Reform first and ask questions later? The implications of (fast) schooling policy and 'silver bullet' solutions

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the uptake of so-called fast policy solutions to problems in different education policy contexts and highlights the potential impacts that can arise from such policymaking approaches. We draw upon recent literature and theorising around notions of fast policy and evidence-informed policymaking, which suggests that, in an increasingly connected, globalised and temporally compressed social world, policymaking has become 'speeded up'. This means that policymaking is now largely predicated upon looking around to foreign reference societies to borrow 'ideas that work', thereby encouraging particular forms of evidence, expertise and influence to dominate. We focus on three different examples of fast policy schooling documents – namely the OECD's *PISA for Schools* report, the edu-business Pearson's *The Learning Curve* and an Australian state (New South Wales) education department report entitled *What Works Best* – to show how all three documents promote an overly simplified, decontextualised and 'one-size-fits-all' understanding of schooling policy. This reflects what we describe as a 'convergence of policy method' across vastly different policy contexts (an IGO, global edu-business and government department), in which similarly fast policies, and methods of promoting such policies, appear to dominate over potentially more considered and contextually aware policymaking approaches.

Introduction

Festina lente ('Make haste slowly'; attributed to the Emperor Augustus)

The contemporary bureaucratic state faces a plethora of 'wicked social problems' (Head, 2008b; Rittel & Webber, 1973) that must be solved with effective public policy, and education is no exception. With the rise of new public management and neoliberalism, and the associated demands for increased accountability and transparency in public policymaking, the *solutions* to these putative *problems* must now be informed by evidence (Head, 2008a; Power, 1999). The need for highly visible political action often tends to override the need for a comprehensive approach to reform and, importantly, a particularly nuanced understanding of what constitutes evidence.

This desire for certain kinds of research to support 'evidence-informed' (Lingard, 2013) policymaking has created a new market for policy, which is populated by new policy actors and genres of policy. For example, academic research could be considered as generally aligning with the notion of 'research *of* policy', which Lingard (2013) identifies as a decidedly critical approach, where research seeks to question and deconstruct the political status quo. Lingard (2013) suggests that this method is 'research for research's sake, with new knowledge and understanding as the desired outcome' (p. 119). On the other hand, 'research *for* policy' generally occurs when a given policy problem is taken for granted. This type of research is frequently commissioned by government bureaucracies and framed by the interests of policymakers who require evaluations to support their political priorities (Lingard, 2013). We would contend that current research *for* policy, along with the restructured state and new forms of networked governance (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012), has opened up the research space and made it more amenable to new actors. Once considered the domain of academics and in-house government employees, international organisations, aid agencies, philanthropies, think tanks and corporations now also populate this space.

Lubienski, Scott, and DeBray (2014) argue that these actors work within complex policy networks to produce and promote evidence tailored to policymakers, meaning they orchestrate rather than produce research knowledge in order to influence policy production. These actors tend to construct simplified and definitive solutions of best practice, and their reports are generally short, easy-to-read and glossy productions. Given these developments, Thompson, Savage and Lingard (2016) consider that these new policy actors, and their reports, change concepts of 'evidence', 'expertise' and 'influence' in circulating policy ideas to affect policy development. This includes the likes of what evidence is used and whether appropriate inferences are drawn from evidence; the ways in which expertise is gained by the promotion of neoliberal ideas that align with productivity, efficiency and questions of 'what works' (Slavin, 2008); and how influence is defined by the types of relationships that actors have with governmental authorities, and especially the ways they can lobby policymakers or garner public opinion through media and communication strategies.

This desire for politically expedient policy solutions, and new forms of evidence and expertise, ultimately leads to the 'speeding up' of policy (Peck & Theodore, 2015) and the convergence of policymaking worlds, both spatially and temporally, embodying in policy terms a sense of what might be described as shoot first and ask questions later. This 'speeding up' of policy, or 'fast policy' (Peck & Theodore, 2015), is characterised not only by the codification of best practice and 'ideas that work' (p. xv) but also, significantly, by the increasing rate and reach of such policy diffusion, from sites of policy development and innovation to local sites of policy uptake and, if not adoption, translation. As Peck and Theodore (2015) argue, and as we would tend to agree, the societal and political practices enabling fast policy need to be thoroughly problematised:

> The purpose of problematising fast policy is consequently to explore both the connections and the contradictions between the smooth spaces imagined and made by global policy models and the more mundane and 'sticky' reality of day-to-day delivery, between the apparently limitless world of the business-class policy guru and peripatetic consultant on the one hand, and the more circumscribed spheres inhabited by local administrators, stakeholders, and frontline workers on the other. (p. xvii)

In this paper, we are interested in demonstrating how the ideas of decontextualised fast policy and best practice are being taken up and promoted by a diverse range of education policy actors, including an intergovernmental organisation (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]), an international edu-business (Pearson) and, interestingly, a state government education department in Australia (New South Wales [NSW]). This reflects the spread not only of fast policies themselves but also what we might deem the idea or approach of fast policy, and the increased 'cross-fertilisation' (Thompson et al., 2016) of such processes between the government and non-government sectors.

In what follows, we first elaborate our theoretical framework for analysis, which is necessary to understand the development and uptake of fast policy. Using a comparative case study methodology, and framing our analyses by issues of evidence, expertise and influence, we provide an account of three fast policies in action across three distinctly different political spaces and institutions. Our analyses suggest that these seemingly diverse policy spaces nevertheless show what we describe as a 'convergence of policy method', in which similar fast policies, and methods of promoting such policies, appear to dominate over potentially more considered and contextually aware policymaking approaches.

Theorising the development and uptake of 'fast policy': a relational approach

Fast policy has emerged in a fast contemporary world, where the combination of a 24-h news cycle and the technologically mediated compression of time and space has created what Peck and Theodore (2015) describe as 'a condition of deepening transnational connectedness' (p. xxxi). In this, we can see the debordering of policymaking imaginaries and the strengthening of social imaginaries of neoliberal globalisation (Ball, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), in which the globe is assumed and actively constituted as a commensurate space for potential policy learning and borrowing (Lewis, Sellar, & Lingard, 2016; Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). To this end, the policymaking process shifts from emphasising the design of local, contextually aware policy interventions to instead encourage a looking abroad for policy shortcuts, or readymade examples of what works:

> The policymaking process accelerates under these conditions, as local policymaking increasingly begins with imported or borrowed designs, from which new permutations and adaptations are repeatedly worked. This creates shortcut alternatives to more deliberative, developmental modes of policy formation, and tends to favour the kinds of technocratic strategies pushed by well-resourced multilateral agencies and validated by evaluation science [data] over organically grown, endogenous approaches to policy innovation. (Peck & Theodore, 2015, pp. xxxi–xxxii)

Fast policy is therefore predicated on an intensification of relations between otherwise distant (and often disparate) policy spaces, and we can see how the disposition of policymakers and educators is now arguably centred upon looking around, both nationally and internationally, in order to compare and learn from others (Lewis & Lingard, 2015; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016; Simons, 2015). However, it is not only the increased connectivity between spaces, actors and organisations that

facilitates the transfer and uptake of 'ideas that work', but also, and importantly, the increasingly rapid and reactive nature of policymaking itself. This is what Peck and Theodore (2015) describe as 'the heightened immediacy, saliency and indeed urgency of … increasingly *compressed* policymaking moments' (p. xvii; emphasis original). We might therefore consider fast policy to invoke both the speed and intensity by which such solutions can travel, and the urgency with which these solutions are to be adopted by policymakers.

At the same time, this intensification of speed and connectivity should not lead one to assume that these examples of 'what works' are being perfectly and wholly transferred from their sites of origin to the sites of uptake, as if somehow disregarding the local contexts in which these so-called solutions may have originated. As Peck and Theodore prudently note, '[i]f the form and effects of policies vary with context and shift while in transit, becoming embedded in both networks and within multiple "local" milieux, the "thing" that is being followed is evidently not itself an immutable object' (p. xxv). We would see the mutable and contingent nature of policy as aligning with the notion of active policy enactment, rather than the notion of a more passive process of implementation (see Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Indeed, policies are not objectively imposed upon people and places but are instead interpreted and differentially enacted by agentic actors within subjective local contexts, becoming something that 'is both contested and changing, always in a state of "becoming", of "was" and "never was" and "not quite"' (Ball, 1993, p. 11). This means that one must emphasise both the dynamic movement and, at the same time, the contextual embeddedness of fast policies. In our analyses, we adopt this approach to observe how so-called best practices travel from their point of origin (to the extent that this can ever be definitively fixed) at the OECD to their uptake and development by an international edu-business (Pearson), as well as their incorporation by an Australian state-level education department (NSW). Even though both Pearson and NSW draw upon the policy evidence and expertise of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (and the OECD more broadly), we would argue this is done to achieve a range of idiosyncratic policy goals, from enhancing an institution's policy influence to improving state-level schooling performance within a federated national system, rather than necessarily seeking to reproduce the OECD's policy directives per se.

By employing Peck and Theodore's (2015) notion of 'following the policy', and in particular the promotion of 'what works' for enabling schooling reform, we can demonstrate then how such policy transfers or translations are, at the same time, mediated by global policy flows (e.g. from the OECD, multinational edu-businesses) *and* decidedly more local processes of negotiation (e.g. the nation-state, schools), including inflection by social and cultural context. This mediation has been variously referred to as 'path-dependency' for policy in specific systems (Simola, Rinne, Varjo, & Kauko, 2013; Takayama, 2015), 'vernacular globalisation' (Appadurai, 1996) or 'localised globalisms' (de Sousa Santos, 2006). Acknowledging these processes of mediation will help demonstrate the slippage between ideal policy archetypes, as identified by the OECD, and their inevitably imperfect uptake in the real world, reflecting constant processes of policy constitution, contestation and reconstitution. Even while the policy work of the OECD, and related organisations, exerts a normative influence, it is one

that is far from perfect. Rather than producing direct facsimiles, we perhaps might describe these iterations as local variations on a theme: that is, recognisable but nevertheless distinct from the original melody.

Of course, these notions of contemporary fast policy have not somehow emerged *ex nihilo* as if from a theoretical vacuum, and we would note that there are many antecedents that gesture towards the increasing frequency with which fast policies are devised and deployed as solutions to seemingly wicked social problems. In light of broader moves towards evidence-based modes of educational policymaking (Head, 2008a; Wiseman, 2010) and the increasing deference of policymakers for 'silver-bullet fixes' (Peck & Theodore, 2015), we can see the clear emergence of what Simons (2015) defines as 'governing by examples'. Evolving from earlier modes of governing through numbers (Grek, 2009; Rose, 1999) and data (Ozga, 2009), governing by examples relies on more *qualitative* forms of evidence – such as examples of successful policies and practices – to enhance the value of purely enumerative accounts. However, these best practices are still framed largely in terms of their ability to improve *quantitative* measures of schooling performance (e.g. national schooling performance on main PISA), in which 'examples of good practice are examples of good performance and are being decided upon by available numerical data' (Simons, 2015, p. 715). This complementarity between numbers and examples means that for certain best practices to be valued and counted as evidence, their uptake must discernably improve measurable performance – that is, they 'must work' (Slavin, 2008).

Additionally, this narrowed understanding of what works also means that certain kinds of putatively objective evidence, and ways of 'knowing' education, will tend to be more valued over other, less quantitatively informed, possibilities. We see the dominance of fast policy approaches, and hence their broad appeal across policy domains such as schooling, as directly emanating from the promotion of decontextualised best practices that can, so it is alleged, transcend the specific requirements of local contexts. This is despite 'evidence-based' policymaking being an inherently political and contingent process, insofar as it is always mediated by judgements, priorities and professional values specific to the people, moments and places in which such policies are to be enacted (see Head, 2008a). As Peck and Theodore (2015) note, any analysis of fast policy will thus invariably emphasise 'the inherent tensions between local specificity and global interconnectedness' (p. xxviii).

Our research here also draws upon theorising around the 'becoming topological' of culture (Lury, Parisi, & Terranova, 2012), in which a proliferation of ordering practices – including measurement, metrics, ranking and comparison – helps to create new continuities and flows that can overcome physical distance. In fast policy terms, this 'becoming topological' is also evident in the 'uncoordinated or rather not externally coordinated, activities, relationships and mobilities of multiple actors, infrastructural systems, and networks' (Lury et al., 2012, p. 11), establishing material (e.g. tests, data, conferences) and discursive (e.g. reports, common ideas and values) flows that globally link together actors and organisations. Indeed, one of the defining features of so-called fast policy is that it enables, and is enabled by, 'a perpetually accelerating and ever-more interconnected world' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xv), in which transnational policy borrowing and the codification of supposed global best practice are increasingly routine. This has seen the emergence of global policy knowledge 'experts' for education,

typified by the OECD and Pearson, who have arguably become authoritative nodes in policy networks that validate 'international expertise and verifiable evaluation evidence' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xxx), eliding the primacy afforded to more traditional political boundaries and spaces.

Given that the notions of technologically facilitated global flows and porous political boundaries are by no means entirely new in themselves (see Appadurai, 1996; Carney, 2009; Castells, 2010), we consider the recent turn to topology as developing from earlier relational attempts to understand economic and social processes. In fast policy terms, the ready transferability of certain policy assemblages and solutions – such as the Anglo-American approach to top-down, test-based modes of schooling accountability (Lingard & Lewis, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011) – would imply that some policies are increasingly mobile and can move across more traditional political boundaries, even if they are still significantly mediated by local forces and contexts (McCann, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2013; Peck & Theodore, 2012, 2015). This enhanced mobility has obvious reverberations in terms of the relational spaces constituted through policy flows and networks, helping to create and disseminate new policy solutions in connected spaces that frequently extend beyond the borders of the nation-state. Moreover, the topological rationality inherent in fast policy approaches changes relations between agents, establishing new 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault, 1994) for how policy problems and their solutions can be constituted, and how local processes of schooling reform might be imagined and enacted.

Methodology

Our analysis employs a comparative case study methodology. The strength of this approach, according to Crossley and Vulliamy (1984), is that it maximises 'ecological validity' – or 'the extent to which behaviour observed in one context is generalisable to another' (p. 198). In this instance, we have chosen to focus on three diverse cases to compare examples of fast policy documents produced by an intergovernmental organisation (the OECD's *PISA for Schools*), an edu-business (Pearson's *The Learning Curve* [*TLC*]) and an Australian state government education department (NSW's *What Works Best* [*WWB*]). Focusing on these three policy documents enables us to identify the development of fast policies across different sites and spaces, while also demonstrating how fast policy solutions are being constituted in new and more traditional education policy production spaces. We should also note here that Peck and Theodore (2015) were largely interested in the practices that help to enable fast policy mobilities. While this is certainly a significant endeavour in the context of a globalised world being increasingly respatialised through topological relations, we are instead more concerned with how such fast policy sensibilities are taken and enacted by different educational actors and organisations, and across traditional and nontraditional spaces of policymaking. We therefore aren't seeking to problematise fast policy per se but rather to problematise the effects that such sensibilities can exert.

Linked to this proliferation of new relations and spaces of governance has been the rise of complex policy networks in education, which bring together diverse actors and agencies, inside *and* outside of government, into processes of policymaking (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012). Acknowledging these insights, Ball (2012) has argued that

contemporary education policy analysis must look beyond the traditional territorial focus of the local and the national, to now include the transnational and the global. We would emphasise that any attempt to understand contemporary processes of policy-making forces one to eschew 'methodological territorialism' (Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008) or 'methodological nationalism' (Beck, 2000) and instead look to the new spaces where influence is actually being brought to bear across the policy cycle. Moreover, these analyses must look beyond the State as the single origin of education policy to also consider the influence of intergovernmental organisations, such as the OECD, and a proliferating array of non-government agencies, including edu-businesses, not-for-profit associations and philanthropic foundations. Investigating the development and uptake of fast policy thus requires an expanded and nuanced approach to policy sociology, in order to address the new actors, spaces and relations involved in contemporary processes of educational policymaking and governance.

Each of our cases here is positioned as both 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse' (Ball, 1993), in which 'policies *are* textual interventions into practice [and] we cannot predict or assume how they will be acted on, what their immediate effect will be, [and] what room for manoeuvre actors will find for themselves' (p. 12). In this light, we seek to understand the meaning, influence, contestations and contradictions of these policy representations (Ball, 1993) and to analyse what counts in terms of evidence, expertise and influence (Thompson et al., 2016). Moreover, and in realising that policy is institutionally produced, we consider the rationalities that underpin the production of education policy by various actors, and how the specific spaces and contexts in which policy is produced will necessarily help to influence the final shape of that policy.

Fast policy in action: three variations on a theme

Case study one: the OECD's 'PISA for Schools'

The OECD's *PISA for Schools* is a 2-h written test that assesses how well 15-year-old students can apply their acquired knowledge in reading, mathematics and science to 'real-world' situations, despite being administered as a paper-and-pencil and, more recently, ICT-delivered assessment. In addition to assessing student performance, the test contains student and principal questionnaires that generate contextual information about particular in-school and out-of-school influences on student learning, such as the socio-economic background of students, parental occupations and student attitudes towards reading, mathematics and science. Significantly, *PISA for Schools* departs from the triennial PISA test, in which the nation-state is the usual unit of analysis, by instead benchmarking *local* school performance against the performance of national (and subnational) schooling systems on main PISA. Schools are thus positioned within a globally commensurate space of measurement and comparison (Lewis & Lingard, 2015; Lingard & Rawolle, 2011) and are encouraged to engage with, and learn from, the policy expertise proffered by 'high-performing' international schooling systems and the OECD itself.

Perhaps most significantly, if one considers the fast policy rationality that increasingly underpins contemporary policymaking, all *PISA for Schools* participants receive a 160-page report, containing not only the analyses of their school-level student

performance, but also examples of best practices from high-performing international schooling systems. Displayed in highly prominent 'break-out boxes', these best practices address issues such as *How schools in Korea use ICT to make a successful education system even better* (OECD, 2012, p. 60), and *How effective schools support other schools in Shanghai-China* (p. 99). These international reference societies (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004) and solutions reflect what Peck and Theodore (2015) describe as the enhanced 'cosmopolitanisation' of 'silver-bullet fixes' (p. 224) and the 'debordering' of policymaking imaginaries (p. xv). These policies and practices are intended to 'encourage school staff and local educators to look beyond their classrooms in search of national and global excellence' (OECD, 2012, p. 4), with the OECD therefore determining, albeit rather scientistically, 'what works' (see Slavin, 2008) for the purposes of local school improvement. In agreement with Thompson and colleagues (2016), we would see such an approach as redolent of the conditions for making fast policy, especially in terms of deferring to global best practices and 'ideas that work' (Peck & Theodore, 2015). For instance, the *PISA for Schools* report provides 'examples of how education systems have implemented school improvement, tackled low performance and fostered the talent of students' (OECD, 2012, p. 89), with these examples of best practice drawn from schooling systems that are 'top-performing … as measured by main PISA' (p. 89). Here, we can see the OECD discursively determining not only what is top-performing but also, importantly, what local schools should do in order to be top-performing themselves, all envisaged solely through the prism of 'PISA lenses' (Carvalho & Costa, 2015).

In effect, *PISA for Schools* serves a dual role, providing both a *diagnosis* of local performance and a *prescription* of the reforms – 'magic bullets' (Kamens, 2013) or 'silver-bullet policies' (Peck & Theodore, 2015) – that should be implemented in order to facilitate improvement. Consequently, we contend that the dominant rationale around 'best practice' in the *PISA for Schools* report might best be described as *solutions looking for a problem*, with the OECD ostensibly determining which set of global best practices is most appropriate for local implementation by *all* schools in *all* circumstances. This presumed universality is further emphasised by the fact that all participating UK and US schools receive an identical suite of 17 best practices within their individual reports, which are determined even before student performance is measured. In fast policy terms, these included examples of best practice within the *PISA for Schools* reports seem to be 'designed to purposefully "sell" rather than to just "tell" stories of policy innovation' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. 11). Arguably, this makes sitting the test, and the data that are generated, somewhat redundant beyond providing schools with the impetus to act upon the OECD's policy recommendations, encouraging more normative 'policy borrowing' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) and less educative 'policy learning' (Phillips, 2000). In this, we can perhaps see evidence of what Jessop (2008) describes as 'policy Darwinism', whereby certain policies, in this instance those of the OECD, come to discursively and materially dominate others.

The OECD's promotion of 'learning from the best' via *PISA for Schools* is interestingly not only limited to the sharing of policies and practices from 'high-performing' schooling systems. Rather, local educators and policymakers are also encouraged to peruse the extensive collection of OECD publications and research papers included in the *PISA for Schools* report, given that 33 (out of a total of 49) referenced works are

authored by, or under the auspices of, the OECD (see OECD, 2012, pp. 129–131). Here, the notion of *expertise* is central to how the OECD uses *PISA for Schools* to help steer local schooling practices and reform agendas, insofar as users are encouraged to draw upon 'the wealth of PISA results and related OECD research and resources … in their search for excellence and best practices' (OECD, 2013, p. 5). Encouraging the further uptake of OECD publications by local educators and schooling spaces also suggests how the development of resources, networks forms and circulation systems – what Peck and Theodore (2015) define as 'soft infrastructure' – is a critical facilitator of mobile fast policy.

In this way, the OECD can position itself as the *global* and, with *PISA for Schools, local* education expert (see also Lewis et al., 2016; Rutkowski, 2015), in which 'expertise and the selling of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function' (Grek, 2013, p. 707). This enables *PISA for Schools* to open up new, and previously unavailable, local schooling spaces to the direct influence of the OECD, thus forging new relational policy spaces across otherwise dispersed sites of policymaking and enactment (Peck & Theodore, 2015), and foregrounding issues of *relation* as much as issues of *location*.

Case study two: Pearson's 'TLC'

TLC is a website, online data bank and biannual report developed by the world's largest edu-business, Pearson. *TLC* is described by Pearson (2014) as 'a global project to help influence education policy and practices, at local, regional and national levels', and that 'the data, analysis and ideas on this website will help governments, teachers and learners identify the common elements of an effective education' (see http://thelearningcurve. pearson.com). *TLC* represents a significant component of Pearson's transformation from a supplier of education products and services towards a desire to become a global education policy actor (Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard, 2015; Williamson, 2016). It works to present Pearson as having expertise in education policy analysis, and the website and associated materials function to show how Pearson can have a positive benefit to global policy debates, system reform and improved outcomes for individual learners. As Williamson (2016) notes, users on the *TLC* website can view and interact with various data profiles that compare education by countries, through time and by outputs. There are also a range of stories and videos to support the idea that Pearson is out to change the world, allegedly for the better. In this sense, what we see here is the 'moralisation' of the market through a demand that companies act in socially responsible ways (Shamir, 2008). Pearson's current business strategy, and the development of *TLC*, exemplifies the changing role that philanthrocapitalism and edu-business are playing in global education policy processes (see Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Hogan et al., 2015, 2016).

We argue that *TLC* is a response to an industry that has sprung up around the demand for evidence-based policymaking in education. In fact, *TLC* exemplifies the increased interconnectivity and cross-referential intensity of policy ideas that Peck and Theodore (2015) invoke through the notion of fast policy. *TLC* is populated by educational performance data collected by organisations such as the OECD, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the United Nations and the World Bank. It should also be noted here that Pearson, an

international edu-business, is seeking to profit from data that are publicly available and publicly funded. By collating these into a single database, Pearson is working to 'flatten' data into a global policy 'monoculture' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xvi), meaning that data are stripped of its 'uniqueness' and turned into data points or indicators for use within the broader *TLC* database. As Hogan et al. (2016) have argued, there are technical issues here in attempting to aggregate diverse data produced by various institutions that seek to characterise different performance measures. Yet, according to Pearson, it is correlation, not causation, that is now important in understanding the black box of education, with *TLC* enabling 'researchers and policymakers to correlate education outcomes with wider social and economic outcomes more easily than ever before' (TLC, 2012, p. 2). As Pearson's Chief Education Advisor, Sir Michael Barber explains this is important in an era of evidenced-based policymaking, because PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data alone are not sufficient 'to ensure a country is on track for economic and social success in the 21st Century' (TLC, 2012, p. 2).

By folding complex policy lessons derived from multiple data sources into one 'all-knowing' database, Pearson has created an infrastructure that allows unprecedented policy mobility, joining up and condensing education data into one easy-to-read format. It sets a new standard for accessible 'policy-relevant' data analysis, providing policymakers with a succinct statement of policy solutions that are achievable and, importantly, politically expedient (Thompson et al., 2016), especially as these policy recommendations align with products and services for sale by Pearson (see Hogan et al., 2015). For example, *TLC* (2014) reports that '[o]ne of the most pervasive and endemic problems in education in just about every country is the lack of attention paid to skills provision … [and thus] this year's *Learning Curve* has taken skills for life as its theme hoping to synthesise some emerging lessons with an agenda for change' (p. 1). Interestingly, this theme can be cross-referenced with Pearson's 2013 annual report, which identified adult learning as one of their 'global opportunities': 'Pearson has a unique set of advantages with which to help meet this global demand for better education and skills …. And, by being better able to meet some of the biggest challenges in global education, we can build *a stronger, more profitable and faster growing company*' (p. 9; emphasis added). In this sense, *TLC* can be seen as a succinct statement of public *policy problems*, to which Pearson can then sell *policy solutions* through its targeted products and services, and for largely private benefit.

Through the production of *TLC*, Pearson has been successful in the transnationalisation of policy, or the cross-border interconnectedness of policy discourses, debates and dialogues (Peck & Theodore, 2015). Moreover, with deference to data produced by powerful agencies like the OECD, IEA and the UN, Pearson presents a policy rationality apparently based on evidence of best practice. While it is difficult to define the impact of *TLC* on national policy development, it is arguable that it is gaining traction through what Peck and Theodore (2015) term the 'cosmopolitisation of policy actors and action' (p. 224). They observe that a globally connected complex of policy actors and 'gurus' are now engaged 'in the promotion of portable policy paradigms, documented success stories and silver-bullet fixes' (p. 224). Indeed, in the production of *TLC*, Pearson calls upon an advisory council of educational experts to ensure its data claims are objective

and research-informed. Andreas Schleicher, Director of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills and Special Advisor to the Secretary-General of the OECD, is one of these advisors. Through these international experts, Pearson is establishing its influence and legitimacy as an agency that has the authority to produce education policy recommendations.

TLC is policy produced outside of the traditional knowledge brokering institutions, such as international organisations, governmental authorities, universities and even think tanks. Yet, the environment of fast policy has created a niche that edu-businesses can leverage. Pearson has been able to present technical expertise and align their policy work within the logics of 'big data' (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), thereby condensing a multitude of evidence into one succinct database. Pearson's influence is strengthened by presenting simple policy conclusions about what works in education, effectively limiting the scope for deliberation by policymakers (Jessop, 2008) to focus on particular silver-bullet fixes (Peck & Theodore, 2015).

Case study three: the Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation's 'WWB'

WWB is a 32-page report produced by the Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), an organisation within the NSW Department of Education and Communities that construes itself as an 'innovative hub of data and evaluation' (CESE, 2012, no page number). The CESE's *raison d'etre* is the development of evidence and resources that can support school-level educators in their search for best practice, in order to provide 'information about the effectiveness of different programs and strategies … [P]ut simply, it identifies and shares *what works*' (CESE, 2012, p. 1; emphasis added).[1] Given the expression of such scientist and neo-positivist (Lather, 2013) logics, it is perhaps unsurprising then that *WWB* has sought to distil the complexities of teaching and learning into seven indicators of effective classroom practice that can, by extension, improve student performance. These include high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, the use of data to inform teacher pedagogy, classroom management, well-being and collaboration. Interestingly, each of these seven themes is prefaced in the report by a series of 'Key Points', which further reduces otherwise intractable problems into three or four readily implementable dot points that teachers and school leaders can use to improve their practice. For instance, and relating to the theme of *high expectations, WWB* makes the following accessible, yet arguably somewhat simplistic and decontextualised, policy pronouncements:

> High expectations are linked with higher performance *for all students*. The reverse can also be true. Some students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be achieving less than their full potential due to lower expectations of their ability … A culture of high expectations needs to be supported by effective mechanisms and strategies that support every student's learning needs. Curriculum differentiation is an effective means by which this can occur *in every classroom*. (CESE, 2014, p. 4; emphasis added)

This advice, being concrete, readily implementable and allegedly applicable for 'all students' in 'every classroom', is very much focused on driving practice shifts at the implementation level of the school, rather than addressing the more abstract policy-level concerns of state-level education authorities. Here, we can see clear symmetries

between the *WWB* and *PISA for Schools* reports, in the sense that both provide highly prescriptive policy solutions that are intended to be relevant to, and hence be able to influence, classroom practice, albeit within an admittedly narrow and economistic interpretation of effectiveness.

Even while CESE acknowledges that these *WWB* policy recommendations are far from a 'complete list of effective educational practice' (CESE, 2014, p. 2), we would still see this promotion of purportedly universal best practices as redolent of the 'what works' (Slavin, 2008) and 'evidence-based' (Head, 2008a) approach adopted elsewhere in *PISA for Schools* and *TLC*. For instance, *WWB* notes that 'efforts to make sustainable improvements in student outcomes – the holy grail of education – may have been hampered by a lack of *clear, reliable and accessible evidence* about what really works in schools and classrooms' (CESE, 2014, p. 2; emphasis added). Such a notional focus on evidence is further emphasised by each of the best practice themes within *WWB*, which are presented in terms of three underlying questions (*Why it matters; What the evidence says* and *Implications for teachers and schools*), explicitly linking certain effective practices – 'what works' or 'silver bullets' (Peck & Theodore, 2015) – to improved student performance. Arguably, this invokes a deceptively simple linearity to how processes of schooling reform can be understood by local educators, potentially encouraging what Gorur and Wu (2015) describe as a 'treacherous leap' from data (or 'evidence') to policy, where relationships between policy settings and student performance are understood in a decidedly causal, rather than (at best) correlative, manner.

This is especially problematic when one considers that many of the so-called best practices present within *WWB* – such as a 'return to basics' focus on literacy and numeracy and explicit instruction – are often present in both 'low-performing' and 'high-performing' schools and schooling systems (see Alexander, 2012). We thus see the implied causality in *WWB* as largely eliding the consideration of local social and cultural factors, particularly if these best practices are to be borrowed from sites with vastly different 'out-of-school' contexts (see Feniger & Lefstein, 2014; Meyer & Schiller, 2013). While this desire to draw causal inferences from student performance data extends well beyond *WWB* (see OECD, 2015), such developments reflect the fast policy inclination for 'shortcut alternatives' based on so-called objective evidence (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xxxi), a temporal compression of policymaking that arguably encourages a normative 'off-the-shelf', or 'pick "n" mix' (Morris, 2012), approach to school reform.

Moving beyond how the evidence of best practice has been discursively constructed in *WWB* as something apparently beyond question or reproach, it is also worth observing how the CESE draws upon various policy experts, including the OECD and IEA, to legitimate the claims made in the report. For instance, the conclusions reached around what works within *WWB* are informed predominantly by meta-analyses con-ducted on performance and contextual data collected through the OECD's PISA and Teaching and Learning International Survey, the IEA's TIMSS and data collected via a student feedback survey administered to NSW public school students during 2013–2014 (see CESE, 2015). Here, we can see how *WWB* looks to combine the traditional state-centric expertise of CESE with more international education authorities, such as the OECD and IEA, in which the expertise and credentials of international non-state actors

are used to justify more local policymaking processes. While there is of course nothing innately wrong with public organisations such as CESE accessing OECD or IEA data to inform their policymaking activities, it does become somewhat problematic when these selective data and analyses become the overwhelming, or indeed the only, contribution to these processes. Acknowledging that policy operates as a form of 'moving discursive frame' (Ball, 1993) or 'mobile policy frame' (Peck & Theodore, 2015), we would therefore suggest that seeing school performance through 'PISA lenses' (Carvalho & Costa, 2015) significantly limits the possibilities for how schooling reform, and even schooling itself, might be otherwise imagined. Moreover, the inclusion of the OECD's and IEA's educational expertise in the *WWB* report demonstrates both the 'deepening transnational connectedness' and 'centres of power' evident in 'fast policy' (Peck & Theodore, 2015), and how international large-scale assessments, within broader moves towards evidence-informed policymaking, make possible new ways of acting locally.

In this sense, the CESE has arguably positioned itself as a technocratic, evidence-based expert within the NSW Department of Education, insofar as it employs data and expertise to disseminate pragmatic examples of what works, notionally free from ideology and subjectivity. We might see organisations such as CESE as key translational nodes within the global policy networks, or 'epistemic communities' (Kallo, 2009), that are constituted around international assessments such as PISA, providing the means to impart a more parochial, and locally relevant, imprimatur to global evidence of what works. By adopting and translating the OECD's global evidence and expertise for a subnational Australian context, the CESE becomes, in effect, a local education expert, with its own authority enhanced by virtue of drawing upon the evidence and expertise of the OECD and PISA. What is perhaps even more telling, however, is that *WWB* is a creation of government, rather than an intergovernmental organisation or for-profit edu-business, suggesting that fast policy practices and rationalities – its 'frames, routines and models' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xvii) – have been similarly adopted by more traditional and state-centric sites of education policy production.

Conclusion

Our analyses show how fast policy sensibilities – and particular valued forms of evidence, expertise and influence – have seemingly influenced policy actors across geographically, politically and socially diverse policy spaces. We are not in any way suggesting this reflects a strict convergence of the policies proffered by these organisations, even if they do indeed resemble one another in this particular set of analyses, and would instead emphasise what might be described as a *convergence of policy method*. The commonality of approaches within the three examples of fast policy here – and even of genre, insofar as all three reports are overly simplified 'how-to' guides to schooling reform – is perhaps even more significant than the specific nature of the contents therein. Indeed, different cookbooks are readily recognisable as cookbooks, even if their 'recipes' are not necessarily the same. In this, we can see how vernacular politics are always, to a greater or lesser degree, present when forming and disseminating policy, and how these local contexts of people, places and problems differentiate the specific uptake of otherwise identical solutions.

We would similarly argue that these reports are evidence of a new policy temporality. Main PISA and other similar assessments (e.g. TIMSS), being conducted every three or more years, are seemingly too 'slow' for the data-driven policy demands of governments, policymakers, educational systems and (increasingly) the public. These groups are increasingly driven by the rationale of a fast, ultra-connected polity, in which schooling reform is regularly demanded and 'quick-fix' solutions are putatively needed. In our contemporary, instantised society, where poll-driven politics reign supreme, 'fast' is certainly getting traction, and these examples of fast schooling policies provide simplified, succinct ideas of global best practice for schools and systems seeking to improve their performance, however this might be defined. Moreover, these policies are promulgated by equally *fast organisations* that are able to respond to these requests, as well as *fast policy actors* who can help promote these ideas through their own policy authority and that of their respective organisations (e.g. Andreas Schleicher at the OECD; Sir Michael Barber at Pearson). One might even argue that the *data* used to form these policy recommendations are 'fast' themselves, both in terms of the quick, user-instigated, on-demand measures of school performance enabled by *PISA for Schools*, and, importantly, the 'ready-to-go' nature of the soft, example-based evidence that we see in *WWB, TLC* and *PISA for Schools.*

The desire for fast schooling policy has created a new global market awash with presumed, and actively constituted, isomorphisms. We can see from this analysis the isomorphism of organisational rationality, in which IGOs, governments and edu-businesses adopt similar approaches to improve student learning and drive up standards. There is isomorphism of the intended reader or user of these policy reports, both in terms of the best practices being promoted and that these best practices are seen to be equally applicable for all users, schools and/or schooling systems, irrespective of local contexts and national spaces. These best practices are also isomorphic themselves, being simple, readily implementable, politically expedient and casually linked to better student outcomes. Here, we would argue that 'fast' not only refers to increased speed and compressed temporalities but also invokes the notion of 'fasting': that is, to deprive or deny, indicating the insufficient attention paid by proponents of fast policy to the local, or vernacular, contexts, which is needed for policy and practice to ultimately be successful. Most problematically of all, the oversimplification inherent in such 'off-the-shelf' interventions constrains the 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault, 1994) by which policy 'problems' and their solutions can be constituted, and how local processes schooling reform might otherwise be imagined and enacted.

Indeed, fast policies are seemingly the antithesis of what is needed or what might be most successful, insofar as policy should be considered and thoughtful, and acknowledge the local cultures, histories and conditions of the places and people in which they are presented as the purported solutions. Instead of being reactive, short-term and politically expedient in outlook, we would instead suggest that policymakers should focus on the long game and thus appreciate the 'slow' policy movements that have characterised education reform in places like Finland or Singapore. This does not mean normatively borrowing the specific policies and practices of a reference society like Finland, but rather learning from their approach to education reform, which arose from decades of systemic, and mostly intentional, education policy developments that were directed to the specific needs of the Finnish society (see Sahlberg, 2007). Returning to

the Augustinian demand that opened this article, perhaps what is needed most of all in this increasingly connected and temporally compressed world are schooling policies that are slow, considered and cognisant of the local contexts in which they are to be employed. Despite the seemingly obvious alignment between fast policies and a fast social world, we would instead stress the clear policy benefits to be had from 'making haste slowly'.

Note

1. It is worth briefly noting here that CESE also periodically produces a publication called 'Learning Curve' (http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/content/12-learning-curve/), which prominently lists 'key findings' or 'key effective practices' on the front pages of its 13 issues. Despite CESE and Pearson each independently developing their respective publications around 'what works', it is yet another interesting example of policy and lexicon 'travel' that they have both alighted on practically identical names, give or take the definite article.

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