NATALIE BROWN & KIM BESWICK

POLICY AND CURRICULUM RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

There is continual change in the education landscape in response to both public and political agendas. In the early 1990s, Simon Marginson noted that "the politics of education are changing and volatile, with little consensus on some issues" (1993, p. 3). This remains the case, with education policy highly politicised, and the results of this playing out in inevitable cycles for state-funded education systems, and other education stakeholders. In Australia, the past 20 years have seen major changes in curriculum for the compulsory years of schooling. These have encompassed development of outcomes based curricula (Donnelly, 2007), Essential Learnings curricula (Luke, Matters, Herschell, Grace, Barratt, & Land, 2000; Department of Education, Tasmania, 2002; Townsend & Bates, 2007), and a recent return to national curriculum prescribed for disciplinary areas (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012a). This latest curriculum development is part of a broader move to a national policy environment that, in addition to a national curriculum, features a national assessment program in literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN), national standards for teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011a), and national accreditation of teacher education programs (AITSL, 2011b). There has also been increasing attention given to the early years of schooling, including pre-school provision (Press, 2008). In the tertiary sector, a move to demand driven university places, and an emphasis on social inclusion reflected through a changed funding model, has had implications for university entrance and pathways into and out of tertiary study (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Public universities are increasingly seeking alternative sources of revenue to supplement and enhance state-based funding (Johnstone, 2004; Chung-Hoon, Hite, & Hite, 2005). In addition, university rankings have assumed increased importance in the context of a global market in higher education (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007).

Changes of this kind are global phenomena. International trends towards refreshing curriculum and pedagogy have been motivated by the perceived changing needs of society in the 21st century (Le Métias, 2003; Luke, Freebody, Shun, & Gopinathan, 2005; Watson, Beswick, & Brown, 2012). This has included the development of values-based curricula in countries such as New Zealand, South Africa, United States (Rodwell, 2011), Portugal (Carvalho, & Solomon, 2012) as well as a focus

on pedagogical reform based on research findings in specific disciplinary areas (e.g., De Jong, 2004; Carvalho & Solomon, 2012). Educational change can be prompted by numerous factors. At least in Australia, significant educational change, including curriculum change has resulted from changes of government (Baker, Trotter, & Holt, 2003). There has also been change as a result of public, or media scrutiny. An excellent example of this has been documented in Tasmania by Mulford and Edmunds (2010) who analysed 141 articles concerning a curriculum reform in a daily newspaper – stemming from initial support to a decidedly negative stance in concert with the demise of the initiative. Support for change is often provided through presentation of data, however, the sources and validity of these data as a rationale for the changes proposed may be open to question or critique. This is particularly the case where narrow sources of data are used to drive reform.

Perhaps the best illustration of this is the current debate about the use of standardised testing to drive reform – particularly in curriculum and pedagogy. Assessment for raising standards of education has,

> Become a globalized educational policy discourse; the evaluation message system (manifest as high-stakes national census testing) has taken the upper hand in many schooling systems around the world with England as the best (or worst?) case in point. (Lingard, 2010, p. 131)

As Stobart (2008) notes,

> A key purpose of assessment, particularly in education, has been to establish and raise standards of learning. This is now a virtually universal belief – it is hard to find a country that is not using the rhetoric of needing assessment to raise standards in response to the challenges of globalisation. (p. 24)

The results of the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) that show declines in Australia's standing (Thomson, Hillman, Wernert, Schmid, Buckley & Munene, 2012) will almost certainly provoke further calls for change.

The accountability agenda that accompanies increasing emphasis on standardised testing is consistent with a global trend, particularly through the UK and US. In the US, accountability and testing reforms have been broadly criticised (Hursh, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010). In Australia increased accountability is focussed on teacher education and the teaching profession, as evidenced by the AITSL developments alluded to above, as well as the school sector. In regard to the latter, the 'My School' website has been introduced giving ready access to statistical information of all Australian schools. Among the key pieces of information available through this site are NAPLAN results. Supporters of NAPLAN testing, point to the ready availability of time series data to assist with diagnosis of learning outcomes and ability to monitor progress. From the *Using My School to support school and student improvement* fact sheet (ACARA, 2012b),

> Effective schools collect quality information from student assessment to evaluate themselves and examine where they need to improve and how they can use experiences of success and failure to generate that improvement.

Allan Luke is a vocal critic of such narrowly focussed high stakes testing, contending that using this as a measure of educational outcome can fail students from low socio-economic or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (2010). He suggests that this type of testing can lead to "scripted standardized pedagogy" that results in "an enacted curriculum of basic skills, rule recognition and compliance" (p. 180). A critique of the NAPLAN tests for a specific group, Indigenous children from remote communities, has been written by Wigglesworth, Simpson and Loakes (2011). They call into question, through the use of specific examples, the use of this as a diagnostic tool for second language learners and children from remote communities. This is through not only the specific language used, but also the assumed cultural knowledge. A further concern with the current popularity of outcome measures is that there is a danger of "measuring what is easy to measure, rather than what is significant in terms of public sector organisations such as schooling systems" (Lingard, 2010, p. 135).

David Berliner and colleagues have researched and documented similar concerns about high stakes testing and their detrimental and unintended outcomes for disadvantaged student groups in the US for some time, as well as negative impacts on curriculum and teaching (e.g., Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2005; 2008). Lessons to be learned from the US experience, however, appear not to have been heeded elsewhere. Rather the Australian trend towards standardised testing can be seen as part of a global movement towards 'policy borrowing' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Adopting policy and practice that is being used elsewhere can be seen as avoiding reinvention of the wheel, particularly when the policy in question has been based on quality and relevant research and the limits of transferability arising from contextual differences have been well understood. The practice, however, needs to be regarded with caution. Lingard (2010) notes that,

> To be effective, policy borrowing must be accompanied by policy learning, which takes account of research on the effects of the policy that will be borrowed in the source system, learning from that and then applying that knowledge to the borrowing system through careful consideration of national and local histories, cultures and so on. (p. 132)

In the context of global policy borrowing, educational researchers need to be vigilant and active.

We contend that for change to bring about positive outcomes for students, it needs not only to be based on quality research but also that evidence is drawn from multiple sources. Importantly, there is a need for cognisance of context. As well as providing a rigorous research basis for future policy, educational researchers have

an important role to play in evaluating strategic change and initiatives that spring from policy changes or innovation. Because education is of public interest, ensuring that initiatives, especially those that have input of resources, receive ongoing and rigorous evaluation is necessary not only for accountability, but to enhance the quality of the education and the educational outcomes of students. Researchers also have a responsibility to publish their findings in a timely fashion and in ways that maximise access to them by policy makers and stakeholders.

THE CHAPTERS

The chapters in this section represent research that has sprung from new initiatives, or systemic change. The projects presented are diverse but reflect a global acceptance of the concept of lifelong learning and informal learning (Morgan-Klein & Osborne, 2007). They cover the full spectrum of formal learning – early childhood and care and 'prior to' learning programs (Nailon & Beswick, and Giacon & Hay) through to Higher Education (Mohd Isa & Williamson). Both in-school curriculum (Moran, Budd, Allen, & Williamson) and extra-curricular learning (Baker) are also given attention. Two of the studies reported allowed sometimes neglected voices in educational research to be heard: parents in the case of Giacon and Hay's work, and adolescent boys in Baker's study.

The chapters are also diverse in research methodology and underscore the varieties of methodologies that can and, we argue, should be used to drive and evaluate changes in educational policy and practice. The need to embrace broad research perspectives and diverse methodologies to predict the need for, evaluate success of, and suggest new directions for educational policy has been picked up by a number of researchers. For example, Luke et al. (2005) critiqued: "An overreliance on test and examination scores as a principal indicator of system efficacy and classical experimental design models as the sole model for the selection and implementation of [educational] reform" (p. 12). They proposed that,

> An alternative is to build a rich, multidisciplinary and interpretive social science as the evidence base; and to disseminate the findings of a range of studies broadly across the educational community to prompt debate and discussion, and to focus innovation. (p. 12)

In his work on educational leadership and education outcomes, Mulford (2007) also commented on research methodologies. He pointed out that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can result in significant data reduction – and in the analysis phase that researchers must ensure that evidence presented for, in this case linking leadership to student outcomes, is sufficiently complex "to come close to the reality faced by schools" (p. 20) and therefore to assist in both understanding and predicting "appropriate outcomes and practice" (p. 22). Multiple methodologies allow issues to be understood at differing but equally important levels of analysis from systemic to individual with studies focussed on particular cases or contexts

providing insights into broad phenomena. Case studies are commonly employed in education research (Tight, 2003). When well-constructed, well defined and acknowledging of limitations, they can offer broad applicability through both the methodology employed and the findings. This is particularly true when the researchers critically confirm or challenge previous findings from the literature, with respect to the context of the specific case. Four of the five studies presented in this section have utilised a case study approach with cases ranging from individuals involved in a garage band (Baker) to two universities located in different countries (Mohd Isa & Williamson).

Using a narrative inquiry, Baker has explored the music, musical practices, well-being and identity of young musicians who are members of garage bands. The findings of this study have much to offer teachers working with young people. There is also a broader message here for education policy makers whose decisions impact young people such as those in Baker's study: research that gives voice to young people, allowing them to explain the world from their own perspective, is crucial to the effectiveness of initiatives designed to improve their attainment and opportunities.

The critical role of the early years in creating conditions for successful education has been well documented around the world (Attanasio, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This perspective underpinned Giacon and Hay's study investigating a specific initiative of the Tasmanian Government, the *Launching into Learning (LiL)* program. The chapter by Nailon and Beswick describes the broader policy context in which studies such as Giacon and Hay's are situated. They present an overview of policy changes in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia from the beginning of the 21st Century. Nailon and Beswick consider the key national influences on the development of policy in the suite of formal (non-parental) programs for education and care of children prior to formal school entry. The use of a methodology where historical policy developments have been summarised and reviewed, with reference to research and evaluation of policy developments has allowed them to highlight the complexity of the ECEC sector. Moran, Budd, Allen and Williamson are working in a school-based setting, to explore professional learning needs of teachers implementing *The Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2012c), and using multiple sources of data to build a deep understanding of their research questions. The prevalence of major curriculum reform has been alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. The consequent professional learning needs of teachers are therefore an important research focus. Moran et al. are analysing the new Australian curriculum in secondary English (ACARA, 2012c) in a number of interesting ways.

One interesting element of Moran et al.'s work is the underpinning theoretical model that is being used to inform the study. The researchers have adopted Harris and Marsh's Authority model (Harris & Marsh, 2005), to reflect the way in which the curriculum change is being implemented in schools. This model, viewing change as an authoritative top-down process, is guiding the choice of methodological

approaches. The chapter by Mohd Isa and Williamson offers a different perspective on implications of educational policy. They have used a qualitative survey as their main data instrument. The choice of this methodology is consistent with the research being conducted in two different and culturally diverse countries: Malaysia and Australia. The issue that is the subject of the research, philanthropy, has been the subject of some previous studies conducted in Australian higher education institutions, but Mohd Isa and Williamson have broadened the lens to look at two contexts through two qualitative case studies that entailed collecting evidence through documentary analysis, surveys and interviews in the two purposively selected universities. Their work highlights the general importance of attending to context as well as identifying specific contextual differences that impact on philanthropic fund raising by universities in Malaysia and Australia. It exemplifies how a one size fits all approach is often not appropriate, and localised research can be essential for quality outcomes.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by acknowledging that change is a constant part of the context in which educational research is conducted and education policy is enacted. The researchers whose work is presented in the chapters of this section are working and will continue to work in a politicised environment whether in Australia or elsewhere. This is at least in part due to the importance of education to individuals in terms of their life outcomes and opportunities, and to governments for which education represents both a major expenditure and the means of improving economic and social outcomes at a national level (Considine, Marginson, Sheehan, & Kumnick, 2001; Wyn, 2006)).

The research studies in this section are diverse in scope, subject and methodology but together illustrate some key features of the kind of research that is needed to inform policy and curriculum debates into the future. These are:

– the value in attending to the voices of education stakeholders that can easily be neglected in a focus on student outcomes and teacher competence (Baker and Giacon & Hay);
– the importance to attending to differences between contexts and the need to adapt policy settings and expectations accordingly (Mohd Isa & Williamson);
– the need to consider and adequately provide for the implications of change for those charged with its implementation (Moran et al.); and
– the importance of understanding the historical context in which current developments are occurring with a view to learning from that (Nailon & Beswick).

We encourage these and other educational researchers to remain vigilant and active in: their examination and critique of educational policy, their contributions to the research base that will inform developments into the future, and the communication of their findings to the broad education community including policy makers.

REFERENCES

Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2002). *An analysis of some unintended and negative consequences of high-stakes testing*. Education Policy Research Unit, Education Policy Studies Laboratory, College of Education, Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Arizona State University.

Attanasio, O. (2012, May). Review of evidence and research gaps. Presentation given during panel 6. *Early childhood education: Directions for future research,* at *Evidence-based education: Policy-making and reform in Africa.* Accra, Ghana.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2012a). *The shape of the Australian Curriculum, Version 3.* Sydney: Author.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2012b). *Using my school to support school and student improvement.* Retrieved from http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Using_My_School_to_support_school_and_student_improvement.pdf

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2012c). *The Australian Curriculum: English, Version 4.0.* Sydney: Author.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2011a). *Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and procedures*. Melbourne, VIC: Education Services Australia.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2011b). *National professional standards for teachers.* Melbourne, VIC: Education Services Australia.

Baker, R., Trotter, H., & Holt, J. (2003). *Research report for Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs*. Sydney: Curriculum Corporation.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report.* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Carvalho, C., & Solomon, Y. (2012). Supporting statistical literacy: What do culturally relevant/ realistic tasks show us about the nature of pupil engagement with statistics? *International Journal of Educational Research, 55,* 57–65.

Chung-Hoon, T. L., Hite, J. M., & Hite, S. J. (2005). Searching for enduring donor relationships: Evidence for factors and strategies in a donor/organization integration model for fund raising. *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 6*(1), 34–53.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2009). *Transforming Australia's higher education system*. Canberra: Author.

Considine, M., Marginson, S., Sheehan, P., & Kumnick, M. (2001). *The comparative performance of Australia as a knowledge nation: Report to the Chifley Research Centre.* Retrieved from http://vuir.vu.edu.au/15895/1/15895.pdf

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers' College Press.

De Jong, O. (2004). Curriculum reform and new practices in classrooms and teacher courses. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education, 2*, 431–434.

Department of Education, Tasmania. (2002). *Essential Learnings framework 1*. Hobart: Author.

Donnelly, K. (2007). Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education: A critique. *Issues in Educational Research*, *17*(2), 183–206.

Edgar, D., & Edgar, P. (2008). *The new child. In search of smarter grown-ups.* Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing Pty Ltd.

Harris, C., & Marsh, C. J. (2005). *Curriculum developments in Australia: Promising initiatives, impasses and dead-ends*. New York: Open Book Publishers.

Hursh, D. (2008). *High-stakes testing and the decline of teaching and learning*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Johnstone, D. B. (2004). *A political culture of giving and the philanthropic support of higher education in international perspective*. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York.

Le Métias, J. (2003). International trends in curriculum frameworks. *The Educational Forum, 67*(3), 235–247

Lingard, B. (2010). Policy borrowing, policy learning: Testing times in Australian schooling. *Critical Studies in Education, 51*(2), 129–147.

Luke, A. (2010). Documenting reproduction and inequality: Revisiting Jean Anyon's 'social class and school knowledge'. *Curriculum Inquiry, 40*(1), 167–182.

Luke, A., Freebody, P., Shun, S., & Gopinathan, S. (2005). Towards research-based innovation and reform: Singapore schooling in transition. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 25*(1), 5–28.

Luke, A., Matters, G., Herschell, P., Grace, N., Barratt, R., & Land, R. (2000). *Draft New Basics Project Technical Paper, Version 3 April 2000*. Brisbane, QLD: Education Queensland.

Marginson, S. (1993). *Education and public policy in Australia.* Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge University Press.

Marginson, S., & Van der Wende, M. (2007). To rank or to be ranked: The impact of global rankings in higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *11*(3–4), 306–329.

Morgan-Klein, B., & Osborne, M. (2007). *The concepts and practices of lifelong learning*. Oxford: Routledge.

Mulford, B. (2007). *Quality Australian evidence on leadership for improved learning – The leadership challenge – Improving learning in schools.* Retrieved from http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2007/8

Mulford, B., & Edmunds, B. (2010). *Educational measurement in Australian schooling: Serving public purposes in Tasmanian primary schools*. Launceston, TAS: Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2008). *The timing and quality of early experiences combine to shape brain architecture* **(**Working paper #5)*.* Cambridge, MA: Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Retrieved from http://www.developingchild.net/pubs/wp/Timing_Quality_Early_Experiences.pdf

Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2005). *The inevitable corruption of indicators and educators through high-stakes testing*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University.

Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2008). Why has high-stakes testing so easily slipped into contemporary American life? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 672–676.

Press, F. (2008). Trends and debates in ECEC policy: A literature review canvassing policy developments in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden and the United Kingdom. In D. Brennan (Ed.). *Building an international research collaboration in early childhood education and care.* Background Materials for a Workshop funded by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), February 18–19th, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Rodwell, G. (2011). One newspaper's role in the demise of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings curriculum: Adding new understandings to Cohen's moral panic theory in analysing curriculum change. *Journal of Educational Change, 12*, 441–456.

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2004). *The global politics of educational borrowing and lending.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing times: The uses and abuses of assessment*. London: Routledge.

Thomson, S., Hillman, K., Wernert, N., Schmid, M., Buckley, S., & Munene, A. (2012). *Highlights from TIMSS & PIRLS 2011 from Australia's perspective.* Camberwell, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Tight, M. (2003). *Researching Higher Education.* Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

Townsend, T., & Bates, R. (2007). *Handbook of teacher education*: *Globalization, standards and professionalism in times of change.* Springer: Dordrecht.

Watson, J., Beswick, K., & Brown, N. (2012). *Educational research and professional learning in changing times.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Wigglesworth, G., Simpson, J., & Loakes, D. (2011). NAPLAN language assessments for indigenous children in remote communities: Issues and problems. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 34*(3), 320–343.

Wyn, J. (2006). Youth transitions to work and further education in Australia. In J. Chapman, P. Cartwright, & E. J. McGilp (Eds.). *Lifelong learning, participation and equity* (pp. 217–242). Dordrecht: Springer.