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Editorial introduction: Assemblage, enactment and agency: educational policy perspectives

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EDITORIAL

Assemblage, enactment and agency: educational policy perspectives

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The idea for this special issue emerged after a panel held at the 7th International Conference on Interpretive Policy Analysis in 2012 in Tilburg, the Netherlands. Our goal for the panel was to bring together recent work around the notions of *assemblage, enactment and agency* in educational policy analysis, with particular attention to issues of subjectivity, practice, power, and relationality. After the conference, we invited other papers to form a special issue on these topics. The collection of papers in this issue aims to explore the emerging shift in policy research towards analyses embracing the notion of policy enactment, and specifically, theorizations that attend to the

> … creative processes of interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualisation - through reading, writing and talking - of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices. (Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins, 2011, p. 586)

These new approaches offer innovative and exciting opportunities for exploring the complexity of policy processes in educational fields.

The authors in this issue share an interest in critiquing linear views of policy processes for their limitations in understanding complexity in policy research. Such linear views of policy have a tendency to separate processes of policymaking into discrete categories of design, implementation, and evaluation that privilege the agential actor as instrumental decision maker. The interpretive turn in policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) has been critical of these approaches, arguing that their focus is on policy goals aimed a predefined problems with pre-defined outcomes. As Shore and Wright (2011) argued, instrumentalism still dominates much of the policy analysis research, particularly in the field of educational policy. Within the interpretive turn in policy analysis, the notion of policy enactment not only poses challenges to linear conceptualizations of policy design, implementation and evaluation, but also questions the instrumentalist view of actors, recognizing the role of agency, interpretation, sense-making, translation, embodiment, and meaning throughout the policy process. The scholarship in this area draws upon notions of assemblage (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010); enactment (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012), networks (Fenwick, 2010; Nespor, 2002; Resnick, 2006; Vidovich, 2007),

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materiality (Sørenson, 2009), and performativity (Mulcahy, 2010), these approaches to policy analysis share a commitment to examine the ways in which policy as a process emerges out of interactions between diversely conceptualized heterogeneous actors.

The analytic of 'process' is important here for our purposes, for as Hernes (2014) argues, 'process thinking invites reflections on the relationships between the given state of affairs and the multiple possibilities for things to turn out otherwise' (p. 3). Indeed, as Landri illustrates (in this issue), engagements with policy are productive; they perform new realities that might never have existed without the moments of resistance, problem definition and change. Similarly, in their essay for this issue, Maguire, Ball and Braun illustrate the fragility and instability of policy work, and that these uncertainties mean openness for what could be performed in the enactment of policy. The aim in this issue is to interrupt the technocratic, instrumentalist view of policy in education, and instead, offer potentialities for democratic thinking in educational policy analysis. But what is democratic in these studies of policy? Webb and Gulson remind us (in this issue) that the promise of emancipatory practices needs our attention in the enactment of policies aimed at transforming educational spaces. Examining what comes to be performed through policy is an important step in understanding the realities for those affected by policies and conceptualizing the ways in which things might be differently performed.

In their contribution, *Meg Maguire, Annette Braun, and Stephen Ball* (this issue) offer an exploration of the multifaceted ways in which educational policies are contextualized in schools. They draw on their study on policy enactments in English secondary schools (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) to show how contextual factors such as policy type, power and positionality, space and time constraints, as well as different subjectivities, are critical for understanding the ways in which policies are translated into practices in schools. Their proposal looks beyond the conventional accounts of 'policy implementation' in which policy is generally treated as a finished object crafted at the higher levels of the bureaucratic structures. These conventional accounts portray schools as decontextualized and homogeneous organizations where policies are merely transferred and applied. In contrast to this functionalist conception of policy processes, Maguire, Braun and Ball argue that policies are better seen as enacted through the creative processes of interpretation and translation (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). The authors examined the enactment of two policies: 'Behaviour Management' and 'Standards and Attainment' to find out that enacting a policy is a process fraught with fragility and instability. Not all policies are adopted in the same way, as each policy carries different significance for different people. Issues of power and positionality also influence the way in which policies are performed into existence, as well as the time of the year and the particular spaces in which those performances take place. They quote Colebatch (2006) to conclude that ' "where you stand" in terms of subject department, pedagogical values, the time of the year and a range of other biographical factors such as length of service, plays powerfully into "where you sit" ' (Colebatch, 2006, p. 10).

In her paper, *Dianne Mulcahy* (this issue) uses the analytic of assemblage to trace the ways in which learning spaces and pedagogical practices emerge as sociomaterial arrangements in the process of enacting a policy initiative in the state of Victoria in Australia. She analyses the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which the 'Building the Education Revolution' (BER) program was constituted as a heterogeneous assemblage of social and material entities. In her analysis, Mulcahy identifies the

micropolitics of the learning spaces as a key factor in the processes of territorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that take place as the policy makes its way into the classroom. In the dynamic of the territorialisation, new assemblages are configured by the rearrangement of the pedagogical and the material in the school. Policies play a fundamental role in the materialization of these new spaces. In Mulcahy's view, the BER initiative could be seen as a 'performative agent with interventionist possibilities regarding schools' spatial and pedagogic outcomes and goals' (Mulcahy, this issue). The deployment of the analytic of assemblage in policy analysis reveals the open and contested nature of policy enactments in schools. It offers an alternative to rationalist approaches to educational policy that looks beyond the conventional linear and bureaucratic characterizations of policy work. Mulcahy's work characterizes policy as a much more complex process, one that is fluid, emergent and mutable, a sociomaterial practice that produces, reproduces and transforms the multiple realities of the school.

In their contribution, **Taylor Webb and Kalervo Gulson** (this issue) use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) analytics of *difference-in-itself* and *faciality* to discuss the idea of difference applied to *schools of recognition*. These are 'public choice schools … that enunciate a culturally focused curriculum, identity of brand' (this issue). In their study, Webb and Gulson investigate the development of the Africentric Alternative School in the Toronto District School Board, showing how neoliberal discourses on multiculturalism engender particular forms of difference and identity within a politics of representation. Their analysis reveals that when neoliberal policies on multiculturalism are enacted, various codings and decodings of racial identity are produced. They note that these new significations emerged in a process of marketization and commodification of education through school choice policies. In their view, the particular iterations of identity and recognition, produced and reproduced by neoliberal multiculturalism, fail to deliver on their emancipatory promise. Instead, it creates a system of grouping and sorting that reaffirms difference while denying the possibility of educational equity. In Webb and Gulson's words 'schools of recognition are the disciplinary and reproductive machine of self-selected and entrepreneurial significations—the *sine qua non* of neoliberal education policy' (this issue).

Jill Koyama uses the concept of controversy to explore the assemblage formed when curriculum change, school reform and vulnerable populations of refugee students come together in one school in the US. Drawing upon actor-network (AN) theories of assemblage, Koyama reports on ethnographic data collected over 26 months in schools in the US looking at the No Child Left Behind policy network. In this article, she features a case of one school's turnaround plan related to a mandated curriculum aimed at improving the academic achievement of refugee students. She frames policy enactment as a socio-material process best described as meshwork (Heimans, 2012), whereby 'practice is both always discursive and material [and] reimpose[s] the messiness of bodies into accounts of practice' (p. 318). Koyama's approach to policy weaves both material and social actors: various material elements of the turnaround plan, ideologies and discourses, school administrators and teachers and other human actors working in the school. Using interview and other qualitative data, the author describes the controversies, that is, the tensions and inconsistencies among the policy enactments, within the way the turnaround plan is brought into existence in the school through various actions. She shows how these controversial enactments exist simultaneously and produce different effects in how the

curriculum for the turnaround plan unfolds within the school. Such assemblage thinking highlights the turnaround plan an entity in multiplicity, showing how actors located outside of the school, such as community organization and refugee resettlement agencies, become assembled and effect change. In conclusion, Koyama argues for assemblage thinking in policy studies to show the agency of policy 'as cultural mediator rather than passive artifact that required actors to respond to it'. Studying how policy things come together and come undone reveals a novel and broadening understanding of the totality of policy enactment.

Alexander Mitterle, Carsten Würman, and Roland Bloch provide a complex but thorough account of contemporary teaching in German higher education by detailing the entanglements of present and past policies at one university. What began as an initial research project aiming to understand university teaching structures by comparing course catalogues and teaching personnel data, Mitterle, Würman and Bloch set out to further understand a puzzling finding: discrepancies between the texts indicated instances in which some professors were actually teaching more than they ought to. Drawing on Actor Network Theory, the authors describe the administrative ordering and policy interactions that bring teachers, students and funding together to make such circumstances happen. The significance of their approach is the focus is on 'figures normally left in the dark' such as instruments for calculating teaching load, staff planning charts, standardised faulty/student ratios, capacity law and funding schemes. By tracing the networks that both historically and currently assemble around these actors, they show how institutional actors are administratively assembled so that the network of teaching and research activities appears stable. However, what the authors' analysis shows is that such stability functions in practice through the result of complex processes of negotiation through the bureaucracy of instruments, charts and laws. The end result, the authors explain: 'what remains are administratively visible courses, taught by teachers that are not associated within the teaching faculty … teaching takes place without faculty' (Mitterle, Würman & Bloch, this issue).

The interest of this intriguing tale for the special issue is the way the authors show how stability in the organization of the university's administrative practices comes to be produced not through the orderly dictions of policies but rather through the complexity of the messy practices that emerge as these policies are translated into action. Tracing the messiness is challenging but doing so illuminates how material actors perform organizational realities.

Radhika Gorur argues that a focus on the performative nature of policy illuminates the political and ontological project of policy work (this issue). Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the sociology of measurement, Gorur invokes the concept of assemblage to trace the ways in which scientific indicators, presented as facts, are produced through the interactions of social actors so that prescriptive policy directives can be formulated into national policy goals and reform. In her article, she examines the production of the indicators in the *Education at a Glance (EAG)* annual report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Using both historical texts written by and interviews with key actors involved with the OECD, Gorur tells 'the story of the OECD indicator development project'. Here, she shows how the differing interests are negotiated between assessment specialists, social scientists, psychometricians, and policymakers in the production of the report. The work of these

actors is the site of translation, where indicators become political projects of evaluation and measurement for ordering educational systems on a global scale through interactions with the EAG. As Gorur states, 'the two projects—the scientific project and the governance project—are impossible to keep apart'. For Gorur, there is a moral imperative to develop 'an understanding of measurement as a productive rather than a descriptive practice'. The significance for policy studies in Gorur's argument is the connections made between the science and governance of policy through the study of the everyday negotiations between policy actors.

Paolo Landri examines an elaborate case study that highlights the complex reassembling of humans and non-humans in the enactment of a state reform for education in a Provinica in South Italy (this issue). Landri shows how the newly instituted initiative, titled '*zones for the improvement of education provision',* instigates the creation of new policy spaces. In presenting the case, he asks how this new policy space materializes in practice and whether multiple instantiations of the space emerge in the enactment of this policy reform. Drawing on sociomaterial notions of the materialization of space (Mol & Law, 1994), Landri traces how objects enrolled into the reform, such as texts, information systems, maps and politically-shaped spaces (such as parliament), 'are mobilized to enact the zone' by performing different manifestations of this space. Contrary to instrumentalism that views reform producing a single result, the author details the multiplicity of space created through the reform: as a bounded region, a network for deliberation, and a fluid zone where relationships change. Landri's point in this work is to empirically illustrate the sociomaterial argument that materialisations are not representative of the social world but that the interactions between human and nonhuman actors in an instance of policy reform reconfigure the spaces in which such change emerges and come define what the policies are as they are performed in multiple ways. Furthermore, his work rejects the deterministic view of the certainty of linear policy processes to show moments of failure, resistance and change, arguing that policy actors traditionally seen at the margins of policymaking emerge as powerful in their engagements with the materiality of educational reform.

Melody Viczko and Gus Riveros articulate a conceptual challenge to the formalized structures of professional learning to argue more attention is needed to understanding the idiosyncratic ways in which policy discourses are enacted in schools. Drawing upon the notion of multiple ontologies (Mol, 1999), the authors argue for considering teacher learning its sociomaterial entanglements in order to see the multiple yet simultaneous realities of its performance that exist in schools. They show how teacher learning is brought into reality through assemblages of many actors: administrative techniques, policies, artefacts, and people. In doing so, they aim to influence how policymakers think about and construct strategies for educational reform that specifically target teachers changed teaching practices. The significance of this work for this issue is that it challenges the singularity with educational institutions often conceive of educational reform. The authors' conceptual argument challenges instrumentalist policy theories focused on implementation with a linear process resulting in one outcome to show that the sociomaterial world in which policies are enacted opens the realm of possible realities for teaching learning is configured in schools.

In conclusion, this issue examines how the notions of assemblage and enactment are used to study how processes of policy emerge in educational contexts, whereby policies

are not seen as static entities of unity but rather as multiple and heterogeneous in nature. The authors invited to this issue are also interested in exploring the agential nature of policy processes, situating educational policies as sites of contestation, conflict and negotiation between actors. As the articles in this issue show, social and material entities form assemblages that perform particular educational contexts, that is, political environments in the doing of educational policy through dynamic processes of micropolitical contestation (Mulcahy), policy definition through material and discursive practices (Koyama), measurement and evaluation (Gorur), and organization of pedagogical environments (Mitterle, Würmann, & Bloch). The analytical contexts are diverse in this issue, however, the concern for policy processes is common to the authors' interest in understanding the work of educational policy.

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