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Policy Enactment, Context and Performativity: Ontological Politics and Researching Australian National Partnership Policies

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Abstract

Recently critical policy scholars have used the concepts of enactment, context and performativity as an analytic toolkit to illuminate the complex processes of the policy cycle, in particular, the ways in which a multitude of official education reform policies are taken up, challenged, and/or resisted by actors in local, situation specific practices. This set of theoretical tools are usually deployed to analyse interview data collected from a single school or cluster of schools to draw findings or conclusions about the complex processes of policy enactment. We aim to build on this critical policy studies work, by firstly, highlighting key aspects of these theoretical/methodological constructs, secondly exploring the performative role of research in the materiality of specific contexts, and thirdly theorising education policy research in terms of ontological politics. We ground this work in a recent collaborative inquiry research project undertaken in Queensland, Australia. This research project emerged in the Australian policy context of National Partnership Agreement policies which were designed to reform public or government funded schools servicing low socio-economic communities, in order to improve student learning outcomes, specifically in literacy and numeracy as measured by high stakes national testing.

Keywords

policy enactment; policy contexts, performativity, partnership policies, ontological politics

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Introduction

Much of what passes for educational research is hasty, presumptive and immodest. We constantly over-estimate our grasp on the social world and under-estimate our role in its management. (Ball, 2006, p.9)

Recently the concept of context has been deployed for education policy researchⁱ focused on enactment, as opposed to policy implementation (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). The term 'enactment', as used by Braun, Ball and Maguire (2011) denotes the dual processes of policy interpretation and translation by a diverse range of policy actors across a wide variety of situations and practices. The first process, interpretation signals an initial reading and making sense or meaning of policy texts. The second process, translation (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) suggests a re-reading of policy, literally 'enacting' policy, in and through talk, school plans, meetings, classroom lessons, data walls, school websites. The deployment of context as an analytic device to make sense of the processes of policy enactment allows researchers to attend to the complex ways in which official policies are enacted within and across schools (see Bernstein, 2000). A focus on theorising enactment through the conceptual lens of context is thus a timely corrective and significant contribution to the critical policy studies literature. The development of analytic tools to understand the complexity of what is going on inside schools aims to work against 'hasty, presumptive and immodest' educational research, asking researchers to think carefully about their 'grasp on the social world' (Ball, 2006, 9).

What Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) aim to achieve in their analytic use of context to understand policy enactment is 'a grounded account of the diverse variables and factors (the what), as well as the dynamics of context (the how) that shape policy enactments and thus to relate together and theorise interpretative, material and contextual dimensions of the policy process' (p. 20). They seek to offer a framework that can take into account '... a set of objective conditions in relation to a set of subjective "interpretational" dynamics' (p. 21) and suggest four overlapping and interrelated 'contextual dimensions' (p. 21). These are:

situated contexts (e.g. locale, school histories and intakes), professional cultures (e.g. values, teacher commitments and experiences and 'policy management' in schools), material contexts (e.g. staffing, budgets, buildings, technology, infrastructure), external contexts (e.g. degree and quality of LA support; pressures and expectations from broader policy context, such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities) (p. 21).

In addition, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) suggest that contexts are always specific, dynamic, and can shift – in and outside schools. They aim to offer the concept of context as a

heuristic device to consider the circumstances of, and especially the ‘materiality’ aspect of these circumstances in ‘real’ schools. They argue that they have tried to disrupt the ‘idealism’ of policy by introducing the “reality” of our case-study schools, with their situated and material contexts, their specific professional resources and challenges, and their different external pressures and supports’ (p. 42).

The conceptual toolkit around policy enactment and context builds on previous analytic concepts, particularly notions of performativity to analyse the policy cycles of the education reform package(s) designed to re-professionalise teachers, and redefine what constitutes good teaching, effective schooling and quality learning (Ball, 2005). The analytic toolkit developed by Ball (2003; 2005) and colleagues (see Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011) aims to provide a theoreticalⁱⁱ lens to analyse the inter-related and interdependent policy technologiesⁱⁱⁱ of the educational reform package(s) in England. This toolkit has been widely adopted and used by scholars to explain policy enactment in a wide variety of national contexts, including, the US (Koyama, 2011), Canada (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013); Australia (Keddie, Mills, & Pendergast, 2011), Singapore (Chua Soo Meng, 2009) and Italy (Grimaldi, 2012). Ball (2005, 216) argues that:

Policy technologies involve the calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organize human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power.

Various disparate elements are inter-related within these technologies; involving architectural forms, functional tests and procedures, relations of hierarchy, strategies of motivation and mechanisms of reformation or therapy.

One key policy technology of the new educational policy reforms, performativity, is defined as a ‘... mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’ (Ball, 2003, 216). According to Ball (2003), the technology of performativity reduces complex social processes into numerical categories, so that, quality schooling is measured by the numbers game of student performance on high stakes standardised testing. Moreover, the ‘mechanics of performativity’ introduces new modes of invisible social control through data generating monitoring systems including ‘the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing, the regular publication of results and promotion applications, inspections and peer reviews that are mechanics of performativity’ (Ball, 2005, 220). The shaping up and management of performance to meet the demands of external requirements, according to Ball (2003, 222) may produce a ‘spectacle, or game-playing, or cynical compliance, or what one might see as an “enacted fantasy” (Butler 1990), which is there simply to be seen and judged — a fabrication’.

In this paper we adumbrate possibilities for extending some of these ideas based on our research project. The main goal of our contribution here is to open up debate about the ways in which education policy research can begin to grapple with the ontological politics within which it plays. The remainder of this paper is organised into three sections to explore and build on the theoretical concepts of policy enactment, context and performativity. In the first section we describe our research project from which the theoretical engagements of this paper arise. We then review qualitative policy research studies which theorise enactment, context and

performativity. Specifically, we examine the ways in which these analytic resources are deployed to make sense of what is going on in specific empirical sites. In the final section of the paper, we argue that research practices enact or perform realities by assembling human (researchers, research participants) and non-human phenomena (research routines, rituals, instruments, ideas, theories, tools, and artefacts) in particular ways. Put differently, research practices do not sit outside the schooling practices that they attempt to make sense of and depict through the use of analytic devices. Rather, we argue that what we 'do' as research is ontologically political. Research practices do not simply investigate or make sense of an external reality, for example, even when putatively, this might be the aim. The doing of research is an 'interference' reality (Barad, 2007; Law & Singleton, 2013). We write about this doing of research in relation to our recent research project which was comprised of two components, the design and enactment of a collaborative inquiry partnership^{iv} and an investigation^v of the enactment of education reform policies and the research partnership in a cluster of schools. We conceptualise both components of the research project as 'interfering' in reality and consequently as being ontologically political.

National Partnership Agreements: A Policy and Research Ensemble

While the arguments we make in this paper arose from work conducted during a collaborative inquiry research project named the Smart Education Partnership (SEP), none of the research was thinkable, or practically possible, without the influence and confluence of numerous policies. In Australia, where the states control most of what happens in schools, the former Commonwealth (federal) Labor government exerted a lot of influence over schools through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)^{vi}. The policy agenda in education as promulgated by COAG revolved around productivity, with a whole suite of policies rhetorically linking productivity to education. The COAG website stated that, '[r]aising productivity is a key focus of COAG's agenda, and education and training are critical to increasing the productivity of individual workers and the economy' (Council of Australian Governments, 2013). The policies developed through COAG – *Improving Literacy and Numeracy, Better Outcomes for Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities* and *Working Towards a National Curriculum, Better Information about Schools* each had an effect on our work, especially the national, standardised, high-stakes literacy and numeracy testing program (NAPLAN^{vii}) (ACARA, 2012a). Of particular influence was the reporting of the results of this testing via internet media (My School^{viii}), a website where comparisons between schools could be made by the general public (ACARA, 2012b).^{ix}

A federal government policy initiative, the National Partnerships Agreement, contributed significant additional funds 'to improve educational outcomes for all students, under a joint state and federal partnership' (Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), 2010). The National Partnerships Agreement not only provided significant additional funds to schools servicing low socio-economic communities, but also generated the context for the emergence of the SEP research project. In other words, the discursive and material conditions of the National Partnerships Agreement policies in Australia enabled practitioners and university researchers to design a SEP research project, receive significant funding to enact this research in schools, and produce knowledge about this research collaboration.

The Case Study: How and What to Depict?

Extract One:

The real difference has to come with that partnership where you're working together in context. So it's no good taking us out of our context and preaching to us – and I think that people coming in and developing an understanding so there's a shared understanding of the environment, the students, the staff...

Extract Two:

I just think that the accessibility of the staff and the people that were involved in this [SEP project] have been really crucial, and I've not had a project before where we've had that degree of accessibility. I think that's been absolutely crucial. I mean, not only does it at the very base form provide you with the accountability, you know they're watching, you've got to do something about it, but there's also just that opportunity to have those professional conversations and to troubleshoot and individually tailor something to your context. Because you've got this umbrella, but every school that's going to sit underneath that umbrella is going to need something potentially slightly different. I think that that's been one of the beauties of this, is that we've had those school based researchers within our context and we've been able to have them develop a knowledge of the context of the school and then - so I think that's been really important and really successful (Deputy Principal, School 2)^x

These data extracts are from an interview we conducted with a school leader in the SEP research project. The Deputy Principal of School 2 repeatedly emphasised the importance of context in understanding the specificities of the *school*, the *students*, the *environment*, the *staff*. But she also talked about the context of research engagement – the importance of having a team of researchers based *in* the school over a three year period, working *within our context*, in order to collaboratively *develop a knowledge of the context of the school, a shared understanding of the environment*. She also talked about the multiple, different ways in which research and policies may get enacted within a school context. The research project discussed in this interview was a partnership between a Queensland education department district office, twelve schools (three secondary and nine primary), the local university, and the Australian Research Council (a primary funder). All the schools in the partnership were underperforming on NAPLAN and the project was designed to have a positive impact on these scores at the same time as improving the literacy attainment of students attending the schools. All twelve government funded schools participating in the project serviced culturally and linguistically diverse, low socio-economic communities^{xi}.

The SEP was initially designed as a collaborative inquiry project^{xiii} to address complex issues in schools to make a difference to students' literacy attainment. Two teams of researchers were involved in the SEP project. The first team worked on the collaborative inquiry component, and the second team investigated policy and research enactment in and across the cluster of 12 schools. In this paper, we report on the second component of the SEP project, although the intensive work undertaken in schools in the first component also informs our writing. The second component of the SEP project involved the collection of interview, focus

group, and field work data^{xiii} to make sense of what was happening in the cluster of 12 schools in the broader policy education reform context of National Partnership Agreements, NAPLAN, My School website, Australian Curriculum, and the Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012a, 2012b; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2012; Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008, 2010; Department of Education Training and Employment (DETE), 2010. At the time of data collection, the SEP project was one of several research projects engaged in schools servicing low socio-economic communities in South-East Queensland, Australia.

Performativity and Fabrication of School Identity

Our analyses of the research data collected during the SEP project began with the analytic contextual typologies generated by critical policy scholars. We had read the work of colleagues reporting on data collected from schools in the same geographic locale. For example, Keddie, Mills and Pendegast (2011, 76) used 'Ball's theorising of performativity and fabrication' to illuminate the fabrication of a school identity in a case study school in Australia. They claimed that their analyses of interview data collected in one week revealed that the school identity fabricated by school leaders, 'while not outside the truth, actually does not exist' (p. 88). They suggested that the theoretical toolkit of 'performativity and fabrication' provided them with the capacity to engage in 'illumination', to demonstrate how a school identity is fabricated through the 'strategic deliberation and management' of a particular version of reality (Keddie et al, 2011: 88). In addition, Keddie (2013, p. 3) demonstrated how the context of a school in the UK made it easier for this school to respond to the increasingly performative demands that it, and others, were being placed under. She argued that her research drew on the 'heuristic device [developed by Braun et al.,] for thinking about the "situated", "professional" and "external" dimensions of context in schools'. Keddie (2013) further argued that context as a heuristic device 'supports an analysis of the school's intake (in particular the high cultural and class related aspirations of parents and students) and its values (namely the school's traditional ethos of academic and behavioural excellence)' (Keddie, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, Keddie (2013, p. 3) argued that the 'contextual dimensions contribute significantly' to the school's 'capacity to forge a worthy school identity within the current hyper-accountable and competitive environment where academic achievement (along increasingly narrow and conservative lines) and maintaining standards in relation to this achievement are utmost priorities.

We propose that the use of context in education policy research (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011; Keddie, 2013) makes possible a critical researcher disposition that seeks to investigate, reveal, understand or explain education policy and its various intersections with education sites and processes. Such work enables the researcher to produce data with respect to policy and then analyse that data to offer findings of different sorts which make visible that which has been invisible prior to the application of the theoretical lens or analytic toolkit. Implicit in such a disposition is the assumption that research is for illumination or unmasking (Baehr & Gordon, 2012), and that there are tools (heuristic devices, toolkits) that are available to make this possible; context being one of them. The purpose of such research is to conceptualise education policy enactment and bring context into the mix of this conceptualization to illuminate the various factors, and especially the material conditions of schools, that constrain, afford, inflect enactment. So here context, no matter how fluid or shifting,

or how multilayered, is a conditioning feature of enactment and research takes place by investigating this context. The research task is to find out about context, or to use context as a resource for understanding enactment. The pre-supposition is that there is a 'real world' outside of research dispositions and practices waiting to be discovered and illuminated through the deployment of a set of heuristic devices or tools. For example, Grimaldi (2012: 445-446) describes his ontological position as 'an intermediate position between social constructionism and critical realism'. He writes of the 'gritty realities out there' external to research and viewed by the research gaze (Apple cited in Grimaldi, 2012: 446).

The ontological politics of such a research gaze or disposition assumes that the researcher can remain outside the reality that is being depicted. The coming together of people, objects, ideas, artefacts, theories in and through the 'doing' of research is removed from the 'gritty reality' out there. It is as if the researcher can gaze on an external 'reality', produce data and knowledge about this 'reality' through analytic devices or toolkits, and not be implicated in creating the 'real'. These theoretical resources have no agency themselves – they are merely devices deployed by critical policy scholars to illuminate or make visible that which was previously invisible in an external real (see Bernstein, 2000). Moreover, the implicit assumption within this researcher disposition is that the analytic toolkit or heuristic device illuminates or unmasks the complexity of what is going on in schools under the radar of the people who work in them, but only illuminated or understood through the devices of critical scholarship (see Latour, 2004; Law, 2004).

As we tried to make sense of the qualitative data we were generating in 'doing' research, we became increasingly troubled by what might have been left unspoken, unwritten in critical policy accounts. Moreover, we were concerned about the performative effects of these ways of knowing and writing about policies and policy enactment in schools. Our concerns aligned with those expressed by Stern (2012, 388) who warned of the potential dangers of critical methodologies, which appear to generate knowledge via 'suspicion/paranoia'. A paranoid reading of current education policies automatically knows these policies as the products of a neo-liberal market logic which in turn erodes teacher professional autonomy and perpetuates structural inequalities. Such critical interpretations, Stern (2012, 392) argued are in themselves performative, 'as a way of knowing', and also perform 'knowing affects on a reader'.

So firstly, we worried about making claims about what we 'found' in the schools, particularly claims about the negative effects of neo-liberal education policies, since so much more was happening in these schools. Given we were also complicit in what was happening in the schools, through both components of the research project, we wondered if our research practices and actions were simply re-producing these negative effects. We wondered whether our research work in schools was simply subjugated to the performative accountability agenda of neo-liberal education policies. And this cuts to the heart of our motivation to make a contribution to critical policy theorisations of context. In the SEP research project, we were constantly confronted by complexity that defied a heuristic form of analysis. We felt that in spite of the fact that we could easily draw conclusions, we needed to keep delaying them and re-think 'our grasp of the social world' (Ball, 2006, 9). For us this is a key to our working with the concept of ontological politics — the need to delay conclusions, 'delaying' is a feature of the methodological processes we will take up further in the final discussion section of the paper.

Theorising Policy Enactment, Context and Performativity

Our interviews and fieldwork *did* show that there are ‘real’ negative effects deriving from the wash back of media reports of low performance in high stakes testing. The performativity demands placed on schools and teachers and students are having negative effects/affects, and schools *are* being placed under constraints that militate against their responsibility to educate, as opposed to prepare for an externally devised assessment regime. But this story was easily ‘revealed’. It caught our attention immediately. It was evident in the plethora of data walls displaying student learning outcomes in every classroom. It was evident in the talk of teachers, school leaders and district administrators. And it was particularly evident during the field work visits conducted immediately after the media reportage of NAPLAN results. The tension in the schools was palpable. So the heuristic device of context could easily be called upon to provide an explanatory framework here — high poverty, intergenerational unemployment, reports of racial ‘tensions’ and violence hitting the major media outlets regularly. In the schools, neoliberal education policies enacted as NAPLAN and My School producing despair and demoralisation amongst the teaching population, already characterised by high staff turnover, and thus perpetuating further instability and uncertainty. A school district characterised by a complex mix of current policy from mandated standardised testing to National Partnership Agreements, which are enacted by district administrators and school leaders in managerial performative ways that intensify unequal educational outcomes.

But what else was going on in these schools? We turned to the data we collected, to discussions with research colleagues who had spent years participating in the collaborative inquiry component, and to research studies undertaken in schools in similar geographic locations.

Scholars such as Gowlett, (2013), Hardy, (2013), and Niesche, (2013) also working in some of the same schools, but on different research projects, were also writing about the complex ways in which school leaders and classroom teachers were enacting neo-liberal education policies. For example, Gowlett (2013: 1) took up a provocateur research disposition and used ‘queer(y)ing’ methodology, particularly Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, to think ‘differently about new schooling accountabilities and how they can unfold in ways that are unforeseen and unexpected’ in a specific empirical context of a secondary school in South-East Queensland servicing a low socio-economic community. Gowlett (2013: 4) argued that her aim in using queer(y)ing methodology was to trouble the ‘three normative and dominant understandings ... concerning the effects of accountability pressures on everyday schooling practices’, namely:

- (1) That they make schooling test focused
- (2) That they narrow curricula
- (3) That they induce prescription ‘from above’ about the most appropriate methods for effective schooling, thus creating a formulaic and generic approach to ‘best practice.’ (Gowlett, 2013: 4).

To undertake this theoretical work, Gowlett (2013: 4) drew on Judith Butler’s theorisation of performativity in contrast to the definition of performativity deployed by

Stephen Ball and colleagues. We note Lingard and Sellar's (2013) distinction between two models of performativity: (1) terrors and fears associated with an audit culture, where performance of teachers and school leaders is constantly monitored against publically reportable criteria and in turn produces detrimental or perverse effects – lowering staff morale, narrowing curriculum to teaching to the test, and reducing pedagogy to scripted lessons; and (2) 'performative resignification' as a mode of agency for thinking otherwise to manoeuvre around performance regimes and mitigate these negative effects. Drawing on notions of performative resignification, Gowlett (2013: 5) argued that the subject-hood of school practitioners was 'brought into being through their actions' and at any one time practitioners were negotiating numerous contradictory discourses, and 'striving for multiple recognitions', which all generated the 'conditions for resignification' of policies during enactment. Via this theoretical lens, Gowlett (2013: 5) depicted a secondary school principal as 'simultaneously constituted through My School AND the National Partnership Agreement, thus forging the opportunity for those simultaneous constitutions to converge and rework how accountability pressures play out'. Gowlett (2013: 4) suggested that the deployment of Butler's theory of performativity 'creates the potential to (re)circulate ideas in new and often unforeseen ways, thus shifting meaning and inspiring new ontological possibilities'. Ontology is brought explicitly into the research equation here. The objective is to inspire new ontological possibilities by documenting the 'counter-politics' of 'everyday struggles and resistances enacted by students, teachers or others in the practices of their daily lives' (Gowlett, 2013: 3).

The same school principal is depicted by Niesche (2013) along the same lines, but this time, through recourse to an analytic toolkit synthesised from Deleuze and Foucault, namely 'control of conduct' and 'counter-conduct'. Niesche (2013: 9) argued that the school principal resisted 'the influence of the [My School] website by actively not speaking about it, thereby not bringing its effects into existence through spoken discourse'. Moreover, the school principal engaged in a counter-narrative to that produced by the My School website by speaking about 'other issues and things that the school does well' (Niesche, 2013: 9). In addition, Hardy (2013: 6) depicted policy enactment in one of the primary schools that participated in the SEP project, through recourse to the 'thinking tools', of 'field, capitals and habitus derived from the work of Bourdieu'. Hardy's (2013: 8-10) research project 'revealed' that teachers appropriated policy discourses to adopt an 'educational disposition' rather than 'solely for performative and political purposes' because they drew upon NAPLAN data as a measure or indicator of student learning, to strategically organise student learning, and to plan their own professional learning.

But the research stories told here were again familiar accounts of counter-politics by actors exercising agency in practice by either: (i) resignification or different logics of appropriation of accountability pressures, or (ii) negotiating multiple and contradictory policy discourses during enactment processes. We also wondered whether these depictions of policy enactment in schools were concerned more with what was happening in the researchers' worlds than those they were investigating. (One simple question we might ask here is - could these depictions about schools have been made without the theoretical prelude?) The 'real world' of schools in these stories remained distant, separated out and illuminated through the research toolkit.

So, instead of joining the dots of analysis to participate in alignment with critical policy scholars we wondered whether there were other conclusions to be drawn, other analyses that might move beyond the familiar research stories of revelation and/or a suspicion (Baehr &

Gordon, 2012). We worried that critical research accounts appeared to be based on assumptions that those who are doing work in schools are somehow duped or misguided or doing things that are slightly out of their control, whereas we, as researchers are not subject to any of these 'outside', unseeable forces, and that somehow were able to 'see' (through theoretical analyses of interviews and field notes) 'inside' what other people were doing?

We were confronted again and again with stories, not just of hope or resistance, but of great resourcefulness, courage and a willingness to not just confront the inevitability of postcode perceptions of disadvantage, but actively engage with a completely different set of ideas about what schooling might be about. We wanted to capture the fluid, shifting knowledge produced, enacted and exchanged through the SEP project, as encapsulated in statements such as the following by the Deputy Principal of School 2 who said *'So that's, I think, what's made the big difference. Both sides, I felt, were learning from each other as it went.'* We came to see many of the schools as 'high-performing' – producing successes of all kinds where none may have appeared obvious in My School data reports, or the research accounts of critical policy scholars. The staff we interviewed were often very proud of the work they did and the difference they were making in the local contexts.

At the same time, we wanted to extend the critical policy studies frame further and begin to think about how the heuristic device of context not only illuminates or describes what it speaks about, but also actively engages with, becomes entangled in, and shapes the formation of the 'real' world. The purposes of our research required that we base our work on different epistemological and ontological assumptions to that of critical policy scholars, or at least explore the ways in which these are played out in the articulations of our research. In the collaborative inquiry component of the research partnership, the research team was concerned to work within and against the policy frames that were available. This might then produce a form of active researcher-led resistance to them in terms of the ways in which they allocated success and failure, to take research that might expedite teachers' work on literacy, that might in turn have an effect on students' literacy and their performance on standardized testing. The aim was to make a tangible difference to the working lives of school leaders and teachers and the educational outcomes of students, with the best available resources on hand.

The second aspect of the research was investigative in its intent; however, it also became involved in the worldly configurations of schools in a different way. As a research team, we found that the cumulative effects of our ongoing presence in the schools built as we proceeded with data collection. The investigation became 'two way' with our interviewees clearly being 'affected'^{xiv} by our return to the schools and through the interview engagement. We also were affected by doing this research work over a long time. We had commenced this project, after being urged by practitioners to assist schools that were clearly struggling to make a difference to students' learning. The team of researchers engaged in the collaborative inquiry component of the project worked intensively with classroom teachers, school leaders and district administrators to deal with complex social and educational problems. And the team of researchers investigating policy and research enactment were simultaneously uneasy and inspired by the multitude of things happening in these schools. This allowed us to begin rethinking context; practically at first – if we were having these effects/affects, and were being affected/effectuated in various ways, then what might this mean? We also wanted to explore ways to think about this further; how could we theorise this? We especially wanted to avoid blitzkrieg

ethnographic methodological resources (Moore, 2013), and/or reflexive self-revelation, as while they may be useful in some research, we felt we needed different resources.

So we pondered on how to engage with the constantly changing/shifting contexts of the schools, the 'real' complexity of the contexts in which we participated during the SEP project. We were aware that the people in the schools we worked in were concerned about their contexts and the ways in which researchers, outsiders coming to work in their schools, approached and worked with them, and depicted them in research accounts. So in thinking and writing up our research project, we had to redescribe how the discursive and the material, in the research and the schools we were working in, worked together. It was not just a matter of being able to label what teachers or schools seem to be doing according to some pre-ordained theoretical frame, but work within the available material-discursive possibilities and try to change them.

To recap, the SEP project was initially designed as a two part project, the first part – a collaborative inquiry partnership, the second part – an investigation of policy and research partnership enactment. It was only in this second part of the project that we began to question the possibility of a putative 'real' external to the research project that could be understood, revealed and reported on. This questioning led to our search for resources to conceptualise research entanglements and an ontological politics (Law, 2009). We write about this in more detail in the next section.

Ontological Politics: Enactment, Context and Performativity

If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science? How might we catch some of the realities that we are currently missing? Can we know them well? Should we know them? Is 'knowing' the metaphor that we need? And if it isn't, then how might we relate to them? Almost certainly we will need to think hard about our relations with whatever it is we know, and ask how far the process of knowing it also brings it into being (Law, 2004: 2-3)

In the research project, we were constantly confronted by complexity that defied a heuristic form of analysis. We felt that in spite of the fact that we could easily draw the same type of conclusions as our colleagues we needed to delay them. We came to see the need to conceptualise the extent to which we were 'in' the context and participating in 'performing' the context. We were concerned also about the accounts produced by other 'critical' scholars of the current 'moment' in the neo-liberalising of education in Australia and more broadly. In its simplest formulation then we sought to slow down research processes, to delay hasty conclusions about how policies are being enacted in schools through recourse to a conceptual toolkit or heuristic device.

We want to suggest as a result of our work in this project therefore that the tenuous relations between what researchers do and what 'policy' does have the potential to be

rethought- especially where research is committed over the longer term to making changes in schools, in a complex mix of policy and research enactments. Such research processes assemble new relations, ideas, energies, and illuminations and these can lead to unexpected and fruitful 'emergences', so that 'we ought to consider not 'what we want to know', but 'what we want to do' (Mol and Messman, 1996: 422), carefully.

One specific outcome of slowing down research processes is the need to approach theory differently. Theory seems often, when we have used it in the past, to be about enabling repeat performances — using others ideas to 'find' things. This almost seems like a ritual. Gather some theory, find an empirical site, run it through the theory and produce some findings; get published. Move on. In slowed down processes, the rituals or repeat performances that theoretical and analytical devices can offer intentionally become more difficult to achieve. So that rather than taking theoretical concepts and applying them elsewhere, the best one might do is to test them out, with the strong possibility that they will need to be changed in the processes of delaying conclusions (see Bernstein, 2000). If an outcome of research is a changed theoretical conceptualisation, analytic tools are more like 'intermediary concepts' (Brown & Tucker, 2010) or locally generated 'dirty' theory (Connell, 2007) — temporary settlements between empirical and theoretical understandings that don't aim to participate in ongoing rituals of revelation away from the specific particularities of their composition.

At the same time, we do think that critical policy studies research concerning power and knowledge relations, enactment, context and performativity remains relevant and valuable. But a different sense of what might be possible in terms of 'knowing' relations, as a way to create new knowledge possibilities, and new knowledge/power relations might expand the scope of critical work. These different kinds of 'knowing' relations suggest policy research as a process where knowing is a joint exercise and one that creates opportunities for the subversion of knowledge hierarchies without recourse to the extreme positions of either objectivism or relativism (see Moore, 2009), for example.

Another potential resource is based on the understanding that observations are in ongoingly constitutive, entangled relations with their agencies of observation (Barad, 2007). So when policy is described, analysed, theorised or researched there are ongoing relations between that which is revealed or 'found' and that which has enabled such revelation/finding. On the face of it this seems straightforward. However, we suggest here that one of the potential blind spots of critical education policy research is in the methodological apparatuses that are employed. Or to be more precise, there is a space in the unarticulated relations between the theoretical resources used and developed, the education policy 'work' being researched, and the findings that are produced. There is a muting of the epistemological position (Tello & Mainardes, 2012) in this – a methodological quietude that is often filled by reference to an analytical procedure (for example, heuristic device, toolkit of context, or some other neatly labelled method) that is both unlinked from the theoretical resources invoked and the findings that might be produced.

By contrast, we suggest the need for resources for encountering context creatively with respect to policy – to 'see' policy and its research 'differently'.

By focussing on knowledge, on the text, and on the valid proposition, we lose sight of the philosophical and scientific task to reflect on how we see things and how we might see them differently (Thompson, 2012, p.26)

Thompson (2012, 22) 'exercises' theory, stating, 'I am interested in examining that which we often lose sight of when we conceive of theory simply as an available and objective foundation'. She argues that in the exercise of theory, 'method' can 'extinguish' what researchers do and establish it as detached from or "independent of the researchers' activity". So to exercise theories one task might be to develop possibilities that interrupt any *a priori* categorisation, and/or, to see whether and how categories hold, or might be shifted, expanded, collapsed and so on, keeping in mind the power that categorical work has to do in making some things visible and keeping others invisible, unseen/unseeable (Bowker & Star, 2000). As Barad (1998, 102) puts it, '[W]e are responsible for the world within which we live, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices which we have a role in shaping'.

As we have suggested, using a heuristic device to analyse policy enactment can presume that there are separate spaces for action – a policy action space and a separate analytic space. The kind of research in the collaborative inquiry partnership project reported in this paper is overtly *in* contexts, as the quote from the interview above highlights and this complicates the 'separation presupposition'. Further to this, a confluence of policies both made the research project possible, and influenced its possible outcomes and ongoing effects. As we have suggested, the complexity of this research and the policy and schooling contexts that we were in, demanded a different response. We make some further theoretical suggestions about this in the next section of the paper.

Discussion: Theorising performativity differently

Researcher: ... Do you know, you said something earlier - when I said, I think universities have to change in the way they deal with schools because the climate is shifting, and you said, yes - can you explain what you meant by that?

Principal: ... I think that one of the - a few of the pieces of advice that I would give is that the universities need to not come in as a top-down thing. They need to understand the context of a school, and how the kind of respect [Lead Researcher, Component One, SEP project] had for people who were already[in the context] - the results are crap, but they're doing a bloody good job with what they've got. So, we had that sense with [Lead Researcher], that there was enormous respect for the work being done, that it was very much building from the teachers out. It wasn't about, I know everything and this is what you need to do. Even though, you know, the others [Researchers in Another Project] try, and there's a sense of niceness — there's certainly niceness and friendliness, but there's not that same down-to-earth - like, things that I could have said, that I would say, to you, that I'd say to [Lead Researcher], I wouldn't say to them. You miss something there, you see?[Principal, School 4]

...the complexities here. Look I think we've got very committed, highly dedicated teachers...who put a hell of a lot of work into it, but at the same time the complexities that they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis are huge. I'd never been in - I've been teaching since 1960 so I've seen an awful lot of different contexts throughout that time, and I have never seen anything as complex as this community...[Principal, School 11]

Perhaps as a result of working across twelve schools and being involved in the schools over a long period of time we began to worry about the 'performative' or 'world-making' aspects of our research work. In contrast to the definitions of performativity used by critical policy analysts, and outlined previously in this paper, we propose that Law's 'thinking performatively' (2009:1) is potentially generative. Law (2009: 1) states:

If we think performatively, then reality is not assumed to be independent, priori, definite, singular or coherent. Rather the logic is turned upside down. If reality appears (as it usually does) to be independent, prior, definite, singular or coherent then this is because it is being done that way. Indeed these attributes or assumptions become examples, amongst others, of collateral realities.

Law (2009) suggests that collateral realities are produced through every aspect of the routines, rituals and practices of research activity. This is more than simply suggesting that data is produced through the interactions of interviewers and interviewees, and that data reportage is one of many possible representations. Such a position still assumes an external 'out there' common-sense reality independent of the researcher, which is refracted through the lens of the research exercise. Rather, the position that we are developing is that

Practices enact realities including collateral realities. This means that if we want to understand how realities are done or to explore their politics, then we have to attend carefully to practices and ask how they work. ... To study practices is therefore to undertake the analytical and empirical task of exploring possible patterns of relations, and how it is that these get assembled in particular locations. It is to treat the real as whatever it is that is being assembled, materially and semiotically in a scene of analytical interest (Law, 2009: 1).

By attending to the specificities of the practices within the schools, by working with practitioners and engaging in collaborative problem solving around making a learning difference, we were engaging in ontological politics. In addition, by studying how practices were being assembled around the enactment of policies and research projects, we also engaged in assembling these practices in new ways through the introduction of new routines, rituals, artefacts and ideas. In addition, we argue that the interview, focus groups and fieldwork component of the SEP was also implicated ontologically, and should be conceptualised this way — as interfering in, and therefore changing, realities (Law, 2009) in the schools. Both components of the SEP enacted 'reals and (here's another collateral reality) they enact people in

particular and distinctive ways' (Law, 2009: 9). That is, objects, artefacts, ideas, and people were assembled in ways that enacted realities in the SEP project.

So, we needed to be able to re-theorise the contexts we were generating through our research practices. This occurred in three ways: firstly in terms of the collaborative research; secondly with respect to the practices of interviews, focus groups and field work; and thirdly, in the practices of documenting and reporting on the research (see Law, 2009). Another important aspect of our thinking here occurred during the second component of the SEP project where we spent time in each of the schools making notes on the artefacts that had appeared as a result of the involvement. We were trying to see how the schooling practices had changed as a result of the initial involvement and how these changes might be sustained into the future. We felt that whatever had been taken up procedurally or had affected curriculum or administration practices would perhaps 'last' and we are analysing this possibility further. What was apparent during our visits and our investigations into sustainability was both the variation in the take up of the literacy innovations, but also the remarkable 'life of their own' that they had taken on. The schools were doing things that the SEP project team could not have imagined might happen and each of them were doing things in quite contrasting and distinctive ways. Furthermore, these continued to emerge and morph in distinctive, surprising ways after SEP funding ended, including ongoing interactions and engagement between researchers and practitioners through digital technologies. Clearly, this is to be expected given that schools are such idiosyncratic places, however it gave us pause as the schools are typified usually by the poverty of their location and their academic failure, their lack of innovation. In that pause we started to think further about context differently. We questioned whether the use of context as a heuristic device in education policy enactment research illuminated what was happening in these schools, or was another form of ontological politics which enacted a 'real', and perhaps a dismal 'real' with little hope for making an educational difference.

Heuristics are simplified rules of thumb that make things simple and easy to implement. But their main advantage is that the user knows that they are not perfect, just expedient, and is therefore less fooled by their powers. They become dangerous when we forget that. (Taleb, 2012, p. 24)

We acknowledge the work of other critical scholars, who have troubled the normative, dominant interpretations of policy enactment through re-theorisations of performativity. At the same time, however, in challenging these scholars' depictions of the enactment of policies in similar contextual situations we have engaged in ontological politics, bearing witness to the many realities that co-exist and emerge in these contexts, and questioning the coherence of a singular 'reality' produced in depictions of policy enactment. This is not to suggest that 'reality' can be simply wished away and replaced with another version of the 'real'.

Enacting realities is not a trivial matter. ... To wash away the metaphysics of common-sense realism is not to claim that anything goes. It is to shift our understanding of the sources of the relative immutability and obduracy of the world: to move these from 'reality itself' into the choreographies of practice. And then it is to attend to how the latter are done – and might be undone. But this shift also

demands that we attend to the collateral realities – all those realities that get done along the way, unintentionally. For, here's my assumption, it is the endless enactment of collateral realities that tends to hold things steady. That (this is the tension) helps to make the choreography possible, but at the same time renders an ontological politics unthinkable (Law, 2009: 13)

One danger is to keep epistemological assumptions, and the assumptions we make about who can know what, about whom, not just unclarified, but undisclosed, or silent. We propose that it is possible to simultaneously undertake research on and in contexts working with complexity and emergence, where the process of 'world-making' is theoretically and practically enacted. Karen Barad's (2007) work as captured in the following quote encapsulates some of the possibilities.

The world is an ongoing process of mattering through which mattering itself acquires meaning and form through the realization of different agential possibilities. Temporality and spatiality emerge in this processual historicity. Relations of exteriority, connectivity, and exclusion are reconfigured. (Barad, 2007, 141)

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- ⁱ Ball (2005: 44) defines “policy as text and policy as discourse. ... Policy discourses ... produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about. Policy texts are set within these frameworks which constrain but never determine all of the possibilities for action.”
- ⁱⁱ Ball (2005) describes theory and the critical gaze acquired through theory as an ‘analytic device’ and ‘toolkit’, that is, “is a vehicle for ‘thinking otherwise’; it is a platform for ‘outrageous hypotheses’ and for ‘unleashing criticism’ .
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ball (2005: 70-71) argues that five elements or sets of influences are identifiable in the ensemble of educational reform packages: (1) neo-liberalism or the ideologies of the market; (2) new institutional economics - explains the workings of social life, social relations, and coordination of individual and collective behaviour in terms of the actions and choices of the rational actor; (3) performativity - ‘a form of indirect steering or steering from a distance which replaces invention and prescription with target setting, accountability, and comparison’; (4) Public Choice Theory ... choice is a key aspect of neo-liberalism (5) New Managerialism ... ‘a delivery system and a vehicle for change’ which stressed ‘constant attention to “quality”’; innovation, and appraisal mechanisms as a means of employee control.
- ^{iv} The collaborative inquiry intervention design, lead by Author 3, incorporated three phases. Phase 1 involved the use of a common diagnostic norm referenced testing instrument across all classrooms (Years 5, 7, 9) across the 12 schools to facilitate data-informed analysis, inquiry and decision-making. Phase 2 involved targeted professional learning for teachers and school leaders in analysing diagnostic test data, and in designing curriculum and pedagogy to address the specific learning needs of students. Phase 3 involved the implementation of innovative pedagogic designs and assessing the effectiveness of these designs. A total of 290 teachers across 12 schools participated in the partnership project over the course of three years (mid 2009 - mid 2012).
- ^v This component was undertaken by author 1 and 2 and involved interview data collection with school leaders and district administrators, focus group interviews with teachers, as well as field work in each of the 12 schools
- ^{vi} Australia is a federation with a Commonwealth Government and eight State and Territory governments. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) includes the Prime Minister (the Chair) State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association. Its function is to ‘lubricate’ the operation of Australian federalism in social policy domains.

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- vii The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a high stakes testing regime which has operated in Australia since 2008. The assessment regime covers reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy for all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Data generated from the standardised tests are made publically available on the My School website.
- viii Official website developed by ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012a, b) <http://www.acara.edu.au/default.asp>) which provides school performance data on NAPLAN and encourages comparison of test results across schools according to a ICSEA scale (The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) - a scale developed specifically for the My School website for the purpose of identifying schools serving “students from statistically similar backgrounds” (ACARA, 2012c, p. 4). The formula for ICSEA is: socioeconomic advantage + remoteness + percentage of Indigenous students + percentage of disadvantaged students with languages background other than English. Socioeconomic advantage is calculated by drawing data from student enrolment records and Australian Bureau of Statistics on parental occupation, education level, and language background (ACARA, 2012c, pp. 10-12).
- ix Concerns have been raised about how data categories produced by the My School website, such as Indigenous students and Language Background Other than English, mis-represent and mis-recognise the very groups of students that they were designed to assist (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass 2012; Lingard & Sellar, 2013)
- x The term context was deployed by most of the interviewees to refer to the specificities of practices within their particular school, classrooms, and local community. The term was also used to depict the evolving, changing context of schools characterised by high levels of staff and student mobility. Moreover, context was often used simultaneously with complexity to describe the multiple realities within the school across time and space, and across different social and material relations.
- xi Unemployment levels are high in the local community, with many single parent families. The local community is serviced by poor public transport and an abundance of fast food outlets. The student population attending the schools includes recent refugees, and large numbers of students with Pacific Islander cultural heritages. Approximately 10 percent of the student population is Indigenous. Many of the students experience learning difficulties, some requiring specialist English language instruction, given that English is not spoken in the home. Although student mobility is high within the community, students usually transition to one of the local secondary schools. By contrast, staff mobility is high with many staff seeking employment in schools situated in higher socio-economic communities.

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- ^{xii} The intervention component appropriated resources from the school effectiveness and school improvement literature, while working in context with teachers, school leaders and district administrators to collaboratively address complex social and educational issues. Some critical policy scholars, including Ball (2005: 61) have described school effectiveness and school improvement research as an example of *'policy entrepreneurship [which]... rests primarily on the proselytising, and in some cases the sale, of 'technically correct answers'. The policy entrepreneur is committed to the application of certain technical solutions to organisations and contexts which are taken a priori to be in need of structural/ or cultural change.'* This was not our intent...
- ^{xiii} Interview data was collected from: 3 district administrators; 12 school principals (8 female, 4 male, 9 primary, 3 secondary); 14 deputy principals/lead literacy teachers (all female). Interviews were approximately of one hour duration, were transcribed and analysed in the first instance using NVivo to generate themes and codes. The interviews were guided by the following themes: (1) Smart Education Partnership, (2) Multi-Level Capacity Building intervention around a diagnostic approach to assessment and needs-based teaching, (3) Collaborative Innovative Model of School Improvement, (4) Implications for Educational Policy: Schooling for Social Justice, (5) Sustainability: Leadership, Professional Capacities, Quality Classroom Instruction. Focus group data was generated from over 50 teachers across 11 schools. Each focus group was approximately 45 minutes in duration, and had between 2-9 participants. The focus group interview was guided by a protocol covering the following themes: (i) general reflections about the SEP project; (ii) participation in professional development activities; (iii) learning about student literacy and instructional design; (iv) specific aspects of the project – tools, artefacts, common professional vocabulary, data visualisations and discussions, opening up of classrooms.
- ^{xiv} The term affect is used here to describe how the “intimate world of feelings intersects with political ideologies and institutions” (Stern, 2012, 388).

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