



# “Schooling” performance measurement: The politics of governing teacher conduct in Australia

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## Abstract

Performance measurement (PM) in the public sector has progressively broadened to cover the operation of professionals traditionally framed as independent and autonomous. How PM reconstitutes the role and conduct of professionals is critical for understanding contemporary dynamics of policy and governance, and service provider–service user relationships. Building on Lipsky’s classic *Street-level Bureaucracy*, this paper examines the ways in which street-level professionals are reconfigured in their roles as evidenced by the operation of Australia’s schooling PM, NAPLAN. The paper reports findings from a project examining the effects of PM in social policy. Attention is given to the ambiguous and conflicting goals arising from measuring literacy and numeracy performance and the varied ways performance numbers are used by management for teacher governance at the street-level. These considerations have implications for the effectiveness of PM in delivering service improvements, the experience of service users, and the achievement of policy objectives.

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## 1. Introduction

It is now over 30 years since Lipsky’s (1980) influential book, *Street-level Bureaucracy*, inaugurated a new conceptual lens and research agenda (Brodkin, 2012). Lipsky’s achievement was to turn analysis to the operation of policy in the everyday interaction between service delivery agencies and service users. This standpoint was a response and a challenge to public administration scholarship at the time that attributed failed policy implementation to the breakdown of top-down administration. Instead, Lipsky’s argued that to understand the effects of policy one must focus on its enactment by professionals and administrators processing applications and delivering services. He controversially stated that policy *decisions* are made at ground level, where government actors interact with citizens. The street-level perspective has generated a widely used nomenclature and an ongoing research agenda that remains apposite to contemporary policy research (see for example Brodkin, 2012; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

Lipsky made some pertinent observations about the role of performance measurement (PM) within street-level bureaucracies. These observations include organisations having multiple and ambiguous performance goals, the development of surrogate performance measures, and the problems of interpreting performance numbers. In addition,

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Lipsky also recognised that appropriate performance measurement can be an important tool in managing street-level workers. However, the depth, breadth and complexity of performance measurement have grown exponentially since Lipsky's original work. Accompanying these developments have been the advent of New Public Management (NPM) and the exponential growth of electronic information and communication technologies. Given these significantly changed organisational contexts, it is meaningful to reflect on contemporary considerations of PM in street-level bureaucracies and organisations. Indeed, to what extent do the observations of the past still have some validity, and what new insights and challenges do contemporary settings provide?

It could be argued that in some cases PM has displaced formal policy in resolving social problems. As such, it is likely that the roles of street-level workers are being transformed as the political, ethical and power effects of PM take effect. However, the implications of these developments for street-level delivery of publicly funded services have not been thoroughly examined. Yet this is critical for understanding the contemporary dynamics of policy and governance, the relationship between the state, public service providers and service users and the achievement public policy objectives.

In the context of this special edition, the paper engages with the lower reaches of Lewis' (2015) chain of performance measurement via its consideration of how local contextual conditions can shape the actions of street-level professionals. Lewis articulates a 'chain' of performance measurement flowing from broad macro settings, including context and policy and criteria, through rules and understandings, to actions, outputs and consequences. Moreover, rather than take a systemic view of the PM system, this paper examines these dynamics at a localised level, where local context and settings mediate macro ones (Hupe & Buffat, 2014). Lewis (2015) also importantly contrasts a dominant 'rational-scientific' perspective on performance measurement with a 'realistic-political' perspective.

These dynamics are illustrated by analysing Australia's schooling PM. The National Assessment Program – Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an initiative directed at providing parents, teachers, school administrators, state and federal governments with information about student (and school and teacher) performance in literacy and numeracy. Case studies of two schools, from two different socio-economic communities are presented. The purpose of these two different case study schools is to understand the potential multiple ways in which educational PM positions teachers and schools, the varied responses of such professionals and their managers, and the interaction with socio-economic context. Their selection from the extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum is in no way held to be representative of high or low socio-economic schools, their teachers and their managers, nor do they posit a continuum between them. Rather, they seek to illustrate the diversity, and offer potential insights into the role of contextual factors in these dynamics. In doing so they add nuance and complexity to the conceptual understanding of the political dynamics of PM.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We begin with Lipsky's insights on the operation of performance measurement at the street-level. The second section outlines NAPLAN, and the third outlines the project from which empirical data reported in this paper are drawn. The next two sections present key themes about teachers' experience of PM within schools, namely ambiguous and conflicting goals, and the use of performance data in the management of teachers. The paper's concluding discussion draws out the politics and consequences of PM for street-level professionals and the implications for public service organisations and service users.

## 2. Street-level bureaucracy, performance measurement and schooling

In undertaking a street-level perspective of PM, it is informative to return to Lipsky's original work (1980, chap. 4, pp. 162–172). He observed the existence of myriad and ambiguous goals operating at street-level and three areas of conflict: between client-centred versus social engineering goals, client-centred versus organisational goals and contradictory role expectations. Moreover, often the activity of street-level agencies is not readily quantifiable, such as service user wellbeing and service quality. Further, the outcomes to which street-level workers seek to achieve are often affected by a range of factors beyond their control meaning that interpreting measurements of performance is fraught. Specifically, it is highly problematic to attribute any particular activity as the cause of change in measured performance. As a consequence, Lipsky observes that "street-level bureaucrats' performance often eludes effective evaluation" (1980, p. 49).

This difficulty does not, however, mean that measurements of street-level performance are not attempted, nor undertaken, nor even that it should not be done: "street-level bureaucracies do seize on some aspects of performance to measure. They tend to seek reports on what can be measured as a means of exercising control" (1980, p. 51). Thus,

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