The implications of school autonomy for educational leadership and social justice

Date: Tuesday 4 November 2014
Hosted by: School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW
Location: John Goodsell Building, room LG21

**Theme**

This 1 day workshop is a precursor to a proposed AARE 2014 symposium on the dismantling of public education systems and the implications for educational leadership and social justice. There is a growing interest in the rise of independent public schools and increasing school autonomy amongst policy makers in Australia. With significant moves in this area in the UK and US, Australia is already seeing shifts in this policy arena. This 1 day workshop will seek to examine how we can understand these changes, how to theorise these moves and consider them in their implications for educational leadership and addressing issues of social justice. The aim of this workshop is to explore in depth the ways that a range of theoretical perspectives can help to understand this phenomenon and provide fresh insights into the implications for educational leadership, policy and social justice: ‘What are the implications of increasing school autonomy for educational leadership and social justice?’

**Schedule: Tuesday 4 November**

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<td>8.30 am</td>
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**Oh to be in England?** Headteachers in a de/re/constructed education ‘system’
Pat Thomson
*University of Nottingham*

**A ‘systemless system’: responsibilising schools, principals and teachers**
Bob Lingard
*The University of Queensland*
Between a rock and a hard place? A school clusters policy and educational leadership
Martin Thrupp
*University of Waikato*

**10.30 am: Morning tea**
**11.00 am: Session 2**

IPS as new autonomy?
Greg Thompson
*Murdoch University*

School and principal autonomy: resisting, not manufacturing the neoliberal subject
Richard Niesche
*The University of New South Wales*

Doing data differently
Christina Gowlett
*The University of Queensland*

**12.30 pm: Lunch**
**1.15 pm: Session 3**

Beyond entity thinking: Opening up educational leadership through relations
Scott Eacott
*Australian Catholic University*

Re-imagining leadership as a resource of and for educational practice/praxis in neo-liberal times
Jane Wilkinson
*Griffith University*

Identity Inc.? The racialisation of the market and mapping the commodification of the self
Kalervo N. Gulson & P. Taylor Webb
*University of New South Wales & University of British Columbia*

**2.45 pm: Final comments, discussion**
**3.15 pm: Afternoon tea/Melbourne Cup**
Abstracts:

A ‘systemless system’: responsibilising schools, principals and teachers
Bob Lingard
The University of Queensland

This paper will consider the situation in Queensland schooling, where there has been a recent move to ‘independent government schools’, accompanied by a responsibilising of principals and teachers in relation to matters of ‘equity and quality’. The paper will provide a critical analysis of two specific ‘reforms’, namely the move to independent public schools and the Great Teachers = Great Results policy. In addition, the paper will also consider the Great results guarantee, an operationalisation of Great Teachers = Great Results and which has been the mode through which Queensland has distributed post federal election Gonski money through contractual agreements between the Director-General and school principals linked to targeted improvement on NAPLAN. Together these appear to construct what one principal in an ARC Linkage project I am involved in (PETRA), has felicitously referred to as a ‘systemless system’. Further, this policy assemblage (framed as well by complementary federal policies) responsibilise principals and teachers through a top-down accountability gaze that in effect absolves head office of any responsibility for supporting their work or for achieving system and school targeted outcomes. The systemless system is a performative one as Lyotard suggested with all of the associated terrors.

Between a rock and a hard place? A school clusters policy and educational leadership
Martin Thrupp
University of Waikato

The ‘Investing in Educational Success’ (IES) policy announced in New Zealand in January 2014 has put considerable ‘new’ funding into setting up ‘communities of schools’ involving primary and secondary schools across the country. The policy has attracted some international attention as it was endorsed by the OECD’s Andreas Schleicher and the Government’s advisory group includes Michael Fullan. But within New Zealand educators have been divided about how best to understand and respond to the IES policy. The secondary teachers union and principals organisations and many New Zealand leadership academics have largely welcomed it while the primary teachers and principals and some academics (the author included) have been strongly opposed. Indeed the IES policy seems to go to the heart of many current debates in New Zealand education policy and some of the themes of this workshop as well. For instance will the IES reduce or increase school autonomy given the starting point of a system that has been highly ‘self-managing’ for the last 25 years? Does putting schools into clusters/communities represent a worthwhile move towards collaboration in a competitive system or is it about increasing control over a recalcitrant profession? Or perhaps both? And when dealing with a strongly-positioned neo-liberal government, is it better for educational leaders to work ‘within the tent’ to somewhat modify untrusted policy or to stand firmly apart? I look forward to telling workshop
participants about the IES developments in New Zealand and seeing what you all make of them!

Oh to be in England? Headteachers in a de/re/constructed education ‘system’.
Pat Thomson
University of Nottingham

Since the Education Reform Act of 1988 English governments of various persuasions have been de- and re-constructing the school system. The inequitable effects of devolution, parent choice, national curriculum, inspection, league tables and data-driven targets are all well documented. While overall levels of educational attainment measured on tests and exams have risen, the gap between the richest and poorest has risen. A recent parliamentary report (October 6, 2014) stated …

…nearly 6 out of 10 disadvantaged children in England do not achieve a basic set of qualifications compared to only 1 in 3 children from more advantaged backgrounds. The story is broadly similar in Scotland and Wales. The consequence for these children is a lifelong struggle to gain basic skills, avoid unemployment and to find and hold down a good job.


The current Coalition government have accelerated the pace of policy change and are now nearing their imaginary of every school or cluster of schools/academies and free schools having direct accountability to Westminster, mediated only by regional Commissioners. Democratically elected local authorities, imperfect as they were, are ever less concerned with educational provision and more and more involved in their new role of marginalized monitoring agents. New/old forms of contractualism and privatization, with accompanying increases in the corrupt use of public funds and cooption of the public mission of schooling, are increasingly under scrutiny from researchers and various public interest groups. Teacher education in universities is also shifting further towards schools, although there is considerable resistance to removing higher education altogether. In this context, headteachers are more autonomous, responsible, powerful - and more vulnerable.

I will consider what Australian states and Australian principals might learn from contemplating the English scenario.
IPS as new autonomy?
Greg Thompson
Murdoch University

Since 2009, Western Australian public schools have been able to apply to be considered an “Independent Public School” (IPS). There are currently 264 IPS across WA with a further 178 becoming IPS in 2015. The WA Education Department website estimates that from 2015 approximately 70% of publish school students and teachers will work in an IPS. The ‘promise’ of IPS is increased flexibility for the school where “the principal has been given increased flexibility and responsibility to make local decisions across a range of school operations” including “student support, staff recruitment, financial management, governance and accountability”.

My presentation will focus on my experience as a Board member of a comprehensive high school in a disadvantaged context that decided to apply for IPS status. The initial application in 2009 was rejected, however the school reapplied in 2010 and was granted IPS status from 2010 onwards. The focus of my presentation will be on three key questions:
1. What makes a principal and a school community desire IPS status?
2. How does IPS appear to offer solutions to seemingly intractable problems?
3. How does the policy of IPS mediate, sustain and inform ‘old’ professional subjectivities and ‘new’ responsibilisations within what is becoming a systemless system?

Identity Inc.? The racialisation of the market and mapping the commodification of the self
Kalervo N. Gulson & P. Taylor Webb
University of New South Wales & University of British Columbia

“Mark this term: empowerment. In the post-colony it connotes privileged access to markets, money, and material enrichment. In the case of ethnic groups, it is frankly associated with finding something essentially their own and theirs alone, something of their essence, to sell. In other words, a brand.”

This chapter works with the idea of commodification of schools and commodifications of the self within marketised education and as part of the Canadian city of Toronto, as a city in which ethnicity and race are conflated with by neoliberal urban phenomenon such as economic development zones and new build gentrification. We suggest that what is occurring might be characterised by the term ‘Identity Inc.’ – in which within market forms, identity is a powerful organising force. Ang (2000) notes, following Hall, that identity is ‘to be a resource of hope, to be the site of agency and attachment that energize us to participate in the making of our own ongoing histories, the construction of our continuously unfolding worlds, now and in the future. (p. 1). Our conceptual focus in this paper is on how the problems of recognition pivot on the extent to which recognition and the concomitant ideas of ethnic identity are used in developing choice schools, or what we develop as policies of
difference. That is, we are interested in how (education) markets tame politics, or de-politicize education policy (following Fraser, 2009).

We use the example of a small public Afrocentric alternative elementary school (AAS) that opened in 2009. We look at how Afrocentricity becomes fixed as an identity and when transmuted into a school such as the AAS in a choice environment, becomes commodified. In this paper we do not suggest that having something to sell – that is a Black-focused school – is the impetus for the Black activists and supporters who established the school. Nonetheless, it is a precondition for any new Toronto school board alternative school to differentiate itself from other schools – and these schools are seen as part of claiming a ‘market share’ of students. The school also initiated a difficult choice for parents concerning participation in the school, for it asks: ‘who belongs to the category of Afri-centric?’ We look then at how the AAS raises a series of key questions concerning education policy, identity and ethno-centric schools or, in this particular case, what is ‘Black’ in Black-focused education, and does it differ from Afrocentricity? In other words, what are the aims of ethno-centric schools in relation to particular forms of identity, curriculum and pedagogy? Further, what are the ways in which Afrocentricity become marketised? We are, therefore, interested in how a black-focussed school becomes both subject to, and can take advantage of, the education market. Cultural and ethnic identity – strategically and opportunistically essentialised – is mobilised and enabled within neo-liberal education policy regimes that are racialised.

**Beyond entity thinking: Opening up educational leadership through relations**

Scott Eacott

*Australian Catholic University*

Educational leadership, management and administration has long recognised the importance of context and relationships in understanding notions of leadership, autonomy, and social justice. Traditional orientations towards relational thinking have considered relationships from the standpoint of individual, independent and discrete entities. This has enabled policy rhetoric and mainstream studies to establish constructs as variables open to manipulation - the underlying generative principle of policy interventions. In this paper I argue that adopting a relational, rather than entity, ontology enables scholarship to move beyond an ontological complicity with entity thinking and challenge the spontaneous understanding of the social world advanced through everyday language. This is not about mapping the intellectual terrain with novel ideas, as such an approach leaves the existing theorisations intact. Going beyond entity thinking, a relational approach makes it impossible to separate educational leadership labour from the time and space in which it occurs. Similarly, it blurs the boundaries between individualism / collectivism and structure / agency. In doing so, it provides a productive space to theorise educational leadership, autonomy and social justice.
Re-imagining leadership as a resource of and for educational practice/praxis in neo-liberal times
Jane Wilkinson
Griffith University

In a recent introduction to a special issue of the Journal of Education Policy entitled ‘What would a socially just education system look like?’, Becky Francis and Martin Mills noted that the body of researchers to which they belonged was in danger of becoming, ‘known observers of sociological phenomena, comparing clever notes within our own exclusive circle, while practices and policies that exacerbate inequalities continue oblivious and unabated’ (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 2).

Francis and Mills called for contributors to the special issue to ‘provide not only analyses of but also analyses for education’ (2012, p. 3). It is in the spirit of providing analyses for education that I offer this paper, inspired by two interconnected bodies of work: firstly, a range of intellectual, theoretical and cultural traditions emanating from Nordic, Western European and Anglo-American nations, which draw on differing understandings of educational practice, pedagogy and praxis. Secondly, embedded within but extending these traditions, I draw on a new theory of practice, which ‘reconnects with a lifeworld – human and humanistic perspective on practice as a human and social activity with indissoluble moral, political and historical dimensions’ (c.f., Kemmis et al, 2014). I argue that surfacing the rich possibilities offered by these differing educational traditions and a developing theory of practice/praxis which re-imagines the lifeworld possibilities of educational practice can provide invaluable resources by which contemporary leadership and educational practice can be re-imagined as forms of collective and socially just educational praxis in a seemingly beleaguered public education field.

School and principal autonomy: resisting, not manufacturing the neoliberal subject
Richard Niesche
The University of New South Wales

The issues of school autonomy and in particular, principal autonomy have in recent years been ones that have dominated the landscape of education policy and politics in the UK, US and Australia. The rise of academies, free schools and charter schools has been observed with keen interest from Australian educators as the latest ideas from the UK and US are usually soon to be on the horizon of the Australian education landscape. The current Australian Federal Government has already expressed keenness for independent public schools such as have already been adopted in WA and to varying degrees in some other states. Many school principals have shown a desire for more autonomy in decision-making. However, what is usually put forward through policy is a form of the principal as a good neoliberal subject, complicit with a dismantling of public education. In this paper, I wish to explore the nature of principals as neo-liberal subjects. I draw upon the work of Dardot & Laval (2013) and Foucault (2007) to argue that rather than being vehicles for the implementation of neoliberal mechanisms of governmentality, principals have a responsibility to act in resistance to these forms of rationalities including personal enterprise, choice and
competition, and the apparatus of efficiency etc to work towards aims of social justice and equity. By acknowledging that the subject is always to be constructed then one can work to rearticulate a new political and principal subjectivity that acts through Foucault’s notion of counter-conduct to forms of neoliberal governmentality.

**Doing data differently**

Christina Gowlett

*The University of Queensland*

What are the productive strategies of mobilization taking place in schools at present? Queensland is in the process of rolling out yet another wave of ‘school improvement’ policies, while simultaneously implementing independent government schools. The schooling climate in Queensland is consequently rife with pressure on schools to perform and ‘improve’. The terrors of such pressure are important to document and discuss, but in this presentation, I want to shift the gaze towards moments of possibility. Inspired by Butler, I will explore how one school is simultaneously submitting to and mastering data usage to monitor their performance.