Dealing with performance anxiety: Tensions for Catholic school leaders using data on student achievement within a results-driven culture

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Abstract

Schools now have access to an enormous range of data that can be used to improve student learning outcomes. These data can include classroom-based assessment information as well as results from external testing programs and other sources. Increasingly, though, there is an expectation at system and national policy levels that data on student achievement are collected for public reporting and program accountability. As such, leaders are being faced with increasing pressure to not only improve student learning, but also to be responsible for producing and influencing publically reported evidence of student achievement.

These seemingly contradictory uses of information highlight a significant paradox for the school leader: the more that data on student learning is used for public reporting to demonstrate the quality of the school, the greater is the temptation to move away from the real learning needs of the individual student.

This paper examines the implications of this paradox for the Catholic school leader, and presents a possibility based on ‘seeing the need’ and ‘doing something about it’. Examining the relationship between Moral Purpose and Moral Action, the case is made for understanding Moral Potency as a key element in influencing the leader’s motivation to act using data on student achievement within a culture of performance and accountability.

Keywords: moral agency, moral purpose, moral action, moral potency

Introduction and Context

Increasing demands by Australian governments and communities for results accountability and the transparent reporting of student and school performance have meant that schools, and their leaders, are being faced with increasing pressure to not only improve student learning, but also to be responsible for producing and influencing evidence of student achievement. Recent international literature has identified these pressures as causing leaders to make conscious adaptations to their leadership practices (Fullan, 2009; Rowe, 2000), with the consequences of such actions resulting in moral and ethical tensions and sometimes discord at a person and community level (Frick, 2009, p.50).
As a result of these pressures, school leaders are required to be explicitly positioned at the nexus of leading change, improving learning and reporting performance. At the centre of this, the leaders are expected to understand the value of data on student achievement, and to use such information to diagnose learning and report performance. Research suggests that this has created a tension between being accountable for the measurement and reporting of student performance on the one hand (Rowe, 2000), and the moral obligation to use information on student achievement to effect improvement in student outcomes on the other (Hattie, 2005). With an increasing array of data available on students from external testing and classroom-based assessment, the analysis and reporting of student and school performance has produced new challenges for teachers, school leaders and school systems.

Increasingly, there is an expectation at system and national policy levels that data on student achievement are collected for public reporting and program accountability. As such, leaders are being faced with growing pressure to not only improve individual student learning, but, at the same time, to be responsible for producing and influencing publically reported evidence of student achievement.

Indeed, recent reporting in the press has heightened the impact that public reporting of student results can have on perceptions of school performance. With the launch of the MySchool website in 2010, the fundamental purpose of national testing of literacy and numeracy has undergone changes. High stakes accountability associated with the public reporting of student achievement on National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing has impacted on the ways the testing results are viewed and utilised. This has produced two effects: firstly, school ‘performance’ is now often equated with student ‘achievement’ at a point in time, and secondly, the focus of the NAPLAN tests seems to have shifted from diagnosis of individual achievement to public reporting of cohort performance. These have produced a difference of intent between testing for student improvement and testing for the purpose of monitoring. One implies a
diagnostic tool to further enhance student progress, the other as testing for accountability (Pettit, 2010).

An issue for school principals and System leaders resulting from high stakes accountability is the increased emphasis on the amount of NAPLAN test preparation undertaken by schools. As reported in The Canberra Times “The federal government's My School website produces its fair share of losers when schools are shown to underperform in literacy and numeracy tests” (13 March 2013). Here, publishing houses now print how-to guides, and NAPLAN-specific workbooks have become very popular with parents seeking help in maximising their children's scores.

Further, the public reporting of NAPLAN test results on the My School website, equating these with school performance and comparing with other ‘statistically similar’ schools, have meant that high stakes accountability and comparison has emerged as a key driver to ‘teach to the test’, instead of developing specific literacy and numeracy strategies to use the NAPLAN results to inform classroom teaching. The Sydney Morning Herald reports that more than 150 schools have been caught breaching rules for national literacy and numeracy tests since 2010, prompting a state government push to crack down on cheating in Victoria. Further, over the past three years, 164 schools around the country have sought to undermine the annual NAPLAN test by pressuring parents to withdraw their children, assisting students to complete the exam, or storing papers insecurely ahead of testing day (Sydney Morning Herald, 12 February 2013).

The Canberra Times publishes ‘league’ tables of literacy and numeracy performance across all schools in the ACT, making comparisons between the three main schooling sectors – Government, Independent and Catholic. As reported, these tables “continue to show the dominance of independent schools over government and Catholic schools” based on simple ranking of Mean scores across the five Domains of literacy and numeracy (Canberra Times, 15 March 2013). However, such comparisons also attempt to link student (and hence school)
performance with financial data shown on the *My School* website, where “the wealthiest independent schools continue to spend about one-third more than government schools and, in some cases, double the amount per student of Catholic schools” (*Canberra Times*, 15 March 2013).

An indication of the perceived importance of these issues is also encompassed in the recent Senate Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN, which received submissions from a cross-section of educational and associated areas, and with public hearings held in June 2013. The Inquiry’s Terms of Reference included whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives, a consideration of unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction, NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices, and, the impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website.

The tensions between improving (individual) student outcomes on the one hand - because this is the moral purpose of what we do - and the public reporting of (school) performance on the other – because this is required for accountability purposes - highlight a significant paradox for the school leader: the more that data on student learning is used for public reporting to demonstrate the quality of the school, the greater is the temptation to move away from the real learning needs of the individual student.

This paper examines the implications of this paradox for the Catholic school leader, and presents a possibility for action based on ‘seeing the need’ and ‘doing something about it’. Examining the relationship between Moral Purpose and Moral Action, the case is made for understanding Moral Potency as a key element in influencing the leader’s motivation and perceived ability to act using data on student achievement within a culture of performance and accountability.
‘Never see a need without doing something about it’

The saying by Australia’s first saint - St Mary of the Cross MacKillop - “Never see a need without doing something about it” (1881) - underscores the crucial role of leadership in giving purpose to student achievement data and operationalising the use of such information for learning improvement. If we accept that our role as educators is about improving student outcomes, particularly in the Catholic school context, it follows that the role, purpose and use of achievement data is instrumental in providing information to a wide range of stakeholders in support of such improvement.

‘Seeing the need …’

The modern mission of the Catholic school stems from the 1977 publication by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, The Catholic School, where the education of students “is not given for the purposes of gaining power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of the communion with man, events and things. Knowledge is not considered for material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others” (p.43).

Subsequent Church documents have reinforced the central role of the Catholic school, and its leaders and teachers, to educate the whole person to their potential: to resist the “noticeable tendency to reduce education to its purely technical and practical aspects” (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium 1998); and to work “toward an integral formation of each student” (Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith, 1982).

Grace (2010) makes the compelling argument for Catholic schools to have “mission integrity”, defined by a “fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to the distinctive and authentic principles of a Catholic education” (p.8). He also argues for a distinctive Catholic educational leadership to be “vision-related, mission-related, values-related and concerned with not
losing sight of the larger questions about the purposes of educational activity which can be marginalized in the press of managerial and technical busyness” (Grace, 2010, pp.8-9).

Importantly, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), representing state and territory Catholic Education Commissions in Australia, has published a set of accountability principles that articulate responsibilities of Catholic schools towards their stakeholders. Referring to the use of data on student achievement, the Commission “encourages the responsible and ethical use of educational data to improve student learning”, and “ Where differences arise between the objectives of governments and those established by the Catholic community as essential to the character and mission of Catholic education, the latter must prevail and no penalties, financial or otherwise, should result.” (NCEC, 1999).

This highlights the paradox and tension for Catholic schools and their leaders: the diagnostic use of student achievement information to improve individual learning often has to be weighed against the mandated requirements for reporting such learning in the public arena.

In resolving this tension, Catholic schools have a mandate, and a responsibility, to be high quality organisations that promote excellence, involving continuous quality improvement, examination of best practices, and continual reflection on their mission integrity and student outcomes – not as a marketing tool or mechanism for reporting performance, but because it is, in effect, the right thing to do for the students!

‘ … Doing something about it’

The point is made that, if we accept our role as Catholic educators in improving student learning, it follows that the purpose and use of student achievement data from a variety of sources is understood in the first place, and is then viewed as instrumental in providing information to a wide range of stakeholders. And in this, the central element in exercising such evidence-based leadership involves leaders themselves having an understanding of the value or worth of data on student
learning as a prerequisite for determining if, and how, such information is used. Linking the moral purpose of what we believe about the value of such data with the practical, and often competing, issues in operationalising the response at the school and System levels, form the basis of moral action within an external, and very public, context (Pettit, 2012). Essentially, the implications are that if we believe data on student achievement has value in its own right, and if we collect such information, then we are morally obliged to use this to improve student learning outcomes.

From Moral Purpose to Moral Action: the role of principal leadership

Academic literature views leadership as a multi-layered, complex set of inter-relationships that influence the way leaders (and followers) act. There are strong suggestions that the essential nature of leadership at the school level emphasises the prime role played by the principal in improving the learning outcomes of students and in providing direction and influence (Frick, 2009; Fullan, 2005).

Cotton (2003) presents the results of many empirical research studies on the behaviours of principals in promoting improvement in student achievement. In discussing the nature of the broader areas of school improvement and school reform, she casts the principal as the central, key person in both initiating and sustaining educational change in the school setting. The movement towards increased accountability and emphasis on results over the past fifteen years has also placed a closer focus on the role of principal leadership, the use of data for evidence-based decision-making, and the explicit behaviours that contribute towards student achievement.

Further, Cotton (2003) makes the clear point that one does not find effective schools without effective principals. Along with a vision and attainable goals focused on high levels of student learning, Cotton then cites research that stresses the importance of the school principal having shared leadership and decision-making, encouraging a “norm of continuous improvement” (Cotton, 2003, p. 29) and the use of data to monitor student progress and to guide program improvement, to name a few.
The central theme of these behaviours is that the principal has a large impact on student outcomes; a view also supported by Hallinger and Heck who state “The fact that principal effects are mediated by other in-school variables does nothing whatsoever to diminish the principal’s importance” (Hallinger & Heck, as cited in Cotton, 2003, p. 59).

In recent years, research by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) has identified five dimensions of leadership from their studies of principals in New Zealand, the third of which involves direct involvement by leaders. Their findings suggest that higher performing schools exhibit explicit leadership, coordination and active oversight of teaching and learning, with a greater emphasis on ensuring systematic monitoring of student progress. Recent research has also demonstrated the impact of various aspects of principal leadership in the school, as one who sets directions, exerts influence and plays a large part in affecting student outcomes (Fullan, 2005, 2009; Levin & Fullan, 2008; McWilliam & Perry, 2006).

These studies clearly demonstrate that principals, through what they value, believe and do, have a significant influence on school climate, teacher expectations of students, classroom pedagogy and student achievement (Burford & Pettit, 2011). However, such a causal relationship cannot be assumed.

It is in this context, then, that the interplay between values, beliefs and action forms the basis for the concept of ‘moral agency’ in moving from ‘seeing the need’ to ‘doing something about it’.

**Moral Agency**

In exploring the link between belief and action, writers speak of the “gap between moral purpose and moral performance” (Thompson, 2004, p. 27), “ethical blindness” (Bezzina, 2011, p.3) and “realized moral purpose” (Fullan, 2010, p.15). In congruence with Starratt’s spiralling framework of moral responsibility (in Doscher and Nomore, 2008), leadership is often seen to be more than
observed behaviours and measured outcomes; it begins with the core of the leader as a human person with a particular set of ethics and beliefs (Begley & Zaretsky, 2004).

Bandura (2002) is explicit about this nexus by making the strong statement that “a complete theory of moral agency must link moral knowledge and reasoning to moral conduct (p.101). That is, it is not sufficient for the leader (or anyone) to know what is right; it is a requirement for them to act on their beliefs to effect positive change. This is a very ‘Catholic’ approach, related to the specific vision, mission and values of the Catholic school. Tuana’s (2007) model of ‘moral literacy’ involving ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills and moral imagination, extends this notion and provides an ethical framework to effect moral agency, where we are “ethical agents” (p.375) who are able to “assess what is held to be valuable in a context” (p. 374).

Further, the importance of moral purpose (Fullan, 2005) that is socially just (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000) has become a key element in re-forming school cultures and building capacity for change. Sergiovanni (2005) also makes the link between moral action and leadership as “the struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being” (p. 115). This is reinforced by Frick (2009) who, in referring to the work of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), makes the point that “moral considerations should be grounded in the prima facie principle: serve the best interests of the student. This principle is affirmed as a moral “ideal [that] must lie at the heart of any professional paradigm for educational leaders” (Frick, 2009, p. 53). Stefkovich and Begley (2007) strengthen this approach in their ‘Best Interests of Students’ model where, notwithstanding the lack of consensus over how ‘best interests’ is defined, and to whom they belong, the overwhelming driver of moral action from their research points to the concern by leaders for the well-being of students. Further, Levin and Fullan (2008) support this approach, and specifically appeal to educators’ sense of moral purpose and “… their belief that education is about success for all students” (p. 294).
The concept of moral agency has been defined in numerous contexts (Bezzina, 2011; Burford & Pettit, 2011). Bandura’s (2002) “dual aspects manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely” (p.101) is within the context of ‘selective moral disengagement’; Campbell (2004) sees the idea as “not only defined by what teachers hope to develop in students, but also by how they themselves behave and interact with students” (p.411).

Bezzina and Tuana (2012) apply the term to leadership, with leaders having to “translate these moral and ethical concerns and purposes into action” (p.4). However, the authors also caution:

“Individuals will only choose a particular moral action if they are both convinced of its importance and have a sense that they are capable of acting in this way … Before they will act in a way that aligns consistently with moral purpose (moral agency) they need a sense of their own role as an influential player in this domain (moral potency) reflected in their sense of a capacity to act in ways that make a difference; their ownership of, and commitment to moral purpose; a sense of hope; and the requisite courage to act” (Bezzina & Tuana, 2012, p.6)

Using this approach to the role of leaders in using student achievement data from a variety of sources within a results-driven culture, moral agency involves the interplay between three powerful elements: moral purpose, moral action and context.

**Moral Purpose, Moral Action, and Context**

The connection between the value placed on student achievement data and its subsequent use in the school has been seen to be strengthened by leadership that focuses on the *diagnostic* power of the data feedback to effect changes in teaching practices. Studies by Richardson (2005) and Pettit (2010) emphasise the role of explicit, strategic and targeted leadership by the principal in using evidence of student learning to impact on classroom pedagogy and school planning decisions.
However, before any meaningful analysis of data on student achievement can be
effected, ‘seeing the need’ for such investigation in the first place is a prerequisite for action.
Pettit’s (2010) research into how 55 schools within a Catholic school system in Australia use the
information from external national testing of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) uncovered issues
relating to leadership, perception, engagement and enactment of the information from the tests. The
study found significant disparities in the way different groups within the school perceived the value
and purpose of data from the external tests. This was seen to be an important factor in determining
the attitudes of teachers and principals to the tests; and these, in turn, influenced the level of
engagement with the data. The research findings showed that external testing was regarded more
highly by principals (many of whom were non-teaching) and assistant principals (with reduced
teaching duties). Both of these groups were members of school executive/leadership teams. This is
 contrasted with the results for classroom teachers who did not value the external tests, and the data
from them, as highly as the former.

Using this case, it would seem that the two groups – leadership and teachers – had
vastly different views about the value of data from external testing. Notwithstanding a shared
moral purpose on the role of teachers and leaders to improve student outcomes, and the view that
data on student achievement is an important source of information about learning, each group
displayed a different predisposition to “moral literacy” (Tuana, 2007) and an “ability to assess what
is held to be valuable in a context” (p.374).

Thompson’s (2004) ‘Moral Compass’ model is also instructive here, and can be applied
to the current discussion to shed some light on the ability of leadership to ‘see the need’ to use data
on student achievement (see Figure 1).
FIGURE 1: THE MORAL COMPASS (after Thompson, 2004)

From Figure 1, Thompson’s model makes the distinction between a person’s ‘identity’, in what they believe to be the right thing to do, and their ‘agency’, or observable actions that express and reflect their vision. Here, values and vision embody a set of beliefs about what should be done according to one’s value system (or moral purpose), whereas performance and practice are observable indicators of what is actually done (moral agency).

And here lies the issue for leadership in the analysis of data on student achievement: it is the operationalisation of one’s values and vision that provides agency for action. In relation to Pettit’s (2010) study, the fact that principals and teachers had very different views about the worth of external testing led to a dichotomy in the way these two groups approached the use of testing results within the school. Similar research (Axworthy, 2005; Frick, 2009; Hattie, 2005; Levin, Glaze, & Fullan, 2008) has also demonstrated the importance of the perceived value of student achievement data in informing decisions about student outcomes. These researchers advocate the crucial role of leadership in providing the culture for analysis, use and reporting of such information from multiple sources as an element within the wider context of evidence-based leadership and data-informed improvement.
Moral Potency: Linking Purpose and Action through Context

Bezzina and Tuana (2012) also take up this point by linking moral purpose with moral action through the important influence of **moral potency**. This involves “not just ownership, but courage and a sense of efficacy [and] a disposition to act morally and translate it into moral action” (p.11). This is a very powerful notion that links Thompson’s (2004) ‘identity’ with ‘agency’, or beliefs into action.

In the context of using data on student achievement, moral potency involves the leader not only having a belief in the moral purpose and value of the data itself, but also a firm commitment to actualising these, with the desire and belief in their power and ability to do so; that is, a “sense of their own capacity to make a difference in pursuing this purpose, and ultimately act courageously in its pursuit” (Bezzina & Tuana, 2012, p.13).

Hannah and Avolio (2010) also discuss the idea of moral potency that involves “ownership over the moral aspects of one’s environment, reinforced by efficacy beliefs in the capabilities to act to achieve a moral purpose … and the courage to perform … and persevere through challenges” (p.293). Moral potency in their eyes involves the ability to move from moral purpose to moral action, and is a function of the interplay between ownership, efficacy and courage. This also resonates with Goleman’s et al (2002) emphasis on the emotional intelligence of the leader, particularly in relation to their ‘emotional self-awareness’, being “attuned to their inner signals [and] recognising how their feelings affect them and their job performance” (p. 253), and ‘self-confidence’, where “knowing their abilities with accuracy allows leaders to play to their strengths” (p. 254).

Using this approach, Pettit’s (2010) study also shows that, even though principals viewed data on student achievement as having high value, there was a perceived inability by this group to actually lead the process of analysis, interpretation and planning in the school. The
question arising here is why beliefs were not translated into action. This finding suggests the principals in the study could have lacked the moral potency, or “realized moral purpose” (Fullan, 2010, p.15) to operationalise a process for effective data analysis and use, despite having an unquestioned personal commitment to improve student learning and a high value placed on the worth of data. Pettit’s (2010) study further suggests that knowing the moral purpose of improving student outcomes and then seeing the need to do so are necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisites for moral action, or doing something about it. The belief in the potency of one’s ability to act is a key factor in translating values into action.

This is a salient lesson for leaders and others whose role is to bring about change, and involves consideration of concepts involving enactment of beliefs; those relating to moral action, moral conduct and the best interests of students. If we believe that leaders have a moral responsibility to improve learning outcomes for students, it follows that there is a concomitant need to ensure teachers are actively engaged in the process. This approach is also congruent with Fullan’s (1991) concept of “subjective reality” (p. 33), Geijsel and Meijers (2005) study of the emotional side of change, and Hargreaves’ (2004) study of the inseparability of change and emotion as significant determinants of attitude and behaviour.

As noted previously, observable actions (moral agency) on a particular issue are dependent upon a person’s awareness of the need to act in the first place (moral purpose and moral literacy), in concert with a realisation of their capacity to do so (moral potency). Indeed, such action can be regarded as the outer, observable layer of behaviours that encompass attitudes and values, to the core of self (Begley & Zaretsky, 2004).

From Moral Purpose to Moral Action: understanding Moral Potency

However, beliefs and values do not necessarily translate into action. Within the context of leading t In this framework shown in Figure 2, ‘seeing the need’ involves a consideration of the
leader’s *Moral Purpose* in understanding “how values reflect underlying human motivations and shape the subsequent attitudes, speech and actions” (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, p. 398).

Within the discussion around moving from purpose to action, the “living out of ethical beliefs and commitments” (Starratt, 2004, p. 5) includes the factors that form a person’s values, and then contribute to the significance one places on the acquisition and use of information on student achievement. It is here where values and beliefs about *who we are* and *what we believe* about leadership, student learning and the role of achievement data are seen to form the basic building blocks for determining moral purpose based on the leader’s core beliefs and values and the needs of the student.

The use of student outcome data, data leadership involves actions by the principal or leadership team to *operationalise* the use of student achievement data from a variety of sources within the school.

There is a need, then, for leaders to focus on moving from a moral purpose to moral action when valuing and operationalising the use of data on student achievement. The implications here centre on the practical application of one’s values and beliefs, through a realisation of willingness and capacity to make a change. In a school situation, this is seen within the context of the principal ‘making things happen’.

The foregoing analysis of moving from moral purpose to moral action is illustrated in Figure 2. This views *Moral Potency* being influenced by context operating as a filter between purpose and action.
In this framework shown in Figure 2, ‘seeing the need’ involves a consideration of the leader’s Moral Purpose in understanding “how values reflect underlying human motivations and shape the subsequent attitudes, speech and actions” (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, p. 398).

Within the discussion around moving from purpose to action, the “living out of ethical beliefs and commitments” (Starratt, 2004, p. 5) includes the factors that form a person’s values, and then contribute to the significance one places on the acquisition and use of information on student achievement. It is here where values and beliefs about who we are and what we believe about leadership, student learning and the role of achievement data are seen to form the basic building blocks for determining moral purpose based on the leader’s core beliefs and values and the needs of the student.

However, this is often affected by significant tension with the Public Purpose of using student data within an accountability agenda of reporting performance. Here, mandated requirements for publically reporting student results on external tests, and equating these with school performance, can be seen at odds with teachers’ and leaders’ beliefs about the essential
nature of their work – to promote and stimulate each student’s potential, and to use appropriate data to diagnose learning in support of this. Using such diagnostically-rich, student-focused data for public reporting can create tensions for school leaders, in contradiction with the moral purpose of improving student outcomes inherent in their role as educators.

The apparent dichotomy shown here as a tension between the uses of information for diagnosis of student learning on the one hand, and accountability for school performance and the “assessment-accountability dilemma” (Rowe, 2000, p. 77) on the other, is a paradox for school leaders and classroom teachers. With pressures for accountability forming a significant driving force for the introduction of external testing, and the consequent emphasis on monitoring standards of student achievement and the implications for classroom practice, Rowe (2000) warns that “the existence of an accountability climate that insists on providing published information which involves comparative judgements about the relative ‘worth’ or schools – and, inevitably, about the teachers who work in them – is problematic” (p. 87).

‘Doing something about it’ is about resolving the tensions between moral purpose and public purpose, and then operationalising this into Moral Action undertaken in the ‘Best Interests of Students’ (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). It considers the factors that enable one’s beliefs to be translated into action, and seeks to explain how attitudes and practices determine and influence current behaviour through moral conduct and actions to effect positive change. Factors such as the degree to which staff are encouraged and allowed to be involved in data analysis and interpretation, with associated time and organisational structures permitting this, can influence both the purpose and level of action that gives commitment and enactment to moral purpose.
The Role of Context

Far from saying that the only determinant of leader behaviour is their own beliefs and moral understanding, the particular context in which the leader operates can play a significant role in shaping one’s beliefs into action.

The dotted line in Figure 2 indicates that a direct, causal relationship between moral purpose and action cannot be assumed, with Context acting as a filter between moral purpose and moral action; between a leader’s willingness and perceived ability to act, and the observed behaviours enacted. It can be seen having the potential to either promote action or hinder a response to ‘seeing the need’ and ‘doing something about it’. In this, three types of Context can be identified.

Personal Context involves the leader understanding their self-efficacy or ability to transform the moral purpose of who they are as leader into action. Here, the leader forms a very personal, and private, view about their own ability to initiate change; a “sense of their own role as an influential player … reflected in their sense of capacity to act in ways that make a difference” (Bezzina & Tuana, 2012, p. 6). If a leader does not feel personally confident to act, they are less likely to form an obligation to do so. Further, the degree to which the principal personally understands their influence as leader and sees the relationship between external testing of literacy and numeracy, curriculum documents and classroom pedagogy can influence how they operationalise staff willingness to engage with data on student achievement and to make meaningful adjustments to teaching practices (Pettit, 2010).

Professional Context involves a consideration of the leader’s understanding of their role in the school, and how organisational structures can work to either encourage or impede change. Here, the leader’s perception of their role (as leader, not manager) can influence their subsequent actions to promote change. In leading the use of student achievement data in the school, for instance, the
level of resourcing (especially related to time and school structures) to assist staff engagement with data are important factors in determining the success of any attempts to promote change based on effective analysis of student achievement information. Practical issues such as engaging teachers in the process of data analysis and interpretation, providing the time and other structures to facilitate this, as well as having an explicit understanding of the need to do so, all contribute to the leader’s role in realising moral action in the analysis and use of data on student learning. Here, the degree to which feedback from external testing and classroom-based assessment is actually led and used in the school in a *practical* sense, and the extent to which such information informs whole-school planning and classroom teaching practices, is dependent on the value placed on the data in the first place (Pettit, 2010). This link, as we have seen, cannot be assumed.

**Public Context** relates to the political and community demands for public accountability of performance. This is different from the Public Purpose of using student data, in tension with Moral Purpose in the view of school leaders, and involves the actual accountability demands from the government and parents in the public reporting of school performance (for example on the My School website), associated with the public discourse about ‘high-stakes’ testing and the perceived consequences of ‘poor’ performance. This is a very real phenomenon, and is one that can impact on the leader’s willingness, and ability, to move from moral purpose to moral action.

Within an environment of public reporting and consequent scrutiny of school performance data in Australia, principals and teachers can be sceptical of the testing motives and the possible repercussions of accountability associated with ‘high stakes’ testing (Burford & Pettit, 2011; Pettit, 2010). This is despite the actual diagnostic value of the tests for improving student learning not being questioned. In this sense, then, the public (and political) context in which the tests are situated can be seen to affect school leaders’ responses to the results and their subsequent analysis and interpretation, despite the view that data on student achievement has value (Pettit, 2010). Importantly in this analysis, then, it is the public context in which data on student
achievement is viewed that can have a large influence on the leader’s willingness and ability to move from moral purpose to moral action.

From this, it seems that the interaction of Personal, Professional and Public Context can have the ability to influence the potency of leaders to translate beliefs into action. This resonates with Bandura’s (2002) ‘moral conduct’ and ‘moral actions’ where both “moral knowledge” (p.101) and “social influences” (p.102) play a large part in determining how, and how effectively, personal beliefs are operationalised into community action.

Thus, the central theme of Moral Potency in Figure 2 suggests that, even though the leader may be ‘morally literate’ with a sensitivity that tunes and gives direction to their moral compass, a particular moral action will only be chosen if they are “convinced of its importance and have a sense that they are capable of acting in this way” (Bezzina & Tuana, 2012, p.6). Moreover, Tuana’s ‘moral sensitivity’ is an important component in shaping both attitudes and actions to produce “morally motivated behaviours” (Bezzina, 2011, p.21).

Moral potency, then, becomes an influential element in explaining how moral and ethical concerns become translated into action; where moving from purpose to action produces observable behaviours that are context-bound. Moral potency has emerged from the analysis of factors that influence how teachers and principals view external testing, how the results are analysed and used, how such a process is led at the school level, and the impact of testing on teaching practices. It represents a framework for understanding the approach by leaders to external testing of literacy and numeracy, and the role of beliefs and values that determine attitudes and observable behaviours of principals and teachers more generally. Crucially, an understanding of moral potency, and the interplay between purpose, action and context, can help to explain why leaders may not necessarily translate beliefs into action, despite knowing that it is in the best interests of the students to do so.
Such a framework may also provide an insight to understanding the connection between the value placed on data related to student achievement on the one hand, and the degree to which actual practices of data leadership, effective data analysis and pedagogy are changed as a result of analysis and interpretation of the information (Pettit, 2012).

**From Paradox to Possibility: a System Response**

Based on the notion of Moral Potency and the role of Context in understanding the nature of the data-for-diagnosis versus data-for-accountability paradox, a possibility exists to help the leader move from moral purpose to moral action; from resolving the tension between moral purpose and public purpose; to move from ‘seeing the need’, to ‘doing something about it’.

In acknowledging this paradox, formal research (Pettit, 2010) and anecdotal evidence over several years has indicated leadership at the school level as having a significant impact on the effective use of data on student achievement. In recognising the explicit role that leadership at the school level can play in utilising data on student achievement, the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn has adopted an approach of working with Principals in small, geographical and functional groups.

Titled ‘Using Data and Evidence to Support Principal Leadership’, a series of one-day workshops is being run progressively throughout 2013 for all 56 principals (in groups of between three and five) to examine the skills needed by school leaders for whole-school data leadership to effect change. Current research on data leadership and implementation, the importance of formulating a theory of purpose and action, and current directions in analysis are linked with each Principal’s own data from school-based assessment and external testing and System information to inform strategic leadership decisions pertaining to the individual school context.

The workshop is divided into four sessions -- Principles of Data Literacy; Using Data to Support Decision-making; Leading the Process, Engaging the Staff; and Target-setting and Follow-
through. Importantly, the role of Context (personal, professional and public) is explored, with each participant discussing and sharing issues affected by differences in perceptions of the worth of data on student achievement, factors affecting data leadership, the effectiveness of data analysis, and any impacts on teaching practices in their own school situations. These are investigated through the lens of improving moral potency to move from ‘seeing the need’ to ‘doing something about it’, and forming an action plan to use data on student achievement more confidently and effectively.

To date, evaluations from the participants (n=28) show that these workshops have been extremely valuable for Principals. From formal evaluation instruments, respondents have indicated the one-day workshop either ‘met’ (27%) or ‘exceeded’ (73%) their expectations. Moreover, the opportunity for Principals to identify resources and strategies, and to use these in decision-making, was seen by them to be an essential prerequisite in confidently using data and information to develop specific action plans in support of their leadership in the school. As a result of their participation in the one-day workshop, Principals either ‘agreed’ (45%) or ‘strongly agreed’ (55%) that they will be using data and evidence in different ways in their schools.

**Conclusion**

Performance anxiety in the use and leadership of student achievement data, particularly from external testing, represents a significant force in influencing the effective use of such information to improve student learning outcomes. The seemingly contradictory, and paradoxical, expectations about the purpose and use of such information – from the moral purpose of diagnosing and informing individual student learning to the mandated public purpose of reporting evidence of cohort performance – has produced tensions for school and System leaders. Understanding the personal, professional and public context in resolving these tensions can assist school leaders to operationalise the moral purpose of using data into moral action based on the needs of the students, rather than on public perceptions of a school’s performance.
Getting small groups of principals together represents one possibility for assisting leaders to operationalise the moral purpose of using student achievement (and other) data into moral action. Inherent in this is an understanding of the role of moral potency as one factor influencing the motivation, willingness and perceived capacity of leaders to move from ‘seeing the need’ to ‘doing something about it’. For the Catholic school leader, this is a moral imperative, intimately related to the mission integrity, vision, mission and values of the Catholic school.
References


