Abstract

Policy changes in Australia mean that teachers are often adapting to new expectations in the classroom. A succession of broadly neoliberal policies around standardisation and competition have been introduced in Australia, subtly shifting the emphases in the job of a teacher. A suite of measures has been implemented that are largely products of this policy assemblage; measures such as the NAPLAN tests, MySchool website, and the Australian Curriculum. While these create pressures that can negatively impact the work of teachers, there always remains a possibility for positive effects. This paper draws on interviews that were conducted with teachers as they prepared for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. Throughout the interviews, a consistent theme that emerged was the conceptualisation of ‘gaps’ and ‘spaces’ in the programs and texts they were offering in the teaching of English. This paper seeks to analyse the ‘deficit’ notion of a ‘gap’ and the way it can be contrasted with the ‘generative’ idea of a ‘space’. It draws on Bourdieu’s thinking tools, particularly the notions of doxa and illusio, to discuss the way ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions come to exist in these cases. It then uses Flyvbjerg’s Rationality & Power (1998) to explore different ways in which teachers think about these ‘gaps and spaces’, particularly as they prepare new materials in response to curricular changes. While these pedagogical ‘rationalities’ are deeply bound in the power of policy and politics, the act of implementation by teachers – where power intersects a generative habitus – creates an opportunity for transformation. By exploring the ‘gaps and spaces’ involved in preparing for a new year of learning, this paper identifies some of the possibilities that exist for good teaching in Australia’s highly politicised contemporary policy environment.

Introduction: Creating Spaces

Teachers occupy a central role in the implementation of any education policy. This has particularly been the case with the rollout of a suite of measures over the past decade that reflect a global policy trend towards neoliberalism (Ball, 2012; Connell, 2013; Rizvi, 2007). Policies in Australia including NAPLAN, the MySchool website, and the Australian Curriculum fall broadly under the umbrella of these globalised reforms. While the impact of these measures has been explored in a range of literature, there remains a need to engage with the complex ways that practitioners interpret these policies. This is particularly important given the political and media narrative around ‘teacher quality’ and the ongoing ‘mediatisation’ of the field of education (Adams, 2016; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Rawolle, 2010). A central question can be raised regarding the doxa of education policy, the taken-for-granted assumptions that characterise these policies as they become practice, and the way teachers characterise their work. Drawing on a study conducted in 2013, this paper examines the way three teachers discussed their planning and preparation for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum (English). One of the key ideas that emerged was the conceptualisation of deficit ‘gaps’ and generative ‘spaces’ in their practice – centred around the texts that were set for study, the use of philosophy and social justice in teaching, and the opportunity to reflect on the nature of ‘curriculum’ itself. These characterisations are particularly interesting in light of the Donnelly & Wiltshire Review of the Australian Curriculum (2014), which described the use of similar terms when teachers were discussing ‘implementation’. This paper begins by providing some background to the original study. It then presents a reading of interviews, drawing on Bourdieu’s thinking tools of doxa and illusio. Finally, referencing Flyvbjerg’s Rationality & Power (1998), it considers the ways in which these teachers were able to create generative moments that challenged the dominant ‘rationality’ of these global policies, and create a space for improving their practice, and their students’ learning.
Background: The Local Vernaculars of Neoliberalism

The trend towards globalised education policy has been discussed in a huge range of academic literature. Sahlberg (2011) describes the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM, Ball (2012) outlines networks of think tanks and educational actors responsible for global policy networks, Steiner-Khamsi (2012) notes the process of ‘policy borrowing and lending’, and Fischetti (2014) neatly analogises the transmission of policy to ‘rubber duckies’ adrift on the ocean. What is clear is that discussions of education policy can no longer be grounded purely in the local or even national – they must also account for these international trends. Rizvi & Lingard (2010) discuss the way policy formulation has been globalised, and that the framing discourses of these policies “are no longer located simply in the national space, but emanate from international and supranational organisations” (p.14). For this reason, much research in the field of education has centred on the local manifestations of these global policies, and the way global rationales are translated into local classrooms.

Of course one of the most powerful framing discourses in the field of education is that of neoliberalism. Rowlands & Rawolle (2013) caution against deploying the term ‘neoliberalism’ without providing a proper account of its meaning – lest researchers become colonised by its logic even when they seek to contest it. Here, I refer to neoliberalism as the ‘institutionalised framework of state policy’ (Connell & Dados, 2014) that seeks to bring the values of marketization, privatisation and competition into the many and varied fields of society that exist outside of the economic sphere – ‘reaching into the social’ (Brown, 2005) and generating a particular ‘imaginary’ (Clarke, 2012). Stacey (2016), in her discussion of the Great Teaching, Inspired Learning policy in New South Wales, notes that there is no consensus regarding what is constitutive of a ‘neoliberalism’ proper – she draws on Connell & Dados (2014) to describe the ‘re-weaving of worldwide economic and social relationships’ to inform her understanding of the concept. The contested nature of neoliberalism often leads to contrasting representations of its status, either as a kind of totalising theoretical leviathan (Collier, 2012) or as a site of multiple ‘neoliberalisations’ (Stacey, 2016). Citing Hilgers, Rowlands & Rawolle (2013) suggest that neoliberalism is frequently used to explain ‘almost anything and everything’. Mindful of this, this paper does not seek to avoid the issue of neoliberalism as a policy formation nor take for granted its status as a theoretical doxa, but rather to recognise it as a dominant rationality in contemporary education, and one that has – through globalised policy networks – come to shape certain policies in Australia.

There is a recent constellation of policies in Australia that are regarded as falling broadly under this ‘neoliberal’ banner. The global trend towards high stakes testing seen in the USA and UK was realised in Australia in the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests (Polesel, Rice, & Dulfer, 2013). Rizvi & Lingard (2010) emphasize Appadurai’s concept of ‘vernacular globalisation’, which refers to the way global policies are mediated by the histories, cultures, politics and pedagogies of the local contexts in which these policies are implemented. In the case of Australia, NAPLAN data was utilised by the Gillard government in the creation of the MySchool website, a policy which appears as the perfect metastasis of neoliberalism into the field of education. Thomson & Mockler (2015) argue that MySchool contributes to an ‘audit culture’ that is typical of ‘neo-liberal education regimes’, and Gorur (2013) notes the way it is tied to a conception of the education ‘market’. There are also a suite of other policies centred on devolution in the guise of ‘school autonomy’ (Stacey, 2016), ‘teacher quality’ and performativity (Mockler, 2013a, 2013b; Moore & Clarke, 2016), and standards (Ryan & Bourke, 2016), all of which are articulated in vernaculars specific to the Australian context.

The Australian Curriculum is also a policy that falls loosely into this array of recent neoliberal reforms. Following Easton’s (1953) classic definition of politics and policy as the allocation of values, the Australian Curriculum acts both as a codification of ‘national values’ into ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 2000; Cuban, 1995) and, by modelling the processes of ‘standardisation’ and ‘choice’, as a piece of market-oriented policy. Although debate about a national curriculum had been ongoing in Australia many decades prior to its introduction (Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid, & Keating, 2010), it was not until the election of the Rudd Government in 2007 with a platform for an ‘education
The framing and delivery was articulated in the light of the ‘productivity agenda’ (Reid, 2009), enabling parents to travel between states for work but maintaining a consistent ‘standard’ of education for their children (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Brennan, 2011), and also in addressing a supposed crisis in literacy and numeracy – the ‘back to basics’ approach being a hallmark of panic in education policy making (Mockler, 2013a).

In 2014 a review of the curriculum was commissioned by then Minister for Education Christopher Pyne, and conducted by Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire. The curriculum review included within its remit an assessment of the status and progress of implementation of the curriculum. In particular, the review sought to determine “the extent to which it has been modified and reshaped when being implemented” (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 105). They reported that ‘Australia does not have a national curriculum’ because they determined that it was not being implemented ‘comprehensively, consistently or with certainty’. The basis on which the reviewers came to this conclusion included the use of phrases such as ‘incorporated’, ‘integrated’, and - perhaps most curious for this paper – ‘map and gap’. The review flagged the issue of accountability both as a reason for which teachers might avoid ‘comprehensive’ implementation of the new curriculum, but also as a potential solution to this perceived non-compliance. It is in light of this review that this paper is written, given the issues raised around implementation of the curriculum which bore some salience in the light of responses given by the participating teachers.

Theory & Method

The study from which this data was drawn utilised Bourdieu’s thinking tools – particularly the notions of habitus and field – to analyse the ways in which teachers intended to implement critical literacy under the new Australian Curriculum (English). However two of Bourdieu’s other tools – doxa and illusio – are also valuable when looking at teacher practice. Doxa refers broadly to the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions or accepted truths that come to dominate a field. Doxa is a fascinating concept precisely for its invisibility – it is similar to the notion of hegemony, although it manifests in specific ways in different fields, and impacts on the habitus in particular, rather than directly on society at large (Chopra, 2003). Illusio refers to the ‘tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game’ (Wacquant, 1989), it provides a sense of value to the playing of ‘social games’ (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013). Where doxa refers to accepted – although not necessarily true – truths within ‘the game’, illusio can be called forth even when an actor rejects the doxa of a field. For example, the act of writing about and challenging neoliberalism is itself an act of illusio – it accepts that neoliberalism is a concept with which engagement is worthwhile, even if one rejects it. Rowlands & Rawolle (2013) challenge academics not to invest illusio in dominant discourses – disrupting the social imaginary of neoliberalism. In these cases, we see teachers who are ‘compelled’ by policy to review their programs – creating a potential for reflexivity in the midst of these ‘travelling reforms’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). This reflexive moment feeds the possibility of an ‘other’ illusio, one in which the stakes of the game are no longer standardisation for the purpose of national economic productivity, but rather seeking ways to engage with the gaps and spaces of classroom programming.

Many of these doxic assumptions in education are furthered and reinforced by neoliberal policy – in particular by the way this powerful imaginary comes to shape the very rationality of schooling (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Clarke, 2012; Connell, 2013). A similar phenomenon was observed by Flyvbjerg (1998), in his study of the Danish city of Aalborg. Flyvbjerg noted the way powerful actors – policy makers, media and commercial enterprise – often use their power to shape the rationality and rationalisations of public projects. Extending the observations made about the relationship between ‘truth’ and power made by Foucault (1978, 2010), Flyvbjerg’s Aalborg study made clear that the ‘power’ of policy is often clearest in the rationalisations that are made after the fact. Extending this logic to the Australian Curriculum, there are clear parallels in the ‘nation building’ productivity agenda articulated by then Minister for Education Julia Gillard and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in their case for ‘Building The Education Revolution’ (Rudd & Gillard, 2008). In media appearances at the time, Gillard argued the case for phonics and ‘grammar’ to be added to the curriculum (Maiden &
Kelly, 2010), suggesting that there had been a decline in standards. Subsequently, and in line with an ongoing moral panic about the quality of education, Minister Christopher Pyne ordered a review of the curriculum (Hurst, 2013) arguing ‘politics has no place in education’ (Pyne, 2014), and seeking to reignite the ‘culture wars’ over the content of the History curriculum (Cullen, 2014). The review, conducted by Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire (2014), seemed designed to identify instances of ‘political’ content and to address a perceived imbalance in the framing of the new general capabilities such as the focus on Indigenous Australia and Sustainability, as well as other issues that had been outlined by one of the reviewers previously, such as an alleged privileging of ‘non-Western’ knowledge at the expense of ‘Western’ subject matter (Donnelly, 2009, 2010). Flyvbjerg’s theoretical work in Rationality & Power: Democracy in Practice (1998) aimed to generate a ‘grounded theory’ of power. In particular, he noted the way that power tended to dominate rationality in most cases, except where stable power relations existed, and that power created ‘rationalities’ and rationalisations in order to reinforce itself. Christopher Pyne’s argument about politics having no place in the curriculum, for example, operates as a doxic ‘rationality’ – a taken-for-granted statement that defines ‘rationality’ through power. Clarke (2012) notes a similar ‘depoliticisation’ in the policy framing of the Education Revolution. He argues that there has been a disavowal of the politics of education policy, and a concomitant emphasis on the economic logics that drive neoliberal agendas. This echoes Foucault’s observation that power’s success is “proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault, 1978, p. 86). These are complex interactions between power as a mobile network of strategic ‘techniques’ and relations (Foucault, 1982), and rationality as a highly contextual, contingent and localised ‘effect’ of power. This theoretical frame is quite relevant when considering the way policy and political rationalities impact the work of teachers in Australia.

The teachers involved in this study were interviewed in 2013, as they were preparing to implement the new Australian Curriculum for English. They were recruited via Twitter, and participated in semi-structured interviews. The study itself was designed to explore the ways in which teachers were planning to incorporate critical literacy into their classrooms under the new curriculum, and the questions were focused on their practice and planning. Out of these interviews, three small cases were constructed to highlight the similarities and differences across different school sites: one state school, one Catholic systemic school, and one wealthy independent school, all clustered around Sydney. These sites were selected to achieve maximum variation (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2009), and to give a range of different responses for a small study. The case studies were generated in light of Flyvbjerg’s injunction to ‘never lose sight of a concrete case’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The three participating teachers were given latitude to reflect on the process of planning, on the curriculum itself, and on their understanding of critical literacy. Tanya is a classroom teacher from a single-sex government school in Sydney’s north. Tanya reflected that her school had a highly-residualised student population due to the number of elite private institutions surrounding it. Julia is head of the English department at a single-sex independent school in an affluent part of northern Sydney. She has worked in the independent sector for an extended period, at a range of different schools. Her school performs well on NAPLAN testing and student background is largely within the top quartile of Socio-Educational Advantage. Penny is head of the English department at a Co-educational Catholic Systemic school in Sydney’s West. Penny took over the English department relatively recently before the interviews were conducted, and over the year prior had been implementing change to various programs. Penny’s school performs close to average on NAPLAN testing, and has a below average indicator of Socio-Educational Advantage. It was in the process of reading these interviews that the notion of ‘gaps and spaces’ began to stand out, and the practice of teachers as ‘interpreters’ of policy rationality became intriguing.

Creating Spaces through Implementation

While the focus of this study was the way in which teachers intended to implement critical literacy under the new curriculum, a number of themes emerged that have become particularly salient in recent times. Comments about the process of implementation and the role of ‘gaps and spaces’, as well as more general conversations about the role of teachers in the implementation of curricular policy in the
classroom, are especially interesting when weighed against the findings of the Donnelly & Wiltshire Review. The participants described the impact of the new curriculum on their planning in terms that might superficially seem inconsequential, but that actually open space for negotiating and interpreting the curriculum and consequently the very rationality of public policy. They did this by identifying the gaps that existed in their respective school’s text base, before going on to discuss the spaces they discovered as a consequence of this process, which enabled a focus on philosophy and social justice. Recognising the existence of these spaces led to reflective discussions about the nature of curricular change and the role of teachers in its implementation.

Identifying Gaps

The process of reviewing the texts each school was using in English presented clear instances of a ‘gap’. For example, there was a noticeable lack of Indigenous voices in their existing text bases. One of the explicit objectives of the new curriculum was a focus on Indigenous knowledge and Australia and its engagement with Asia. Parallel with this was the general capability calling for intercultural understanding, all of which contributed to a perception of a ‘gap’ in the existing texts used for English teaching in participants’ schools:

Not all the [existing] texts were necessarily by Indigenous authors, they were often reflections on the experience as opposed to from the voice of. (Julia)

We discovered that we had what I call very ‘Waspy’, so white male…text base. When we had a look at the requirements for Asian texts in particular…we realised we actually had this huge gap…We’d never even noticed. (Tanya)

They argued that the process of finding texts was difficult, primarily because these were relatively new conceptual areas to explore through young adult texts. In effect, the recognition of this ‘gap’ marked a site where previous ‘rationalities’ had obscured alternative voices.

Another gap existed in their delivery of critical literacy for students in junior years and ‘bottom’ streamed classes. All three participants described a kind of upwards focus in their programming, where critical and socially-aware activities in the classroom were primarily aimed at senior years and ‘top’ classes:

I suppose [critical literacy] has been largely in the domain of senior stage curriculum. (Julia)

A lot of what I was responding to is [staff] frustration about what was not happening prior to my starting there. And that was that the kids have got gaps, when they get to senior school we don’t know what to do with them. (Penny)

Within my school setting, critical literacy probably is only a focus on our top end classes…because of this pressure we have with NAPLAN, those bottom end classes with low skill abilities, it is actually the structure of English that we teach rather than what we end up viewing as the optional extras. (Tanya)

These are confronting ideas, but they reflect what might be considered one of the doxa of education in New South Wales: that there is a strong justification for focusing on the senior years. In this regard, the opportunity to review the curriculum acts to disrupt this doxa, since all participants ‘became aware’ of the fact that there were gaps in the skills base of students in younger grades. For Penny this was simply a reinforcement of her existing practice: her focus since becoming Head Teacher had been on filling these gaps.
Recognising Spaces

The presence of these gaps also enables a consideration of their potential to act as ‘spaces’ for learning. In the case of Tanya in particular, she described an optional philosophy class that was taught at lunchtime once a week by a father from her school. She explained that rather than the poor attendance they had expected, these classes were incredibly popular:

What’s really great about it is it’s not just those top end kids, it’s our really disengaged and uninterested kids. (Tanya)

The opportunity to reflect is particularly valuable here, because as the interview continued, Tanya noted that she is able to embed philosophy, critical literacy and socially critical pedagogy throughout her higher ability and senior classes, whereas she feels there is no ‘space’ to do so in other classes due to the pressure from NAPLAN. Penny drew on NAPLAN data to argue that for a lot of students, their inferential comprehension is weak, that their capacity to ‘read between the lines’ is a gap. However, she suggested that the texts they set for students to study can provide a space to open up this metaphorical and moral dimension:

Part of my philosophy or passion around education is that I’m not just there to teach them what’s in the text, it’s to teach them how that helps to educate them about empathy…a lot of them are just working-class people who are sort of battling ignorance from parents. That’s what we see, apples and trees, it flows through into the kids. (Penny)

This philosophy is echoed by Tanya, who describes education as ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’, about ‘having power in the world’. She explains that embedding this philosophy in her teaching - and challenging students about their own doxa - can be a way to engage them in the classroom. Reinforcing this idea, all three participants outlined the power of social justice and critical approaches to texts as a tool for engagement. Julia too, outlined the ways her school created spaces for critical literacy, particularly regarding the issue of Asylum Seekers and other social justice issues:

Embedded within that is a series of Asylum Seeker stories about their experiences coming to Australia. So the boys are interacting with a multimodal text, but within that they’re obviously exposed to fairly confrontational stories, and are challenged politically and socially. (Julia)

Curiously, while the participants argued that ‘nothing much would change’, there is a subtext of change throughout the interviews. Despite the policy being regarded in the media and political debate at the time as a huge overhaul, all three participants suggested that little had changed:

I think that there was a lot of hot air around the Australian Curriculum…New South Wales has taken all of that away by making it look really familiar, so I don’t know if teachers of English in particular are going to be doing anything too dramatically different… (Julia)

You’ll notice there’s a lot of the old outcomes that are still sitting in the new syllabus. (Penny)

Penny, who seemed most comfortable with her school’s coverage of the ‘gaps’ in the text base and coverage of critical literacy in junior years which were identified by the other participants, noted of the change that:

What I was doing was taking what I’d learned as a senior English teacher, and where the gaps you need to fill - you know you were sure were there - you now build it. So in a way I
suppose [the Australian Curriculum] is actually becoming more closely aligned to our senior syllabus. (Penny)

Here Penny is describing the way her school’s existing program adequately addressed the new curriculum. This reflects the language used by some teachers in the Donnelly & Wiltshire review, where teachers described a process of ‘incorporation’ – or even ‘placing their own skin over it’ (p. 105). This language sounds quite similar to the way Julia described the New South Wales Board of Studies taking the Australian Curriculum and “making it look really familiar”. However, one of the consistent themes that emerged was the notion that implementation of the new curriculum was a moment for reflection – it enabled teachers to reconsider their practice and look at their programming in a new way.

I think it’s good, it makes us address any gaps we did have. Any time that you’re asked to question your own practice I think is a good thing. (Tanya)

I just think what happens when you get a new syllabus is that, people go ‘you can’t keep doing your old ways of thinking’, so it makes people go back and rethink what they’re doing or refresh their understandings. (Penny)

This captures the generative spirit of curricular renewal, even when it is located in the context of a neoliberal policy assemblage. While there are legitimate criticisms to be made of the trend towards standardised curricula, the full spectrum of effects cannot be predicted in the shift from ‘intended’ to ‘implemented’ curriculum. Part of this relates to the way in which teachers mediate the power and rationality of policy as it enters the field of their classroom. To some extent this reflects the ways that teachers understand the curriculum itself, and how it relates to their practice. Schiro (2013) identifies four different ‘curriculum ideologies’ that teachers tend to embody in their practice: Scholar Academic, Social Efficiency, Learner Centred and Social Reconstruction. Much of the language used by the participants in this study reflects the Learner Centred and Social Reconstruction ideologies. Pinar (2004) points out that “in one important sense, school curriculum is what older generations choose to tell younger generations”, a point that would seem to reflect the Scholar Academic ideology with its subject and content focus, and the Social Efficiency ideology, which seeks to reproduce a balanced and efficient society (Schiro, 2013). However, Pinar goes on to make the point that because of the tensions and struggle that inhere within the curriculum – and its ‘formalised and abstract distance’ from everyday life – that it is in fact ‘an extraordinarily complicated conversation’ (p.186). It was in the space of this complex conversation that these participants were able to discuss policy.

**Strategy and Reflexivity in Policy Conversations**

Flyvbjerg (1998) notes that it is in the context of stable power relations – though not necessarily symmetrical relations – that there can be space for ‘rational’ discussion of policy and its outcomes. He observed, for example, that when there was not an antagonistic battle between the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Technical Department that it became easier for the Aalborg project to progress. In the field of education policy, there is often a similar moment of stability at the point of implementation. The hotly contested political debates between Liberal and Labor, alongside the involvement of academics, think tanks and teacher unions that play out in the media, represent unstable and sometimes antagonistic power relations. However, once the rollout of the Australian Curriculum began, teachers were given the freedom to reassert their own rationality in their classrooms. Penny put this effectively when she explained:

A curriculum can’t do anything, it’s how you interpret it and what you do with it. I mean, yes, the Board of Studies says ‘we want this in there’, reality is you can write a program that’s got fabulous stuff in it and meets every dot point in the syllabus and say you’re teaching it and sign off on it on registration, but whether that’s actually what you’re doing in the classroom… (Penny)
These moments are points at which *illusio* shifts – where the political debate about national productivity, teacher standards, transparency and student performance are marginalised by teacher practice. The moment of reflexivity brought on by the new curriculum enabled teachers to think *strategically* in order to negotiate the way a policy is enacted in their classroom. Like the Technical Department ‘playing the game’ in Aalborg (Flyvbjerg, 1998), these strategic moments – that might involve compromise or cunning – create a *space* for an alternative rationality. Foucault (1982) suggests that one of the necessary conditions for the exercise of power is that of *freedom*. By this he means that there must be space for resistance – for agency – in order for a subject to exercise power. Flyvbjerg’s (2002) observation that power comes to dominate rationality is relevant here, but in a profoundly interesting way: teachers can exercise their own power in the context of their classrooms. When discussing another contentious policy, the NAPLAN tests, Penny argued:

> It’s my belief that if you teach well, you teach English well, then there should be no need other than a familiarity with what the exam looks like, there should be no need to be doing practice NAPLAN tests. (Penny)

While there is ample evidence of the deleterious impact of high stakes testing on the work of teachers (Au, 2007; Polesel et al., 2013; Sriprakash & Loughland, 2014; Thompson & Cook, 2012; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), it is reassuring to see that there remain *spaces* in which teachers are able to position these tests as ‘incidental’, rather than summative – and competitive – proxies for ‘quality’.

Taking the strategic approach depends on this reflexive moment, a space of shattered *illusio* where the *doxa* of education policy can be challenged. The interesting thing about the case of the Australian Curriculum is that this tension is immanent to the policy itself: the act of implementing a neoliberal policy creates a space for challenging the assumptions that are usually occluded by neoliberalism. While it seems ubiquitous, and indeed this paper itself contributes to the *illusio* of neoliberalism by referring to it, there remain contradictions (Harvey, 2005; Weller & O’Neill, 2014) which act as inflection points and generative spaces for teachers to resist. The words of Penny are quite valuable here:

> One of the things that I teach my kids is that composers don’t work in a vacuum. Everything they write is some reflection on themselves and the world in which they live. (Penny)

Likewise, these policies are not implemented in a vacuum, they are both a reflection of the political world, but also the social world in which they live. This perspective is considered in the Donnelly & Wiltshire Review (2014) although described by the reviewers as ‘deviance’, rather than adaptation (p.106). It is interesting to reflect on Donnelly & Wiltshire’s findings, given the comments made by participants. In particular, the idea that teachers were ‘picking and choosing’ elements of the curriculum, or that the use of phrases such as ‘integration’ and ‘incorporation’, meant that they were ‘confused’ or otherwise ‘not implementing the curriculum as intended’ (p.112), can be contested. Curricular documents are reflections of the ‘official curriculum (Apple, 2000; Cuban, 1995), and it is very difficult for any public policy to proceed to implementation without some shade of nuance ‘filtering’ the outcomes. Cuban (1995) explains that “teachers, working alone in their rooms, choose what to teach and how to present it”. Indeed, the pedagogical enactment of curriculum is a process that relies heavily on the experience, understanding and expertise of the teacher. As can be seen in these conversations, there was very good will on the part of these teachers as they prepared for the new curriculum, and the ‘gaps’ and ‘integrations’ were simply a part of the process of translating the curriculum into practice. More importantly, this process provokes reflection by the teachers who must implement policy, an act of translation that marks a policy just as profoundly as the doxa on which it depends.
Conclusion

Teachers work in contested spaces, and their work is subjected to the pressures of globalised policy and media attention. The implementation of the Australian Curriculum has been an interesting process – both for its pedagogical impact, but also for the attention paid by political figures and parents alike. While there is much literature that outlines the deleterious effects of globalised neoliberal policies on classroom practice, there always remains the possibility of a transformative moment. This is not to argue that inappropriate policies should continue; indeed, the evidence suggests that neoliberal policy frequently impedes the good work of teachers. But this study serves as a reminder of the professional capacities and deep care of teachers and their work – an antidote perhaps to the culture of accountability and surveillance that defines governmentality in the age of neoliberalism (Ball, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2012). In the instance of these three teachers, the process of implementing the new English curriculum created a generative space for reflecting on practice. These kinds of spaces are important and, in contrast to the view put forward by the Donnelly & Wiltshire Review, represent a moment of genuine professional engagement by teachers. These ‘spaces’ that exist at the point of implementation are worth exploring further, particularly as the pace of policy change does not seem to be settling. Implementing policy requires teachers act as translators, and that process of translation can rupture the doxic rationalities of powerful policy networks. Instead, teachers are given the chance to redefine the stakes of the education ‘game’, to improve the classroom for their students, and to carve out a space for transformative and valuable learning.
References


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