Are Teachers Still the Problem? An Analysis of the NSW Education What Works Best Documents

Brad A. Fuller
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney

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Brad Anthony Fuller
The University of Sydney, Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Abstract: This paper interrogates Stacey's assertion that New South Wales (NSW) education policy is underpinned by a 'particular instance of neoliberalisation' which has significant 'direct and material impacts' on teachers. It examines the role Evidence-based Practice can play in the neoliberalist reform of education globally and analyses the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation's What Works Best documents. The paper asserts that the character of education policy in NSW is consistent with the wider Global Education Reform Movement and continues to exhibit and extend the neoliberalist tendencies identified by Stacey. Furthermore, it claims that, through a collection of neoliberalist devices, teachers are being 'governed at a distance' through documents such as What Works Best. It is hoped this paper might provide teachers with 'insights and arguments to help them to resist unwarranted expectations about the role of evidence in their practices and even more so of unwarranted interventions in their practices'.

Introduction

Drawing on Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis to examine the NSW Education policy document *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* (GTIL), Stacey (2017), concluded that an 'accumulation of neoliberal rationalities and their accordant processes' has enabled a 'particular instance of neoliberalisation' of education policy in New South Wales (NSW) (p. 790). According to Stacey, this is exemplified in the language used in GTIL which reveals that the 'character of education policy in NSW' rests on the underlying desire of the state to 'govern at a distance' (Rose, 1996, p. 43), situating responsibility for students' success or failure with classroom teachers, whilst ignoring 'broader questions of systemic structures that produce inequity' (Stacey, 2017, p. 790).

Stacey (2017) warned that, by making teachers the 'problem' in GTIL, the document had potentially significant 'lived effects' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 40) – 'direct and material impacts – for teachers' (Stacey, 2017, p. 786). Following Stacey, this paper draws on Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) approach to analyse the language used in two related NSW Education documents. The analysis seeks to determine whether the 'particular instance of neoliberalisation' has evolved since the publication of GTIL and whether teachers are still the 'problem'.

The paper begins with a discussion of the link between neo-liberalism, education reform, and the Evidence Based Practice (EBP) turn in education internationally and, particularly, in New South Wales, Australia. Subsequent sections cover a description of the analytical approach and justification for its adoption. Following the analysis of the two documents, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the analysis.

Background

Understanding EBP within the NSW context is reliant upon a broader historical knowledge of the development of the EBP model and its use by governments globally as an instrument of neoliberalist reforms in education (Shahjahan, 2011).

The Medical Model

The Evidence-based Practice Model was gradually adopted into the field of education from the medical profession over decades from the 1980s, with a marked acceleration around the beginning of the new millennium (Gage, 1989; Hammersley, 2001; Oancea & Pring, 2008; Trinder, 2000). Although medical practitioners had a history of using evidence to inform practice dating back to at least the eighteenth century, the model which has come to dominate the field traces its origin to the medical school established in Canada's McMaster University in the 1970s (Claridge & Fabian, 2005). Constrained by the brevity of the course (just three years), evidence-based pioneer David Sackett developed a degree in which students would work directly with patients instead of attending lectures (Hoffman et al., 2013). Rather than teach the students everything they would need to know (impossible in the time allotted), they would learn how to seek information from 'the best available clinical evidence' (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71), most notably Randomised Control Trials (RCT), and apply it to their practice. Sackett is credited with defining the term 'Evidence-based Medicine' in a seminal paper from 1996 (Claridge & Fabian, 2005, p. 552).

Evidence-based Practice in Education

Evidence-based practice's watershed moment in education came from a presentation in England given by David Hargreaves called *Teaching as a Research-based Profession: Possibilities and Prospects* (Hammersley, 2005). His opening statement set the scene for a debate that has now been raging for a quarter of a century. He said: 'Teaching is not at present a research-based profession. I have no doubt that if it were, teaching would be more effective and more satisfying' (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 1).

Hargreaves was scathing in his observations on the state of research in education and opened the door to government intervention in education research by stating 'left to ourselves, we educational researchers will not choose the necessary radical reforms' (1996, p. 1). Radical reform, he said, would elevate teachers to the level of public prestige enjoyed by the medical profession, particularly doctors in hospitals, which he linked to the growth of research in those fields. In order to enjoy doctor-level prestige, teachers would have to abandon education theory derived from psychology, sociology, philosophy, and history and, instead, look to the evidence to determine 'what works' (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 8). He maintained that traditional teacher education had been ineffective because new teachers quickly jettisoned their training as they spotted the 'yawning gap between theory and practice' evident in the work of their incumbent, experienced colleagues (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 2).

What Works

Despite a host of concerns uncovered in the rigorous debate that ensued around the suitability of the evidence-based model for education (Biesta, 2007; Elliott, 2007; Hammersley, 1997; Pring & Thomas, 2004; Smeyers & Depaepe, 2006), governments around the world moved to establish centres for education evaluation and dissemination of information. These institutions such as EPPI-Centre in the UK, EdCan Network in Canada, and the Institute of Education Sciences in the USA were charged the task of *knowledge mobilisation* by undertaking systematic research reviews to inform policy development and practice in education. The information derived from the reviews would then be made available to school principals and teachers as 'evidence' about *what works* (Cooper et al., 2009).

What Works Best

New South Wales, Australia, became a belated what works adherent when the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) was established in 2012, with a mission to be the 'central point of education evidence within the NSW Department of Education' (NSW Government, 2021, p. Resources section). Not content to simply determine 'what works' like centres from other countries, the centre published its findings under the title *What Works Best* in 2014 (WWB2014) and then *What Works Best: 2020 Update* (WWB2020).

The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)

The establishment of CESE can be viewed as an outworking of what Sahlberg calls the 'Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)' in NSW (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 203). Sahlberg defines GERM as an unofficial international educational agenda which has evolved since the 1980s as a top-down education sector response to the greater challenges of globalisation. He says it has become 'a new educational orthodoxy', in which success in the global competition of education is measured by standardised examinations, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Test (2015, p. 203). The initial GERM infection, according to Sahlberg, was the result of three 'primary sources' - an emphasis on reforming approaches to literacy and numeracy instruction; education for all - an international program which fostered common learning standards, national curricula, and inclusive policies; and the commodification of education characterised by competition for students and accountability through standardised testing (2015, pp. 204-205). Sahlberg also identified five globally common features which can be used to identify the presence of GERM in a system: increased competition among schools, standardisation, a focus on core subjects, test-based accountability, and school choice (2015, p. 205).

Following the release of the 2018 PISA Test results, Sahlberg (2019) identified a 3-year cycle in which international standardised test results are published, a public outcry ensues, and politicians demand reform. He noted that traditionally, this has meant doubling down on the five globally common features of GERM, especially more competition, more accountability measures to control schools and teachers, and the scapegoating of underperforming teachers. In turn, he says, this leads to a renewed zeal from policy makers to look to the 'evidence' coming from the research about 'what works': empirical data that will lead to improvement and propel the nation back to its proper place at the top of the international education rankings, ensuring a competitive advantage in the global marketplace

of the knowledge economy (Sahlberg, 2020). The 'R' for Reform in GERM sits within a wider global reform movement driven by an ideology known as Neoliberalism (Connell, 2013).

The Neoliberal Agenda

Neoliberalism quickly became the dominant global political discourse from the 1980s. Aided by the disintegration of the eastern communist bloc and the perception in the west that communism was a failed ideology, it seemed that the neoliberal version of globalised capitalism was the only option (Lipman, 2006). Trading the environment, culture, health, and welfare for jobs and growth, governments and corporations in industrialised nations began to develop policies focussed on economic growth and corporate profits. In order to achieve growth and profits, economies were deregulated, trade barriers were softened or removed, public sectors were drastically reduced, and the financial markets took precedence over the actual production of goods (Hursh, 2000). These policies were spread across the globe through the agency of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund by tying reforms to investment (Hursh, 2000; Harvey, 2007). Bourdieu (1998) characterised the neoliberal agenda as a 'radical separation' of the social from the economic where productivity and competition towards maximum economic growth is the irresistible, 'self-evident, … taken for granted, … ultimate, and sole goal of human actions' (p. 31).

The core ideal of Neoliberalism is that the free market or market forces should be the primary influence on government policy making, which in turn directs economic, political, and social life (Mirowski, 2013). Therefore, to (eventually) maximise economic prosperity for individuals, economies need to be reformed. These reforms involve promoting a competitive, free global market by removing barriers to trade in goods and services at individual, corporate, and national levels. This competition between individuals, businesses, and nations, it is believed, will lead to greater productivity, and thus more prosperous global citizens (producers/consumers). Flowing on from this, deregulation and privatisation of industry and social service is seen as the most effective way to enable the market to facilitate competition and drive productivity, realised as profits (Connell & Dados, 2014).

Society is reconceived as 'the economy' with citizens as human capital in a world where each individual is 'free' to compete for resources with other individuals in the global economy (Hursh, 2000, p. 4). This ideology reforms schools in order to produce human capital—workers fit for the short-term needs of global business—docile and productive (Ball, 2012). Thus, a common cry from neoliberal education reformers is the need to get 'back to basics'. These basics, characterised as reading, mathematics, and other skills and knowledge which may be advantageous in the 'knowledge economy', must be acquired at higher levels than those of competing nations to ensure personal and national prosperity (Ward, 2012, p. 9). Individual well-being is reframed as important, but only in terms of the relationship between well-being and greater productivity (Hursh, 2000). The technical expertise to carry out the required 'reforms' comes from a group Michael Apple calls the 'professional and managerial new middle class' (2006, p. 31) through a process known as 'managerialism' (2006, p. 24). He says that, through imported business models and tighter systems of control:

> *Managerialism is largely charged with bringing about the cultural transformation that shifts professional identities to make them more responsive to client demand and external judgement. It aims to justify and to have people internalize fundamental alterations in professional practices. It both harnesses energy and discourages dissent. (2006, p. 70)*

Signs of managerialism, also known as 'new public management' (Ward, 2012, p. 46) at play include 'constant need for "audits", the production of evidence, rationalization, and standardization of both labour and knowledge' (Apple, 2006, p. 105). As a sidenote, Apple says managerialism is responsible for teachers 'experienc[ing] considerably heavier workloads and ever-escalating demands for accountability, a never-ending schedule of meetings, and in many cases a growing scarcity of resources both emotional and physical' (2006, p. 64).

Analysing Education Policy with the WPR Approach

Following Stacey (2017), this paper uses Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) updated WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be) approach to analysing policy which prompts the analyst to problematise the policy by answering a series of questions about how 'problems' are constructed in the policy:

Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualized differently?
Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
Question 6: How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20)

The WPR approach is a post-structural analytic strategy or tool designed to assist in 'making politics visible' through the practices of 'interrogating, problematizations (the ways in which problems are represented), reproblematization, and self-problematization' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 16). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) assert that rather than addressing problems that exist, policies *produce* problems as 'particular sorts of problems' which 'shape lives and worlds' (2016, p. 16). The selected text becomes a 'lever' to 'open up reflections on the forms of governing, and associated effects, instituted through a particular way of constituting a problem' (2016, p. 18).

The aim of the analysis of the WWB documents was to uncover whether there is evidence of the 'particular instance of neoliberalisation' which Stacey identified in her analysis of the GTIL document, and whether teachers are still the 'problem'.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the link between neo-liberalism, education reform and the Evidence Based Practice (EBP) turn in education internationally and, particularly, in New South Wales, Australia.

The Documents: What Works Best and What Works Best: 2020 Update

The two 'what works' documents produced, in 'close alignment' with the *School Excellence Framework* (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4) by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) are *What Works Best* (WWB2014) from 2014 and *What works best: 2020 update* (WWB2020).

The introduction to WWB2014 lists seven items which are interchangeably called 'themes', 'practices' or 'strategies' for schools to 'consider' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4) and WWB2020 adds 'assessment' to the 2014 list resulting in:

1. High expectations
2. Explicit teaching
3. Effective feedback
4. Use of data to inform practice
5. Assessment
6. Classroom management
7. Wellbeing
8. Collaboration (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4)

The authors note that whilst this list should not be the sole focus for 'school leaders and teachers' looking to improve student outcomes, they are the 'best evidenced practices in education' which are 'almost always evident in our high-performing schools' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4).

The next section will analyse statements made in the introductions of *WWB2014* and *WWB2020* for the purposes of uncovering smuggled-in assumptions which may be at play. Biesta (2007, 2010) maintains that there are assumptions underpinning documents such as WWB2014 and WWB2020 which 'raise important questions about the very idea of evidence-based practice' and highlight 'the role of normativity, power, and values' (2010, p. 493).

What's the Problem? It's a Crisis!

The 'problem' identified in the *WWB2014* introduction is a 'perceived decline' of Australian students' results generally and a 'downward trend' particularly for NSW students 'as suggested by trends in international assessment data' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2). By 2020, the authors of WWB2020 claim that the 2014 document not only quickly established a 'wide audience' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4), but it 'remained popular and well-used' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4).

Given this level of success and the 'effective teaching practices' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4) espoused within, would it be reasonable to expect that declines and downward trends would be arrested? At least some movement on the plateau?

By the time of the 2020 update the authors reveal that there is still a 'problem'. The 'perceived decline' has become 'the decline' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4) and the previously unidentified perceivers of decline were now identified as the concerned public. Whereas NSW students' performance in 2014 were above average compared to their Australian peers, by 2020 their PISA results had 'fallen sharply' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4), although they were able to move from 'largely plateaued' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2) in 2014 to 'mostly continuing to plateau' in 2020 (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020, p. 4).

Crisis Terminology as a Means of Governing

The 'problem' of the public's concern about NSW students' sharply falling standardised test results revealed in the language of the *What Works Best* introductions, is

evidence of how the 'contemporary Zeitgeist, and the political climate always leave their marks on the educational branch' (Larsen, 2015). The WWB2020 paints a picture of an education system in crisis: continuing decline, sharp falls, declining proportions, and growing public concern. McConnell, (2020) maintains that crisis terminology is 'at heart, a political issue' (2020, p. 13). In the *What Works Best* introductions, the authors are using crisis terminology as a 'policy tool' - an 'exercise in power and an attempt to persuade' (2020, p. 8). The message to teachers here is clear: the public has spoken and unless you adopt teaching strategies that have been proven to work, our children will not be able to get a job and it will be your fault.

Presuppositions and Assumptions: Uncloaking the Neoliberal Agenda

Both introductions make clear links to neoliberal ideology by assuming that the knowledge economy should drive education with its 'needs and demands' for students to have 'strong foundational skills' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2). Meanwhile, lifelong learning is redirected from something one pursues because learning is *good*, to a lifelong pursuit of new skills as demanded by the knowledge economy.

How did this Come About?

The authors of WWB2014 found the 'reasons' for the decline in NSW standardised test results 'difficult to determine' but wondered if the efforts of leaders and teachers—'who remain 'as committed to ensuring positive student outcomes for their students as they have ever been'— 'may have been hampered by a lack of clear, reliable and accessible evidence about what really works in schools and classrooms'. They posited that another potential reason for the decline might be our 'strong understanding of how much student's backgrounds impact on their learning'. 'Preconceptions about the 'different resources' they 'bring to school' might also be an 'impediment' to 'ongoing improvement in outcomes' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2).

By the time of WWB2020, the 'reasons' remained but were reframed as the 'well known' 'challenges', too many 'highly diverse' students, with many of them experiencing 'significant socioeconomic disadvantage'. School leaders and teachers remained 'as committed as ever' and 'significant additional funding' had been 'injected'. So, although— according to WWB2014 and WWB202— teachers are as committed as ever and well-funded, they aren't equipping their disadvantaged students with 'foundation skills' for the 'knowledge economy' which explains the 'sharp decline' in international standardised tests, because they don't know 'what works best'.

Back to Basics as a Site of Solution

The passage from 2014 offering the 'refocussing on the basics' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2) as a 'site of solution' (Stacey, 2017, p. 787) is neoliberalism 101. It is training masquerading as education in which outcomes are predetermined, and success means scoring a high mark on a standardised test once the teacher has shown the student how to 'do it the right way' and then tells them how well they have done according to their marks. In other words, 'good students will learn good knowledge and will get good jobs' (Apple, 2006, p. 5).

The 2014 introduction also makes the presupposition that 'it is a daunting task for a teacher or principal or school leadership team to decide to challenge the status quo and tackle student improvement anew' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2) but the back-to-basics remedies outlined in the WWB documents read like an outline of education orthodoxy as practiced since at least the beginning of public education in the western world. This approach involves the privileging of numeracy and literacy within a teacher-directed, homogenised and 'static' curriculum taught in a didactic fashion which 'forbids much active participation'. Where knowledge is a fixed entity, 'handed down from the past', that must be 'imposed' from 'above and outside' the students by the teacher, to mould them into a preconceived notion of what a good citizen should be, that is, 'docile, receptive and obedient' (Dewey, 1938, pp. 24-25).

Revealed in this way, it is clear that the aim of the WWB documents is not tackling student improvement anew, it is to cling on to oppressive, reductionistic practices, another example of the neoliberal agenda presented, through a sleight of hand, as reform. Dewey called this 'traditional' model of education 'The Old' (1938, p. 25), and noted the that the 'history of educational theory' is 'marked' by the 'opposition' between 'traditional and progressive education' (p. 23). Contemporary calls for a 'return' to the old, back-to-basics model have been a recurring conservative ploy in the global north since the 1800s (Author, forthcoming).

A further assumption revealed through the use of variations of the reductionistic phrase 'positive student outcomes' in both introductions is more evidence of neoliberal ideology at play. The authors claim that 'sustainable improvements in student outcomes' is the 'holy grail of education' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2), but this is the *neoliberal holy grail*, not the natural aim of education (Dewey, 1916; Noddings, 1995). The focus on student outcomes is a neoliberal attempt to move education from a substantive mode— 'based on and oriented by a broader set of ideals and ethics and largely unconcerned with practical outcomes', to a technical mode— 'centred on much more concrete, measurable outcomes, goals, and specific objectives of rationality' (Ward, 2012, p. 66).

More Assumptions: Managerialism and Student Outcomes

Finally, the Holy Grail of Education and the use of outcomes in education are essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1955) and, therefore, cannot be portrayed as a given. Critics have highlighted the potential for outcomes to be used as a 'managerial tool' which can 'diminish teachers' academic freedom and divert academic attention by putting administrative practices at the forefront' (Erikson & Erikson, 2019, p. 2296). Concerns have also been raised around the use of outcomes for quality assurance, where outcomes become a tool for 'management and evaluations' of teachers (2019, p. 2296). Furthermore, learning that is expressed as outcomes tends to favour measurable outcomes at the expense of 'desirable outcomes that cannot be measured' (2019, p. 2296): in other words, not every goal of education can be reduced to a learning outcome (Avis, 2000; Biesta, 2009). Reindal (2013) warns that unless the 'dangers of a naïve understanding of learning outcomes are addressed, there might eventually be a situation in which learning outcomes define what constitutes an educated person' (2013, p. 538). One wonders if this is the end in sight of *What Works Best*?

Having set the scene for reform, the next move in the neoliberal playbook is to persuade rather than coerce people to agree to reform measures via a tactic known as 'governing at a distance' (Rose, 1996, p. 43).

Effects of Neoliberalism: Governing at a Distance

In order to circumvent a neoliberal paradox—being at once, publicly anti-interventionist whilst simultaneously seeking greater control over areas such as education—neoliberal-leaning governments create arms-length institutions to allow them to 'govern at a distance' (Rose, 1996, p. 43). Through CESE and its publications such as *WWB,* the NSW government does not have to specify exactly how teachers should teach but instead uses the evidence as a 'rational' and 'non-controversial' but limited range of options to 'shape and utilise' teachers' freedom (Rose, 1996, pp. 53-54). One effect of the uncritical, prima facie adoption of the information within *WWB* is to restrict teachers to 'particular kinds of thinking' (Hursh, 2000, p. 7) that privileges a conceptualisation of education for the training of compliant, economically productive individuals rather than educating political, ethical, and aesthetic citizens (Hursh, 2000). Popen (2002) calls governing in this manner a discourse of containment.

Effects of Neoliberalism: Culture of Containment

One of the key technical methods utilised by governments through the production of documents such as *WWB* is the 'Culture of Containment' where 'official discursive arrangements of events are narrowly constructed to *constitute* rather than *represent* lived experience'. A discourse of containment— 'what can be said and by whom'—produces a 'culture of containment and epistemic privilege' (Popen, 2002, p. 386).

By narrowly constructing the field of education as described in the WWB introductions and then prescribing the 'best' way to 'teach' within the eight WWB 'themes', 'practices' or 'strategies' for raising test scores, the power to determine 'what can be said and by whom' (Popen, 2002, p. 383) has been removed from teachers. The effect is that their autonomy and agency have been contained by the visible and hidden constraints laid down by the document. The neoliberal agenda is at play here, by providing documents (*What Works Best*) that seem to be democratising— promoting so-called best practices— but paradoxically only allowing 'official speakers the rhetorical power to name the world, and those in it' (Popen, 2002, p. 388.).

Popen (2002), identifies two technologies of containment which are relevant to the analysis of the WWB documents: Social Technology of Containment (ahistorical and individualised narrative) and Fundamentalist Literalism.

Social Technology of Containment (ahistorical and individualised narrative)

When WWB2014/2020 speaks of declines, public concerns, back to basics, and principals fighting the status quo, they are presented as fact. However, this is not the historical reality, it is just one reading of it (Buchanan, 2020; Pogrow, 2006; Cuban, 2020). Students of education history will be aware that education has been portrayed in the mass media as in a state of chaos and/or decline with a variety of scapegoats, from poor teachers to faddish pedagogy, for as long as education and mass media have existed (Mockler, 2020; Ball, 2017; Alhamdan et al., 2014). According to Popen (2002), this is an example of the 'Social Technology of Containment'— a 'rhetorical technique to extract an incident from its social, political, and historical context for the purpose of containing its meaning, and containing social activisms' (p. 389). Popen reminds us that it is important to 'go beyond official narratives and connect our epistemic accounts to historical realities' (2002, p. 388).

Fundamentalist Literalism

The pronouncements in the *What Works Best* introductions such as 'student outcomes are the holy grail of education' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2) are an example of fundamentalist literalism. Popen says 'literalists lay claim to truth that is ahistorical, authentic, and authoritative. What can be said truthfully about the world is contained by a singular translation, to which we either agree and are included, or by disagreeing are excluded' (2002, p. 389).

Conclusion: Neoliberalisation at a Distance

The aim of this paper was to uncover whether there is evidence of the 'particular instance of neoliberalisation' which Stacey identified in her analysis of the GTIL document, and whether teachers are still the 'problem' in the WWB documents. By situating the trend toward evidence-based practice in education in NSW within the wider Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2015), it has been argued that the character of education policy in NSW continues to exhibit, and possibly extend, the neoliberalist tendencies identified by Stacey (2017) in the GTIL document. The 'systemic structures that produce inequity' which Stacey found had been 'occluded' in GTIL remain unexamined in WWB2014/2020 and teachers remain the 'problem'.

The solution, according to the neoliberalist agenda, as presented in both the 2014 and 2020 introductions, is to determine *What Works Best* to assuage public concern that our students are being outperformed by students from other nations in the competition to secure a job in the global knowledge economy. A range of 'deep seated presuppositions and assumptions underlie the *What Works Best* introductions. For example, the neoliberal view of education which centres around preparing students to take their place in the global knowledge economy, the holy grail of sustainable student outcomes, and foundation skills imposed through high expectations and explicit teaching are presented as uncontested fact despite the statement in the WWB2014 introduction that the 'reasons [for the decline in student performance] are difficult to determine' (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p. 2). This explains the focus on standardised knowledge and skills (outcomes) delivered in a standardised fashion by teachers—perhaps more precisely described as trainers—who follow recipes of what works best to produce future knowledge economy workers who outperform their international peers on standardised tests.

The effect is that, through a collection of Neoliberal devices, such as 'crisis terminology and managerialism, teachers are being 'governed at a distance' by the arms-length CESE through documents such as WWB within a 'culture of containment' for the purpose of moving education in NSW from a substantive mode to a technical mode.

However, the problem can be reconceptualised through the conscientisation (Freire, 2005) of teachers. Teachers must be alert to the Neoliberal devices employed throughout the *WWB* introductions and the documents generally. They must be aware of the potential for documents such as these to be presented as 'beyond critique', where difference can be recast as dissent or deviance, and where, rather than informing practice, the information becomes an 'arid hermeneutics' as a 'substitute for live moral, political, and intellectual debate'; where teachers are 'left teaching a lifeless form of scholasticism that reproduces and preserves our continued isolation from the world and from each other, and that prevents us from arriving at forms of epistemic privilege that expand our democratic imaginations' (Popen, 2002, p. 390).

Following Biesta (2010), it is hoped this analysis will allow teachers to 'disrupt and replace' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20) the neoliberal vision of education outlined in the

What Works Best documents and to provide them with 'insights and arguments that can help them to resist unwarranted expectations about the role of evidence in their practices' and even more so of unwarranted interventions in their practices' (2010, p. 493).

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