform to be a context for English teachers and learners to realise their creative and critical agency as they enact innovative ways to intervene in the world.

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