

Mastering the Challenge of Literacy, Numeracy and Science education: a critical analysis of the Masters Report

The recently released review of primary education in Queensland, *A Shared Challenge: Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning in Queensland Primary Schools* [Masters Report] (Masters, 2009a), responds to the Queensland government's concern about the state's poor performance in the 2008 NAPLAN and 2007 TIMSS tests. The report contextualises and analyses the problem and formulates five recommendations for addressing it.¹

In this paper we analyse the report as a policy document. We draw on understandings of policy as strategic and tactical responses to political contingencies (Ball, 2003, 2008), and Bacchi's (2005) analytical approach which focuses on the ways policies define that problem they appear simply to address. In formulating her 'What's the policy problem?' approach, Bacchi argues that the ways problems are represented "impose constraints on social vision" (p. 29). She argues that:

it is crucial to reflect upon the representations offered both by those who describe something as a problem and by those who deny an issue problem status. Its purpose is to create a space to consider competing constructions of issues addressed in the policy process, and the ways in which those constructions leave other issues untouched. (p. 4)

Accordingly, the questions we pose and address are 'How does the Masters Report itself problematise the performance of students in Queensland on the NAPLAN and TIMSS tests, so that that performance constitutes a particular problem for policy?', and 'How is this problematisation of students' performances mobilised and manifest in the way the report marshals evidence and frames recommendations?' Our concern here is not with whether there 'actually' is anything problematic about literacy, numeracy and science education in Queensland² but, following Bacchi (2005), with the implications of how the

1 At time of writing these are under consideration by government; the government's response, however is expected to be known shortly after submission of this paper.

2 Masters (2009, p. 16) notes that by the middle years of schooling the differences identified as problematic have largely disappeared; this might be taken to suggest that there is not 'a problem', or that

problem is represented, specifically, in this report, with how its representation affects the policy response, and with the ways this response is calculated to impact on Queensland primary education.

We draw attention to the report's discursive strategies for establishing the truth of its account of the problem, and the relations among different aspects of that account and its recommended solutions. We consider its use of research literature and statistical data, its use of comparative methods, its own primary 'field' research, and the sources it uses as models for its proposed solutions to the problems. We argue that the report's methodological tools constitute practical strategies for establishing its own regime of truth, which sets the conditions for the acceptance and implementation of its preferred policies and practices.

We argue that the report's representation of Queensland's education performance constructs student performance as an issue of teaching quality and a domain of accountability. While the report recognises a range of social and systemic factors shaping students performance on national and international tests, it disregards these in both its definition of the problem and its formulation of recommendations. By placing social context out of the frame of analysis, the report sets the conditions for privileging of (its) particular policy choices. Our analysis, then, illuminates the way the report forecloses a range of alternative or complementary policy responses to the state of education in Queensland and seeks to open up space for continued discussion of those alternatives.

The Report: structure, scope and overview

The report summarises the reviewer's brief as:

“to examine available data on the performances of Queensland students and, drawing on international research evidence, to provide advice in the areas of curriculum, assessment and teacher quality... to identify existing effective practices, to propose ways in which these could be scaled up, and to make recommendations for new strategies or initiatives for improving levels of literacy, numeracy

'the problem' it is less urgent than the report suggests, or that the problem might better be understood quite differently.

and science achievement in Queensland primary schools” (Masters, 2009a, p. v).

A twelve page Executive Summary begins by establishing the case that Queensland students achieve poor learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy and science in relation to other states and countries. It then addresses how achievement levels might be raised, devoting one of four first-level headings and two following paragraphs to the need for well prepared teachers.

In contrast, the body of the report begins with a chapter (Part I) that argues from the published research of others³ that highly effective teachers, schools and systems are crucial to high levels of achievement, and characterising each in terms of high expectations, deep knowledge, targeted teaching and continuous monitoring. Part II elaborates the case that students in Queensland schools are performing relatively poorly and that the performance of successive cohorts over an extended period has deteriorated, and provides a brief account of structural, social, cultural and systemic factors shaping poor test performances, and achievement, respectively. Part III is a potted history of curriculum forms and reforms, including its organisation and management structures. Part IV (“Visits to Schools”) offers a general summary discussion of observations and discussions at a “small number” of schools. Part V offers “Reflections and Recommendations”.

The report concludes that the way to raise achievement levels in primary schools is to increase the resources and support in ways that are likely to be of general benefit to schools in their efforts to improve literacy, numeracy and science learning, facilitated by securing a workforce that is very well prepared through pre-service teacher education programs; to provide high quality professional learning for teachers and ongoing expert advice and support for the teaching of

³ To establish both the importance and the characteristics of quality provision, the report cites the following: Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007), *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey & Company (cited 7 times); Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., & Cocking, R.R. (2000), *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school*. Washington: National Research Council. (1); Hattie, J., (2003), *Teachers Make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence?* Paper presented at ACER Research Conference *Building teacher quality: What does the research tell us? 19-21 October 2003, Melbourne*, (1); Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006). Linking leadership to student learning: The contribution of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 496-528, (1); Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation. (1); Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H. (2008). *Improving school leadership: Volume 1: Policy and practice*. Paris: OECD. (2); Walberg, H. (1984). Improving the productivity of America's schools. *Educational Leadership*, 41(8), 24, (1).

literacy, numeracy and science, to clarify what teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn by particular stages of schooling and monitoring the extent to which this is occurring, and to provide high quality professional learning and support for school leaders (Masters, 2009a, pp. viii-ix). Accordingly, the report recommends:

1. That all aspiring primary teachers be required to demonstrate through test performances, as a condition of registration, that they meet threshold levels of knowledge about the teaching of literacy, numeracy and science and have sound levels of content knowledge in these areas;
2. That the Queensland Government introduces a new structure and program of advanced professional learning in literacy, numeracy and science for primary school teachers;
3. That additional funding be made available for the advanced training and employment of a number of 'specialist' literacy, numeracy and science teachers to work in schools (and/or district offices) most in need of support;
4. That standard science tests be introduced at Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 for school use in identifying students who are not meeting year-level expectations and for monitoring student progress over time;
5. That the Queensland Government initiates an expert review of international best practice in school leadership development with a view to introducing a new structure and program of advanced professional learning for primary school leaders focused on effective strategies for driving improved school performances in literacy, numeracy and science. (Masters, 2009a, pp. xx-xv)

Defining and researching the problem⁴

Bacchi suggests that it is instructive to see the process of policy discourse as beginning with identification of a specific concern (Bacchi, 2005). In the case of the policy discourse of which the Masters Report constitutes a critical moment, the concern is the Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh's concern with the public reporting of test results that indicated education standards in Queensland were

⁴ We note, here, that our discussion of problematic aspects of the report, its research and its recommendations are informed by privileged participation of one of us in discussions with members of the Queensland Deans of Education Forum as they framed their collective response to the Masters Report; we have not cited their response, but members of that forum will recognise where our own comments align with and have been informed by their discussions.

languishing (Bligh, 2008; c.f., DET, 2009). She acted decisively to initiate a policy response, by establishing a Steering Committee “to undertake a review of Queensland primary education. The purpose was to explore opportunities to improve the state’s educational achievement, with a particular emphasis on literacy, numeracy and science outcomes” (DET, 2009). While the overarching Terms of Reference largely reproduced the statement just cited, however, the specification of the review process already defined the problem the review would address much more specifically and much more narrowly:

- Review 2008 NAPLAN and 2007 TIMSS results
- Review existing analyses of this and provide further analysis if required
- Review other research material that provides comment on Queensland’s school performance
- Review results from Year 2 net 2007 against NAPLAN 2008
- Conduct a literature review drawing on best practice from international research and practice
- Undertake consultation as required. (DETA, 2008)

Following Ball (2008) we see policy as a reflection of an “enlightenment concept” of progress, “moving from the inadequacies of the present to a future state of perfection where everything works well and works as it should” (p. 7). In this case, the Masters Report analyses the nature and extent of the problem and frames recommendations that formulates the basis for strategies and practices that would remedy the problem, progressing Queensland from a poorly performing state to a well performing state. According to Ball (2008), this ‘reformative’ discourse is characterized by a “necessarian logic” driven by economic and globalisation imperatives which to varying extent, has a “semantic and ontological force” (p. 13) that contribute to the understanding, expectations, demands and disappointments of educational outcomes.

Ball (2008) highlights the role of “policy intellectuals” in processes of policy discourse. In this case, the reviewer was publicly described and authorised as an “international expert” (Bligh, 2008). His status as Professor and CEO of the

Australian Council for Educational Research invites an understanding that his research and recommendations are scientific, and independent of the government and, thus, true and impartial. In his analysis of the policy directions in the UK, Ball (2008) observes a shift toward a “ ‘what works’ ideology of the third way, which is presented as ‘beyond’ politics, obscures the class politics embedded within current education policies” (p. 150). This constitutes the report not merely as a response to a problem, but as a political technology deployed to represent reform as socially and politically neutral, informed and legitimated by science and research, rather than by ‘political interests’.

Understandings of what constitutes ‘poor performance’ are neither given in the nature of things, nor self evident, but products of policy discourse, framed by policy environments. The contemporary policy environment, in Australia as in the UK and the USA, is dominated by neo-liberal discourses of globalisation and economic rationalisation (Apple, 2001; Henry, Rizvi, Lingard & Taylor, 2001; Ball, 2008; Olssen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004). The commissioning of the report, and the report itself, including their focus on literacy, numeracy and science, commonly represented as core curricular areas for the knowledge economy, can be seen in the wider context of education reform in Queensland which can itself be seen as preoccupied with competitiveness in a global economy (c.f., DET, 2002).

The relation between the credibility of the report and its recommendations is shaped by how it represents the problem it addresses, and the research through which it explores the problem lays a basis for its recommendations. In part, the credibility of the report’s research is determined by its adherence to recognized ethos and values, principles and procedures for conducting reliable and valid research. At the same time the research method and approach of the report are central to how it represents the problem it addresses. They constitute a discursive strategy that persuades a particular problem representation, and this strategy of persuasion closes off other problematisations and other strategies for addressing those problematisations.

To demonstrate how the report does this, we draw attention to four elements of its representation of the problem.

First, the constitution of the learning of young people who live in Queensland is represented as a problem of the state. It is “*Queensland’s* results... the *state’s* educational achievement” (DETA, 2009, our italics) that are in question, a discursive move that identifies individuals – the young people who attend schools in Queensland - with the social cultural imaginary, legislative entity and administrative governmental apparatus of the state ‘Queensland’. The positioning of this problem as that of the state supports the identification of who is responsible, or more responsible for the problem and solution, as reflected in the title of the report as a “Shared Challenge”. The report explains who are responsible here:

A theme that emerged from the review was the fundamental importance of having all players – teachers, students, parents, school leaders, system leaders and system support staff – working in a consistent and mutually supportive way with a common focus on achieving continuous improvement in student outcomes. The task of raising literacy, numeracy and science levels in Queensland primary schools is *a shared challenge*. (Masters, 2009a, p. 61)

The responsibility each of these groups of agents is accorded in both the problem and the ‘challenge’ it poses varies. In an important respect, students are seen as central to the problem: “the average performance of Queensland students in [Year 3, 5 and 7] was significantly lower than the average performance in other states” (p. 2). The specific problem manifests in these groups of students, particularly Indigenous students and those in rural and remote areas, represent the ‘problem’ of Queensland primary schools. However, the level or form of responsibility of these groups of students for the problem, or their capacity and agency in meeting the ‘challenge’, are nowhere discussed in the report. The report outlines two explanations for their lower performance: the later school starting age of these students, and the presence of a significant population of students scattered in remote schools. Neither explanation addresses these students as active agents in their own education. The absence of any discussion on what these students can do positions them as passive,

docile subjects. Despite the gesture towards them cited above, they are part of the problem but not part of the solution.

Equally, the report accords parents a degree of responsibility for the problem, noting for example, that many are “too accepting of deviant behaviour” (p. 50), as well as including them as a “fundamental” part of the solution, as we noted in the “shared challenge” passage cited earlier. The treatment of parents, we think, warrants close attention, and is crucial to our sense of how the report simultaneously constructs the specific problem that it ‘needs to’ address, and how it marshals research into and out of its analysis and how, consequentially, it frames its particular recommendations for dealing with the problem.

The report concedes that “very few parents are not interested in seeing their children safe and happy at school” (p. 51). However, it distinguishes this from engagement in their schooling (p. 51). It also notes that parental engagement is a characteristic of effective schools (pp. 7, 11, 51). However, as with their children, while they are part of the problem, they are marginal to its solution. The principal recommendation concerning parents is:

That parents of students entering Years 3, 5 and 7 be informed about the availability of these assessment materials to schools and encouraged to talk with teachers about their children’s performances on them. Consideration also should be given to making the materials available for online access by parents following their use by teachers. (Masters, 2009a, p. 108⁵)

The need for parents to be informed, in fact, recurs throughout the report.

The purpose of such information is largely to allow them to monitor their children’s progress (pp. xvi, 5, 10). The report offers almost no sense that their agency might extend to anything beyond supporting the work of the schools and their teachers (e.g., pp. 5, 7).

Given the considerable research on the differential relations between parents and schools and involvement of parents in their children’s schooling (e.g., Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Cairney, 2000, Jeynes, 2005; but c.f., Griffin, 2008, who suggests that the issue of relationship with schools might also be highly problematic for middle

5 This Preliminary Report is included in the Final Report as an appendix, and is cited, herein, from the appendix in the Full Report.

class, as well as working class parents), the report's recommendation concerning parents, we suggest, implicitly reflects and potentially perpetuates existing social inequities in schooling. This research on parent engagement points to the differentiated characteristics of parents, rather than their categorical homogeneity, and this in turn points to the intimate relationships between children's learning in schools, and the social contexts of schooling.

As we have noted in our summary of the report, the report recognises that contextual "factors such as low socioeconomic status, rurality and Indigenous status" shape students' learning in schools (Masters, 2009a, p. 8; c.f., pp. 15-16, 33-39, p.61). This conclusion is supported by an enormously extensive body of work nationally and internationally, over a very long period (e.g., Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; Apple, 1996; 2001; Ball, 2003, 2008; Lupton & Thrupp, 2007). However, these factors are rejected as "*acceptable* explanations for low performance or lack of progress" (Masters, 2009a, p. 8, our italics).

This dismissal of contextual factors for understanding how the problem (even as defined in the report) might be addressed flies in the face of a plethora of research on the importance of contextual considerations in shaping pedagogy and curriculum to produce good learning outcomes (e.g., Hattie, 2003; Lovat, 2005; Rowe, 2004; Toomey, 2006). Lupton and Thrupp (2007) argue that "a more serious recognition of local contexts could give rise to fairer evaluation of school performance, a fairer distribution of resources, and the provision of more appropriate advice and support to schools in less favourable contexts" (p. 111) The different representation of problem shapes its recommendations and the capacity of agents in the problem.

The report's closing off of the consideration of context in its problem representation enables it to focus almost exclusively on teachers, schools and systems in its detailed discussion of the problem, its causes and its remedies. In doing so, it deploys a form of "reculturation" (Ball, 2008, p. 45) to promote four effective practices that might solve the problem: high expectations, deep knowledge, targeted teaching and continuous monitoring, that it identifies as common across highly effective

systems, schools and teachers. The enactment of these practices in school seems not only unaffected by the contextual factors, but able to supplant the impact of contextual factors.

The second of the four elements we draw attention to in the report's representation of the problem is its selection of data. The selection of data from which to formulate teaching of and learning by Queensland students as problem simultaneously constructs how the problem is to be understood, and imparts authority to that construction, not as a particular representation, but as *the problem, per se.* and, consequentially, how the causes of the problem might be identified.

Whilst the Preliminary Report advised against using NAPLAN and TIMSS assessments as the only performance indicators, it also framed these assessments as “provid[ing] independent measures of how Queensland students perform in relation to other states and territories and – in the case of TIMSS – other countries” (2008, p. 4): quantifiable measurement offers an objective reporting of the education performance. The use of comparative data, specifically, allows Queensland education to be representing as ‘*under-performing*’, validating the Premier’s concern about Queensland education.

In a context in which the local economy is severely threatened by a global economic meltdown, the poor performance of Queensland education adds to the pessimism of a quick economic recovery and sustaining a strong economic growth. In keeping with our concern about how this particular representation of the problem excludes other possible representations and with the consequences of this particular choice of problem representation, we note that this choice of evidence to identify and examine the problem tells us nothing about the actual quality, range or depth of learning or capability of young people living in Queensland. Comparison with the performance of (students from) Singapore and Finland are used to signal the need to bring Queensland performance in line with the national and international standard. The focus on comparison rather than ‘intrinsic’ quality emphasises that the underlying imperatives here, not stated in

the report, but given in the broader policy context within which the report was commissioned (c.f., p. 1 above), are economic and political.

Performance indicators derived in relation to such standardised tests provide a seemingly transparent and clearly prescriptive means of constructing accountability. In particular, the value of such comparison across contexts is supported by the report's dismissal of contextual factors as relevant to test performances. However, the acceptance of these tests as adequate indicators of Queensland performance on the basis of its capacity for national and international comparison fails to recognise that the only fair interpretation of such statistical comparisons is how a particular population sample of each country performs in comparison to another in the test, the extrapolation of what that means about the effectiveness of the education system and the incitement for reforms are political and public constructs that reflect what Foucault (1995) describes as "disturbances around the scaffold" (p. 68). In the report, there is no explanation of how these tests are relevant to Queensland's 2020 targets, but it assumes that an improvement in the test results were important to these targets. The questions that need to be ask then are: what is the relationship between these test with Queensland targets; indeed how do these tests performances relate to threats of globalisation and economic competitiveness; how are the results of these tests related to its education outcomes, and what are the opportunity costs with an increased attention to these test performances in schools? In constructing a relationship between the NAPLAN and TIMMS performances to effective practices, the report suggests that such a relationship is an acceptable explanation of 'quality' practices, concomitantly, with Queensland performing so poorly, it casts doubts on existing practices.

The third of the four elements we draw attention to in the report's representation of the problem is the identification of the system and its personnel as the cause of the problem and, consequentially, that which must be addressed. The analysis of the data that constitutes the problem is framed by a discussion of the characteristics of highly effective teachers, schools and systems. This framework demonstrates that such teachers, schools and systems have major effects on student learning, and therefore, tacitly locates both the problem and solution

within the schools and systems. Whilst it is not possible to be exhaustive in the identification of agents that contribute to education outcomes, who are those identified, and who are those not identified influence the policy response. Thus Masters argues that:

Although there are many influences on how well students perform in school – some of them fall largely outside the control of schools – it is clear from research that the most effective way for education systems to improve achievement levels in primary schools is to improve the quality of *classroom teaching*. It also is clear from research that school leaders can have a profound influence on the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. High-performing schools tend to adopt a number of practices in common. There is also much that school systems and governments can do to raise the quality of teaching across a jurisdiction. (2009a, p. 3)

Fourth, the identification of four particular ‘deficit hallmarks’ of the system, framed as characteristics of highly effective teachers, schools and systems: high expectations, deep knowledge, targeted teaching and continuous monitoring. This framework for understanding effectiveness is applied across all the agents suggesting a universal ‘truth’ quality of these characteristics, as well as, marking these characteristics as necessary and adequate to address the ‘problem’ the report identifies. The sharp delineation of what constitutes an effective school gives the report clarity, and this clarity suggests a discursive strategy of problem representation that simultaneously invites a particular recognition of how sharply this representation has grasped the core of the problem, and strongly foreshadows a recognition of the responses proposed as the only possible appropriate remedies for the problem.

In addition to these four elements in the formulation of the problem, we note that the initiation of this policy initiative was done at great speed and with a sense of great urgency. The NAPLAN test results were released, the Premier announced the review immediately (ahead of even any Press response). Masters was commissioned, with only (approximately) a one month timeframe for an initial report, followed by an almost immediate enactment of (a variation of) its key

recommendation. The full review was given a very short timeframe. There were very short timeframes for public and stakeholder consultation and response and (foreshadowed, impending at time of writing) announcement of policy outcomes. This tight overall timeframe imparts a sense of urgency in which the report was generated which, reflects Gerwitz, Dickson and Power's (2004) notion of 'spin' as constitutive of the policy response and itself stresses the importance of the problem and, in doing so, of the self evident nature of the problem *as defined*. Ball argues that the compression of space and time in neo-liberal globalisation discourses effects a reconfiguration of education policy and contexts and a "speeding up" and "urgency of policy" (2008, p. 197).

Finally, in relation to the scope of the report's research, we reiterate that both the announcement of the review (Bligh, 2008), and the general statement of its brief in its Terms of Reference (DETA, 2008) broadly suggested that this was to be a review of "Queensland primary education". However, both the timeframe and the specification of the review process made it far less than that. They effectively constructed the problem the review was to address in such a manner that it could not, without breaching its commission, address broader social, cultural, systemic, political and educational issues that might have offered important insights into how primary education in Queensland might be enriched and enhanced.

Mix and Match: The research and the recommendations

Bacchi's approach invites those adopting it to anticipate a clear continuity from definition of problem, through identification and where necessary, conduct, of appropriate research, to recommendations. Given that the problem is defined in terms of poor demonstrated literacy and numeracy and limited demonstrated knowledge of science, then one might reasonably anticipate that these elements would be paralleled in the recommendations.

Indeed, we think, Recommendations 2-5 do correspond reasonably closely to the definition of problem and the research privileged in the specification of the review

process and the report's analysis. We note, however, that there are several important disconnects between the research and the recommendations.

First, the initial recommendation concerns the preparedness of graduating pre-service teachers. Clearly this addresses the issue of the capacity of teachers to model and to teach literacy, numeracy and science. To this extent it complements the other recommendations (2, 3) that focus on the capacity of teachers to teach students well in these curricular and cross curricular areas. To frame such a recommendation tacitly constructs/represents teacher education as a significant part of the problem of school students' poor literacy, numeracy, or knowledge of science. Yet the report cites no research by others and conducts no research of its own that establishes that teacher education is part of the problem it has formulated and addressed.⁶ Further, unlike most of the other recommendations, it indicates no resourcing to enable teacher education to remedy its claimed deficiencies. It also overlooks research that suggests that the sorts of tests it proposes may themselves be highly problematic (e.g., Ballou, 2003). And, finally (on this matter) it overlooks the well recognised regulatory system already in place and the collaborative work between the regulatory body (the Queensland College of Teachers) and the pre-service teacher preparation institutions to assure the quality of graduating teachers.

Second, while we are most concerned here with *discontinuities* between the research and the recommendations, we note that the focus on teachers in Recommendations 1-3 parallels key aspects of the four-dimensional framework outlined in the discussion of research on what makes for high levels of student performance in tests such as PISA and TIMSS. However, as our earlier discussion suggests, we regard these continuities as themselves problematic, not so much for what they include but for what they almost inevitably exclude, including any attention to social, cultural and systemic contexts, the roles of students and their

⁶ In saying this, we do not wish to suggest that pre-service teacher education is not problematic in important ways, but merely that Masters provides no research evidence there it is. To establish a basis for this recommendation the Report draws largely on unsystematic anecdote and opinion. In so far as it draws on research on this issue it draws on highly problematic research that graduating teachers consider themselves inadequately prepared.

families as active participants in the educational process, and curricular and pedagogical practice.

Third, we note again the disconnect between the research on contextual factors that shape educational outcomes and the recommendations in ways that decontextualise the measures recommended and, in so far as they do, make it unlikely that the recommendations might achieve their ostensible goals.

While we think that these issues constitute problems in the report and its recommendations from a number of perspectives, our own interest here in Bacchi's approach imparts particular significance to the ways these disconnects relate to the representation of, and ways to address, the problem. We suggest, then, that these recommendations, reinforce both the identification of the phenomenon in question *as* problem and the definition of the problem as that particular problem. In the sense that the problem they address is a problem a state (rather than people's educational, personal and cultural growth and their capacities to secure good lives for themselves) they can readily be understood as part and parcel of neoliberal ideology and economic rationalist imperatives in the contexts of globalising (and presently crisis ridden) economies, as foreshadowed and framed by the wider Education and Training Reforms for the Future policies (DET, 2002).

These ways of moving from definition of the problem through research into the problem to recommendations to solve the problem foreclose - even make unthinkable - other possibilities.

First, by representing the problem at the level of generality of a whole state and a whole system, and by dismissing unevenly distributed social factors from consideration, the report is almost set up to make blanket 'one-size-fits-all' recommendations. The fact that the report and recommendations frame the delivery of supports so that local schools can make choices about which resources to use and in what ways is framed at a level of generality and context

independence that ensures that the strategies remain generic, divorced from close sensitivities to the contexts in which it is proposed that they should be enacted.

Second, by representing the problem in terms of teachers and systems they marginalise parents, communities, despite substantial research that indicates that their involvement is crucial to the quality learning outcomes from schooling.

Third, by constructing the problem in terms of teachers' expectations and knowledge, and the monitoring of children's learning, they assume or imply something approaching a causal relation between teacher behaviour and student learning. To some extent the attention to targeted teaching might appear to negate this claim of ours. However, the essentially diagnostic, and remedial (and thus deficit) terms in which such targeted teaching is conceived in the report ignores research around the importance of rich contextualizing of curriculum and pedagogy in 'quality teaching' literature.

Fourth, we think there are significant disconnects between the research and the recommendations in terms of the sites for the research into the characteristics of high performing systems, and the sources of models for the recommendations. Simply, recommendations are drawn from systems other than those on which the report's research to demonstrate characteristics of good systems. (We reiterate, here, what we noted earlier, that the drawing of recommendations for Queensland education from countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore, whose social, political and economic cultures, broadly understood, are radically different from those of Queensland or other Australian states, appears to us to be a deeply problematic example of decontextualisation.)

Conclusions

Bacchi's 'What's the problem?' approach offers important insights into the ways problems are made rather than given, and made through particular ways of representing complex social phenomena. The importance of analyzing problems in the report; we reiterate, is not just a dismissal of problematic aspects of

education in Queensland, but an appeal for more complex understandings of, and responses to ongoing issues and concerns. By focusing on the report as a policy document rather than the truth of its claims enables us to interrogate it in terms of its likely effects. And, as we have argue throughout, the most powerful effect is to frame the construction of policy (and to some extent, almost certainly, public) discourse around education and its needs and purposes.

Thus, in so far as the report and its recommendations can be understood in the terms we have suggested, we argue that it plays a key role, and constitutes a key political technology in problematising particular phenomena and constituting them as a specific, particular problem, in relation to which particular policy strategies can be constructed. The report's methodological tools constitute practical strategies for establishing its own regime of truth, which sets the conditions for the acceptance and implementation of its preferred policies and practices.

Further, the problem is defined in terms of test performances in particular curricular and cross curricular areas, and the understanding of the problem and hence of possible solutions, is constrained by this focus. Moreover, the specific ways the problem is analysed leads to generic rather than contextualized responses that focus on schools, teachers and school systems and privilege testing and monitoring over quality learning, pedagogy or curriculum.

This construction of the policy problem and its flow on through the report and recommendations are important because they prefigure policy responses driven and shaped by economic rationalisation and its objectives which many, including educational scholars and practitioners we have cited, consider problematic. They are important because the way the problem is *made* shapes how it can be (imagined to be) solved, and this has major implications for how resources will be allocated. Here, our concern is not just that resources will be allocated to projects which our critique of Masters' response to 'the problem' suggests are unlikely to solve the problem, but because the commitment of those resources to those projects necessarily entails the non-direction of resources to other possible

projects which other educational research suggests might have more beneficial outcomes. Our concern, then, is with the ways this definition of and response to the problem is calculated to impact on Queensland primary education.

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