

One newspaper's role in the demise of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum: Adding new understandings to Cohen's moral panic theory in analyzing curriculum change

Grant Rodwell

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of print media in the development of systemwide curriculum change. Consideration is given to the nature and influence of newspapers on public opinion about curriculum change through the examination of the role of the *Mercury* in one period in the history of Tasmanian curriculum change. The application of Cohen's (*Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers* (3rd ed.), London: Routledge, 2002) work on moral panics in influencing public opinion is utilized as a theoretical framework.

Keywords Curriculum change · History of curriculum change · Media and curriculum change · Constructivist curriculum · Media and educational policy

Introduction

The Tasmanian Essential Learnings (ELs) Curriculum (2000–2006) (Tasmania Department of Education 2003) had a turbulent history particularly during the years of 2005 through 2006 when, following the state election, a new minister for education brought it to its end (Mulford and Edmunds 2010; Rodwell 2009a). The failure of systemic adoption of ELs included political factors (Rodwell 2009b) and policy dysfunction (Rodwell 2010), but there were also other causes. Any observer of the history of ELs will note the prominent attention the *Mercury*, Tasmania's premier daily newspaper, gave to the issue of the ELs rollout. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of that newspaper in the demise of ELs.

Based in Tasmania's most populous region and capital—Hobart—the *Mercury* is by far the state's widest circulating and most influential tabloid newspaper. The Roy Morgan Research (2008) organization reports that as of March 2007, in a survey

G. Rodwell (✉)
School of Education, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, NT, Australia
e-mail: grant.rodwell@cdu.edu.au

most immediate to the demise of ELs, the *Mercury* had an over 14 year statewide readership of 125,000 from Monday through Friday. It had a Saturday readership of 147,000 for the same cohort, and the *Sunday Tasmanian* had a readership of 139,000 for the same cohort (Roy Morgan Research 2008). This represents approximately one quarter of the Tasmanian population which was estimated at 500,000 in 2008 (Brown 2008).

Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Cohen's (2002) work on moral panics as a lens in understanding the role of the *Mercury* in this epoch in the history of Tasmanian curriculum change. Particularly during 2005 and continuing through the election of the ELs in March 2006, the *Mercury* ensured that perceived shortcomings with ELs were never far from public consciousness. Mulford and Edmunds (2010) report that during 2005 alone, there were

...fifty four articles related to the ELs curriculum in the *Mercury* newspaper. Five of these articles were positive, being published in the Learning section, Schools Guide and Back to School features. Twenty two articles addressed the appropriateness of ELs, Twenty seven focused on student reports – particularly the quality of the language, or jargon used to describe student achievement. One article expressed concern at the drift of enrolments to non-government schools while another chided the Secretary of the Department of Education for his use of jargon.¹ (p. 50)

Positioning the study in respect to Cohen's (2002) theory of moral panic provides a starting point for this paper, especially in respect to supporting research within the literature of media and policy. This is done in order to strengthen Cohen's theory in developing an understanding of how moral panic continues in relevance with our current understanding of failed systemic curriculum innovation. The particularly forceful public outrage associated with the history of ELs strongly suggests an analysis specifically associated with this phenomenon. It is necessary to understand ELs in its national and international context of constructivist-inspired, outcome-based education (OBE) commonly labeling this curriculum as Essential Learnings. Finally, an attempt will be made to analyze various *Mercury* articles positioning them within the moral panic paradigm in an effort to assess their role in creating moral panic concerning ELs amongst Tasmanians. This will provide further detail on factors contributing to the failed implementation of a systemwide curriculum.

Moral panic and educational policy

Although now considered outdated by some media and policy researchers, Cohen's (2002) work on moral panic provides a cogent platform upon which to begin an

¹ For an overall history of the *Mercury's* reporting on ELs, see Chap. 4 in Mulford and Edmunds (2010).

analysis of the *Mercury's* role in the demise of ELs. His benchmark study of mods and rockers in the 1960s, wherein he coined the term “moral panic,” was one of the early studies considering the role of the media in generating an outrage that went beyond simple public concern. Of course, moral panic is a relative term: Exactly what constitutes “moral panic” depends on the observer with some observers preferring the term, “public outrage,” and others “public concern.”

Cohen (2002) showed that a popular criticism of youth subcultures was that of a threat to law and order. This was manifest through the way the mass media represented them in the form of what Cohen calls the “control culture.” Largely, this refers to the media sensationalizing an event followed by a call for punishment in persecuting the offenders. Eldridge et al. (1997) commented that “in the process and as part of the dramatic element, scapegoats and folk devils are located and are woven into the narrative” (p. 61). The paradigm embodies the media’s role in whipping up moral panic in society at large for purposes other than seeking an end to the actual perceived offending group of people or event (usually, there are associated political objectives). However, nearly 40 years have passed since Cohen’s (2002) study was originally published. Since then, a variety of researchers from a variety of disciplines have used Cohen’s paradigm to investigate, among other things, the role of pressure groups on public policy. Understandably during recent decades, Cohen’s paradigm has undergone considerable modification and updating. Yet, it continues as a fruitful platform upon which to begin analysis of some educational policies such as ELs.

The highly effective media manipulation by pressure groups was one factor prompting McRobbie and Thornton (1995) to argue that the moral panic model as presented by Cohen (2002) needed updating. These pressure groups provide a constant stream of information and sound bites and are always ready to wheel out experts to enter into television and radio discussions. The authors note that moral panic is now a term regularly used by journalists to describe a process which politicians, commercial promoters, and the media habitually attempt to incite. The authors go on to contend that “moral panics seem to guarantee the kind of emotional involvement that keeps up the interest of, not just tabloid, but [also] broadsheet newspapers (McRobbie and Thornton, p. 559). Consequently, this paper utilizes more recent research on the role of the media on shaping educational policy linking it to Cohen’s (2002) theory.

More recently, Sarah Cassidy (2008), education correspondent for the *Independent*, commented on the latest reports of the primary review led by Cambridge University describing how moral panic is shaping educational policy. The review, reflecting the largest review of primary education in England in 40 years, concluded that “primary school education has been damaged by...[a] mixture of ‘moral panic,’ ‘policy hysteria’ and ‘fad theory’ [and] has had a devastating effect on primary schools in England” (p. 5). Clearly, this illustrates some parallels with ELs. However, public concern regarding primary reforms in the United Kingdom was more concerned with a perceived narrow curriculum and test-based approach rather than the OBE constructivist-inspired ELs curriculum.

ELs and its national and international context

In 2000, Paula Wriedt, the Tasmanian minister for education, gave instructions for her department to begin the development of a K-10 statewide curriculum that was soon to become known as Essential Learnings (ELs). Underpinned by constructivist pedagogy, the curriculum was integrated doing away with traditional subjects, or disciplines, such as mathematics, science, English, and history, and replacing these with an integrated, enquiry-based curriculum supported by OBE. These were the first attempts in Tasmania at a statewide K-10 curriculum and at a major curriculum change in nearly 20 years. The move reflected a new wave of confidence by the ruling Tasmanian Labor Party. The comfortable return of Labor at the 2002 state election suggested that the ELs development and implementation was meeting the approval of the Tasmanian public at large. However, by 2005 with faltering administration, the ELs rollout began to be burdened by political and public controversy. Many of the problems centered on reporting procedures particularly in association with the newly introduced computerized student assessment and reporting information system (SARIS) and the use of language that many parents and potential employers allegedly could not understand.

Tasmanian opposition politicians began seeing political advantage in the situation. By 2005, this concern and political grasping snowballed into public outrage in many quarters of Tasmanian society including sections of the teaching service. After a worrying few days during the March 2006 state election, often referred to as the ELs election, Wriedt eventually was returned but with a drastically reduced vote in her electorate. Premier Paul Lennon stripped her of the education portfolio and, consequently soon after, the new minister for education, David Bartlett, scrapped the curriculum in a drive to get ELs off the front pages of the newspapers. Within months, he announced the end of ELs and the consequent development of his Tasmanian curriculum.

In media talk, particularly for the years of 2005–2006 in Tasmania, ELs was “a story with legs.” But this was not the first time that the *Mercury* had played a large role in “sinking” a state school curriculum in Tasmania. A similar situation occurred in 1909 (see Rodwell 1992).

ELs was one of a number of essential learning curricula developed by Australian states and territories, but it was the only one to be rejected by the voting public. In Australia during the early 21st century, the essential learnings curriculum was fast becoming mainstream in Australian schools with only New South Wales and Western Australia being the only states not implementing some form of the curriculum. ELs was mandatory for all Tasmanian state schools. Certainly, ELs was the most radical of the essential learnings curricula put in place by the various Australian state and territory educational authorities. All other states and territories which implemented essential learning curricula maintained traditional subjects as the key learning areas (Graham 2005). Thus, by 2006, the year that the ELs curriculum was discontinued in favor of a more conservative approach, essential learnings was far from being regarded as radical on a national level even in spite of difficulties associated with integrated curricula as noted by researchers such as Dowden (2007).

Certainly on an international level, applicable lessons for ELs planners and the government were evident. For example, the fate of curriculum reform in Quebec offered a lesson for the Tasmanian planners on the fate of OBE and constructivist-inspired curricula. Henchey (1999) described the developments in Quebec during their early phases. *Inter alia*, he reported that this reformist, integrated curriculum with its emphasis on communication technologies embraced a “rethinking of the focus and essential content of various subject areas,” and an “emphasis on cross-curricular and interdisciplinary learning” (p. 231). It especially embodied “new approaches to assessment and reporting” (p. 231).

What was the fate of the Quebec developments? In a history that parallels that of ELs, CBC News announced on June 1, 2007, that “after years of complaints from parents and teachers, Quebec has backed away from an unpopular curriculum reform” (“Quebec restores percentage grades on report cards” 2007, para. 1). These developments occurred at the same time as the demise of ELs. Such was the popular feeling against the loss of traditional subjects and the consequent introduction of constructivist-inspired, integrated curricula where, in contrast to some countries, curriculum authorities are supported by legislation to safeguard the traditional school subject disciplines. For example, in the United Kingdom the national curriculum enshrines the disciplines (British Council n.d.). The history of ELs in Tasmania is remarkably similar to mandated curriculum change in Quebec.

In the context of what occurred in Quebec and Tasmania, this paper should observe what happened in Western Australia and elsewhere in the world with respect to OBE-based curricula. Berlach and O’Neill (2008) remind readers that “epistemic imperatives lie at the heart of any [curriculum] change” (p. 49), and unless these are well considered at the planning stage, the whole curriculum change effort is likely to break down at the school level. They illustrate that when the Western Australia Curriculum Council began developing its K-10, OBE-based curriculum into the high-stakes years of schooling (years 11 and 12), strong opposition began to emerge to the point that the OBE-based curriculum was overturned. The authors argue that a base cause for failure to roll out the curriculum successfully came because “epistemic imperatives” were not sorted out at the planning stage: Put simply, there was little agreement and common understanding in schools and the community about key terminology and language embodied in the curriculum. Moreover, the authors show that this same failure to adhere to epistemic imperatives at the curriculum planning stage led to the demise of similar curriculum change efforts in New Zealand, South Africa, and the US.

ELs and mediatizing educational policy

During the ELs years in Tasmania, at least two prominent international education journals devoted entire issues to research on the media and educational policy (see *Journal of Educational Policy*, 2004, Volume 19, Issue 3; *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2007, Volume 82, Issue 1). In his introduction to the May 2004 edition of the *Journal of Educational Policy*, Pat Thomson quipped that “it used to be a standing joke among head teachers in Australia that one had to buy the Sunday

newspapers to find out about changes in education policy” (Thomson 2004, p. 251). This and other related research is important in reconfiguring Cohen’s (2002) moral panic theory in order to explain the *Mercury’s* role in the demise of ELs.

Clearly, the media’s campaign against ELs was not a phenomenon peculiar to Tasmanian education policy. Indeed, Haas (2007) shows how “there is ample evidence that news media influence[s] public perceptions” (p. 63). According to Haas, “media research provides evidence that news pieces influence which people and issues the public thinks about, as well as how they perceive them” (p. 64).

It is not uncommon for the media to assume the position of a proactive driver in educational policy in the sense that educational policy is fashioned to appeal to the media as described by Lingard and Rawolle (2004). However, in the case of ELs, the impression is given that the print media, particularly that of the *Mercury* in its commentary and criticism of ELs, certainly had a large impact on the fate of ELs but did not adopt the perspective of the government shaping education policy to appeal to the media in a proactive manner. Rather, it included government reactions to public criticism of ELs fending off criticism of the ELs policy.

The *Mercury’s* attack on ELs conformed to a number of distinct strategies comprising aspects of Cohen’s (2002) moral panic paradigm that have been highlighted in other research (see for example McRobbie and Thornton 1995, on the role of the media in shaping policy). First, the *Mercury* helped create public outrage and spectacle around ELs. It linked ELs with disgruntled parents, employers, and impending economic ruin for the state. It highlighted problems associated with reporting to parents. It created a crisis as a political act through an appeal to scientific, rational, and neutral discourse. It reported on how ELs might offend Christian ethics. And finally in an exposé journalistic fashion, it portrayed in-school resisters as being freedom fighters against an authoritarian government bureaucracy. Collectively, these various aspects of the *Mercury’s* influence on the demise of ELs significantly outline a new understanding of Cohen’s (2002) moral panic paradigm and its relation to understanding curriculum change.

Generating public outrage through political spectacle

In Cohen’s (2002) moral panic paradigm, the media’s generating public outrage is of pivotal importance. Anderson (2007) argues that “to understand the role of the media in schooling and school reform, it is necessary to examine how the media collude in the construction of the political spectacle” (p. 103). He goes on to show that the media uses spectacle to generate points of view, perceptions, anxieties, aspirations, and strategies to strengthen, or undermine, support for specific educational policies, practices, and ideologies. He illustrates the role of the media on school reform policies and practices showing implications for power and how this operates in the context of the media spectacle. In Tasmania, much of this public concern was centered on literacy and numeracy attainment along with the alleged, nonsensical OBE language.

In June 2006, Annie Warburton, compere of the popular Tasmania’s ABC Nights radio and contributor to the *Sunday Tasmanian*, devoted a weekly article to the

perceived detrimental results of OBE and its associated ELs curriculum on children's standards of literacy attainment. Alleged falling literacy standards and the manner in which the schools were failing Tasmanian children and parents were a common theme in Warburton's contribution to the *Sunday Tasmanian*:

And now darkness descended on the land and the newspapers and the books and the magazines were full of poor spelling and bad grammar and incomprehensible jargon, yea, even unto the electronic media and online and a voice cried out in the wilderness: who will deliver us from this plague? But the teachers heeded it not, for in truth they had forgotten how to spell, nor could they punctuate or parse, nor could they make a verb agree with its subject, nor indeed could they tell a pronoun from an adjective.... And the politicians, who had been taught by the teachers and knew no better, came to them in unholy alliance and together they begat the doctrine that all children were equal at everything and none should ever be allowed to experience "failure"; this became known as "Outcomes-Based Education." (Warburton 2006b, para. 3)

Thomas (2006) draws our attention to how the media, particularly the print media through its news columns, orchestrates a "campaign to create a crisis of confidence" in the state system of education (p. 31). This is exactly what Warburton's articles did. Her messages included carefully crafted sentences in satirical prose. Due to its popular appeal, it was reprinted in the Australian Association of Reading Teachers (AART) newsletter (Warburton 2006b; see also Australian Association of Reading Teachers 2006).

Anderson (2007) draws our attention to the work done by Edelman (1977, 1988) in analyzing the impact of the media on policy formation and "creating the political spectacle" (p. 103). Edelman (1988) focused on the relationship between language and politics and what he called the "linguistic structuring of social problems" (p. 80). "How the problem is named involves alternative scenarios, each with its own facts, value judgments, and emotions" (Edelman 1988, p. 29). Of course, this is exactly what Warburton does through her astute use of satirical prose. She very effectively structures the problem of falling literacy standards and the effect this has on society at large.

As Edelman (1988) shows, "A crisis, like all news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; the appearance of the crisis is a political act, not a recognition or rare situation" (p. 31). If not actually creating the crisis concerned with falling literacy standards in Tasmania, Warburton is certainly fueling the crisis with her *Sunday Tasmanian* article. First, she linked Tasmania's falling literacy standards amidst the public outrage associated with OBE. The next step was linking this supposed malaise with ELs.

In her second article in the *Sunday Tasmanian*, Warburton claimed in reference to her previous article, "I've had a greater response to my last column than to anything else I've ever produced, for radio or print, locally or nationally" (Warburton 2006a, para. 3). In this article, she linked falling literacy standards with ELs. So, in the popular Tasmanian mind, ELs was looming as a major driver in the decline of literacy standards.

Linking ELs with disgruntled employers and impending economic ruin

Accompanying the rollout of SARIS into all Tasmanian schools in 2005 was moderated assessment and standardized reporting procedures according to criteria determined by the Department of Education. Many Tasmanian parents and business groups objected to the report cards because of the perceived unintelligible language. For example, an April 2006 *Mercury* article by Duncan claimed:

Ms. Branch [President of the Tasmanian Council of State Schools Parents and Friends Association] said a common complaint had been the report's confusing language.

"We need to get this right," she said. "Parents need to know if their children are learning, or not." (Duncan 2006, p. 5)

Confusing language was a difficulty noted by Berlach and O'Neill (2008) with the Western Australia OBE-grounded curriculum. But with ELs, employer groups also objected to them for failing to show clearly and precisely what exiting students had achieved at school. During 2005, the *Mercury's* attack on ELs was relentless. Heather Low Choy (2005b) headlined the following article in the tabloid representing employer dissatisfaction with ELs: "Business Hits ELs Reports: Makes No Sense, Say Employers." She reported that Damon Thomas, chief executive of the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI), was particularly critical of the ELs report cards because they did not use the terms maths, science, and English. Instead, students including exiting year 10 students were being assessed on such things as "being numerate," "acting democratically," "thinking reflectively," and "being arts literate" (Low Choy 2005b, para. 5). Thomas was particularly critical of the department's use of a jargon buster for parents to interpret the school reports (Low Choy 2005b).

Later in the same article, Low Choy (2005b) reported on Craig Ransley's views on the ELs report cards. He was director of one of the "state's top human resource firms" (para. 3). While Ransley's views on the contents of the ELs report cards as a whole were very condemnatory, his last sentence in the Low Choy article held particular political venom stimulating an increase in political comment and outrage in Tasmanian society at large. He accused the Department of Education of designing report cards in order to mask accountability issues in respect of low literacy and numeracy scores.² Thus, accusations of conspiracy now entered the public discourse of the ELs imbroglio. Of course, this was a grave charge. Presumably, Ransley was talking about the relative poor standards that Tasmanian children were showing in national literacy and numeracy tests. But for many Tasmanians, this was a serious accusation and had considerable credence particularly for supporters of the Liberal

² Historically, Tasmanian students have always fared poorly in national comparisons of literacy and numeracy attainment. Demographically, Tasmania is an aging population with young families drifting to the mainland for employment opportunities and older people moving to the island for retirement. It is also the most regional and least urbanized of Australian states and territories. During the years of the ELs, the Department of Education published an annual *Literacy and Numeracy Plan for Schools* outlining the state's progress in literacy and numeracy achievement with explanations of demographic trends (see <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/annualreport/04-05/pre-compulsory/initiatives/achievement>).

Opposition who had much of its supporter base in business organizations such as the TCCI.

During mid-2005, the department published its jargon buster on its website. Writing in the *Mercury* in September 2005, Low Choy headed her article as “Dud Decoder of Courses Jargon.” She contended that parents who consulted the jargon buster were left “more bamboozled” with a leading language expert saying this was no surprise (Low Choy 2005c, p. 5). In support of her argument, she quoted Professor Roly Sussex from the University of Queensland. According to Low Choy (2005c), Sussex said that most parents would find the jargon buster unintelligible. In the ultimate insult for a department of education, he suggested the department hand its literature over to a professional editor for a rewrite. This was a suggestion that carried loaded inferences in respect to the department’s ability to write plain English. But, when Low Choy reminded Tasmanians that ELs was “Education Minister, Paula Wriedt’s ‘baby’” (Low Choy 2005c, para. 1), she was ensuring that in the popular Tasmanian mind, the jargon was not seen as the creation of some anonymous bureaucrat but rather a politician who would soon be facing an election. Further, she argued that Wriedt had “long been talking it [ELs] up as a change for the better” (Low Choy 2005c, para. 2), and that earlier in 2005, Wriedt stated that her department had spent a lot of time trying to make the ELs “reports user friendly” (Low Choy 2005c, para. 2).

A combination of Ransley’s statement regarding his involvement with a government cover-up, Low Choy’s inclusion of this in her article, and Warburton’s related writings yielded a sophisticated political act. Edelman (1977) demonstrated in his work with language, the media, and politics that “the linguistic evocation of enemies and the displacement of targets” (p. 26)—in this case the alleged conspiracy behind the ELs report cards, falling literacy and numeracy standards, and the inability of the department to portray easily understood ELs language to the public—is a subtle, yet powerful, political act. As Anderson (2007) argues, “Those with the power to manage can cast ... progressive teaching methods ... and so forth, as the villains in educational reform” (pp. 108–109). This displaces “attention from other possible actors and events,” and “limiting the demand for accountability to schools displaces other targets that escape attention” (Anderson 2007, p. 109). Thus, Ransley’s reported comments ensured that attention on falling literacy and numeracy standards were not focused on any other causal factor.

Thomas (2006) draws our attention to the fact that much of the research on the influence of the media on educational policy has to do with agenda-setting (see Baker 1994; Cunningham 1992). This was clearly the case with the jargon buster episode in the ELs saga. Other researchers also draw our attention to the way in which research has focused on news and current affairs coverage as agenda-setting agents (Bell and Garrett 1998). Once the *Mercury* had set the agenda, it was very difficult to break this mold which required considerable time and effort and, thus, distracted from the task of managing the development and rollout of ELs. The distraction that the print media reports had was confirmed by many including an ELs planning officer and group of Tasmanian school principals. In a focus group of school principals, one Launceston primary school principal confirmed, “Teachers

were very distracted by the media in their implementation of ELs for some considerable time.”

Creating a crisis as a political act through an appeal to scientific rational and neutral discourse

During the history of the development and rollout of ELs, the Howard coalition government was in power in Canberra, and the period was characterized by incessant federal and state bickering. This squabbling came to a head with the publication of *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula* in 2005 (Donnelly et al. 2005). For the *Mercury*, this report showed Tasmania’s controversial ELs curriculum remained the worst primary school curriculum in Australia. Low Choy reminded Tasmanians the report “blasted” aspects of ELs as being “vague and lacking academic rigor” and also identified the curriculum as being at the “bottom of the class in all three subject areas” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 3) as compared with curricula in other Australian education jurisdictions. Low Choy wrote that “Dr. Nelson [the federal coalition minister for education] has been critical of ELs, demanding that Tasmania’s Education Department prepare ‘plain English’ report cards for students in addition to ELs-based report cards” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 3).

Indeed, in the same article, Wriedt accused the report’s author, Dr. Kevin Donnelly, of political bias (Low Choy 2005a, para. 4). In this same article, Donnelly retaliated to such claims by declaring that four highly respected and qualified academics contributed to the report. “They include the eminently respected former head of the Mathematics Association of Australia and an acknowledged primary school science expert who has been awarded international travel for her work” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 4). Ironically, Donnelly claimed, “Education is too important for our young people to play politics with” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 7).

Low Choy reminded Tasmanians that the ELs curriculum had been under fire for the past month “drawing heavy criticism from parents, teachers, students, language experts and the business community” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 9). Despite this criticism, “Ms. Wriedt has continued to champion ELs, implemented in all state schools this year” (Low Choy 2005a, para. 10).

Low Choy (2005a) attempted to establish *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula* as an independent referee and authority on Australian curricula. The report rated the ELs curricula for mathematics, science, and English as the worst in Australia (Low Choy 2005a). Low Choy (2005a) indicated how Donnelly drew comparisons between the “all-out approach” to ELs in Tasmania and the more conservative approach to essential learnings employed in the Victorian curriculum (Low Choy 2005a, para. 6). “But unlike ... Tasmania there is a greater recognition of the importance of the academic disciplines,” he argued (Low Choy 2005a, para. 6).

No doubt mindful of the forthcoming 2007 federal election and the marginal Tasmanian seats of Bass and Braddon and an even more imminent state election, Nelson used the occasion of the release of *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula* to wage yet another assault on the Tasmanian Government and its ELs

program. He stated that he had found curricula in countries like England, Singapore, and Japan to be outstripping Australia's performance in primary schools, particularly in mathematics and science (Low Choy 2005a). Low Choy (2005a) reported how Nelson pointed out that Australia's education system has been infected by "OBE jargon," and "needs to return to a much more concise, prescriptive syllabus ... [where] parents can understand and assess the progress of children on a year-to-year basis" (Low Choy 2005a, para. 12).

Low Choy gave no space in her article to Donnelly's career in supporting and shaping conservative education policy. Indeed, since the election of the Howard government in 1996, Donnelly was occupied with research and writing for groups such as the Menzies Institute, the Melbourne-based conservative think tank (Macintyre 2007). Donnelly was also a regular correspondent with the *Australian*, Australia's only national newspaper, and as with the *Mercury*, owned by the Murdoch group. The manner in which the *Mercury* used this think tank research to cover political interest with a discourse of rational policy analysis is precisely the subject of research by Haas (2007). He shows that the media often creates a crisis as a political act through an appeal to scientific, rational, and neutral discourse. Here, we see the *Mercury* attempting to gain political advantage through an appeal to the findings of a supposedly politically agnostic Howard government report in the form of *Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula* (Donnelly et al. 2005). Of course, this report is no more politically neutral than is the *Mercury*. But to be fair, the report did at least develop a research methodology for its work, however debatable that might have been.

Offending Christian ethics

Lugg (2000) has shown how educational policymakers in the US have long sought to portray through the media how their policies concur with Christian ethics. Not surprisingly, media reports showing how existing educational policy offends Christian ethics place such policies in severe negative light for many in countries such as the US and Australia. This is embedded in the moral panic paradigm as Christian elements are introduced into the cause of the supposed outrage.

The *Mercury's* attack on ELs included an article showing how certain parents from Tasmanian Christian groups found exception with ELs (Paine 2005). For example, in the article headed "Essential Learnings Debate Turns Spiritual," a Tasmanian relief teacher criticized ELs "for requiring her to assess a child's spirituality" (Paine 2005, para. 5). The teacher said she had had several concerns about the ELs curriculum since her first involvement 5 years previously. She said that she "also worried that children would believe 'nothing was right or wrong' under the new inquiry-based system that encouraged children to think for themselves" (para. 6). She questioned what "ethical behaviour" was actually claiming when "people have different views of what's ethical" (para. 7). When asking about teaching and assessing values, she referenced one woman's response that "knowledge and skills should come before inquiry-based thinking" (para. 8). She, however, claimed that she could not get a "good" answer to this inquiry (para. 10).

In the same *Mercury* article, Wriedt further argued that the criticism that the basics were “neglected was ridiculous” (Paine 2005, para. 10). “To suggest we would put a curriculum in place that would not teach the basics, the reading, writing and maths, is laughable” (para. 10). Wriedt reminded *Mercury* readers that she, herself, was “a parent and my son is getting some of those basics in kindergarten, taught in a context that children can understand” (para. 12).

Portraying resisters as freedom fighters against an authoritarian government bureaucracy

In its apparent drive to increase public awareness of the perceived deficiencies in ELs, the *Mercury* was also able to invent some new media strategies—or perhaps, refine some older ones that dated back to the American muckraker era (Rounds 2002). During 2005 and early 2006, the *Mercury* seemed intent on uncovering teacher discontent with ELs, but the department placed a ban on teachers speaking to the media. First, the *Mercury* quoted Peter Gutwein, Opposition spokesperson for education, showing how this alleged authoritarian policy was detrimental to informed debate (Low Choy 2005d). He claimed that, “It has become patently obvious during the recent debate over the ridiculous and confusing ELs jargon that teachers are not able to speak freely on this critical issue” (Low Choy 2005d, para. 6). With even greater appeal to the popular psyche in an almost undercover-type operation, the *Mercury* gathered stories concerning teacher discontent with ELs echoing wonderful, and at times devious, American exposé journalism of a 100 years earlier (Rounds 2002).

There was no doubt that many teachers were strongly opposed to ELs regardless of their motivation. In an article headed, “ELs Rubbish, Say Teachers: Students Now Learning Less,” Low Choy (2005d) wrote, “Teachers say Tasmanian students are learning less under the Education Department’s controversial new Essential Learnings curriculum” (para. 6). Two state teachers defied departmental rules of speaking out about ELs with one secondary teacher claiming that most teachers would like to see ELs abolished. “When the Education Department’s enforcers are around, we toe the party line, but in the staffroom we’re saying what rubbish ELs is” (para. 8). Another teacher, “with almost 30 years’ experience,” claimed that most teachers hoped ELs would collapse “before it does too much damage” (para. 9). He then condemned “public service rules [that] prevent[ed] teachers talking to the media” (para. 11). “It’s like Chairman Mao’s cultural revolution. You can’t have a dissenting view” (Low Choy 2005d, para. 12).

A primary school teacher with almost 30 years of teaching experience claimed that “more students would slip through the cracks under the new system” (Low Choy 2005d, para. 13). She further stated, “I don’t think the kids are learning nearly as much as they did before ELs came in” (Low Choy 2005d, para. 13). Both teachers took issue with the department’s use of jargon in ELs documents with Low Choy reminding readers that the department had been criticized the previous week for using convoluted jargon to explain ELs. Low Choy claimed that the department admitted that “it could do better, but said jargon was professional language”

(para. 13). These two interviewed teachers strongly disagreed on the intelligibility of the jargon (Low Choy 2005d).

Indeed, disaffected teachers found a firm ally in the *Mercury*. The discourse from the newspaper took a subtle, but effectual turn then portraying disaffected teachers as embattled freedom fighters against a repressive Department of Education. Public outrage was increasingly fueled concerning ELs as professionals were portrayed as guardians of Tasmanian educational standards that were under attack by the reckless government and its ELs curriculum.

A focus group of school principals confirmed the distracting influence of the press on what they were trying to achieve in their schools with ELs. However, they insisted that this was much worse in the south than in the north of the state where the *Mercury* did not have the same level of readership.

The Department of Education's management of the media

Anderson (2007) highlights implications for school practitioners and school reform by showing that educational policymakers must be aware of the influence of the media on attempts to achieve and be proactive in offsetting negative influences. ELs planners always seemed to be on the back foot as the media waged campaigns against their goals for achievement.

Anderson (2007) argues that educationists should better understand, and perhaps directly intervene, in media representation of educational issues and policy. While in hindsight, it is a truism now to argue that the ELs planners should have been more proactive in dealing with the media, thus underscoring the point that ELs planners often showed their naivety in what was the department's first attempt at systemwide curriculum change in decades.

Conclusions

The *Mercury* tied its anti-ELs discourse to proven strategies that have been associated with Cohen's (2002) work on moral panics using tried and proven methods to shape Tasmanian education policy. The approaches taken in the *Mercury* lacked subtlety and were seemingly related to government planners and their inability to assume control of public discourse. This was principally brought about by the fact that ELs was so radical in respect to its views on desirable knowledge for children.

Certainly, the moral panic paradigm forms an adequate platform upon which to investigate the public outrage associated with ELs. Yet, this paper has demonstrated that Cohen's (2002) moral panic paradigm requires modifications as suggested by more recent research. As educational policy generally and curriculum policy specifically become more politicized and the subject of public concern, this modified moral panic paradigm increasingly will afford a relevant framework for further research. However, this paper has demonstrated that the moral panic

paradigm is not constant and often undergoes change providing researchers with constantly changing perspectives and challenges.

As McRobbie and Thornton (1995) have noted, the paradigm in itself is outdated requiring additional explanatory perspectives. Consequently, this paper has looked to more recent research dealing with mediatization of educational policy. It has shown how the *Mercury* helped create public outrage and spectacle around ELs. But in committing so many mistakes through inadequate planning, ELs planners were as much responsible for this as was the media. Through their manifest inability to manage the change effort, ELs planners created a climate of dissatisfaction in the community at large providing disgruntled parents and employers with an allegedly intelligible language. For its detractors, ELs would bring economic ruin for the state furnishing a generation of poorly educated students.

Moreover, the *Mercury* further created public outrage and spectacle through highlighted problems associated with reporting processes. It created a crisis as a political act through an appeal to disgruntled parents and employers in respect to the ELs reporting process and the language used in the reporting process. It also appealed to allegedly scientific rationale and neutral discourse—the think tank paradigm. It reported on how ELs might offend Christian ethics. And finally, through portraying in-school resisters as being freedom fighters against an authoritarian government bureaucracy in an exposé journalistic fashion, it portrayed ELs and planners in dark, authoritarian tones.

There are clear implications here for curriculum planners. Increasingly, they will need to understand, manage, and work with the media. The media can influence powerfully the nature of educational policy. Herein lies an ever-increasing area of research as curriculum policy is thrashed out in the media in an ever-changing manner.

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