Generalizing Across Borders: Policy and the Limits of Educational Science

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What is This?
This essay is a critique of the scientific and policy rationales for transnational standardization. It analyzes two examples of policy export: early childhood standards in one of North America’s oldest Indigenous communities and the ongoing development of international standards for university teaching. It examines calls for American education to look to Finland, Canada, and Singapore for models of reform and innovation, focusing on the complex historical, cultural, and political settlements at work in these countries. The author addresses two affiliated challenges: first, the possibility of a principled understanding of evidence and policy in cultural and political-economic context, and second, the possibility of a mediative educational science that might guide policy formation.

Keywords: cultural analysis; educational policy; educational reform; globalization; international education/studies; research utilization; social context

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land. More than 2,000 years ago, Native American peoples established communities on the bayou—trading at this juncture where rivers and ocean joined. Oktawa, meaning “wide water,” is the Choctaw name for Lake Pontchartrain. Great rivers are prototypical media of communication (Innis, 1949), places of cultural exchange, of the blending of knowledges and cultures. The Yolgnu people of Northern Australia have referred to garnma—“two-ways education”—as the meeting of salt and fresh waters. New Orleans is affiliated with the term creolization. These waters have been touched by proto-globalization or, simply, sedimented and resedimented layers of colonialism. Here it occurred through the journeys of French, Spanish, and British colonizers, Jesuit priests traveling the Mississippi, Mestizos and Creoles, African and Afro-Caribbean men and women and children incarcerated and brought here against their wills, and the First Nations peoples whose spirits reside in this place, on this wide water (Spear, 2009).

My focus in this essay is on two related questions. First, in a period where bodies, capital, and information cross borders at unprecedented scale and speed, how well does policy cross borders? Second, what are the substantive consequences of attempts to move educational innovation and educational science from one cultural context to another, from one nation to another, from one jurisdiction and system to another? In an era characterized by moves toward a transnational management model of education, the focus here is on the drive to standards, where equity is couched in a new technical vocabulary of risk management, market choice, and quality assurance.

You will hear shifts in standpoint as this essay moves across borders and boundaries, geopolitical and epistemological. I speak as outsider and insider; born and educated Chinese American, I have worked in Australia, Canada, Singapore, and in East Asian and Pacific Island education systems as a teacher educator, researcher, and policy consultant. I have written critical theory and I have been involved in large-scale empirical studies. My current research is on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school reform. Ten years ago, I crossed the unmarked boundary between the university and government bureaucracy. I was deputy director general and ministerial advisor, directing system reform in the state of Queensland, with 1,200 schools, 40,000 teachers, and a million students. Eight years ago, I helped establish Singapore’s first national educational research center, setting the parameters for that country’s first large-scale evidence base for government policy.

Viewed from this autobiographical and cultural standpoint, the relationships between research and the making of policy, between policy and classroom practice, between evidence and reform are not abstract. They are everyday problems facing politicians and bureaucrats, school boards, parents and principals, teacher educators and teachers. Matters of culture, ideology, and political
economy, further, are not incidental burrs in the making and implementation of policy. They are essential, square one considerations. Effective policy makers not only consider bureaucratic capacity and implementation but also anticipate local upshots and collateral effects. Courageous policy makers lead by building public understandings, engaging with complexity across real and imagined boundaries, moving toward durable educational settlements around shared values and social contracts. This requires a close eye on the local articulation and recontextualization of policy: a kind of narrative scenario planning and public explication based on rich interpretive historical, cultural, and political understandings. A narrow managerial science cannot suffice for such a task.

I begin by offering encouragement not just to researchers but to all who have worked in state systems and government, who sit on school boards or in university boardrooms—encouragement to raise troubling questions in policy settings where we are pushed to take on the new common sense of accountability through narrow metrics and through standards that do not always do justice to what is educationally and culturally meaningful. There is a silencing process that goes on in institutions pushing neoliberal accountability: the stated or unstated implication that critique is nonproductive and antiscientific, that foundational questions are irrelevant to the realpolitik of systems reform. To say this is not a matter of romanticism or political correctness. It is testimony to the fact that the normative, the ethical, the cultural—matters of value—have quietly slipped from policy discussion (Ladwig, 2010), overridden by a focus on the measurable, the countable, and what can be said to be cost efficient and quality assured. After a decade of implementation of centralized policy in the United States and the United Kingdom, there is ample evidence that the actuary’s approach can make for reductive educational science, short-term policy orientations, and a plethora of unwanted collateral effects at the school and classroom levels.

This essay examines the scientific and policy rationales for transnational and national standardization, focusing on two examples of policy export: early childhood standards in one of North America’s oldest Indigenous communities and the development of international standards for university teaching. It then shifts focus to the current calls for American educational systems to look elsewhere for reform and innovation—to Finland, Canada, and Singapore—and documents the cultural and political contexts of these places and systems. My aim is to address two affiliated issues: (1) the possibilities for a principled policy borrowing that begins from an understanding of cultural and historical context and (2) the possibilities for a meditative, multidisciplinary educational science that might better guide such an approach. My tools are story, metaphor, history, and philosophy, leavened with empirical claims. There are truths, and indeed policies, that can be obtained through travel across place and time, through argument, history, and philosophy as readily as through field experiments and meta-analyses. This essay, then, is a deliberate attempt to take readers elsewhere, to other places—to Australia, to Ontario, to Asia, but as well to Indigenous communities down the road and across the waters—and in so doing perhaps to make the educationally familiar a bit stranger.

For policy debates and educational science alike can and should begin from a recognition of the centrality of history, place, and culture—and, following Dewey, a recognition of the primary of issues of equity, morality, and value. My case is that effective policy requires a richer, broader cultural science of education. In his 1973 article “Speech and Language: On the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Speakers,” Dell Hymes (1973/1996) explained this as a “mediative” rather than “extractive” science—a science with the requisite theoretical humility to represent and engage with communities’ and cultures’ everyday practices and rights, not to override and overwrite them.

**Following the Leader**

Writing in the *New York Times*, columnist Nicolas Kristof (2011) recently argued that America should look to China for examples of education reform. He praised the discipline and focus of Chinese teachers and students. Also in the *New York Times*, globalization writer Thomas Friedman (2011) proclaimed the value of Singaporean mathematics education, although he cautioned of the need to borrow Singapore’s pedagogy without its approach to individual freedom. In her important book *The Flat World and Education* (2008), Linda Darling-Hammond discusses Singapore and Finland as models for reform. Recently, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan convened a summit of OECD countries featuring discussions by representatives of school systems and unions—with Ben Levin (2008), former deputy minister of education for Ontario, outlining Canadian reforms. Reporting on the gathering, the *New York Times* (Dillon, 2011) quoted Andreas Schleicher, head of the Indicators and Analysis Division of the OECD’s Directorate for Education, on the status of teachers and teaching in “high-quality/high-equity”-performing countries.

Could it be that American education is on the cusp of “outside-in” reform—that the historical flows of expertise, innovation, educational science, and policy from the United States have reversed? But on what grounds would a principled policy “borrowing” proceed?

When our academic generation began graduate studies in the 1970s, we inhabited a very different educational world. The term “globalization” simply hadn’t been invented yet. As Kris Gutiérrez (2011) reminded us in her AERA presidential address, we were the minority kids of the 1950s who participated in nuclear attack drills, used tracing paper, learned the new maths, read Dick and Jane, and, I recall from 1962, debated in class whether China should have the nuclear bomb. In that world, the public good was the national good, the domestic good was the global good. We were taught then what we now call American exceptionalism: that the American public good—whether in terms of economic growth, two party politics, or the newfound postwar discourses of civil rights and equity—was good for everybody, everywhere.

This concept extended to the history of the field of education, where American educational innovation—from Dewey and Thorndike onward—was taken as generalizable to other parts of the world, as providing universal educational truths about universal human learners. In my doctoral research in the early 1980s, I traced the 25-year movement of U.S.-based testing and behaviorist approaches to reading from Teachers College and Chicago, across the border to Toronto, and across the continent to ministry offices on Vancouver Island (Luke, 1988). I recall one of my late Chinese auntsies telling me about meeting John and Edith Dewey in Shanghai in the interwar period. Dewey’s lectures in Japan and China after World War I, which I discuss later in this essay, have
a continuing influence in those countries. When I taught graduate programs in Thailand in the 1990s, I was struck by how closely the graduate training programs of major universities resembled those of the American Midwest—where our Thai colleagues had gone to study under Vietnam-era aid programs. For the last century, then, American educational research, innovation, and reform have traveled across borders, just as European colonial education did in centuries before.

There has been a transnational “generalising” (spelled with an s in the Queen’s English) across borders, often uncritically, often as part of aid and development programs, and often with little close analysis of its cultural and social effects. In a field that is concerned about the dangers of generalizing across states, school systems, and student cohorts without the vaunted gold standard of evidence, there has been little hesitation in transporting curriculum; pedagogy; models of the principalship, school governance, and reform; assessment and evaluation, models of child development and learning—and, as I’ll argue here, marketization and privatization—to other countries. This is done through aid programs; through fellowships; through UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Asia Development Bank; through international journal publication, citation, and ranking systems; and through the training of international graduate students. It may be done through the shipping of in-service programs or exportation of textbooks, tests, or performance indicators, wherever we parachute, container ship, or franchise educational expertise and commodities without substantive engagement with local histories, cultures, and difference.

Yet the work of American educational research is itself culturally produced, the product of a distinctive configuration of educational histories, social problems, political economic contexts, and systemic and ideological constraints. How generalizable is American educational research beyond borders?

Even after the 1972 Arab oil crisis, after A Nation at Risk in the 1980s, there was no domestic discourse on globalization. With the exceptions of the work of Paulo Freire, and of the well-documented Anglo-American reinterpretation and appropriation of Vygotsky, examples of the outside-in importation of ideas and paradigms to the United States are extremely rare. Educational systems in Asia, Africa, and the Americas were defined principally in terms of a development paradigm. Hence the work of American educational research in a Cold War and postwar era replicated an inside-out model of innovation and policy that was predicated on the rest of the world’s playing developmental “catch-up” with American schooling. It is important not to caricature the effects of the development paradigm. Work in poverty amelioration, the education of girls and women, language-in-education planning, and the expansion of universal free education and university infrastructure were important moments in the postwar modernization and development of many postcolonial states. Yet even critical work tended to replicate an Anglo/American focus on gender, class and race; and distinctively American work on cultural and linguistic minorities continues to be generalized to other populations and other cultural milieux, without critical or empirical recalibrations. In the context of the current dilemmas of school reform, to continue to define American education as the apotheosis of the development of the school and the center of educational science is, at the least, ironic and, at best, in need of critical scrutiny and recontextualization.

Those of us working in Australia and New Zealand, Canada, and Europe are not exempt from the pitfalls of the postwar aid model. A narrative case: In the mid-1990s, I evaluated an AusAid program on Tarawa atoll in the island nation of Kiribati. We were examining the Australian construction of middle schools on North Tarawa Atoll. We took a long ride in an open boat across the 15-kilometer lagoon to arrive at small villages without electricity or running water. Students and teachers used palm-walled, coral-floored constructions, which provided cool, all-weather learning environments, where they blended English-medium instruction with vernacular language use. At the same site, we found unoccupied concrete-block, Australian-style classrooms and Australian furniture, learning materials and textbooks discussed, disintegrating in the sun and salt air.

If there are lessons from the literature on globalization, they are that in a world of nonsynchronous and uneven development, (a) the “Other” nations/countries are not on a linear evolutionary development aspiring toward the status of American schooling; and (b) global equality and inequality are linked; that is, the transnational division of labor and modes of information mean that domestic policy and multinational corporate action here have ramifications for jobs, workers, and the ownership of means of production elsewhere. We live in a complex world of push–pull effects, where social and economic policies and practices with specific domestic effects have fallout with unpredictable half-life and collateral effects elsewhere on the planet. But these are lessons that increasingly fall outside of the mainstream discourses and practices of school reform. Indeed, other pathways, other pedagogic/curricular traditions, other forms of knowledge, other forms of childhood and child rearing, other forms of school leadership and institutional organization are possible and necessary, and may offer sustainable ways forward.

**Sciences, Standardization, and the Market**

The idea of shaping societies and cultures through the metrics of objective sciences was lampooned in the first great science fiction epic, Gulliver’s Travels (1726/2002) was a parable of colonialism, science, and politics written by Jonathan Swift and first published in 1726. On the third of his journeys, Gulliver is admitted to the ruling council of the Flying Island of Laputa. The council is a robed priesthood, where all decisions—about society, culture, war, peace, and everyday life—are determined by scientists who, literally, turn the levers and wheels of machinery that provides metrical solutions. This was a prototype of a mechanical thinking machine—the “engine of difference” that Charles Babbage would invent 125 years later (Kenner, 1968).

The object of Swift’s parody was the Royal Society of England. One of the early goals of the Royal Society—composed exclusively of British male aristocrat–scientists—was to develop universal standards of measurement and scientific procedure. Hence, the notion of a royal or gold standard of evidence. The Society’s work ranged from early attempts to establish uniform measures of distance, weight, and time—for example, it established Greenwich Mean time—to establishing universal taxonomies, categorical tables, cartographies, and catalogues of species and phenomena. And as Darwin, Lyell, and others would find out, it provided a gentleman’s forum for the adjudication of scientific truths and findings. The assumption was that the very advancement of
modernity, of civilization as it was known, depended upon this approach to formal codification and authorization of method, of definition, of procedure. This approach subsequently enabled circumnavigation, modern Western medical science, breakthroughs in physics and chemistry, and so forth. In Commonwealth countries, we refer to the pound, the gallon, and the inch as “imperial” measures.

For a moment, let’s set aside the genocidal and just simply silly forays of scientific and pseudoscientific truth affiliated with the volatile mix of colonialism and science. It is not a pretty picture. We need to note and bracket Stephen Jay Gould’s (1981) history of the sciences of eugenics and mental measurement, and governments’ tendencies to select ideologically those scientific truths that justified cultural, political, and class privilege and that perpetuated economic and human exploitation. We would also need to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples globally used other modes of navigation, other modes of healing, other modes of stewardship of the land and animals that would have and/or continue to have different pathways—while their bodies and artifacts were measured, weighed, and presented at the Society and preserved in its archives, such as the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum. Martin Nakata (1997) writes of the early-20th-century forays of British scientists to the Torres Straits in North Australia to measure and record observations of his ancestors. There are continuing disputes over the repatriation of Indigenous remains in the United Kingdom.

Indeed, modern science is predicated upon the establishment of uniform systems of measurement, common technical nomenclature, and replicable procedures. As Michel Foucault (1972) explained, Western science and governance alike work through the construction of grids of specification for the mapping of human subjects. Further, the history of literacy is, inter alia, a quest for mutual intelligibility, comprehensibility, and transportability of messages via access to shared codes and symbolic systems. For example, a specialized register of English is the international standard for air traffic control, where mutual comprehensibility and replicable procedure are key. Standardization of this particular linguistic corpus sets the grounds for interoperability, for commensurability, and for exchange between social and institutional fields, across cultures and geographies. Part of the anomaly facing Adam Smith and his 19th-century contemporaries was the absolute impossibility of transporting and exchanging goods across jurisdictions because of restrictive taxation regimes and parochial protectionism as goods moved across Europe. Forms of trade and exchange were further impeded by different railway gauges, different container sizes, and indeed, different systems of weight and measurement.

In the field of higher education, following the Bologna Accords (1999–2009), standards are justified in terms of the need for transportability of credentials across borders. Different countries use PISA and TIMMS data to check that their curricula are of “world class” (Hopmann, 2008). The case for an Australian national curriculum is that students should progress on the same curriculum regardless of whether they live in the outback or the city. In the establishment of state curriculum and legislation for performance standards in the United States, the justification is that standards are a road to the classical liberal goals of fairness and equality of access. This is the logic of educational standardization.

Yet there are other effects:

1. In the last two decades, there has been nothing less than an epochal shift: We now live in an era when schooling and education, teaching and learning have undergone a whole-scale redefinition by reference to a culture of accountability, performance, and measurability—excluding processes and outcomes that do not fall within the ambit of conventional measurement technologies;
2. This process has progressively increased the power of official authorizing, regulatory bodies for the setting and adjudication of standards; but, also,
3. It has established competitive markets to capitalize on the will to standards; and
4. These markets extend the reach of corporate products, defining everyday practices in educational institutions—and (reflexively) reinforcing the techniques of the applied sciences of educational standards and measurement that justified their introduction.

These markets are dominated by multinational textbook and testing companies. For example, the battles between Cambridge’s IELTS, the Educational Testing Service’s TOEFL, and other measurement instruments are more than technical battles over the legitimacy of measurement of English language acquisition. They are proprietary corporate battles over which products will determine what counts as English proficiency for literally hundreds of thousands of students in what has become a high-stakes, multibillion-dollar global educational market. In the United States, the legislation of scientifically based reading instruction has generated a competitive market of consultants and corporate and university providers seeking government adoption of their products, a process accompanied by accusations of misrepresentation and conflict of interest. My point is that the push for standards creates fields for capital exchange and that these are dominated by sophisticated multinational edu-businesses, redefining professional educators and students as consumers (Luke, 2004). I am not sure that this particular conflation of business models with the actual work of educating is what Reid Lyon and colleagues had in mind a decade ago when they exhorted education to look to the pharmaceutical industry for scientific procedures and standards.

This is the key policy question: At what point does the search for standards in education, under the laudable auspices of fairness and access, become a stalking horse for particular economic and ideological interests? Further, at which point does it actually have the effect of placing cultural and educational, linguistic and sociocultural diversity at risk?

Policy Crossing Borders

I turn to outline two cases of policy crossing borders: early childhood standards for the Pueblo Indigenous communities in New Mexico and quality teaching metrics as part of the competitive ranking and funding of universities.

Mary Eunice Romero-Little is a Cochiti Pueblo researcher at Arizona State University. Over the past decade, her work has documented Pueblo child rearing and childhood and the experience of Cochiti Pueblo children as they move from family, home, and community to early childhood education. The Pueblo
communities are among the original peoples of North America and—despite a history of mission and federal boarding schools and displacement and removal of their children in the last century—have had documented success in intergenerational maintenance of languages and traditional practices.

In *Standardized Childhood* (2007), Bruce Fuller describes the national and transnational push for “standards” in early childhood. The general rationale for state and national policy makers is that early intervention can lead to improved educational achievement and cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional capabilities—and that children from poor and cultural minority backgrounds are most at risk. The stated goal of standards for infancy to age four is equity of access to infant care, child care, and quality educational and health services such as Head Start. In policy documents, the aim is to develop state regulatory “blueprints” and “learning guidelines” (Schumacher, Hamm, Goldstein, & Lombard, 2006). These will set the foundations for expanded professionalization of early childhood workforces, licensing and accreditation of programs and facilities, and performance in the allocation of funding. Comparable approaches have been developed across OECD countries (Tobin, 2005).

Romero-Little (2010) describes the context of Cochiti Pueblo child rearing:

Traditional ways to care for and teach young children were carried out through an intricate and dynamic socialization process shaped by Indigenous languages and guided by Indigenous epistemologies for thousands of years. In Cochiti Pueblo, . . . newborns are considered highly intelligent beings who come into the world with universal knowledge of both the spiritual and physical realms. (p. 12)

She describes a distinctive epistemic connection between the physical and spiritual worlds: “a sacred trust” and responsibility that is not “spoken” in conventional terms (Romero, 2003, pp. 147–148). It is carried out through daily interactions in the home and performed in seasonal activities and events held in the community such as in kivas (ceremonial chambers). New Mexico’s 2005 state standards are viewed by elders, leaders, and families in the Pueblo community as a threat to language retention, to cultural ways of childhood and child rearing, and indeed to their peoples’ “sacred” knowledges and languages.

We spoke to him only in Keres at home and he was speaking it well. But then he went to headstart. The first day he came back and said to us in imperfect English: “Don’t speaky to that way (Keres), speaky me Ingles.” (Romero-Little, 2010, p. 12)

Yet Romero-Little does not reject out of hand Western approaches to early childhood. Instead, she develops community-based criteria for the selection of programs. These include a focus on essential cognitive and linguistic skills for community and mainstream learning—but also requisite conditions for Indigenous language use and retention, and the development of “congruent” cultural knowledges, ways of interaction, and learning. Through detailed ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, Romero-Little is able to establish new parameters for policy that might work without deleterious cultural and language effects.

This example of Hymes’s “mediative” ethnography is not the current early childhood science that is used to generate monocultural/universalist standards and targets. Further, Romero-Little’s work sets the grounds for the adaptation of particular Western/European-based approaches that, to borrow from Carol Lee (2001), “culturally model” community interaction, learning, and vernacular language practices. Here we see in sharp relief two contrasting approaches: One draws from logical positivist and developmentalist models of education and leads to a standardization of practice. The other, based on a Hymesian ethnography of communication, yields a qualitative, interpretive, and culturally based scientific description. The two approaches set very different parameters for policy.

My second case is the development of standards for transnational comparison and ranking of university teaching. In 2009, I represented my university at the Third International Conference on World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Center for World-Class Universities, 2009), where the 100 top-ranking universities are announced annually. The conference was sponsored by Thomson-Reuters. There were over 200 delegates from universities around the world: a curious assortment of university presidents, marketing reps, heads of international student recruitment, government bureaucrats, freelance consultants, and some higher education scholars. The discussions were unique: A senior administrator of a leading Mexican university discussed the recruitment of international students; a ministry official discussed the intention to establish Arab ranking systems; several Eastern European academics viewed citation indices as extending English language hegemony; and, in the background, representatives of a leading American business magazine were recruiting consultants to generate their own patented ranking system. This cast of characters is neither accidental nor incidental. In the boardrooms of university management, a multitude of issues—government regulation and funding, philanthropic funding and investment returns, university personnel management, marketing and branding, faculty human resources, regional partnerships and co-branding, international student recruitment, intellectual property, metrics, and comparative ranking—sit in an uneasy remix.

The conference culminated in the announcement of the Shanghai Jiao Tong top 100 universities—an announcement accompanied by a website launch, a pen with a rolling printout of the top 100, and press and media interviews. Representatives of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking system, also funded by Thomson-Reuters, announced the forthcoming launch of their annual rankings. The running commentary among many of us was that if our universities had been in the top 100, we would not have been there.

The Bologna Accords are now the paradigm case of a regional attempt to regulate or “harmonize” educational credentials as per tariff and trade agreements (King, Marginson, & Naidoo, 2011). The aim of the accords was to enable a freer flow across the E.U. of educated subjects, and credentials, with verifiable “quality assured” degrees and expertise across borders. It was in part a question of the interoperability and comparability of the curriculum and assessment, degree duration, and content coverage of, say, MBAs. This is a real issue for employers: In 1997, I worked with the Education Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to assess whether onshore and offshore, online, and satellite campus degrees awarded by reputable U.K.,
U.S., and Australian universities were actually indicative of capacity and fluency in the English language.

Several presentations at the Shanghai Jiao Tong conference discussed the impacts of the global financial crisis on funding of land grant institutions and endowments; others focused on the use of journal-ranking metrics, indicators of comparative research performance. (Publication and citation metrics around research productivity began with the invention of early versions of the Web of Science in the 1960s at the University of Pennsylvania, providing practical applications of the postwar field of scientometrics.) The new development at the conference was the announcement by researchers working for the OECD and the E.U. on standards for quality university teaching and research supervision. Some of the discussion focused on current indicators (e.g., seminar vs. lecture), ratios of tenured versus casualized staff, staff qualifications, class size, outcome indicators (e.g., employment levels of students), and student satisfaction and exit surveys. The notion of a universal metric for quality university teaching is intriguing, given the distinctive curricular and linguistic traditions of universities and the qualitative research on particular cultural and interactional styles of university pedagogy, where gender, class, and cultural/linguistic backgrounds make a difference (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). At the conference I asked whether assessment tied to rankings will have the effect of driving the behavior of university teaching toward the production of, for example, increased student exit survey ratings. A panel of technical experts working on OECD/E.U. measures explained that the metrics would be sophisticated enough to accommodate this.

My principal objection is that the general corporatization of universities is already showing signs of ironing out difference, local academic and intellectual eccentricity, eliminating courses and programs that do not generate revenue, and gradually re-normalizing national, regional, and cultural traditions of university teaching. The ongoing debates in Oxford and in French and German universities—characterized in The Economist (“Free Oxford University,” 2005) as the protection of tenured academics’ elitism, privilege, and ungovernability—are manifestations of the general move toward corporate managerialism. In Australia, universities and their faculties are given overall numerical rankings and funding based on measured teaching quality, despite the unreliability and sampling problems of exit surveys used. In 2010, all universities were supplied with tiered lists of journals field by field, performance against which has been used to rank individual schools, faculties, and universities on government quality rankings. By current estimates, the combined cost to government and universities, including additional staff time, infrastructure, consultants, and software development, has been $100 million AUD (Rowbotham, 2011). In universities, then, as well as in schooling, the total bureaucratic rationalization of every operational component is well apace, accelerated by declines of government taxation bases and funding, endowment returns, and philanthropic funding.

Thomson-Reuters provides principal funding for the Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking; it also funds the Times Higher Education Supplement universities ranking system, the IELTS English language proficiency test, and the Web of Science citation ranking system and is one of the largest producers of university textbooks in the world. Its principal corporate rival is Elsevier, owner of the Scopus rankings system. Thomson’s Prometrics testing and online assessment arm was sold to the Educational Testing Service in 2007 for $435 million, and now constitutes that organization’s “for-profit” subsidiary. In effect, the systems for monitoring and generating standards for the international comparison of university teaching and research, proficiency and entry tests, and a corpus of textbooks are the provenance of several multinational corporations (Graham & Luke, 2011). The international movement is driven by a new political economy of higher education, where governments, transnational organizations such as the OECD, and corporations together drive an ideology of equity through market and standards. The result has been that most of our universities now have developed core administrative infrastructure for performance metrics, compliance, and strategic engagement with ranking systems, all costly enterprises. There are, arguably, few institutions now outside the reach of this higher education global marketplace (Naidoo, 2003).

These two cases—early childhood education and university teaching—illustrate the policy push across borders to transnational standards. Moves toward standardization and corporate management have not overridden the role of national regulation in Asia or Europe—there are and will continue to be significant local adaptations, critiques, and resistances (Mok, 2010; Rizvi, 2007; Shahjahan, in press). Yet in boardrooms and staff rooms there is a new common sense: that standards will enable equity, that this is about self-evident basics, that teachers and professors will perform better if there are stronger merit incentives and performance benchmarks, that to catch up with country or system X in the competitive production of human capital requires a hard-nosed approach to outcomes, and so forth, that parents or communities or international students must be able to access transparent information to enable market choices of educational goods and services. But in each case, standardization of educational practices has the potential to flatten out cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and educational diversity, with potentially deleterious effects on residual and emergent educational traditions.

**Borrowing and Recontextualizing Educational Policy**

But what of the prospects for the importation of reform from other systems to the United States? The question is how and on what grounds principled borrowings of policy can occur. My point here is that educational reforms are complex and embedded contextual, cultural, and historical stories. The extrapolation and recontextualization of innovation, reform, and method need to be undertaken with caution.

First, a negative exemplar of policy borrowing from Australia. In 2009, the Australian Labor federal government took office proclaiming its own “education revolution.” It featured calls for a knowledge economy to be achieved through a national curriculum that focused on the basics, a one-laptop-per-child policy, and an expanded testing and accountability system. Several colleagues and I made our contributions to the reform debate in separate reports to the state governments of South Australia (Luke, Graham, Land, Weir, Voncina, & Sanderson, 2007) and Queensland (Luke, Weir & Woods, 2008; cf. Luke, Woods, & Weir, in press).

Our argument was as follows: Citing reanalyses of PISA literacy tests for 14-year-olds, we focused on what Schleicher (in...
press) refers to as “high-quality, high-equity systems.” In regression analyses, Canada and Finland have been more successful than Australia in terms of ameliorating the impacts of the socioeconomic background of students on literacy performance. Australia and New Zealand follow slightly behind, with U.S. and U.K. results leading to markedly steeper equity slopes on comparative regression analyses. Broadly speaking, the countries with more equitable results on conventionally measured achievement have longstanding commitments to public education and comprehensive social welfare, health care, unemployment and pension systems. On the other hand, countries with highly stratified income disparity, measured by the Gini coefficient of income variability, have much greater difficulty creating a level playing field for achievement. In the most simple terms, poverty matters, and school achievement does not work independently of combinatorial suites of social and economic conditions and intervention policies.

Moving from these metrics to contextual and historical policy analysis, we attributed the success of high-quality/high-equity systems to the policy balances of “informed prescription” and “informed professionalism,” that is, a modicum of centralized prescription via assessment/curriculum dictates and strong levels of investment in teacher education, in-services, and professional development. Finland and Ontario have several common features:

- highly qualified teacher education candidates and graduates;
- extensive investment in in-service and ongoing teacher development;
- what we termed low-definition or less prescriptive curriculum, with a strong emphasis on local board, municipal, and school-level curriculum interpretation and planning; and
- low to moderate emphasis on standardized testing.

Note that these policy suites from “high-quality/high-equity” systems do not follow the standardization/marketization model I have described above. But equally important, we pointed out that Ontario and Finland, like Australia and New Zealand, had strong social democratic commitments to public education, to educational principles of social justice—and that these sat within compatible commitments to universal access to child care, health care, and social welfare infrastructure. We argued that it was logical for Australia to consider closely systems with comparable social contracts.

Our intervention failed. The education minister (now prime minister), Julia Gillard, sought policy advice directly from Joel Klein. In forums sponsored by News Corp in Sydney and New York, in accounts published in News Corp’s national newspaper The Australian, in talks at the Brookings Institution, Gillard publicly lauded the New York model of school reform. With few historical, curricular, governance, industrial, or sociodemographic similarities between Australian schooling and the New York system, the Australian government has imported and adapted many reforms that will be familiar to this audience. These included expanded census testing in literacy and numeracy, published comparative school test score performance, a push to a national curriculum as part of a high-profile back-to-basics movement, support for a Teach for Australia program, greater budgetary and staffing decision making by school principals, and continued funding for the independent/private school sector, and most recently, announcement of budgeting for comparative teacher rankings and one-time merit payments. We are now three years down the road of reform: Staff morale is low, teaching to the test has begun in earnest, and the first cases of test score fraud are in play in several states. The statutory body established to manage these systems has admitted that the metrics used on its website to compare the socioeconomic backgrounds of schools were flawed, and school test-score comparisons illustrate unresolved technical issues of sampling and measurement error (Luke, 2010).

These policy moves were made without a published or publicly presented analysis by the government of current system performance, which is consistently in the top tier of OECD countries. Those who have criticized elements of this policy agenda have been attacked in editorials and opinion pieces in The Australian (Snyder, 2008).

In effect, the Australian federal government chose to borrow reforms which a decade of U.S. research tells us we have had at best mixed and conditional, and at worst negative, effects (Fullan, 2011). It ignored and, in instances, mocked cautions raised by a broad spectrum of educational researchers and teacher educators, unions and professional organizations as self-interested, politically correct, and not in the public interest. This speaks to the transnational push to use highly selective versions of educational research and empirical evidence to buttress ideologies around markets, around standards, around parental choice, and around teachers and unions, teaching and professionalism.

To examine the alternatives, I want to focus on the broader contextual variables that sit alongside some of the successful systems reforms on offer. I want to briefly revisit Ontario and Singapore in light of my earlier claims about science and policy traveling across borders. My emphasis here is on the constituent role of cultural historical context and the political economic factors in the formation of policy and practice. A decade ago, Ontario began a major push toward educational reform. One of its key architects was Ben Levin (2008), then Ontario’s deputy minister of education under the Liberal provincial government, now a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The Ontario reforms followed the general parameters of the informed prescription/informed professionalism model. Ontario teacher education programs are oversubscribed, with excellent students competing for positions—and provincial universities such as York and Toronto run urban teacher education programs with a strong focus on cultural diversity and equity. Levin and colleagues worked with the unions to develop a strong performance-based equity orientation, with simple messages about professionalism, about equity and learning, and about accountability to community. In contrast with the aforementioned breakdown in relations between the educational research community and policy makers, it is also worth noting that many key Canadian researchers have participated in policy development and implementation processes at the provincial and school board levels.

A modicum of curriculum specification was undertaken; schools were asked to set and track targets for test score improvement, but high levels of support for teacher and school development were provided. This included large-scale in-service training and the establishment of a literacy and numeracy secretariat with
over 100 staff members to assist principals and teachers in developing and modeling effective programs. Currently, many boards have moved toward developing and implementing assessment-for-learning and teacher-moderated assessment systems. There has been no scripted instruction or scientific curriculum mandate—just consistent support of teacher professionalism to respond to mandates for school-level planning and analysis that requires high levels of principal and teacher expertise. The Ontario reforms have prioritized the expansion of adaptive professional expertise, rather than the production of routinized teaching (cf. Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The results over the past five years have been solid initial test score gains, now with some plateau effects; improvement in the achievement of second language learners; and according to PISA data, comparative success at ameliorating the impacts of socioeconomic background. Important to note, this foundational success has set the grounds for continued professional development and curriculum work in areas such as critical literacy, Indigenous studies, middle school literacy and numeracy, moderated assessment, and so forth.

In 2009, the government supported a province-wide call for “A Renewed Vision for Public Education” (People for Education, 2009). These reforms are not essentially about teaching methods, or correct instructional models, or finding the right package—they represent a distinctive Canadian commitment to equity, to multiculturalism, and to a social contract between government, communities, and professional educators around education and the public good. This is about education and equity as core Canadian values, not a search for scientifically derived technique.

Singapore schooling is a key component of former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew’s agenda for nation building. His People’s Action Party (PAP) has won every election since nationhood in 1963. Over that 48-year history, Singapore has emerged as one of the world’s leading economic powers, with the 10th-largest foreign reserves in the world, the 4th-largest banking exchange sector, and the busiest port and logistics center, while producing 10% of the world’s microchips. When I arrived in Singapore, the minister of education explained that in a country of 5 million people on an island of about 250 square miles—with no natural resources to speak of—the education system is the core business. Singapore’s educational success as a top-ranked TIMMS country in math, science, and literacy is a national source of pride—the country’s secondary school completion rate is over 95%. Its higher education sector is well funded and supported: In 2005, the per capita government funding support for each undergraduate education student was approximately six times the comparable allocation that I received while running a teacher education faculty in Australia.

The education system is tasked with the production of human capital, but as well with maintaining an official multilingual state and racial harmony among its Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations. This is an education-obsessed country, where fast-food outlets in shopping malls reportedly put up “no studying allowed” signs to keep students from hogging the tables.

When I arrived in Singapore in 2002, the policy focus was to import specific innovations from the West—including moderated assessment, constructivism, higher order and critical thinking, genre-based instruction, multiliteracies, and digital learning—into a system that many believed were too much on rote, traditional, didactic knowledge. Locals refer to the traditional approach as “East Asian chalk-and-talk.” My academic colleagues and I at the National Institute of Education advised that it was far better to begin from a rigorous empirical description of classrooms and schools, and then make policy choices about reform with a fuller estimation of cultural and social consequences (Luke, Freebody, Shun, & Gopinathan, 2005). The resultant picture is featured in important work by Singaporean researchers: high levels of time-on-task, teacher-centered pedagogy that is focused on curriculum content, and a very strong emphasis on basic skills (e.g., Kwek, in press; Koh & Luke, 2009; Kramer-Dahl, Teo, & Chia, 2007; Liu, 2007; Luke, 2008). At the same time, classroom observation and assessment documented clear thresholds and limits in autonomous, critical, and higher order work.

Singapore’s successes in mathematics and science education—and the identifiable strengths and weaknesses of its traditional pedagogy—are not in themselves the product of a specific scientific or policy approach. The system works through a structural isomorphism where state, family, and corporation are linked together to create a face-to-face culture, and where education, Confucian respect for teachers, and elders’ authority are at the heart of the social order. At the same time, this particular multi-racial social contract and its educational achievement patterns are not without empirical complexity, internal contestation, and debate (Hogan et al., 2005).

What if I were to suggest that we import East Asian chalk-and-talk to Tennessee, or Ontario multiculturalism to Arizona? Caveat emptor—let the borrower beware, or at the least borrow carefully. The relative success of each of these models is contingent upon context. In Ontario, Singapore, and Finland, public education is part of a total cultural, social, and political economic settlement and is geared to the production of a particular educational habitus (e.g., Simola, 2005). Simply stated, all of these countries’ particular reforms—Finland’s research-based teacher training; Ontario’s literacy, multiculturalism, gender-equity, and antithomophobia programs; and Singapore’s mathematics education—are produced and work in situ. They are the products of histories and cultures, always contingent and contested, and in each country they work as part of a larger governmental and community commitment to specific visions of education as a public good.

Policies—successful and unsuccessful—are ultimately epic poems or stories, with problems to be solved, heroic agents, participants, false starts and dead ends, and with endings, at times happy and at times tragic. A principled policy borrowing depends upon an interpretive analysis of a whole educational system in operation: an understanding of everyday cultural practices, of diverse communities and demographics, of contending ideologies and relations of power, and of the human beings who make that system what it is. The stories of Singapore, Finland, and Ontario are not about the triumph of scientific methods. They are not about the triumph of markets, or successful standardization. They are about cultural and governmental settlements, about durable historical, social, and cultural commitments to particular forms of education and, indeed, forms of life.

A Cultural Science of Education

Given my initial claims about the problems of science, borders, and colonization, it would be ironic and hypocritical for me to
write as an external expert with normative solutions for the very complex problems facing American educational research, schooling, and society. Certainly, after my description of Australian reform, you would not want to emulate us emulating you.

There are two salutary historical lessons here. First, policies do not always travel well. In fact, too often, selective versions of educational science, selective minings of educational research are undertaken in the service of particular economic and ideological interests. To paraphrase Michael Apple (1979), “the selective traditions” of educational research—like selective traditions of curriculum—are fraught with motivated exclusions, with omissions and silences. Further, as Apple’s (2000) later work goes on to argue, these decisions are often driven by a collusion of multinational corporate and partisan political interests, now amplified by the work of those transnational institutions that play an increasing role in the setting of standards for educational evidence and performance.

At times, these organizations make principled efforts at evidence-based policy. In other cases, governments are part of cynical efforts to create policy-based evidence—to reconstruct, after the fact, scientific rationales and data for overtly political and ideological decisions. Any of us who have sat looking at multilevel solutions to complex performance and demographic data, or who have worked in schools, know how interpretive and contingent our science is. But many systems and educators now face a push for standardization that exceeds the imperatives for interoperability, where rationalizations of fairness are used to justify sameness, to flatten out diversity and ignore difference. This is not the science of social transformation that Dewey envisioned. It is an ideology of marketization and standardization, aided and abetted by multinational educational enterprises. AERA, with its extension into a world educational research enterprise, with all of its good intentions, needs to proceed cautiously, lest American educational science, selective minings of educational research are...
the application of psychology to society, economics, and human welfare. Thorndike’s behaviorist stimulus-response bond theory had set the terms of American educational psychology for a half century. He had established applications to mental measurement, to genetic intelligence, to reading and lexicography, and to industrial management and labor (Clifford, 1968). The result was Human Nature and the Social Order (1940/1974), a tome of over 1,000 pages. He wrote:

The welfare of mankind now depends upon the sciences of man. The sciences of things will—unless civilization collapses—progress, extend man’s control over nature and guide technology, agriculture, medicine and other arts effectively. They will protect man against dangers and disasters except such as he himself causes. He is now his own worst enemy. Knowledge of psychology and its applications to welfare should prevent, or at least diminish, some of the errors and calamities for which the well-intentioned have been or are responsible. It should reduce greatly the harm done by the stupid and vicious. (Thorndike, 1940/1974, p. v)

Thorndike was writing at the end of a decade of economic depression, a moment when the world was becoming increasingly aware of the rise of Nazism, fascism, and Stalinism but had yet to confront the large-scale state use of pseudoscience. For Thorndike, it was a behaviorist psychology of individual difference that would guide the engineering of society for the common good.

A decade later, after the dropping of the atomic bomb, John Dewey, age 89, returned to write a second introduction to Reconstruction in Philosophy (Dewey, 1920/1948), a collection of lectures originally delivered in Tokyo in 1919 after World War I. He defended the enterprise of a problem-based scientific and philosophical approach. In the face of the logical positivism forwarded by Rudolf Carnap and others and with the storm clouds of McCarthyism on the horizon (Reisch, 2005), Dewey wanted to reassert a science and philosophy that dealt with cultural morals and values. For Dewey, morality was a “practical sociocultural fact” from which all inquiry proceeded:

The simple fact of the case is that any inquiry into what is deeply and inclusively human enters perforce into the specific area of morals. It does so whether it intends to and whether it is even aware of it or not. When “sociological theory” withdraws from consideration of basic interests, concerns, the actively moving aims, of a human culture on the ground that “values” are involved and that inquiry as “scientific” has nothing to do with values, the inevitable consequence is that inquiry in the human area is confined to what is superficial and comparatively trivial, no matter what its parade of technical skills. (Dewey, 1920/1948, p. xxvi)

This interpretive community, this educational research association, has been here before. The question is not one of a binary of science or superstition, measurement or chaos, quantitative or qualitative truths. It is a question of what will count as science—whether and how a generalizable educational science is possible, what its principled uses and grounds are, what it can teach us, and what that science ignores and places at risk.

NOTES

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Media corporations model what Veblen (1923) referred to as the supplanting of “industry” (the actual labor and technology of production) by “business” (commodification and marketing); see discussion in Graham and Luke, 2011.

See, for example, an account of these comments at http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0619_australian_education.aspx.

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