The crisis discourse of a wicked policy problem: vocational skills training in Australia

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Abstract In 2007 the Rudd Labor government in Australia introduced significant changes to education policy for the nation. The *Skilling Australia's Future* (Rudd et al. Skilling Australia for the future. Election 2007 policy document, 2007) policy was meant to redress a perceived failure by the previous Howard federal Liberal-National Coalition governments to fund and manage vocational skills training adequately. The *Skilling Australia's Future* policy established a number of areas for immediate action. This paper looks at one of these areas from the policy document, namely, the Rudd government's plan for addressing skills shortages (Rudd et al. 2007, pp. 4–9) through the establishment of Trade Training Centres in schools. The policy is analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis, featuring the semiotic concept of intertextuality. Findings from the application of this method suggest that *Skilling Australia's Future* (2007) belongs within a history of like-minded policy and, although a new direction is provided by the allocation of Trade Training Centres to selected high schools, the policy is not clearly separable from the market-driven discourse that has pervaded education policy since the 1990s.

Keywords Policy · Vocational education · Skills shortages · Trade training centres

Introduction

A sense of urgency inhered in the Australian Rudd Labor government's education policies. According to Gonczi (2008) the policy entitled *Skilling Australia for the Future* (ALP 2007) was part of a succession of policy documents which suggested that Australia's economic prosperity depended upon the productivity of the individual, who was imagined to be well trained and highly skilled. *Skilling*

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Australia for the Future (hereafter *SAF*; Rudd et al. 2007) and associated Trade Training Centre (hereafter TTC) policies were simultaneously part of this education revolution and part of a history of policies designed to deal with the crucial issues of training and productivity, especially in relation to the articulation between secondary schools and higher education (Crump 2007). The *SAF* policy established a number of areas for immediate action. This paper looks at one of these areas, namely the plan for addressing skills shortages (*SAF* 2007, pp. 4–9) through the establishment of TTCs in schools. This paper argues that the concept of skills shortages has a history in terms of workplace reform and exemplifies the struggle that governments experience when writing policy in this area. The concept of skills shortages also heightens the Labor government's sense of urgency in policy reform and provides the government with the measurements to drive policy articulation using the perception of policy crisis (Kenway 2008).

The paper derives from early research undertaken in Phase 1 of a research project which examines *SAF* and seeks to provide some preliminary answers to the question: *Why, in the present global context has the Federal Government focused on Trade Centres for all Australian secondary schools?* Phase 2 of the project asks the question: *How is this policy enacted in educational communities?* A preliminary reading of *SAF* suggests that this policy makes the claim that previous Howard Federal Coalition governments have neglected vocational education and training, and that this has led to skills shortages and risk to the nation's economic productivity. The policy argues that this risk must be managed and contained, yet the measurement of skills shortages used by the policy is somewhat narrowed.

The paper employs poststructural policy analysis, and more particularly, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate this claim further. One CDA method in particular is described and applied. This method uses the semiotic concept of intertextuality to examine the relationship between this policy and other, similar policies. Intertextuality is the process whereby one text refers endlessly to other texts (their intertexts) and to their processes of social and cultural production (Fox 1995). Intertextual analysis is the process whereby the analyst of one text is initiated into the processes and history of that text's production.

From such analysis, the point is made in this paper that the *SAF* policy and the skills shortages it describes belong to a history of similar policies, and can be considered to be a 'wicked' policy problem (Rittel and Weber 1973; Mitroff 1983; McKay 1990; Allen 2004). A wicked policy problem refers to problems where there are no single or simple answers. Rather, there are interconnected sets of problems, which often are not fully understood by policy makers (Allen 2004). Wicked policy problems in relation to education for example, address questions such as social justice and injustice, and/or the proper relationship between individuals in schools and the state. These are deep philosophical, economic, cultural and social questions that do not yet have a finished and definitive policy solution. The *SAF* policy is a wicked policy problem because there have been years of debate around the topic of vocational education and issues of productivity and the debate remains unsettled, if not at times, exaggerated. The Labor government's choice to place TTCs in schools overlooks some of the deep, interconnected sets of problems within the issue of skills shortages and will create a new set of interconnected problems for the issue.

This paper argues that the Federal Labor government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd provided TTCs in schools as a means to offset skills shortages and the perceived earlier neglect of this area by the Howard Coalition governments. The paper first examines a method suitable to researching both current and past federal government vocational training policies simultaneously. There is a discussion of poststructural policy analysis using CDA and particularly, the semiotic tool of intertextuality. The paper then turns to an analysis of the policy using this method and makes a number of observations of the policy, which are then examined in terms of the language of the policy. The paper then concludes that the *SAF* policy is little different from preceding policies in this area, but that the policy does allow for a new set of problems and new actors to emerge within this policy process.

Researching vocational education policy in new times

Analysis of the *SAF* policy requires a method that will both capture the lengthy history of vocational education in Australia and account for the policy imperatives of a Labor government, which replaced 11 years of conservative rule. The Rudd Labor government's *SAF* policy was part of a bigger, wicked policy problem around vocational education that has a history of centuries of social reading and action (Fox 1995; Wodak and Ludwig 1999; Stevenson 2007) surrounding it. At the same time, the *SAF* (Rudd et al. 2007) policy seems to have been heavily influenced by an imminent skills crisis caused, it claimed, by the Howard Coalition government's neglect of problems in vocational education and training. Rudd et al. (2007) argue consistently in the pages of the *SAF* policy that the previous Liberal National Party Coalition governments were heavily influenced by worldwide trends towards neoliberalism; small government and user pay systems of education. They argue that this in effect meant that the Howard Federal Coalition governments did not intervene adequately enough to prevent the crisis that the Federal Rudd Labor government claimed to exist, and to be in need of redress.

Poststructural policy analysis, using the tools of CDA and more particularly the semiotic feature of intertextuality, can capture both the long history of policy development in this area and the more recent imperatives.

This paper acknowledges the polarised debate surrounding policy analysis. Conventionally, policy analysis has examined the policy cycle of context and content of the policy, the implementation of the policy and the outcomes of the policy; or, the sequence and set of routines formally described as ideation, realisation and evaluation or informally, as thinking, doing and testing. This paper rejects analyses of this kind as technicist and instead calls for an analysis that best suits the problem under investigation (Taylor 1997). This is because working with earlier cyclical policy models (Anderson 1974; Bridgman and Davies 2004; Dale 1989; Ham and Hill 1984; Lingard 1993; Wilenski 1986) is often an unsatisfactory experience, as policy implementation is not always neat, cyclical or linear. This paper argues that the policy process is always messy, because there is rarely the opportunity to read and/or implement the policy text in one, definitive way (Ball 1993). This is because a policy text relies on the context of its linguistic construction

and on the context of its implementation. The context of a policy can be revealed through the social reading of the text and within the constitution of the language meant to describe this context. Metalingual clues and codes encourage the reader to recognise, understand and question what the text is saying. The key point always is though, that policy analysis brings to the surface the role of state activity (Lingard 1993) as a site of struggle in each stage of the policy process.

The social process of policy analysis then, becomes complicated with the contradictions implicit within discourse. Indeed, Thomas (2006) argues that it is important to analyse the relationships between discourse and ideology in order to gain a better understanding of a policy and to determine who benefits from the policy. Taylor (2004) suggests that policy texts document multiple and competing discourses and highlight marginalised and hybrid discourse. Policy texts document the discursive shifts emerging within a policy problem and allow us to see the discourse that is lost in the process. It is for these reasons that CDA is a method which can be employed by policy analysts.

CDA looks at the ways in which texts construct representations of the world. There is a particular emphasis on the manner in which texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power (Janks 1997). Taylor argues that CDA is particularly relevant to policy analysis.

> … because it allows investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and how language works *within* power relations. CDA provides a framework for *systematic* analysis-researchers can go beyond speculation and demonstrate how policy texts work. As Fairclough (2001) puts it '… the interdiscursive work of the text materializes in its linguistic and other semiotic features' (1997, p. 234).

Intertextuality is a linguistic and semiotic feature of all texts which permits the analyst to see the 'interdiscursive work' (Taylor 1997, p. 234) of a text (McHoul 1984). Intertextuality draws on the work of Foucault (1976), Derrida (1976), Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Cixous (1990) to determine the process 'whereby one text plays upon other texts, the ways in which texts refer endlessly to further elements within the realm of cultural production' (Fox 1995, p. 1). This is because signifiers refer to other signifiers and, more importantly, signifiers show the manner in which human subjects are created in ways which '… supersede earlier versions of rationality' (Fox 1995, p. 4). The method permits the researcher to investigate the intertext using texts that are similar, as well as those that are different. In the case of the policy under review the intertexts chosen were some of the texts which preceded the policy: reports on the vocational education in schools environment, which derived from a concern about skills shortages and reports about this environment, especially in relation to vocational training in schools, and issues with the provision of VET services more generally.

Intertextuality works as a method for this paper because it seeks to show the long history of reform in vocational education as well as its more recent iteration, and hints at possible future reform. The next section describes the method of intertextuality applied in this paper, in more detail.

The intertextuality of the *SAF* policy: applying a suitable method

Skilling Australia for the Future (2007) repeatedly makes the accusation that the previous Howard Federal Coalition government neglected a growing skills crisis and that its ad hoc approach to policy reform in this area exacerbated the skills gap and placed Australia's future economic prosperity in jeopardy. Crump ([2007](#)) affirms the ad hoc and poorly planned decade (2000–2010) of policy change in this area. Consequently, the method outlined in this paper examines the use of the terms 'crisis', 'skills gap' and 'skills shortages' because these were the reasons Labor gave to justify their policy and the need for TTCs in schools. The method works to uncover the ideology about vocational education in schools at the time the policy was conceived. The method pinpoints the ways that discourse was constructed in relation to this issue and highlights discourse that was marginalised or lost in the process of policy construction. Finally, the method determines who is permitted to speak on these issues, what they are permitted to say and the authority each individual has, when speaking on the subject.

There were several intertexts that could be called upon to answer the research question. Fox ([1995](#)) argues that the method permits the use of a variety of texts, including audio-visual texts. To begin with, the method requires a brief history as contextual analysis of the policy in question, in order to determine the ideological context of the policy. Then to examine the existence of a 'crisis', reports of the issues raised in the policy and a review of reports about the issues raised were accessed. Reports of the issues raised were taken from the texts that the policy drew upon for its argument: these include the Productivity Commission's (Abhayaratna and Lattimore [2006](#)) study, *Workforce participation rates—how does Australia compare?* and the St George and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry ([2007](#)), *Small Business Survey*. These were interesting choices as Dullard and Hayward ([1999](#)) and Costar and Economou ([1999](#)) have already argued that surveys such as these were used by the previous Federal Liberal-National Coalition government, led by John Howard, and by the Liberal Victorian State Premier, Jeff Kennett, as a means to create crises where none existed. These former governments claimed to adhere to Friedman ([1982](#)) economics whereby it was believed that unpalatable economic and social change could be engineered in the event of a crisis, real or imagined. Friedman encouraged his supporters to create crises if necessary to create a desired reform.

The reports of the issues raised in *SAF* were then analysed by looking at the policy's intertexts, texts and reports about skills shortages, gaps and crises. The texts chosen included the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (hereafter NCVER [2007](#); Commonwealth of Australia [2007](#)) report on skills shortages, and an ABC radio broadcast about skills shortages entitled *The National Interest* (3 October 2008). The ABC broadcast in particular represents part of the public discourse around this issue, as it acknowledges that parents are concerned for the future career and prosperity options of young people. The ABC program participants were involved in a roundtable discussion about skills shortages. These were individuals described by the host of the program as those who live and breathe training issues, and included the Manager of the Master Builders' Association, a Human Resources

specialist, a member of the Electrical and Plumbers' Union and the CEO of Restaurant and Catering Australia. These participants, like Willis (1977), Vickers (2007), Gonczi (2008) and Crump (2007), affirmed that youth do not decide school to work options in a vacuum, but make their choices with, or in spite of parents. Gonczi (2008) goes further in arguing that the abstract idea of a knowledge economy becomes concrete for most parents in the form of anxiety over individual school performance, choice of school, and their childrens' positioning in the competition for university places, that lead to rewarding careers.

Intertextuality is also a means to demonstrate the limits of discourse. There are constructions of crisis management for example which did not obviously appear in the *SAF* policy document, but which are crucial to understanding the policy. One such intertext is Milton Friedman's (1982) work on neoliberal policy reform, *Capitalism and Freedom*. This text was also examined for its relationship to the policy. The lexical chains between policies then became apparent, and helped the author to make preliminary observations about the policy.

The policy's intertext: a brief history of a wicked policy problem

The following section examines the context of the *SAF* policy and traces the ideology evident in the discourse used. The intertexts used in this section are commentaries on vocational training and vocational education in schools and a report on these commissioned by the previous Federal Howard Coalition government's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (hereafter HRSCET), entitled *Learning to work: Report on the Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools* (Commonwealth of Australia 2004). An analysis of the history of the policy terrain of vocational education illuminates the substantial social reading and action called upon when governments past and present decide to implement policy in this area. The binaries evident, which impact upon the level of government response to skills shortages and training, hinge upon the traditional hold of the standard, school-to-work biography and the notion of full employment. The next few paragraphs describe these characteristics in greater detail.

There is a history of debate about the type of curriculum to be taught in schools in Australia, and indeed there are analogous worldwide debates (Te Riele 2007). Individuals have long argued about what is best for particular student cohorts (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Holmes et al. 2007; Jones 1985; Kemmis et al. 1983). Conservative governments in Australia have tended to buy into what Beck (1992) referred to as the standard, linear and unproblematic school-to-work biography of some students. With the end of the long boom, with increasing rates of teenage unemployment and with students feeling locked into vocational programs with little articulation between TAFE and university (Karmel 2007), this standard biography no longer applies.

More recently, the Howard Federal Liberal-Coalition conservative government applied demand side funding to policy on vocational education in schools Commonwealth of Australia (2004) through the Australian National Training Authority and through national training packages within the National Training

Framework. It was hoped that individual demand would stimulate innovative mechanisms to foster training and thereby boost the economy in local areas and in the nation in general (Crump 2007). It was also believed that a devolved approach to skills shortages and skill attainment would best suit local circumstances Commonwealth of Australia (2004) and lead to the employment of local youth. This arrangement was undertaken on the understanding that adequate funding would be provided to schools. However, HRSCET (2004) found that funding became an issue because the unit cost of vocational training in schools was more expensive than the provision of general education and was more so in rural areas and areas away from TAFE facilities.

Labor governments on the other hand have argued for a more nuanced school-to-work biography, given the variance in the abilities of young people in respect of finding full employment (Crump 2007; Maras 2007; Stevenson 2007; Vickers 2007). Labor governments since Hawke have tended to see that work has never been as simple and secure as the standard biography asserted; that full employment has rarely been achieved (Jones 1985) and that over the last 20 years the taken-for-granted patterns of work and transition to work have become less dominant.

Under Kevin Rudd's leadership, the Australian Labor government added to the long history of policy around vocationalism and vocational training in schools. The *SAF* policy claimed to address skills shortages, gaps and a looming crisis due to the Howard Coalition government's inactivity in this area. It was claimed that this inactivity led to more than 325,000 people being turned away from the TAFE system, to very low and declining completion rates for apprentices and trainees, and the provision of mostly lower level traineeship qualifications, often with minimal effort to afford real training. Most importantly, Rudd et al. (2007), supported by Karmel (2007), claim that Australia's training system also remains largely driven by the needs of providers and agencies seeking funding and subsidies, without a strategic focus on the needs of the economy or employers.

SAF therefore has a long history of policy preceding it. As such, Mitroff (1983) would describe the policy as dealing with a social problem has associated with years of struggle. Rittel and Weber (1973) and McKay (1990) term such problems 'wicked' policy problems. Reform around vocationalism is part of a wicked policy problem because there are always two sides to any debate and both are probably wrong (Bleiker 2000). *SAF* is part of the wicked policy problem around vocationalism, which has been re-framed since 2008. Stevenson's (2007, p. 17) table of Cycles in Educational Emphasis is a summary of changes to vocational education that is relevant here. Stevenson argues that vocational education has always adapted to real crises. Beginning in the 1920s in particular, the crisis of post World War 1 reconstruction led to training that was largely technicist in nature. During the depression years, understandably, the emphasis of vocational education shifted to the needs of the individual. From 1983 onwards the threat of economic recession and the growing influence of globalisation have meant that the emphasis of training is on skill competencies and industry driven education, with national bodies managing the measurement of observable performance of vocational education students against industry standards.

It is within this cycle that the policy issue of TTCs appears. It is very easy to assume that 'cause' creates 'effect' and that the relationship between industrial needs and knowledge 'can be codified into competencies for direct teaching' (Stevenson 2007, p. 18). The Labor government opted to provide one solution to the problem of skills shortages, and that solution was the provision of TTCs. The simplicity of the solution hides the fact that, at the time of writing, TTCs did not necessarily address skills shortages, and also that with devolution comes individual agency that either works with or against the policy and further that the policy solution does not account for ephemeral and imponderable decisions made by individual actors in this process. One such decision is the choice of which skills shortages should be recognised in the first instance, and deciding whether these are real or perceived shortages. The discussion of the ABC broadcast intertext following makes this point.

This paper now turns to an analysis of the reports of issues raised in the policy and reports about *Skilling Australia for the Future* (Rudd et al. 2007), in order to determine patterns affecting who can speak on this issue and what is permitted to be said. It is of concern that a crisis discourse is used in order to legitimate the policy and the provision of TTCs to some schools. Even though there is an equity focus and an attempt to better articulate the transition between secondary schooling and higher education (Crump 2007), the ideology behind *SAF* seems little distant from previous policies, with a market-driven, demand side focus evident. It is clear from the policy that education authorities are continuing to emphasise the job market and the tailoring of curricula to the needs of the market. It is important to note that this policy exists in an era of discourse-led social change (Luke 2002) because individuals turn to the words of a policy to make meaning, at least initially. Studying the discourse of the policy matters therefore (Edwards et al. 2001; Lo Bianco 2001; Taylor 1997, 2004).

The discursive construction of skills shortages, skill gaps and crises

Skilling Australia for the Future (Rudd et al. 2007) is a policy document that draws on a number of political discursive tactics which have been efficacious for governments in recent years. The policy uses intertextuality through a 'can do' instrumentalist discourse designed to show that the Labor government means business and can manage the economy (Brett 2007). In relation to attacks made on recent Federal Labor Party political leaders, there was also the image purveyed that Kevin Rudd was a strong leader who had the 'ticker' for the task (Brett 2007). This discourse was particularly evident in the visuals provided on the front cover of the policy, which depicted a leader in charge of the nation. Overwhelmingly though, there was evidence of crisis discourse, which the Federal Labor Party has taken and used it to its advantage. Crisis discourse implies impending disaster, catastrophe, emergency and calamity. The opposite discourse is one of calm, order and business as usual. The following paragraphs and tables describe the construction of this crisis discourse through words that imply impending calamity. These include words such as *gap, risk,* and *constraint*.

Table 1 Elements of crisis discourse in *SAF*

Phrase from *SAF* (2007)	Crisis language	The intertext (synonyms)	Pg. no.
… there is a *risk* of our future prosperity being *constrained* by skills shortages, an ageing population and *lagging* productivity growth	Risk	Danger, jeopardy, peril, hazard, menace, threat	1
	Constrained	Forced, unnatural, inhibited, controlled unnecessary use of power	
	Lagging	Falling behind	
… closing the skills *gap anticipated and ignored* by the Howard Government	Skills gap	Hole, opening, break, breach, fissure, crack, space, a chasm	1
	Anticipated and ignored	Predictable, probable, likely, expected, projected, estimated, must fill the chasm-*cannot let it be*	
… address *chronic* skills *shortages*	Chronic	Constant, unceasing, unending, continued, persistent, unremitting, unending. Implies ill health	1
	Skills shortage	Ongoing less than	
The Australian economy is experiencing *debilitating* skills shortages in *critical* areas. … *pressure* on *inflation* and interest rates	Debilitating, pressure	Incapacitating, devastating, unbearable, weakening Implies ill health, sick threatening unnecessary force	4
	Critical	Dangerous, serious, grave, significant, decisive, vital, important.	
	'Inflation'	Price rises, rise and increase. 'Inflation'—the bad old days!	
… *failed* to systematically address the growing skills crisis	Failed growing skills crisis	Unsuccessful, botched, disastrous, futile, abortive threatening	6
… the skills crisis requires national leadership	Skills crisis	Written as a fact	12

Table 1 lists the phrases from *SAF* which are elements of a crisis discourse. The words used in the policy are matched with their synonyms from Microsoft Word's online thesaurus.

Table 2 examines the claims of crisis and shortage based on a reading of the policy's favoured intertexts: those of Abhayaratna and Lattimore (2006) and St George and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2007).

Table 1 shows the manner in which the policy writers framed the language of the policy within a crisis discourse. The information in both tables then shows the permitted discourse about the skills crisis, which is described as a 'shortage', an 'underrepresentation' (Abhayaratna and Lattimore 2006); 'significant', a 'constraint' and a 'major barrier' (St George and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2007). In the Productivity Commission report, skills shortages are defined as pertaining to issues of gender and age. There are long term problems of underemployment, underuse of the employed, lack of opportunities for growth in employment for males aged 25–54, for women of child bearing age and for those in

Table 2 Elements of the crisis and how portrayed in *reports of* the topic

How do the favoured intertexts describe skills shortages?

Abhayaratna and Lattimore (2006). *Workforce participation rates*	St George and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (August, 2007)
Shortage = individual choice in hours of work and whether to work (p. 3)	**Shortage** = a constraint and barrier on investment opportunities. Significant labour issues include availability of suitably qualified employees, the number one constraint for all three business categories (small-large)
Crisis/Risk = Working age population underemployed with declining participation rate from 63.5% in 2003–2004 to 56.3 in 2044–2045 compared to other OECD countries	**Crisis/Risk** = business profit and wealth of the nation
Solution = The underrepresented individuals need to be mobilised to offset the ageing population. e.g. underrepresentation of:	**Solution** = Governments and industry need to increase productivity, increase skills and decrease wage costs
Prime aged males (25–54)	
Child bearing females (25–44)	
Those nearing retirement (55–64)	

Who gets to speak?

pre-retirement (Abhayaratna and Lattimore 2006). These skills shortages constrain business development. There is also a risk that Australia's employment participation rates will decline over time, compared with other OECD countries. These are the reasons the policy gives for placing TTCs in schools. In short, there is an ageing population and a decline in the number of active workers (Stanley 2007).

What is missing in the descriptions in Tables 1 and 2 are alternative understandings about skills shortages available from the policy's intertexts, such as the NCVER (Commonwealth of Australia 2007) report entitled: *What is a skill shortage?*, and the ABC Radio National (3 October 2008). This discrepancy in definition would matter less if the TTC policy, which derives from *SAF*, had not specifically targeted the concept of skills shortages. Although *SAF* (2007) looks at age-related skills shortages, the TTC policy looks at industry-related skills shortages. It is here that there is a discrepancy.

The NCVER (Commonwealth of Australia 2007) report argues that there are many types of skills shortages. The report contends that the term 'skill shortage' is confusing and slippery. The report cites the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2003) to argue that 'Labour shortages are not easy to measure' (p. 103) and that 'there is no universally applied definition of labour shortages' (p. 105). The report further claims that the most severe type of shortage is a Level 1 Shortage. This they define as occurring when 'there are few people who have the essential technical skills who are not already using them and there is a long training to develop the skills' (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p.7). According to the NCVER report the real risk surrounding skills shortages is the accuracy of data available. The report claims that businesses do not keep accurate data and that at times it is in their interest to exaggerate data for their own profit, so as to have the taxpayer pay for training which benefits business. The report strongly recommends that the task

of filling skill vacancies belongs to business and not government and that government's role is to provide for a strong general education so that businesses can continue to use this as a measure to distinguish between job applicants. That is, skills shortages need only be addressed in the event of a Level 1 shortage, where the crisis in supply can affect other parties to the possible detriment of the economy. It seems from this report that much of the argument in *SAF* is somewhat confusing, and slippery as well, relying upon different interpretations than other intertexts.

The ABC broadcast explores the notion of a skill shortage further, and argues for a more nuanced approach to skills shortages. It is within this text that it is possible to see interpretations of the issues by different, relevant stakeholders in the debate. It emerges that not all industries were affected by shortages and for some of those affected this is seen to be more to do with issues other than those identified in the *SAF* document. The participants in the broadcast included representatives from the electrical, building and construction industries, catering and hospitality industries and retail industries. Participants in the catering, hospitality and retail industries were more concerned about skills shortages which occur during training than access to training. This is because in these industries, potential applicants are often poached during training, because of high staff turnover. The participants involved in the electrical and building and construction industries felt that the issue of shortages was not as acute for them as for others because their trades involved a 'standards in and standards out' focus, meaning that their apprentices were not poached during training, but had to complete training before employment. Apprentices in these industries also tend to know the demands of the job. More generally, participants argued that parents were often aspirational on behalf of their children, but also too aspirational: wanting their children to be the employer rather than the employed and the manager rather than the managed. They also noted that good employers train and bad employers poach. They listed a number of reasons why apprentices and trainees leave before the completion of training—most notably, the easy uptake into the workforce, a complex VET system with infrastructure and accessibility issues, and imponderable personal reasons—and argued that the worst training attrition rates occurred in hospitality, catering and retail.

Indeed, participants in the radio program were keen to show the differences across sectors. They argued that government policy in this area needs to better target industries with skills shortages and to acknowledge that some industries need minimal help in this area. This is important in relation to the areas targeted by the *SAF* policy and in relation to the subsequent TTC policy. Many of the approved TTCs were in industries that did not have skills shortages nationally, but were in response to local needs. The notion of a crisis in skills and skills shortages is less clear-cut than the *SAF* policy argues.

Who gets to speak about vocational education and what is permitted to be said?

The notion of when and whether a government should intervene in the market is crucial to understanding *SAF*. In this policy document a crisis in skills shortages is cited as the reason for government intervention and the establishment of TTCs in

schools. The notion of government intervention to solve a crisis has a long political history, but its most recent iteration is in the form of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a conceptual framework for the relationship between government and the market (Friedman 1982) where it is argued that individuals are best served in an economy when individual entrepreneurial skills are used to grow and protect individual property, the free market and free trade. Government is expected to withdraw from the market so that the market can best perform. Milton Friedman (1982) encouraged supporters of neoliberalism to believe that only a crisis, 'actual' or 'perceived' will create political change. This adage has been adopted by governments worldwide, often to disastrous effect (Harvey 2005). The intertextual question in relation to this paper then, becomes one of whether or not the skills crisis is actual or perceived. This goes to the research question: *Why, in the present global context has the Federal Government focused on Trade Centres for all Australian secondary schools?* The concluding section describes some preliminary answers to this question in relation to the paper's contextual review, the intertextual data previously outlined, and the research question.

A discursive shift?

The review of the context of vocational education in Australia provided in this paper argues that the *SAF* policy is part of a long succession of government policies grappling with the ideas of school to work transition, vocational or general education, and the provision of specific or general vocational education curricula. As such, the *SAF* not only highlights the role of the state in policy formation, but also hints at the roles of individual agents in the process. The *SAF* can be termed a wicked policy problem as there are many ways to address the problem of vocational education, while the Rudd Labor government chose one way. First, the policy problem around VET has always been about the right mix of study options and whether government or businesses are to bear the cost of vocational training. A review of the context suggests that the previous Howard Coalition governments, following a neoliberal ideology of limited intervention in the market, put in place vocational policies which a number of commentators (see the submissions to Commonwealth of Australia 2004) argued were less than successful. Even though the *SAF* policy does aim to offset the disparity in service delivery by ensuring that training is only conducted by registered training authorities and that it leads to a nationally recognised qualification, the policy is still driven by the needs of providers rather than students.

Secondly, governments traditionally break difficult or wicked policy problems into their component parts (Dullard and Hayward 1999). This is so that the policy problem can be managed or seen to be managed. The Howard coalition government claimed that devolving the problem to local TAFEs and private providers was a solution. The Labor government blamed this policy decision on the crisis that led them to devolve the problem further to local schools, their administrations and community. New actors such as principals and school bursars have entered the field of vocational training, adding to an agenda already driven by the needs of providers

and agencies seeking subsidies. The student however is strangely absent from this process and the crisis seems to be neither proven nor solved.

Within this wicked policy problem are emergent sets of new policy problems. If Luke (2002) is correct and we live in an era which turns on text and discourse, it would seem that the discourse of the *SAF* policy is more product oriented than process oriented, with the provision of buildings and equipment imagined as a solution to a perceived serious, even critical problem. The discourse of the *SAF* policy is that there is a skills crisis, there has been neglect in this area and so the provision of TTCs to schools will fix this crisis. The provision of TAFE-like facilities in schools does go some way to alleviating some of the issues discussed previously. However, the intertextuality of the document shows that the *possibilities* open to the government before the policy was implemented, and now, are constrained by the belief in a looming crisis and the belief that Howard Federal Coalition governments had let the nation down. In this sense, intertextuality demonstrates the limits of discourse. In an era of 'can do' (Brett 2007) politicians it seems that the Rudd Federal Labor government tried to show determination and assured leadership on this matter, rather than looking at the equivocal and inconstant, perhaps 'slippery' nature of VET in a contemporary society.

The NCVER report (Commonwealth of Australia 2007) and the ABC broadcast associated with *SAF* show that there were other *possibilities* open to the government. The broadcast (ABC Radio National 2008) in particular asserts that individuals are part of this issue and that they may or may not choose training options that can be mediated by the provision of a TTC.

The question then becomes one of *whose* problem is solved rather than *what* problem is solved. It also becomes a question of *who* provides the solution and *when* or *whether* they provide a solution. The question as to whether there is a skills crisis depends upon the texts and discourse accessed. In *SAF* the crisis is reported as being *real*, but within other reports of and about skills shortages the crisis is *perceived* differently. For example, when the participants in the broadcast speak, they speak of change, futures planning and improvement, as opposed to a response to a crisis. They use words such as 'call', 'improve', 'better', 'more', 'support' (ABC Radio National 2008, u.p.), 'provision' and most importantly, 'Level One shortages *not all* shortages' (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, pp. 7, 103, 105). Such words and perceptions may provide a way forward for new actors entering this field of education and will be the topic of future research in this area.

The study of *SAF*'s intertext using the policies which have preceded it and reports of and about the policy's content, shows that the binaries around vocational education remain, and contemporary politicians continue to realize the value of a selective argument and the judicious use of graphs and grids to achieve an outcome (see Kenway 2008). It is the role of new actors within this field to challenge these selective arguments. A preliminary reading of the *SAF* policy, within the first phase of a research project designed to investigate the reasons for placing TTCs in schools, seems to be that the *SAF* policy addresses some of the skills shortages which have already been defined, constituted and articulated. The policy under review does acknowledge the sequence of policy which came before it, but still remains a version of that sequence, affected by the weight of the ages. There has

been a discursive shift around the productivity, urgency and crisis discourse used. Urgency discourse is frequently used as a tool of neoliberal reform (Friedman 1982; Dullard and Hayward 1999; Costar and Economou 1999), rather than left-wing reform. It would seem that this is now a governance tool regardless of who governs.

This paper has sought to show that the concept of skills shortages has a history in relation to the ways that schools have been managed, how access to VET has been structured and how workplace reform affects postcompulsory schooling. These have discursive effects in policy documents. The paper highlights the struggle governments experience when writing policy in this area. Through the use of critical discourse analysis the paper shows that even though this policy version accounts for equity in the process of trade training, there is a troubling use of crisis discourse. This discourse is used in relation to a crisis that some perceive to be not entirely real. At the time of writing, a way forward for those now involved in TTCs and their implementation in schools throughout Australia is to recognise this policy difficulty and to recognise that the policy and their role in it now becomes part of the unfolding history of these issues. This will lead to new lexical chains and discussions of new intertextuality in relation to implementation.

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