EDUCATIONAL THEORY

REFUSING TEACHERS AND THE POLITICS OF INSTRUMENTALISM IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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Abstract. In this article, F. Tony Carusi considers the politics of instrumentalism performed between educational policy and research that figures the teacher as the primary means to raise student achievement. By reducing teachers to a means toward an end, policy and research work together to collapse what teachers are into what teachers *are for*, and in doing so, they enable discourses that privilege the instrumental specifically as ontological. In contrast to this collapse, Carusi highlights here the resistance of the ontological to the instrumental by considering what teachers *are* apart from what they are for. Thinking the ontological apart from the instrumental leads to a dark pedagogy in which the refusals and negations performed by teachers occur where the politics of instrumentalism that renders them as an "in-school factor" do not see.

Key Words. educational policy; educational research; teacher agency; instrumentalism

Interviewers from the current affairs television program "The Project" recently invited the Aotearoa New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern to play a word association game as part of their show.[1] The hosts would say a single word, and Ardern was to reply in kind. When one of the hosts offered "teacher" as the word, the prime minister replied "Critical. Teachers, they have the power to change everything."[2] Putting to one side the ambiguity of the word "critical," the extemporaneous quality of Ardern's reply that teachers have the power to change everything speaks to how far the politics of instrumentalism has succeeded in standardizing the role of teachers as a means to an end. Change is broader than the arrangement of means and ends that comprises instrumentalism. Yet, as a head of state, Ardern's words are backed by a raft of education policies in Aotearoa that position the teacher as the primary instrument in closing achievement gaps, especially as they persist across ethnic and socioeconomic groupings.[3] While the international education policies discussed below position teachers as the primary means to raise student achievement, Ardern's words locate teachers on the side of that Archimedean point from which everything can be lifted. Teachers that have the power to change everything captures in hyperbole what has become a common feature of education policy in Aotearoa and the United States

1. Aotearoa is the indigenous name of New Zealand. I will refer to Aotearoa from this point forward.

2. "Jacinda Ardern Dishes on Donald Trump, Mental Health," *Newshub*, sec. Politics, October 26, 2018, https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2018/10/jacinda-ardern-dishes-on-donald-trump-mental-health.html.

3. F. Tony Carusi and Timu Niwa, "Learning Not to Be Poor: The Impossible Position of Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand Education Policy Discourse," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 48, no. 1 (2020): 30–44.

wherein teachers are identified as the most important factor in raising student achievement.

Other interpretations could emphasize a more generally held optimism about the ability of teachers to change everything. Popular representations and personal anecdotes of the teacher that changed a student's life or the teacher who made great personal sacrifice for their students' success further contribute to the image of Ardern's all-powerful teacher. Yet, an international context in which teachers are publicly protesting overwork in Aotearoa, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, to name only some, suggests an alternative interpretation, wherein teachers are positioned impossibly as *the* instrument for changing structural issues like poverty through the proxy of raising student test scores.[4] And while philosophers of education have begun to address the figure of the overworked and beleaguered teacher variously through notions of teacher demoralization, depression, and despair,[5] the idea of teachers as the primary means to drive society-wide change continues as a founding gesture of education reform in research and policy. What Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe have termed the "educationalization of social problems"[6] — a construal of education as the primary solution to a variety of social problems — has landed squarely on teachers' shoulders.

Building the instrumental link of teachers as a means to raise student achievement in education research and policy discourses has produced critical responses from academics and teachers. Gert Biesta critiques this link on the grounds that it reduces teachers and teaching to a "factor" for individual students' learning[7] at the expense of the incommensurability of the subjectivities involved in the teacher/student relationship.[8] Such a reduction already presents problems for Ardern's "everything" that teachers can change. Namely, either teaching can only

4. Ibid.

5. On demoralization, see Doris A. Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018). On depression, see Carl Anders Säfström, "A Pedagogy of the Depressed," in *A Pedagogy of Equality in a Time of Unrest: Strategies for an Ambiguous Future* (London: Routledge, 2020), 97–112. On despair, see F. Tony Carusi, "Why Bother Teaching? Despairing the Ethical through Teaching That Does Not Follow," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36, no. 6 (2017): 633–645.

6. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, *Educational Research: The Educationalization of Social Problems* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2008).

7. Gert Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Won't Work: Evidence-Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007): 1–22; and Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2010).

8. Gert Biesta, "On the Weakness of Education," *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010): 354–362; and Gert Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

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change learning, thus not everything, or learning is inflated to mean everything. Another response to this reduction of teaching to student achievement comes from U.S. teachers who have stopped recommending the profession of teaching to students who express an interest in becoming a teacher and point to the overemphasis of student achievement in current U.S. policy discourses as their primary reason for doing so.[9] And as education policies across the globe increasingly tie test scores to teacher appraisals, teachers are growing less satisfied being teachers.[10] While there is need for further discussion about what teaching and the teacher are outside of student achievement, this paper deals with the other side of this reduction: what enables the teacher standing in front of the classroom to be the most important factor in student achievement? Who is this teacher who has the power to change everything, when everything is reduced to student achievement? These questions highlight the work education policy does to position teachers as a means to an end. This article considers the work that policy does to convert education research about teachers' work into instrumental demands that reduce teachers to the primary means to raise student achievement. This reduction of teachers performed by policy collapses *what teachers are* into *what teachers are for* and, in doing so, enables discourses that privilege the instrumental specifically as ontological. To conclude, the final section considers the role of refusal and negation as an ontological response to what teachers are that consternates the instrumentalization of teachers by educational policy and research discourses.

Undoing the Obviousness of Policy Instrumentality

Education policy is a complex rhetorical activity comprised of both instrumental and noninstrumental arrangements of practices, spaces, and times wherein reality is assumed to "be" in ways conducive to its instrumental arrangement.[11] When focusing exclusively on policy's instrumentality, education policy renders its subjects and objects into means–ends relationships. In philosophy of education, the instrumental reductions performed by policy have been critiqued as antithetical to the *public* of public schooling,[12] incapable of accounting for preexisting biases,[13] and unduly confining the focus of teaching and education

9. Stephen J. Owens, "Georgia's Teacher Dropout Crisis: A Look at Why Nearly Half of Georgia Public School Teachers Are Leaving the Profession," *Georgia Department of Education*, December 2015, https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/Teacher/Survey/Results.pdf.

10. William C. Smith and Jessica Holloway, "School Testing Culture and Teacher Satisfaction," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability* 32 (2020): 461–479, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09342-8.

11. F. Tony Carusi, "The Ontological Rhetorics of Education Policy: A Non-Instrumental Theory," *Journal of Education Policy* 36, no. 2 (2021): 232–252.

12. Chris Higgins, "The Possibility of Public Education in an Instrumentalist Age," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 451–466.

13. Eric Bredo, "Is Educational Policy Making Rational — And What Would That Mean, Anyway?," *Educational Theory* 59, no. 5 (2009): 533–547.

research to measures of effectiveness.[14] Yet the ways that the instrumentality of policy proceeds as a legitimate mode of education reform remains largely unconsidered. While there may be something inherently, though not exclusively, instrumental about policy, assumptions and decisions about what counts as means and ends as well as the connection an instrumental relation establishes between them is a matter of politics. Rather than proceed from the obviousness of policy instrumentality to then suggest an improved alignment of means and ends, this article focuses instead on the politics of instrumentality performed by policy, that is, how policy makes its objects and subjects into instruments.

In the United States and Aotearoa, education policy discourses have increasingly relied upon education research connecting teacher effectiveness to student achievement. Irrespective of the myriad epistemological, material, metric, ontological, and social relations that construct student achievement both in and out of school, these policy discourses tell readers what matters most for student achievement is the teacher in the classroom. As U.S. President Barack Obama writes in the opening of *Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, "we know that from the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents — it is *the teacher standing at the front of the classroom*."[15] By indirectly limiting "success" to "the moment students enter a school," such statements promote a strong instrumental link between teachers and student achievement, whereby the teacher's role is *the* means to raise student achievement, apart from a student's race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status and quite apart from anything a teacher may do that falls outside of their role as means.

The *Blueprint* further instrumentalizes teachers through the category of "highly effective teacher," a category of teacher that replaces the highly qualified teacher introduced by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Different from the qualified teacher, the category of effective teacher couples the quality of a teacher with their effectiveness at raising student achievement. Pointing out its specifically instrumental value, Biesta highlights the "meaninglessness" of effective teaching if we do not ask "effective for what?"[16] In the case of *Blueprint* as well as the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative, an increase in students' standardized test scores, a change labeled as "growth" in both texts, defines what a teacher is effective for. The category of highly effective teachers is carried forward in the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and though the definition of the category is determined at the state level, most states continue to use

14. Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Won't Work"; and Carusi, "Why Bother Teaching?"

15. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 1 (emphasis added).

16. Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Won't Work," 7.

the definitions of growth established through *Blueprint* and *Race to the Top*.[17] Taken together, these U.S. education policies and supporting documents illustrate how policies continue to shape teachers instrumentally in relation to student achievement.

In Aotearoa, a similar status is given to teachers in the Ministry of Education's initiative *Investing in Educational Success* (IES), an initiative that organizes teachers across schools into Communities of Learning. The teacher, according to IES, is "one of the most important influences on what students learn."[18] IES further elevates teaching as the most important factor when citing a McKinsey report to say, "'there is no more important empirical determinant of student outcomes than good teaching.'"[19] Aotearoa's Ministry of Education positions the teacher similarly in *Ka Hikitia* (KH), an education policy designed "to ensure Māori students are enjoying and achieving education success as Māori."[20] KH echoes IES, stating that "quality teaching is the most important influence that the education system can have on student achievement."[21] Across these Aotearoa education policy discourses, the countless relations that inform those nebulous terms of success, learning, and achievement are on one side of the lever and on the other side stands the teacher in front of the classroom.

If policy is accepted as inherently instrumentalizing, then, perhaps unsurprisingly, policy discourses consistently make teachers and teaching into instrumental means. Recalling current policy discourses cited above, teachers are the means to raise student achievement, regardless of ethnicity, race, class, or any other demographic category. This is unsurprising when we take for granted that arranging means and ends is a central, even obvious, feature of what policy does. From this perspective, of course policymakers identify ends to be achieved in a particular policy area and provide means to achieve those ends through new and revised policies. This instrumentalization is further strengthened by singling out teachers as the primary means to raise student achievement. By arranging teachers as means, policy identifies those who are to blame when its ends are not met and avoids more complex explanations and reforms such as inequitable resourcing of schools and sociostructural phenomena that permeate but extend beyond school boundaries.

17. Kevin Close, Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, and Clarin Collins, "State-Level Assessments and Teacher Evaluation Systems after the Passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*: Some Steps in the Right Direction" (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2018).

18. Investing in Educational Success Working Group, *Investing in Educational Success — Working Group Report* (Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education, June 3, 2014), 31.

19. Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed, "Shaping the Future: How Good Education Systems Can Become Great in the Decade Ahead" (New York: McKinsey, 2009), cited in *Investing in Educational Success — Working Group Report*, 34.

20. Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa. Ministry of Education, *Ka Hikitia — Accelerating Success 2013–2017* (Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education, 2013), 5.

21. Ibid., 16.

But why "perhaps" unsurprisingly? I write perhaps because there is a gap where things could be otherwise, an indeterminacy elided between the instrumentality of policy and, in the policy discourses described here, the position of teachers. Yet, the unsurprising instrumentality of policy that understands teachers in terms of student achievement relies upon the elision of what teachers *are* (WTA) with what teachers *are for* (WTAF). More technically, by erasing the distinction between being and being for, policy is a site where the ontological merges with the instrumental to conceive of being and becoming as means to a given end.[22]

The Instrumental and the Ontological of Policy

Pointing out the work that policy does to fuse WTA with WTAF is not to say that teachers are not or should not be for anything whatsoever, though recent work on postintentionality,[23] the school as "obstinate,"[24] the teacher as *non sequitur*,[25] and the teacher as a "sporadic identity"[26] has begun to complicate the instrumentalization of teachers more generally. Instead, the concern of this article is to highlight the central role that education policy currently plays in determining WTA specifically in terms of WTAF, a role that relies upon the conflation of the ontological and the instrumental. This is not to offer an ontological notion of the teacher as somehow outside of or immune to politics, as will become clear in the consideration of ontological politics below. Of interest here is the politics of instrumentalism engaged in by education policy, a politics through which education policy can paper over the gap between being and being-for in its instrumentalization of teachers. The consequence of closing the gap between being and being-for performed by policy, and the exigence taken up by this article, appears when this closure is contravened and put at risk of exposure by teachers who are not effective in raising student achievement. Policy arranges consequences for teachers failing to perform their instrumental role, enabling the appearance that teachers

22. I use ontological here in Ernesto Laclau's sense of the term, which theorizes the ontological as an always receding horizon that social movements, broadly conceived, attempt (and fail) to meet repeatedly. In this sense, understanding "teacher" as ontological requires consideration of efforts to describe *what* teachers are, such as those performed by education policy discussed here, and extends beyond existential quiddity, i.e., *that* teachers are. See Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity," in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 20–35; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); and Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014). For a sense of the implications of Laclau's use of the ontological for education, see F. Tony Carusi and Tomasz Szkudlarek, "Education Is Society … and There Is No Society: The Ontological Turn of Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 907–921.

23. Tyson Lewis, "The Pedagogical Power of Things: Toward a Post-Intentional Phenomenology of Unlearning," *Cultural Critique* 98 (2018): 122–144.

24. Gert Biesta, "What Kind of Society Does the School Need? Redefining the Democratic Work of Education in Impatient Times," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38, no. 6 (2019): 657–668.

25. Carusi, "Why Bother Teaching?"

26. Gert Biesta, "Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From 'Learning From' to 'Being Taught By,'" *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 5 (2013): 449–461.

are responsible, and to be blamed, for not meeting policy ends. When the teachers do not meet policy's instrumental end, their ontological end can be triggered, e.g., teachers can be sequestered from teaching for "professional learning" where they are no longer teachers but learners, or more extremely, they can be removed from the profession altogether. Yet, when peeling the paper back and focusing on the gap that educational policy denies, the teacher becomes a figure that interrupts policy prescriptions not because of deficiencies to be fixed through professional learning, but precisely in performing their role as a teacher, something I will characterize below in terms of negation and refusal.

What are teachers and what are teachers for? Asking these questions together but separately serves two purposes. First, these questions underscore a difference between ontological and instrumental notions of the teacher. An ontological notion of the teacher focuses on what a teacher is and the conditions and contexts that make it possible for one to become a teacher. For instance, Biesta conceives of the teacher as a "sporadic identity," which is not something that a teacher can claim or possess but is an identity that emerges when someone acknowledges they have been taught by someone else.[27] This suggests an ontological notion of the teacher as a moment or event that, while not insubstantial, is fleeting in its appearance. The instrumental question of what the teacher is for follows within the event of their appearance and shifts according to the particular event in which the teacher appears. Rather than collapsing ontological and instrumental notions of the teacher, the sporadicity of the teacher resists instrumentalization in advance of its arrival yet persists as an ontological feature across the advent of the teacher. This is not to say the advent of the teacher cannot be construed instrumentally prior to or after their arrival (consider Maria Mendel's concept of "retroactive instrumentality").[28] However, separating WTA from WTAF positions us to conceive the sporadic identity of a teacher as something prior to, thus different from, its instrumental (or other) interpretation.

Second, asking these two questions together provokes analysis of how the ontological and instrumental are combined. The next section examines how the instrumentalization of WTA occurs when evidence drawn from a wide array of educational research is instrumentalized by best evidence syntheses into a uniform set of findings that policy takes up as evidence to support the generic instrumentalization of teachers. The contentious work of defining WTA, something that can be emphasized when separating the questions above, is circumvented by policies that collapse the ontological (WTA) into the instrumental (WTAF). Conflating these questions allows the instrumental to replace the ontological such that to be is to be for, to become is to become for, and being and becoming are in this case immediately directed as a means toward some known, even if changing, end. This produces a politics of instrumentalism through its ability to ignore the ontological roles of

27. Ibid., 457.

28. Maria Mendel, "On Retroactive Instrumentality," in this issue.

uncertainty, ignorance, impossibility, and a lack of knowing in advance, which are arguably primary features of WTA.[29] When merging WTA with WTAF, policy is able to instrumentalize teachers as a matter of their being, foreclosing other, less ontologically certain arguments about WTA. For the policies discussed here, teachers *are* an instrument, and the success of this instrumentalization marginalizes, even makes nonsense of, questions regarding what the teacher is apart from what they are for. While much more can be said about what and whether a teacher is, sporadically or otherwise, this paper focuses on the politics involved in the collapse of the ontological into the instrumental, a politics of instrumentality by which education policy defines, develops, hires, and fires teachers based on their ability to raise student test scores.

The "Best Evidence" of Policy Instrumentality

The most basic admonition of statistics warns us that correlation is not causation, though statistics gives us no such aphorisms regarding instrumentality. What bridges the statistical evidence of teachers raising student achievement with the instrumental teachers defined by policy who raise student achievement in all schools across a given nation? Answering this question requires us to look at the empirical research that is taken up as evidence of teacher quality raising student achievement. However, rather than a review of the evidence or a meta-analysis, this turn to empirical research fixes on the international conversion of statistical evidence into grounds for instrumentalizing teachers. Policy discourse in the United States obscures the details of this conversion by not providing the research that informs federal education policy, an interesting omission given the requirement of "scientifically-based research" (in NCLB) and "evidence-based research" (in ESSA) to substantiate school improvement. However, Aotearoa's Ministry of Education provides research citations to support its emphasis on teachers as the means to raise student achievement. The ministry's citing of evidence allows us to consider how a policy discourse engages in the politics of instrumentalism by converting diverse research findings into the streamlined means and ends of policy. While the following analysis focuses on Aotearoa education policy, the broader international trend of education policy that, like the United States, positions the "teacher as the most important factor in the classroom" should not fall out of view, especially when education policy provides the means to end teachers' careers, as in the case of the United States with its near twenty-year continuous span of federal education policy starting with NCLB, then RTTT, and currently ESSA.

29. While this list is not exhaustive by any means, see for instance Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2013); F. Tony Carusi and Tomasz Szkudlarek, "Education Is Society … and There Is No Society: The Ontological Turn of Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 907–921; Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–325; Tyson E. Lewis, "The Fundamental Ontology of Study," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 2 (2014): 163–178; and Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

The IES Working Group Report (hereafter, IES Report) cites a mix of five articles and reports as evidence to support the instrumental position of teachers as the means to raising student achievement: two best-evidence syntheses,[30] one peer-reviewed academic article,[31] one research-in-progress report,[32] and one management consultancy report.[33] Putting to one side questions about the politics of evidence at play in citing these particular sources,[34] as well as the categorical misuse of effect size in best-evidence syntheses,[35] the IES Report is able to rely on findings from this body of evidence to render teachers as the most important factor in student achievement. Due to limitations of space, this section will focus on the two best-evidence syntheses used in the IES Report, as these studies "focus on the 'best evidence' in a field,"[36] which allows for the greatest amount of evidence to enter into instrumental policy directives.

Adrienne Alton-Lee's best evidence synthesis (BES) is cited in the IES Report to say that "[q]uality teaching is identified [by the BES] as a key lever for high quality outcomes for diverse students; up to 59 percent of the variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes, while up to 21 percent is attributable to school-level variables."[37] In addition, the IES Report cites another BES[38] to connect "'expertise external to the [professional development] group', of the right sort, as a quality evident in professional communities [of teachers] that showed a positive impact on student outcomes."[39] Taken together, these

30. Adrienne Alton-Lee, *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)* (Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education, 2003), https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Pedagogy-and-assessment/Building-effective-learning-environments/Using-Best-Evidence-Syntheses-for-diverse-learners; and Helen Timperley, Aaron Wilson, Heather Barrar, and Irene Fung, *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration* (Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education, 2007), https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/16901/TPLandDBESentireWeb.pdf.

31. Linda Darling-Hammond, "Teachers and Teaching: Testing Policy Hypotheses from a National Commission Report," *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 1 (1998): 5–15.

32. William Sanders and June Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Academic Achievement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996).

33. Barber and Mourshed, "Shaping the Future."

34. For more on the politics of evidence involved in the development of IES, see F. Tony Carusi, Peter Rawlins, and Karen Ashton, "The Ontological Politics of Evidence and Policy Enablement," *Journal of Education Policy* 33, no. 3 (2018): 343–360.

35. See Adrian Simpson, "Princesses Are Bigger than Elephants: Effect Size as a Category Error in Evidence-Based Education," *British Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 5 (2018): 897–913.

36. Robert E. Slavin, "Best-Evidence Synthesis: An Alternative to Meta-Analytic and Traditional Reviews," *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 9 (1986): 5.

37. Investing in Educational Success Working Group, *Investing in Educational Success — Working Group Report*, 31.

38. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung, *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*.

39. Investing in Educational Success Working Group, *Investing in Educational Success — Working Group Report*, 33.

best-evidence syntheses provide the IES Report with the evidence base to support education reform that converts diverse findings from a broad swath of education research into the simple instrumental relation of teachers as the most important means to raise student achievement.

However, both the best-evidence syntheses it cites engage in the instrumentalization of teachers prior to the IES Report by delimiting what will count as evidence only to those studies that confirm the link between teachers' work and student outcomes. In other words, the search for "what works to improve education outcomes" ends before it begins: what works is teachers' work and both best-evidence syntheses establish this in their criteria for evidence. For instance, the primary selection criterion for the Alton-Lee BES stipulates "the research included in this synthesis has been selected because it provides evidence of links between teaching, learning processes, and student outcomes."[40] Based on this criterion, any research that fails to show links between teaching and student outcomes would not be included as evidence in the BES. Similarly, Timperley et al.'s BES states, "[t]he primary purpose of this synthesis is to unpack the 'black box' between the professional learning opportunities and teacher outcomes that impact positively on student outcomes."[41] Timperley et al. describe the purpose of the BES as "draw[ing] together bodies of research evidence to explain what works and why to improve education outcomes and to make a bigger difference for the education of all our children and young people."[42] Alton-Lee offers a similar overview of her BES, writing that it "draws together in a systematic way the available evidence about what works to improve education outcomes, and what can make a bigger difference for the education of all our children and young people."[43] Unlike the Alton-Lee BES, the Timperley et al. BES mentions that it retained studies that "had no or low impact on student outcomes,"[44] but these studies were excluded from the core studies in the synthesis and had no effect on the primary purpose of showing that professional development impacts positively on student outcomes. Both best-evidence syntheses are concerned with what works, and each takes as its starting point that there is a significant relation between teachers and student achievement without considering (at least) the null hypothesis that teachers or professional development have no significance for student achievement.

The "what works" approach to education research and policy has been critiqued for papering over the moral and political complexity of education with a veneer of instrumental effectivity and efficiency,[45] and the two BESs that the IES

40. Alton-Lee, *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling*, 1.

41. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung, *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*, 22.

42. Ibid., ii.

43. Alton-Lee, *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling*, ii.

44. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung, *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*, 22.

45. See Biesta, "Why 'What Works' Won't Work"; and Elizabeth Atkinson, "In Defence of Ideas, or Why 'What Works' Is Not Enough," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21, no. 3 (2000): 317–330.

Report draws on bear these concerns out. Moreover, the superlative label of "best evidence" motivates a kind of discursive selection bias: this label relegates any unselected evidence to an inferior status. Yet a focus on this simple discursive move neglects the instrumental relations built within and by the selected evidence. Acknowledging that labeling evidence as "best" may contribute to the use of a BES in policymaking, by focusing on the uptake of BES by education policy, this section highlights the politics of instrumentalism between research and policy, a politics that shapes teachers and their work in more detail than a general critique of the "best evidence" moniker of policy makes available. Specifically, the IES Report makes use of the above two best-evidence syntheses to justify the reduction of teachers to their role in student achievement as measured by standardized test scores. Yet, these documents do not represent a monolithic instrumentalization; instead, they represent the politics of instrumentalism at play between evidence and instrumentality.

Best-evidence syntheses are research endeavors that compile empirical research from diverse academic sources. The IES Report is a policy endeavor that, in an evidence-based policy climate, draws on these BESs as sources of the "best evidence." The conversion of evidence into instrumentality occurs initially when each BES synthesizes selected empirical research into a set of findings, which then provide evidence for the IES Report that currently shapes education reform across Aotearoa specifically in terms of the teacher's superlative status in raising student achievement. These BESs represent a first-order conversion of diverse empirical findings into "best evidence," which subsequently supports a second-order conversion of the findings from the "best evidence" into policy instrumentality, in this case, that teachers are the most important factor in student achievement.

This two-step performed between the BESs and the IES Report provides an example of the politics of instrumentalism at work in instrumentalizing the teacher. As mentioned previously, attaching the teacher to student achievement as a means to an end is one of many ways policy could reform education, but through the importation of evidence by way of best-evidence syntheses, policymakers are able to make evidence-based policy premised on the teacher being the most important factor in raising student achievement. There are multiple agents and places that can play a role in determining WTA and WTAF, including teachers themselves. Yet, in current international policy discourses where education policy identifies teachers as those responsible for student achievement, a politics of instrumentalism collapses WTA with WTAF to such a degree that if teachers do not perform according to WTAF, they can be taken out of the classroom and even forced the leave the profession, thereby foreclosing the uncertainty of what teachers who do not lend themselves to an instrumental role are. This foreclosure eliminates the contestability of WTA in favor of teacher effectivity based on variations in student test scores.

Refusing Instrumentalism

Having shown the work that policy does to make teachers into instruments, how can an ontological focus help us ask WTA when decoupled from WTAF? As

discussed above, acknowledging the gap between the ontological and the instrumental interrupts the attachment of teachers to some preestablished end, an attachment that is assumed by and informs international education policy. Maintaining and attending to the distance between the instrumental and ontological offers those who ask what it is to be a teacher a broader theoretical perspective in which being a teacher can take shape apart from a policy-driven politics of instrumentalism that positions teachers as the means to change test scores or, recalling Ardern's all-encompassing words, to change everything.

I will suggest some ways this distance between the ontological and instrumental proposes a politics different from the politics of instrumentalism engaged in by policy. The politics of instrumentalism discussed above answers the question of what teachers are in instrumental terms, closing the distance between being and being for. To conclude, I will take up a politics from the ontological side in order to maintain rather than collapse that distance — an ontological politics that refuses the immediate instrumentalization of being a teacher and appears in those moments when teachers, through their protests and other forms of dissent, obstruct the smooth operation of education policy. A first step toward arriving at this sort of refusal will be to describe an ontological framework in which reality is contested rather than given, wherein teachers can be other than an instrument.

Ontological approaches that maintain the contested nature of reality highlight the politics and rhetorics involved in the assumptions and performances that constitute being and becoming.[46] More than a simple materiality that grounds all being, becoming, and the subjects and objects that populate reality, contestational ontologies consider the multiple grounding exercises performed across different discourses to create objects and subjects that appear and disappear accordingly. The example for this paper is the appearance of the instrumental teacher in educational policy and research to the exclusion of the teacher in other guises. I turn here to the notion of ontological politics, a notion that generally conceives of realities as multiple, contested, and conflictual and as informed by a politics in their coming to be.[47] Annemarie Mol gives the example of the multiple realities that go into making anemia what it is.[48] Statisticians and pathophysiologists, for example, identify anemia as a condition that occurs outside of normal hemoglobin levels. Yet, for statisticians these normal levels are taken

46. For reasons of space, I do not enter into a comparison of the multiple ontological frameworks that heterogeneously assign contestation, contradiction, and multiple differences to the generative powers of being and becoming. For the admittedly instrumental purposes of the present argument, I discuss ontological politics as a framework that exemplifies well the political work that generates reality and therefore provides a way to figure the teacher apart from the instrument.

47. On ontological politics, see Annemarie Mol, "Ontological Politics: A Work and Some Questions," in *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 74–89; and John Law, *Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

48. Mol, "Ontological Politics."

from population samples whereas pathophysiologists identify normal levels in individuals. Because being outside of these normal levels determines the presence of anemia in an individual or group, defining these normal levels differently makes anemia multiple, thus creating conditions for a person or group to have anemia according to a statistical norm but not according to an individual diagnosis, and vice versa. The reality of whether one has anemia becomes multiple at this point because in one reality they may have anemia and in another they may not. Questions then arise about how to treat a person, or, more appropriately, from which reality, statistical or pathophysiological, does a person receive treatment? Which definition of anemia is enacted in which context under what circumstances becomes a matter of politics to the degree that the decision, first, to diagnose a person as with or without anemia and, then, whether or not and how to treat them depends upon the different relations of power at play at that given moment.

In less sanguine terms, the notion of ontological politics provides some explanation of how policy makes the teacher into an instrument. When referring to an ontological understanding of teachers, I am highlighting the competing discourses that take part in defining what a teacher is and what indicates that teaching has taken place. In education policy studies, the notion of ontological politics has recently been used to discuss the subjects and objects of policy and their realities in excess of their instrumental determination by policy.[49] Using the best-evidence syntheses described above, policy makes the ontological claim that teachers are the most important factor in raising student achievement in a reality where the "best evidence" has been synthesized from diverse results of empirical research. However, the ontological claim of policy on what teachers are (and are for) is but one among multiple realities. Ontological politics as a concept is not about determining which reality is true and which false. Instead, it shows that the ontological is *political* and that decisions about what teachers are occur apart from what teachers are for. When these questions are merged — that is, when what teachers are becomes what teachers are for — policy becomes a strong tool for determining what a teacher is. However, when tending to the difference between these questions, the question of what teachers are interrupts the politics of instrumentalism at play in policy by dropping the "for." An ontological politics expands the realities in which WTA takes shape and opens analysis to a broader field where WTA extends beyond their reduction to an in-school factor. By broadening the analysis of WTA beyond the school, an ontological politics of WTA considers those areas of contestation where teachers resist their instrumentalization by policy and is able to locate teachers in their refusal of policy instrumentalization.

49. See Carusi, Rawlins, and Ashton, "The Ontological Politics of Evidence and Policy Enablement"; Carusi, "The Ontological Rhetorics of Education Policy"; Parlo Singh, Stephen Heimans, and Kathryn Glasswell, "Policy Enactment, Context and Performativity: Ontological Politics and Researching Australian National Partnership Policies," *Journal of Education Policy* 29, no. 6 (2014): 826–844; and P. Taylor Webb and Kalervo N. Gulson, "Policy Scientificity 3.0: Theory and Policy Analysis in-and-for This World and Other-Worlds," *Critical Studies in Education* 56, no. 1 (2015): 161–174.

Stephen Ball describes a politics of refusal as "a struggle over and against what it is we have become, what it is that we do not want to be."[50] The language of being and becoming is helpful to an ontological refusal of the instrumentalization of teachers, i.e., by refusing to be what teachers qua policy have become, particularly through the negative work involved in refusal. Being against what we've become. Not wanting to be what we are. The act of refusal is an act of negation, an act of saying no without necessarily having some positive follow up to put in the place of what is being refused.[51] Different from the hope that so often forms the ground and horizon of how teachers are thought, a politics of refusal undoes the end, in view or otherwise, that policy attaches teachers to. But rather than describing this refusal as means without ends,[52] I am suggesting a way to think teachers apart from instrumentality, neither as means nor ends. The self-negation performed by teachers absents the ontological from the instrumental. We are not instruments, we are not means, we are not a part of this reality. These are refusing teachers who will have multiple, heterogeneous, and conflicting positive expressions of what they are as teachers, but who, as teachers, refuse publicly through protest, and personally by dissuading others from becoming teachers and through their growing dissatisfaction in an environment that evaluates teachers based on test scores. Teachers — in their strikes, in their dissuading others from the profession, in their looming shortages — all perform an ontological politics of negation by not being the teachers that policies demand. When teachers refuse what they are and will become, teachers negate the realities of best-evidence policy.[53] And while this negation frustrates those well-trained attachments to the instrumental impulse seeking an end, it "does not," as Katarzyna Dworakowska writes, "involve filling the (empty) space with another narrative."[54] By understanding teachers' resistance to their instrumentalization by policy in terms of an ontological politics of refusal, this analysis, perhaps in a way that is undesirable in a conclusion, stops short of satisfying any demand for what comes after these refusals. The protests have not ended, and international education policies show no sign of abating in their instrumentalization of teachers as the most important in-school factor in raising student achievement. The growing movements and expressions made by teachers out of school evinces a negation performed through an ontological politics of refusal. Through protests, dissatisfaction, attrition, dissuasion, and other refusals

50. Stephen J. Ball, "Subjectivity as a Site of Struggle: Refusing Neoliberalism?," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 8 (2016): 1143.

51. See Carusi, "Why Bother Teaching?"

52. See Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Tyson E Lewis, "Education for Potentiality (against Instrumentality)," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 878–891.

53. Matthew Clarke and Anne Phelan, "The Power of Negative Thinking in and for Teacher Education," *Power and Education* 7, no. 3 (2015): 257–271.

54. Katarzyna Dworakowska, "Is Education Exhausted?," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020): 900.

beyond the "in-school" purview, teachers' absence and absenting occur where the politics of instrumentalism of policy and research do not see. In this dark pedagogy, we may yet find some truth in Prime Minister Ardern's words that start this paper. When teachers have the power to change everything, they refuse by becoming nothing.

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