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Making Sense of complex policy worlds

Title of the paper

How the policy subjects of education policy in Australia ‘appropriate’ policy?

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Abstract

Education Policy in Australia has followed a similar path to many other countries, and introduced decentralising policy, which encourages school choice whilst implementing local and international testing systems which rank performance by students, school, state and country. These changes have the capacity to reorder the way education is governed in Australia. This paper examines the governmental programs visible in policy documents related to school education policy and the experience of students and their caregivers, using a case study of the campaign for a local inner-city high school in Sydney Australia. However, in examining policy level documents and the experience of students there are conceptual problems in bridging the gap between top-down policy and bottom-up student experience. In this paper I draw on the concept of 'appropriation', where those who experience policy, make aspects of policy their own (Nielsen 2011). This concept is illustrated in the interaction between the policy created, the policy implemented and the ways the policy subject uses the policy. In this paper I explore the way policy subjects 'appropriate' from the policy trends in education and 'make their own' policy. This 'appropriation' offers both potential for resistance, but also acceptance of policy trends. I suggest that the ways in which policy subjects 'accept' policy may be as interesting as the ways in which they 'reject' it.

Keywords: Appropriation, Governmentality, Education Policy, School, Australia

Introduction

In this paper I examine the governmental programs visible in recent policy changes in Australian school education policy, which encourage school choice and the particular effects they have on policy users. I will draw on a case study of the community campaign for local

secondary schooling inner-city Sydney, New South Wales to explore how these changes are understood by policy users. I draw on the concept of 'appropriation' where those who experience policy make aspects of the policy their own, and in doing so offer resistance to the policy (Nielsen 2011). In this paper I argue that 'appropriation' is useful in demonstrating agency by the policy subject and provides a valuable tool for understanding the complexity of policy implementation. This demonstration of agency is useful in policy studies which have relied on governmentality analysis to make clear the broader political rationalities involved in policy analysis but been confounded by the problem of agency in governmentality. Appropriation operates to help solve this methodological problem in governmentality driven policy studies. In this paper I will discuss the school education policy landscape in Australia. I will then discuss how appropriation operates in policy studies and finally, in the context of the opportunity appropriation provides to understand policy impacts, I will consider the case of a local campaign for new high school in Sydney, Australia.

School policy in Australia

In Australia school education policy has undergone significant change in recent years. This change has manifested in federal school education policies which cede responsibility for education from the state and territory governments through new governance arrangements, against a backdrop of the ongoing debate around government funding of private schools (Lingard 2014b, 39-40). In Australia, until recently, it was not possible to talk of an Australian education system. Each state and territory had its own publically funded schools, its own education system, its own centralised bureaucracies, its own testing and its own curriculum. There were no measures of national comparison in school education. In a period of what Lingard terms cooperative federalism, significant changes were made to the governance of school education (Lingard 2014c, 68). These changes have facilitated an environment which

encourages school choice. The policies collectively rather than individually work on the policy user, in this case parents and caregivers, to engage them as self-choosers of schools. The two new policies which drive choice are NAPLAN and “My Schools”. An older policy which is also important is the school funding regime, through which the federal government provides funds directly to private schools.

The first major change was the introduction of a program of national standardised testing. The tests, the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), were introduced in 2008 and were designed to improve student performance in literacy and numeracy. The tests are administered each year to students in years 3,5,7 and 9 and allow comparisons at the level of student, school, and state and territory. The stated aim of the National Assessment Program (NAP) “... is the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools and the community can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes” (Authority 2017). The results of the tests are “...used to inform future policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and, where necessary, intervention programs” (Authority 2017).

While national testing provides a point of comparison locally, it also feeds into international trends that preference results in testing as a measure of performance. Policy documents from the time of the introduction of NAPLAN suggest that the commitment to introduce standardised testing was generated by a concern that Australian education standards were falling short in international comparisons by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through its international testing programs; Programme for International Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) (Australian Government 2008, 16). International testing regimes are part of a globalisation of

school education policy which restructure education governance, and produce concern at a local level that Australian education is not sufficient and that Australian students will not meet the needs of a globalised workforce (Lingard 2014a, 98-99). This desire to increase standards feeds into a national anxiety that Australian school students are underperforming in international comparisons (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). The effects of NAPLAN are intensified on the policy user when considered in conjunction with the effect of “My Schools”.

Shortly after NAPLAN was introduced the federal government in conjunction with the state governments introduced a policy mechanism with the stated aim of improving “accountability and transparency and in particular to facilitate performance comparisons of schools” (Zanderigo, Dowd, and Turner 2012, 14). The policy made NAPLAN results by school, available to the public to allow parents to compare schools via a website called “My School”. Its stated aim is to allow “fair comparisons to be made among schools serving students from similar socio-educational backgrounds...with the aim of supporting and driving improvement across the nation” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015). It allows and encourages school choice and it uses the comparable standards offered by NAPLAN to do so. On its release, the very existence of the website raised concerns that it would produce league tables of top and bottom performing schools. Though the website itself does not offer this feature, the media does use it to this effect and league tables have become a usual occurrence in media reporting about NAPLAN. However, it is not only through media reports that school choice is encouraged, the website itself offers parents the capacity to research schools through the “My Schools”. Although there is contestation about which parents and caregivers have the capacity to make choices, choice is the output that is offered by “My Schools” (Mills 2015).

These two policy changes have resulted in new governance arrangement in school education policy. These arrangements see responsibility for the policies sit with the independent statutory authority- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). ACARA is jointly funded by the state and federal governments. It is these changes, in addition to the subsequent policy changes these initial changes allow, which have redrawn the school education landscape. They both centralise and decentralise policy, collecting in a national framework, but operating as policies of decentralisation because they push responsibility for choices onto the policy users.

Whilst the policies described above are relatively new entrants to the national school education policy, the government funding of private schools is not. In 1973 the Labor government began to fund private schools, motivated by a crisis in the country's Catholic school sector, which without government funds looked as though it may fail (Windle 2014, Campbell 2005). While this decision directed government funds to private schools, private schools had long been a feature of the Australian schooling system. As the first schools in Australia they endured when public schooling was introduced, but did not receive government funding. In the post-war period the government increased its role in secondary education. Population increases coupled with a greater appetite for secondary education as the needs for skilled labour changed and the population became more affluent (Campbell and Proctor 2014) meant state government began to invest in secondary schools. In Australia secondary schooling had been largely optional, and to the extent that it existed, was often delivered by private schools. Consequently, the immediate post-war period was one of rapid growth in the schooling sector. It was not until the 1950s that government schools took on the primary provision of secondary education (Department of Education 2000, 3). The model adopted was comprehensive high schools which serviced the needs of their local catchment

based on borders drawn by the state government and enrolled students indiscriminate of wealth or academic ability. This shift further expanded and cemented the role of the state as an education provider.

Government funding to private schools continued until the late 1990s when the federal government under conservative leader John Howard, changed the funding model and increased the level of funding to private schools. This change generated an increase in the uptake of private schooling in Australia and produced what is claimed to be a quasi-education market (Lingard 2014b, 40). This claim is supported by statistical evidence with 38% of students in private schools across Australia in 2005 up from 24.1 % in 1975 (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009, 58). The trend raised concern that the public school sector, particularly at a secondary level, would become residualised (Windle 2014). The debate around school funding is ongoing. In 2011 the government commissioned a review of school funding, the resulting report suggested school funds should be distributed on the basis of need however, the provision of funds to private schools was so entrenched that the government was forced to guarantee that regardless of suggested changes to the school funding model no school would receive less funds (Windle 2014). This debate is important in understanding the school education landscape, because not only is an ongoing political issue which effects how schools are funded but it is part of the fabric of the Australian school system.

Both the school education policy strands discussed here reflect a greater increase in school choice, from just private vs public to choice between public schools as well. However, the ability to exercise this choice was often dictated by tradition rather than active participation in a school market (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009, 2). Other choices in schooling were more constrained by government policy which made it impossible to choose a school

other than your local one (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009, 2-3). In introducing “My School” the government created a means through which parents could engage in school choice. However, school choice is more than the opportunity for parents and caregivers to choose the school their children attend. By facilitating choice for parents and caregivers the responsibility for the outcomes of schooling is moved from government to individual. For parents and caregivers choice becomes necessitated in order to deliver on the responsibility they feel to provide for their children. Where once the good parent was “one who trusted and supported government education” the good parent becomes the “Informed chooser of schools” (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009, 4). Parents and Caregivers motivated by anxiety about student performance and how it will impact future opportunities embrace choice (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009). In moving this responsibility to the parent it makes possible “government at a distance” (Rose 1999). The state is able to recede and allow its citizens to negotiate their own choices. The introduction of the “My School” website provided the governmental technology which made this both possible and desirable. In the language of governmentality, for the policy users this shapes their subjectivity. The result of a greater responsabilisation of the citizen is reconceptualization of the role of the state in its relations with its citizens.

The decision to choose one school or another may involve more than the information provided in “My Schools”. Rowe and Windle argue that parents utilise existing information networks and family and friends to research schools in addition to “My Schools” (Rowe and Windle 2012). However, what “My schools” does very effectively is to demonstrate the relative strengths of a school be it public or private, effectively increasing the social capital of successful schools. Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia and architect of “My School”, reiterates this view: “Many people before they had this information, would have said

to themselves private equals good and public equals bad,”... “ and then we had the data set, what people worked out was a lot of state schools were outperforming expectations” (Munro 2017). The outcome is a public versus public choice model, where high performing schools are desirable and low performing schools are not. In the public versus public choice model, the market is not understood in strictly economic terms, the currency can be academic performance, or postal address. Though as Mills suggests, the higher socio-economic bracket of the family the greater their capacity to engage effectively in school choice (Mills 2015). This model produces anxiety in parents and caregivers because despite their desire higher performing schools are not always available for choosing, due to their entry requirements or catchments management plans. This is the situation which characterised the campaign for a new high school in inner-city Sydney. I explore the details of this case study in this paper, however in order to understand the way policy users were able to negotiate with government about their issues it is first useful to understand the concept of ‘appropriation’ in policy studies.

Appropriation

Appropriation comes to policy studies from ‘Community of Practice’ theory in anthropology, where it refers to the taking of another cultural identity into one’s own culture, with the effect of diminishing the original ownership (Schneider 2003). The word is derived from the Latin, *appropriare* meaning to ‘to make one’s own’ (deriving from *proprius* ‘one’s own’) which makes clear the connection it can have to policy in circumstances where the policy user seeks to ‘make policy their own’ (Schneider 2003, 217). In making policy one’s own, the policy user is demonstrating the agency which allows ‘appropriation’ to occur (Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009). Appropriation theorizes the process by which ideas, norms, and values initially generated in a particular social group, possibly in a different historical era, then

adopted more broadly in the public domain, become part of a different social group's cultural repertoire (Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009, 782). Appropriation allows for the idea that people do not necessarily receive policy in the way it was intended but that they may "accept and resist policy elements in their everyday lives" (Nielsen 2011, 72). In particular, policy processes are both messier and more contingent than analysis at the level of policy alone can reveal (Nielsen 2011).

Governmentality offers a useful lens through which to view policy changes. Though it operates at the level of policy, governmentality reveals what is made problematic by policy, and makes visible the broader political rationalities involved in governing. Governmentality is a term derived from Foucault to describe an analysis which attends to the way of governing by asking questions which reveal the hows, and whys, and what fors, of governing (Inda 2005, 3). For Foucault, governmentality describes the "art of government": once population became the purpose of government, the population was used as the rationale for governing. This change made self-conduct the target of government (Foucault 1991, 92). It is the concentration on the conduct of people which is contentious in the methodological debates around how to use governmentality.

For Foucault the subject whose conduct is shaped by the rationalities of rule to which he or she is subject is critical. For Foucault the subject in revealed in governmentality is shaped through a process of self-formation delineated by their socio- historical context. The subject becomes the target of study and suggests that an attention to what is going on for individuals is a way of understanding governmental techniques. He is also suggesting that the subject can be understood through an attention to governmentality techniques. This particular idea draws much criticism because Foucault at once puts the subject in the researcher's line of

sight but then removes them, by suggesting that they are understood through governmental techniques, which are empirically revealed through a study of the techniques and strategies of government, not through direct engagement with the subject (Marttila 2015, McKee 2009). This is the problem Nielsen is trying to overcome in the drawing appropriation into policy studies.

This problem is made more real by the charge levelled at governmentality studies that they produce one-dimensional typifications of the subject (Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde 2006). Rose, O'Malley and Valverde see this problem as one of homeostasis, where the empirical uses of governmentality reveal rationalities of rule that are rigid, which preclude change. If the subject is shaped by the political rationalities in which they exist, there is no capacity for change. Nielsen and ethnographic governmentality scholars see the answer to this quandary in an attention to the subject or policy user by finding ways in which they demonstrate agency (Nielsen 2011, Brady 2014). The subject is not ill drawn if there is evidence of their agency, and change can occur if there is agency. This is the attraction of a governmentality not tied to the methodological framings Foucault supplied.

However, Dean argues that it is unreasonable to criticise Foucault for not fulfilling the methodological requirements of social science. For Foucault, the questions posed were of sufficient analytical potential, so to ask his project to meet the needs of social science misunderstands his project (Dean 2015). Dean describes Foucault's purpose in governmentality as "Foucault is not seeking access to the complexity of everyday life but the conditions under which we form a knowledge of and seek to govern such domains in everyday life" (Dean 2015, 359). In this way, scholars assert that Foucault's governmentality does not need to account for the subject from the position of the subject; it is sufficiently analytically

useful to use ‘text of rule’ to find an account of how the subject is made possible (O'Malley, Weir, and Shearing 1997, 502). However, even if Foucault’s approach is not to ask for the certainties of experience of real people, which is the task of ethnography or realist governmentality, his legacy allows us to draw from his ideas and ‘appropriate’ them.

Appropriation allows people to “translate the ‘policy’, a more inert and transformable object in their own image” (Nielsen 2011, 73). What this means in practice is that the policy user or policy subject, may, in either acknowledging or not acknowledging the constraints of the policy environment they are tied to, use that same policy in different and unexpected ways. Thus the individual experience of the policy user is able to appropriate policy and ‘make it their own’ and in ‘making it their own’ they are demonstrating agency. Consequently, appropriation solves the methodological problem Nielsen sets out. However, Nielsen also argues that the analytical value of appropriation is to bridge the divide between broader political rationalities and localised experience without either setting up a generalised account of the people of policy or a detailed account of localised experience without any connection to the broader policy processes (Nielsen 2011, 69). This second requirement of valuable appropriation needs to be considered in the context of the case study of this paper.

[The Case of the Community Local Options for Secondary Education](#)

In Sydney, Australia’s most densely populated city, recent policy battles have emerged over the insufficient provision of public schooling, particularly secondary schooling. In presenting the case study below, I draw on media reports, documents from the state government and the working party investigating inner-city school provision, other significant stakeholders as

well as the documents produced by the campaign group, Community Local Options for Secondary Education (CLOSE) including their *Facebook* page.

In 2013 a group of concerned parents began to campaign for local secondary options for schooling because the existing options were, in their view, insufficient. The campaign, Community Local Options for Secondary Education (CLOSE), argued that the catchment secondary schools for students in the inner city were too far away and overcrowded. Notably inner-city Sydney never had a local comprehensive school because by the time the government was investing in comprehensive schooling, the families had moved further out from the city and the demand was not there (Sherry and Easthope 2016). Leading CLOSE campaigner, Skye Molyneux, appropriated the policies of choice to demand the government provide a new school because the existing options were too far away, “she was forced to send her sons to private school ...parents don’t have a choice” (Hutchinson 2017).

CLOSE petitioned and campaigned the state government to resolve the issue. While the existing catchment schools were either at some distance from the inner-city or overcrowded, the campaign also argued that the increasing number of families in the inner-city generated a need for more inner city schools. As such, the campaign emerged against a changing demographic of the residents of inner- city Sydney, increasing urbanisation and gentrification but also the unanticipated surge in families choosing to live in apartments in the city (Sherry and Easthope 2016). This unanticipated surge in inner-city families has resulted in claims of ‘child blindness’ on behalf of government planners (Sherry and Easthope 2016).

The government initially rejected CLOSE calls for additional schools, arguing that though there were schools at capacity there were some under capacity. However, in mid – 2014 the government agreed to a working party, which included community consultation to discuss

solutions to the problem. Initial discussions revolved around how to improve the current education offerings. The language of choice was also used by the government. The first newsletter of the community consultation process says that the “following solutions should be considered, how educational offerings at school influence parents’ choice of school-should these be adjusted, broadened and/or specialised?” and “Whether the public school ‘brand’ can be improved through advertising and marketing?” (Communities 2014). This discussion acknowledges that a traditional model of government service provision in education is no longer sufficient. Despite there being no change in the government policy around local catchments, this acknowledgment by government demonstrates that government could no longer tell the parents and caregivers where to send their children. The specific demands for choice from the community overrode traditional government service provision and traditional government authority in service provision.

The choice narrative is further embedded in the discussions around the fate of the two selective high schools within inner-city Sydney, Sydney Girls High School and Sydney Boys High School. Both schools are in the inner-city and both take enrolments based solely on academic performance; they have no catchment and take no local enrolments. CLOSE campaigned to have the enrolment policies of these schools changed to allow local enrolments. Local Member of Parliament for Sydney, Alex Greenwich MP, who supported the CLOSE campaign, commissioned his own Reachtel poll which found that “increasing local student intake at selective schools such as Sydney Boys High, is supported by nearly 90% of my electorate” (New South Wales 2013). The level of rancour in the community about these schools is evident in the CLOSE *Facebook* post on the discussion of the need for a new school:

In inner city Sydney this should also be read in the context of the ghettoisation of public schools, not least driven by a system of way too many 100% selective schools that act as exclusive bastions for kids from top income earning parents (CLOSE and CLOSEast-Community for Local Options for Secondary Education 2017).

Nonetheless opening the schools to local enrolments was resisted by government, students at the schools and past students (Neilage 2014). The public versus public choice narrative is highly visible in this exchange both on behalf of the government and the community.

The CLOSE campaign was ultimately successful in 2015 when the New South Wales Government announced it would build a new public comprehensive secondary school in Surrey Hills in central Sydney. The community involved in the campaign were invited to participate in the design process for the school and the new school, which will cater for 1200 enrolments, will open in 2018. However, CLOSEast, an extension of the CLOSE campaign, continues to campaign for a new public comprehensive school in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

Discussion

The CLOSE campaigners mobilised the choice narrative whilst tapping into older narratives about the importance of government provision of local public schooling. Where once Australian students were educated in larger numbers at their local comprehensive high school and minimal school choice was exercised, now the choice being demanded is for a local public school. The government initially resisted the demands of CLOSE arguing that a new school was not required. Sherry and Easthope show that evidence the New South Wales Department of Education was relying upon for school planning, showed that families in that area would prefer to use private schools (2016, 21). Though the CLOSE campaign demonstrates the inaccuracy of this claim, it is interesting to note that the state government was as enthralled

by the outcomes of the school choice rationality as the federal government. This is in contrast to the policy users who used the choice narrative in demanding a local public high school.

Utilising the language of choice to demand the government provide a new public comprehensive school demonstrated appropriation of the policies of school choice. Importantly, the choice narrative was purposively embraced instead of engaging the public versus private schooling debate:

CLOSE and CLOSEeast have always been very deliberate to never pitch the need for new schools around the public vs private school debate. Where people want to send their kids is their own choice (CLOSE and CLOSEeast- Community for Local Options for Secondary Education 2017).

There are two possible ways to account for this decision. One is to suggest that the prevalence of the school choice narrative meant the group had to exhibit a sensitivity to the public vs private debate in order to ensure that their campaign was not derailed by an argument over the relative value of one sector over the other. Alternatively, in campaigning and negotiating with the government, utilising the dominant narratives of school choice over older narratives of fixed role of government in public schooling, could be seen as politically expedient. The older narratives involved an assumption that the government holds the authority in the relationship between government and the citizen which would be counterproductive to citizens in making demands on government (Clarke, Newman, and Smith 2007). The choice narrative legitimised the campaign's authority rather than ceding responsibility to government.

There is a complexity to the dynamic of the campaign because in campaigning for a public comprehensive high school CLOSE was arguing for the very type of school which was falling

out of favour: both with parents and caregivers and the government. Just ten years before the CLOSE campaign began in 2013 the local comprehensive school was under threat. Campbell argues that the comprehensive school was a casualty of the quasi-education market of the 1990s and 2000s (Campbell 2005). The basis of his argument is that the middle class were shifting their allegiance to private schools in order to deliver for their children the material assets needed to negotiate the future globalised working world. Not only did private schools become more attractive, but the reverse also occurred where public schools, particularly local comprehensives, were seen as under resourced and threatening, in the sense that they educated threatening populations, “the ethically alien and the poor” (Campbell 2005, 9).

Whilst it is dangerous to describe the middle-class as a homogenous group or to consider it anything other than a contested moniker, Campbell makes the argument that a reassertion of class into education discussions is productive not because it is useful to essentialise the ‘middle class’, but because it is revealing of a group of people who self-identify as middle class (2005). The middle class, he argues play out their aspirations through education (Campbell 2005).

Campbell argues that the shift away from comprehensive high schools was the result of middle class retreat from government (Campbell 2005, 9). Consequently, by demanding local comprehensive school, the CLOSE campaign suggests that not only are Campbell’s assertions premature, but also that rather than retreating from government as Campbell suggests, the middle class in this particular context of inner city Sydney are reimagining their relationship with government and reimagining the comprehensive as a school of choice. This idea is supported by Rowe who sees a similar reimagining in the campaigns for inner-city schooling in

Melbourne, Victoria (Rowe 2017). However, she ties the change to the political motivations of the inner city community and suggests that the re-emergence of a middle class preference for public schooling is symbolic of a political movement by certain sections of the middle class who equate public schooling with a commitment to broader political goals including egalitarianism and collectivism and secularism (2017, 46). However, the CLOSE campaign's stated determination not to engage with the public/private debate means that the motivations Rowe observed are less visible in this case.

I argue that this case study demonstrates appropriation *fait accompli*, where not only has the CLOSE campaign appropriated the policies of choice to deliver a service they require, but they have used it to rearticulate the importance of the provision of comprehensive public schooling whilst making the policy of choice subject to their choice. This case study demonstrates that policy implementation is never clear cut and that there is a two way relationship in policy which becomes more apparent when the policy users experience is considered.

Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated that the concept of appropriation, with its attendance to agency, is useful to resolve the methodological quandary encountered in policy analysis which draws on governmentality but also seeks to consider the policy user or subject, from the perspective of the policy user and subject. It makes clear that policy users demonstrate their agency in ways which may either offer resistance to, or acceptance of, the policy. In the case of the CLOSE campaign for an inner-city high school in Sydney, policy users both accepted and rejected the policy of school choice, which I argue now operates as a governing political

rationality in Australian education policy. CLOSE effectively used school choice to garner support from the community, but also resisted school choice, by rejecting the prescribed policy outcome of the school choice, that they should actively peruse the school which offers most opportunity to their children. This juxtaposition reveals the complexities of the policy user experience.

This case study provides a clear illustration of how appropriation allows us to see how policy users are 'making policy their own' to produce unexpected outcomes. These outcomes, such as the demand for a comprehensive school, run contrary to the political rationalities which have informed school education policy in recent times. They are in conflict with the trends in school education policy which characterise the relationship between government and citizen. While it is not possible to assume from a singular example that a similar renegotiation is going on elsewhere, it is notable that the dynamics in the example suggest new ways of considering what and how the citizen makes demands of the state. The character and meaning of these new ways understood in connection to the broader political rationalities which underpin governing are worthy of greater exploration.

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