

The contestation of policies for schools during the Covid-19 crisis: a comparison of teacher unions' positions in Australia and Germany

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While it is recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about fundamental changes in the way school education is conceived and delivered in many countries, the nature, depth and permanency of these changes need to be examined carefully as there are important differences in their impacts on specific areas of schooling. This presentation compares policies to manage schools in Germany and Australia in response to the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020. The study, which is comparative and qualitative, explores the interrelationship between different levels of governance and the responses of teacher unions. By conducting a policy analysis from a transnational and comparative perspective, an understanding of what occurred in these two countries during the Covid-19 pandemic and allows for broader and deeper insights about the ways in which federal systems respond to and manage school policy. The inquiry addresses the political and policy implications of operating schools during the pandemic and the significance of the responses of school teacher unions in this process. Further, to determine if there was a shift in the balance of power between the governing bodies and teacher unions in Germany and Australia as a result of the contestation of school policies.

The inquiry is underpinned by the theoretical perspectives of historical institutionalism and path dependency derived from the work of Mahoney, and Pierson, which were employed to conceptualise and critically appraise the decisions taken in relation to the provision of schooling. The methodology was designed to conduct analysis of union documents and press releases utilising the justification categories of value, collective, and formal and procedural driven arguments. From the findings we argue the contestation which occurred between different levels of school governance and the teacher unions amidst the pandemic created the potential for a critical juncture in policy settings and control over the administration of schooling. However, there is no indication of fundamental shifts in the organisation, policy direction or control over schooling in Germany or Australia. Instead, there is a conformity to established institutional arrangements and path dependencies, which secure and protect the vested interests of the different policy actors. This research makes a targeted contribution to the evolving discussions, debates associated with the impact of Covid-19 on school education and challenges the nature and dimensions of changes wrought on this policy landscape.