

LITERACY & NUMERACY  
**STUDIES**

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(Editors)

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## EDITORIAL

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ALISA BELZER & RALF ST. CLAIR

For several years our work has addressed the impact on practice of national policies related to standardisation and accountability in the US, England, and Scotland (Belzer 2003, 2007; Belzer & St. Clair 2003, 2007; St. Clair & Belzer 2007). Our purpose has not been to evaluate the implementation of these initiatives or their effectiveness in terms of improving learner outcomes, but rather to explore two interrelated assumptions. The first is that significant changes in adult basic education policy have an impact on the field that is both broader and narrower than their initial designs might suggest. The second is that implementation of policy is shaped not just by top down statute and regulation, but by an interactive dynamic among practitioners and learners, program managers and directors, and local and national authorities that control many of the funds supporting adult basic education. Analyses of standardisation and accountability policies from these perspectives have helped shed light on the ways in which they can provide useful structures for advancing the aims of adult basic education, while at the same time limiting the field's responsiveness to learners, narrowing what can be accomplished, and pushing practitioners to change practices simply to appear compliant. Yet they also shape, often implicitly, definitions of literacy and assumptions about teaching and learning, resulting in a far broader reach than the procedural changes they initiate.

When we developed the call for papers for this special issue, we knew we had only scratched the surface by looking at three national systems and that the passage of time changes the understanding of policy. It seemed clear that a range of perspectives drawn from writers who are positioned differently in the field could deepen our understanding of the ways policy and practice shape each other and influence the work of practitioners and the provision of services for learners. The papers we have selected for this issue tell a broader story that amplifies and extends our earlier work.

Tusting investigates how standardisation and accountability embedded in the English *Skills for Life* system can contradict practitioners' images of good teaching, leaving them feeling sometimes inadequate, sometimes resistant, and sometimes responsible for absorbing the brunt of policies they see as putting undue demands on learners. While Tusting studies the impact of policy on practitioners' images of themselves as teachers soon after the policy was put in place, the articles by Smith and Gopalakrishnan discuss accountability implementation in the US

approximately 10 years after it was initiated. Both do so from a systems perspective that looks at how policies play out over time in aspects of the field that were not necessarily the proximal “sites” of the policy at the outset. Specifically, Smith raises questions about how initiating a standardised national accountability system “has affected professional development systems, activities, and opportunities”, wondering whether the need to train teachers to comply with the National Reporting System (NRS), an accountability system put in place in the late 1990s, has affected opportunities to develop professionally in areas related to teaching and learning. She assumes that these two objectives could be in competition for limited professional development time and money. Gopalakrishnan’s paper documents the ways in which the accountability system, though initially implemented in purely procedural ways, has come to have a substantive impact on program management, curriculum and instruction. Although some have questioned the validity of outcomes data from the NRS, he does find that changes within the accountability system yielded strong indications of improvement on the measures used in his state. He looks in particular at how the accountability system influences practice at the program and classroom levels once its newness has worn off. He found many programs stopped scrambling to comply with new demands and started actually making use of the information generated.

Ünlühisarcıklı gives a fresh perspective by introducing us to the Turkish adult basic education system, in which she describes accountability as being “mainly concerned with compliance with laws and regulations, rather than the ‘quality’ of provision as such”. Her paper demonstrates the ways in which broad centralised assessment policy can be interpreted with great variation when it is not aligned with accountability, professional development, or assessment strategies. This leaves much to the instructor’s discretion suggesting the opportunity for significant responsiveness, but also substantial variation in outcomes.

These papers make clear that system level changes in accountability procedures and expectations go well beyond their original intent, scope, or focus, to have an impact on teaching, learning and program management, and more broadly on the nature of service provision, the setting of priorities for whose purposes for learning get met, and the climate for instruction. Although change seems almost inevitable, the nature of that change seems less predictable; it is shaped by variations in interpretation, capacity and understanding, and level and quality of compliance. While Tusting and Ünlühisarcıklı illustrate aptly the combination of likely but unpredictable change wrought by broad centralised policies regarding accountability and standardisation, Smith and Gopalakrishnan push us to think about the conditions that can maximise the potential of positive impact of well intentioned policy (although good

intentions cannot be taken as a given). These four papers continue to strengthen the view that systems need coherence and alignment with regard to professional development, meaningful data management, and consistent messaging about the purposes and uses to which accountability measures will be put to improve practice rather than punish programs and practitioners. Without these, changes are likely to be carried out on the surface, based on a fear of surveillance and negative consequences for failure to comply. As a result the changes may not help learners at all, but cost practitioners dearly in terms of time, energy, and emotional turmoil. Changes can be costly (literally and figuratively) without reaping much actual benefit.

All four papers affirm that only when accountability requirements are viewed as providing information that can inform and improve practice in meaningful ways will they yield meaningfully improved practice. They demonstrate that professional development, leadership, and timely and specific access to data that is directly informative (along with the know-how to use it) are of critical importance. These three elements are interlocking and interdependent, functioning like three legs of a stool. Without any one, the stool will wobble. However, at least as important as the stability provided by the three legs, is the “floor” upon which they rest, pointing to the critical importance of an accountability system that can help a range of stakeholders make useful decisions about service provision and practice. Timely data that is not informative is not meaningful. The effort to document and report on learning gains is busy work if assessment does not measure growth that is relevant not just to funders but to a range of stakeholders, most importantly learners. Finally, information generated by accountability data and supported by professional development should yield knowledge that has the potential both to inform and improve practice in meaningful ways. These conditions will create a strong base upon which to rest the stool. Although we believe it to be a meaningful step, there is a need for more opportunities like the one represented by this issue of *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* for different countries and different systems to learn from each other about what happens, under what circumstances and how, when it comes to accountability, systems of standardisation can have an increasingly positive outcome.

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