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Sam Sellar

University of South Australia

The SACSA Framework: unsettled policy for unsettled times

This paper will tell the ‘story’ of the genesis and development of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework, South Australia’s contribution to the raft of recent curriculum policy that has, at some level, sought to reconceptualise curriculum in more socially just terms. It will also provide an illustration of policymaking in the currently difficult times for education – an illustration of the uneasy compromises made between social justice impulses and socially reproductive tendencies inherent in economic rationalist views of education. Based upon research undertaken as part of an honours thesis, this paper will focus upon the responses and ‘stories’ of seven interviewees who were closely involved in the development of the SACSA Framework but from different positions within the policy development process. The ‘stories’ of the interviewees illustrate what Taylor et al. (1997) and Ball (2000) describe as the ad-hocery and messiness of policy production and they provide an insight into the struggle over social justice issues at a policy level.

During 1999 the then Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) began a process of curriculum ‘renewal’. At this time, the current South Australian curriculum policy documents were the Statements and Profiles which had been in place since 1993. These were the product of an attempt to develop a national curriculum – a curriculum which South Australia almost exclusively took up in close to original form. The move from Statements and Profiles to the SACSA Framework was described by many interviewees as a ‘refinement’ process; a revision of the Statements and Profiles rather than a curriculum reform. However, at this early stage in the conception of the emergent curriculum framework, a new Minister for Education was appointed along with a new Chief Executive of the Department. This management restructuring brought with it a distinct ideology. One interviewee likened this ideology to that

...of Jeff Kennet Victoria or Thatcher Britain...which was,
you get improvement by holding people against accountable
measures. (UniSA Writing Team Member 3)

This managerial and in turn, ideological change, impacted upon the embryonic curriculum development, creating a strongly neoliberal drive and focus centred around the 'marketisation' of education described by Whitty (1997) and Apple (2001). The Framework was intended to be 'tied to money in terms of Partnerships 21' (Middle Years Band Reference Group Member), a local management initiative of the new Chief Executive. Interviewees spoke of the 'very clear agenda, which was about devolution of responsibility and financial management to schools' (UniSA Writing Team Member 3) and pressure from the Chief Executive to,

speed up the Statements and Profiles refinement process and
in a relatively tight period of time, to review, redevelop and
come up with a new framework for South Australian
curriculum. (Senior DECS Policymaker)

Significantly, the new leadership, appointed under a Liberal government, brought with it new language and new ways of operating that were discursively different from the way in which curriculum had been produced in South Australia in the past. This new focus and motivation reflected neoliberal agendas and was indicative of moves to redefine education according to economic rationales. However, the focus upon economic rationalism was complexly interwoven with the intentions of various stakeholders to create a more coherent, teacher-friendly curriculum document, built around more progressive interdisciplinary structures and with social justice intent.

One mandate of the new leadership was that the SACSA Framework was to be produced using new processes for curriculum development. The writing of the document was 'outsourced' to a team from the University of South Australia and the Council of Education Associations of South Australia (CEASA), who jointly won the tender bid. A number of committee structures were put in place as part of the production process and these were often comprised of stakeholders from government, universities, schools and professional associations.

The process of developing the SACSA Framework was therefore fraught with different individuals and institutions maneuvering for position and attempting to use

whatever leverage possible to bring about their desired outcome. One of the struggles that took place during the SACSA Framework development was that of educators, academics and bureaucrats attempting to continue South Australia's history of school-based and negotiated curriculum. From the beginning, many of the interviewees viewed the revision process as an opportunity to push for a more progressive and socially just curriculum, as well as for 'room to move' for teachers. This was in contrast to the incoming ideology of 'standards and accountability', 'outsourcing' and moves to subject education in South Australia to 'market' controls, which, while touted as providing greater 'choice' and 'flexibility', would also require teachers to surrender a degree of their autonomy.

Some interviewees recognised that aspects of the revision were inevitable and used their position to create what they believed to be the best educational and social investments possible in the document. As one interviewee put it:

I've got to say that was one of my driving motivations...we are in this now but if we can give freedom for teachers to move around in then I reckon that's an important win...I think we were aware that he or she who holds the pen really has...a real amount of power. (UniSA Writing Team Member 1)

Significant in this statement is the notion of an 'important win'. As the policymakers struggled over the ideological investments they could make in the document, they were engaged in a 'game' played for very real stakes. Some interviewees from both the Department and UniSA recognised that moves to create a more structured curriculum - which was to be mandated and the performance of students, teachers and schools monitored through reporting against standards - could restrict and erode their professional autonomy, replacing it with an environment of 'performativity' (Ball 2000). Using their positions as writers and as members of reference groups, interviewees described how they attempted to influence the structuring and language of the document in ways that would preserve a belief in teachers as educators with a weight of professional knowledge and skills rather than simply as 'accountable' deliverers of curriculum.

'Accountability' and 'competition' are key concepts within a performative environment – concepts that are integral to the SACSA Framework and its symbiotic

role with marketisation moves such as the Partnerships 21 initiative. It is within corporate managerialist environments, such as that found within the policy context of the SACSA Framework, that the technology of performativity thrives and it is this encroaching method of management that many interviewees described. One interviewee described it as a 'competitive based view of curriculum' with logic of, 'if you can get people to report their performance then you can improve it because you can compare it against someone else's performance'. Another interviewee described 'standards' and 'accountability' as keywords 'indicative of the times', thus showing a recognition of the changing managerial methodology. The attempts by some interviewees to 'make this work for us' and 'to make sure that teachers have got elbow room' represent a resistance to this new managerial technique, although it was at times acknowledged as inevitable, in order to preserve the autonomy of teachers in the face of increasingly disciplinary 'discourses of power' (Lyotard 1984). What emerges from these resistances and contests over the content and techniques of the curriculum is a complex picture of the struggle, the 'game' that was played, during the development of the SACSA Framework. It was not a simple 'teachers versus bureaucrats' divide that is often conceived of in education but rather a more complex struggle between progressive educational values, conservative educational values and the 'market' – a struggle waged by agents occupying a variety of positions in the Department, UniSA and schools.

However, at the risk of undermining this complexity and creating a simplistic binary opposition, I wish to discuss the progressive educational values that at times were in conflict with the neoliberal agendas behind the curriculum development. All of the interviewees spoke about equity – how equity perspectives were included within the document and how these work, or don't work, to promote more socially just education. Some of the interviewees spoke highly of the socially just nature of the 'equity' discourse in the document, stating that the SACSA Framework is a 'progressive document that has [a] center of social justice and equity' (DECS Policymaker 3); that it is 'absolutely predicated on a notion of social justice' and that students cannot achieve the outcomes without dealing with 'the whole notion of social justice and equity' (DECS Policymaker 2). Other interviewees were less favourable, criticising the conception of equity embedded in the document as 'tokenism' - naming the problem and being seen to deal with it, without actually engaging with

disadvantage and inequity in a meaningful manner – described by one interviewee as ‘treatment by presence not treatment by engagement’ (UniSA Writing Team Member 2). The interviewee went on to state that,

...if you name groups...then you’re one step ahead of not naming them. Then if you recognise their experience and include it in the curriculum you’re ahead again. What it doesn’t quite [explain] is how you provide the transactional sort of skills that those kids need in order to say ‘okay, I can recognise myself in here and I feel included, now...how can I get rid of...being...poor’. (UniSA Writing Team Member 3)

However, all of the interviewees agreed that an equity focus, ‘tokenistic’ or otherwise, was present during the development process and it is evident in the final document as the Equity Cross Curriculum Perspectives.

An equity focus was embodied particularly in the provision of a separate committee for each of a variety of disadvantaged groups, rather than one single homogenous equity group, or no group at all. While a multiplicity of equity groups is not a guarantee of effective and engaging social justice conceptions in the finished document, it did highlight an intent to deal with and to be seen as dealing with equity issues. With a history of social justice in South Australian education, coupled with the increasing recent pressures of meeting the needs of those groups in society that are becoming disenchanted with schooling - choosing to leave earlier in their schooling resulting in falling retention rates – it would not have been possible to ‘ghettoise’ equity and social justice issues in either the development process or the finished document. There was a definite need to address these pressures and concerns.

However, as was just stated, the ‘presence’ of ‘equity’ does not necessarily entail the ‘treatment’ of social justice issues. One interviewee observed that there are ‘two levels of equity’ and that while progressive conceptions of ‘equity’ are present, the document as a whole presents a ‘deficit model’ (DECS Policymaker 1) rather than reconceptualising and redefining equity.

Fraser (1997) also makes such a distinction between two levels of equity or social justice, which she calls affirmative and transformative. Some interviewees expressed an excitement they felt in the initial stages of the project, when they and others

believed that the SACSA Framework represented an opportunity to break with these deficit models and to create a transformative curriculum. However, as one interviewee stated, 'one of the things we think went wrong is that there was no courage really' (DECS Policymaker 1). This lack of courage led to an emphasis upon affirmative social justice, the form that best sits with neoliberal and market philosophies.

However, despite the setbacks for those pursuing transformative social justice agendas, many interviewees described the potential for educators to 'co-opt' the SACSA Framework initiative for socially just ends, as well as to use the equity focus as justification or leverage for more progressive pedagogy. While the transformative justice many had hoped for became 'watered down', there was still potential to invest the document with progressive elements. Some interviewees described an attitude of 'if we're going to do this, we're going to make it work'. One interviewee stated that because,

there are statements about equity there...that legitimises
[teachers] concerns and then they can take it up. So it's
positive that it's actually there... if SACSA is supposed to be
mandated, then equity is in SACSA...then they can act.

(Middle Years Band Reference Group Member)

Evident here are aspects of the 'pragmatic radical' vaunted by Boomer (1999). Although the equity conceptions in the document were less progressive than many had hoped, there was still an optimism that at least equity is a legitimate part of the document that can give leverage to educators working for social justice in their own schools and communities.

The struggles and debates that occurred during the production of the SACSA document provide an insight into the tensions defining the policy climate at the time. A significant motivation behind the curriculum, from the embryonic stages of the curriculum's development, was the corporate managerialist, neoliberal mandate of the new Department Management. This ideological environment created a context for the writing of the document and its effects were broadly felt. This context created new positions within the Department, 'management' positions which pressured the individuals in them to focus on economic and management agendas rather than educational ones. It became increasingly clear to many interviewees that management

within the Department was ‘singing the hymns’ of the political and economic ideals of the current Government and the new Chief Executive. Attempts by various agents to influence the reforms, such as a position paper produced by the Department Equity Team, were vetoed or marginalised by pressures from other groups and interests, further reducing the ability of those working along more radical lines to incorporate their perspectives within the text. The result is a document that can be read in various and at times contradictory ways. The SACSA Framework also represents unsettled policy for unsettled times. The pressures from different ideological groups, struggling to define education progressively, conservatively or economically are reflected in the text. More hopefully though, the policy document reflects the ability of those working for social justice to invest the document with enough power, and at times ambiguity, to legitimate progressive action within sites and classrooms. In a policy climate with such strong economic and managerial pressures it is this ability to work within the cracks of policymaking to keep social justice on the agenda that provides hope for a more progressive and socially responsive education.

The tension between social justice and socially reproductive impulses evident between the different groups and agents involved in the development of the SACSA Framework is also revealed within the text itself. There are broad ideological divides between the different curriculum organizers and emphases in the document. For example, the Vocational and Enterprise Education section reflects economic rationalist ideologies that favour education as a source of human capital, sits uneasily with the Equity Cross Curriculum Perspectives section which, at certain points, extols a somewhat radical critique of society and the role of education as a reproducer of class, race and gender inequity. Other ideological contradictions are evident, especially between the Essential Learnings, a curriculum organizer designed to promote a holistic curriculum that develops life capacities in a broad and deep sense, and the emphasis upon ‘standards’, ‘skills’ and ‘accountability’. In conclusion, these tensions of context, which unsettle the text, also carry into implementation sites of school and teacher use of the SACSA Framework in practice. Taken together with major curriculum reforms in other Australian states and territories, these context-text-consequence tensions indicate ‘unsettlement’ in educational policy and practice – an ‘unsettlement’ of broad historic and social-structural significance.

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