

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION POLICY FIELD; THE RISE OF EDU-BUSINESS

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Abstract

This paper reviews existing literature to identify the changing nature of the Australian education policy field. Through this analysis, it is argued that an international paradigm of testing, propagated by comparative performance data, disseminated by multinational agencies and non-government organisations, is leading to a global audit culture, where a resultant performative ethos is changing notions of traditional state-centred education service provision. This analysis of literature provides a contextual background to explicate the rise of edu-business. Through the use of some examples of edu-businesses currently operating in the Australian education market – found through a stylised approach of network ethnography – it is suggested that there is a pressing need for further in-depth research that investigates the currently opaque and blurred relationship between edu-businesses, schools and governments. Such research will ultimately hope to contribute to the education community's understanding of how increasing trends of privatisation are influencing the 'public' processes of education.

Introduction

With common standards and a competitive market, we can deliver a first-class education to any child, from any background, in any classroom... I don't pretend to be an expert on academic standards. But as a business leader, I do know something about how common standards unlock investment and unleash innovation. With standards in place, investors are willing to take bigger risks because there are bigger rewards... Now, it's true that setting standards will help News Corporation as we try to figure out what programs our schools need. I must note, however, that common standards will give every one of my competitors the exact same advantage. And that's how it should be in a free and competitive market (Rupert Murdoch, 2011).

The above sentiments, expressed by Rupert Murdoch, the founder, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of *News Corporation* – a global conglomerate with assets close to US\$62 billion – largely contextualises the current climate influencing educational reform around the world. As a consequence of economic globalisation, neo-liberalism, the widespread adoption of New Public Management (NPM) and the subsequent pursuit of capital as the primary function of the nation state (Buroway et al., 2000), we are witnessing unprecedented changes to the principles and structures of public education, where schools, governments and edu-businesses are coming together in complex networks of interactions. As Burch (2009) observes, the centre of gravity in public policy has shifted. No longer does the nation state and its traditional hierarchal form of government have complete salience over decision-making in education policy (Eggers, 2008). Instead of governments looking inwardly to

analyse their education systems, they respond to external global pressures, largely propagated by the high-premium now placed on evidence-based policy, like the international league tables produced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) from the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Brown and Lauder, 2006). Such data are now systematically used by countries to evaluate their international status due to the belief that high ranking on these league tables is an indication of the nation's future ability to compete in the global marketplace (Breakspear, 2012). This high-stakes testing and accountability environment is generating a performative culture, where schools, systems, States and nations are increasingly engaging with private providers and edu-businesses to drive up standards as purposefully indicated by the achievement data that these tests generate (Stobart, 2008). Indeed, it is this context that Murdoch refers to in his above comments, where private providers and edu-business have now created particular segments in the market to leverage shifts in government policy to position themselves as offering 'solutions' to national policy problems, of raising standards and achieving educational improvement (Ball, 2012). As Burch (2009) argues, the once relatively fringe market principles of competition, consumerism and incentives linked to performance have become accepted policy strategies for improving social outcomes.

The private providers and edu-businesses gaining prominence under this framework are drawing on political networks, new technologies and a global paradigm of testing (both international and national) to become major suppliers to schools systems for a vast array of educational services (Ball & Junemann, 2012). The effects of this shift are largely unknown, and as yet there have been few detailed and systematic parallels drawn from the emerging literature in the US (Burch, 2009) and UK (Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012) with similar changes occurring here in Australia. Thus, this paper provides a review of literature to argue that there is a pressing need for research to investigate the private providers and edu-businesses gaining prominence in contemporary Australian education governance structures. This begins with a discussion of multinational agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) to establish how an international testing paradigm is leading to a global audit culture, where a resultant performative ethos is changing the nature of traditional state-centred education provision. From this context, we are witnessing an increasing trend of public service privatisation, where government policy initiatives like the 'Education Revolution', instigated by the Rudd Labor federal government in 2007, has greatly assisted private providers and edu-businesses to make inroads into Australian education markets. The significance of this emerging environment is portrayed in this paper through the use of stylised examples of some of the edu-businesses currently operating within the Australian context. The use of these examples also highlights how basic Internet searches, as a method of network ethnography, are particularly useful in exploring and investigating the currently under-researched role of private-providers and edu-businesses in Australia. The intention of this paper is to highlight the changing nature of the Australian education policy field to argue that

there is significant value in research which seeks to unveil the currently opaque and blurred relationship between business and education in Australia; an investigation that ascertains why the likes of Rupert Murdoch, an incredibly successful businessman, now perceives education as a sector that can generate considerable 'reward'.

The agenda setting influence of multinational agencies and NGOs

Multinational agencies and NGOs have become central actors in the post-World War II globalised world, where many features of the modern state including economic, political and educational frameworks derive from global models constructed and propagated by these organisations. As Rinne (2008), Yang (2010), Jakobi (2009) and Moutsios (2010) acknowledge, changes in state education policy cannot be understood in isolation from, or within, the borders of nation states without taking into account the impacts of these organisations. This evolution of reform in education from the time that changes in educational policy could be observed and understood to a large extent through the internal forces and struggles of nations (Rinne, 2008), parallels the rise of globalisation in the 1980s, where trends of internationalisation have had unavoidable impacts on steering and guiding the decisions of national policy-makers and the direction of national educational policies. As Jakobi (2009) posits, international organisations (IOs) have become a central force for addressing an increasing number of political issues with global implications. They can develop, promote and disseminate policies across countries, coordinate policy efforts, set standards, and provide technical assistance or financial incentives – all of which according to Moutsios (2010) are instruments targeted at national policy change. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010), affirm, IOs have become major sites for the organisation of knowledge about education. It is in this space that a global discourse on education is produced and circulated – a discourse which conveys education as the means to social progress, a notion linked to economic competitiveness and the subsequent desire of the standardisation of education policy.

This phenomenon can be specified and contextualised through an analysis of the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), two international agencies that are cited significantly in literature as contributing to a global education discourse through their international programmes of student assessment. The statutes of the OECD and IEA reflect that a major aim of their activities is to provide information relevant to policy-making and educational planning. This objective is seemingly realised, with a great number of studies acknowledging the work of the OECD and IEA as influencing wide-scale educational reform in a number of countries (see Dobbins & Martens, 2012; Gür, Çelik, & Özoğlu, 2012; Ho, 2003; Rinne, 2008; Sahlberg, 2007). In this sense, comparative assessments, such as PISA, The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), have

become tools in creating an international system of stratification of national school systems based on educational achievement. As a result, comparative data about education is now systematically used as a popular evaluative method, whereby governments appraise their national status according to their student's international ranking, partly due, as Feniger, Livneh and Yogeve (2012) suggest, to the belief that high ranking on these league tables is an indication of the nation's future ability to compete in the global marketplace. Breakspear (2012), in particular, explores the normative effects of international benchmarking in school system performance in an OECD Education Working Paper. Breakspear (2012) indicates in this paper 'that PISA is becoming an influential element of education policy-making processes at the national level' (p.27). He identifies that a majority of the countries he surveyed have initiated policy reforms, to varying extents, in direct response to PISA at one point or another across the survey rounds. Furthermore, policy-makers accept PISA as a valid and reliable instrument for international benchmarking current system performance and the relative changes in outcomes over time. Here, we must appreciate the significant influence of multilateral agencies and NGOs as shapers of the global education environment, where they define and promote education standards and performance indicators that are then used to guide governmental policy initiatives. (Yang, 2010). Take for example the following excerpt taken from an article published in the Australian newspaper earlier this year, where journalist Franklin (2012) quotes Prime Minister Julia Gillard from an 'exclusive interview' he had with her:

There are disturbing signs that countries in our region are getting in front of us and we need to address that. Four of the top five performing school systems in the world are in our region and they are getting better and better. On average, kids at 15 in those nations are six months ahead of Australian kids at 15. If we are talking about today's children, tomorrow's workers, I want them to be workers in a high-skill, high-wage economy where we are still leading the world. I don't want them to be workers in an economy where we are kind of the runt of the litter in our region and we've slipped behind the standards, and the high-skill, high-wage jobs are elsewhere in our region. We're positioning so our nation can seize those opportunities and come up winners. But in order to do that we need to be very focused on this challenge that we win the education race (accessed online).

The reference Gillard makes to PISA results, and specifically Australia's performance in relation to Shanghai-China, Hong Kong-China, Korea, Japan and Singapore, is held up as an external rationalisation for policy reform. It posits that if Australia is to remain internationally competitive in the global marketplace then it must be focused on improving student outcomes. Steiner-Khamsi (2004) terms this as a form of externalization, where policy-makers use results from cross-national analyses to evaluate the effectiveness of their own educational system and/or to selectively borrow or lend policy from more effective educational systems. To this end, Steiner-Khamsi identifies three extreme

types of policy reactions to the results of international comparative studies: scandalization (highlighting the weakness of one's own education system as a result of comparison), glorification (highlighting the strengths of one's own educational system as a result of comparison), and indifference. These reactions can be readily identified in the literature surrounding educational reform in individual countries like the 'shock' experienced by Germany after the release of PISA 2000 results and the continuing 'glorification' of the Finnish education system (see Ertl, 2006; Grek, 2009; Sahlberg, 2007; Takayama, 2010).

The global testing paradigm, an audit culture and performativity

It is quite evident that there is a new form of policy influence that sits above the nation state and its traditional policy producing apparatus. We are seeing to some extent what Appaduari (1996) describes as the dissociation of politics from the territorial space of the nation. We are witnessing the rapid flow of educational discourse across nations, contributing to what Lingard (2010) has termed a global education policy field, where a commensurate space of measurement – largely propagated by the comparative performance data of OECD and IEA type studies – is shaping policy debates, setting discursive agendas and influencing national educational policies around the world. This field is blurring distinctions between international and domestic, the global and the local, and in doing so affecting a new spatiality to politics. Instead of governments looking inwardly to analyse their education systems, they now respond to external, global pressures, largely preoccupied with raising international performance and thus, international competitiveness (Lingard & Ozga, 2007). This prevailing fixation on performance data has led to what commentators have termed a 'policy as numbers' paradigm. According to Lingard (2011), 'statistics' and their centrality to the governing practices of the state is not a new phenomenon, with numbers, rankings, and comparisons being used in state functioning since the rise of the nation state in the eighteenth century. He does argue, however, that this reliance on data, or 'policy as numbers' has become the reductive norm for contemporary education policy. As Power (1997) suggests, auditing is given a central role in this environment, where Rizvi and Lingard (2010) observe, educational systems are increasingly using standardised test regimes (both national and international) to steer their systems and drive up educational standards. Indeed, they contend, 'all nations on the globe are attempting to improve both the quantity and quality of their human capital. This of necessity involves ... a focus on assessment and testing and new accountabilities as part of the emergent 'audit culture'' (p.96).

As described by Stobart (2008), this emphasis on testing is fundamentally about 'meeting targets', where the need for change (like improving student performance) is accompanied by the political rhetoric of goals, targets, measures and consequences. The United States, England and increasingly, Australia, are regularly sited in literature as proponents of high-stakes testing regimes.

Such literature goes beyond an analysis of the Standardised Attainments Tests (SATs) in England, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top programs in the United States and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia to largely critique these systems as detrimental to curriculum and pedagogy processes (see Gregory & Clarke, 2003; Hursh, 2005; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Kohn, 2000; Ravitch, 2010). The work of Diane Ravitch (2010) is particularly interesting to engage with, given she was initially supportive of the NCLB as the Assistant Secretary of Education in President George W. Bush's administration. Ravitch, now disillusioned with the US education system, questions in her recent book, *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*, how testing and accountability became the main levers of school reform in America? And further, how elected officials became convinced that measurement and data would fix schools? Ravitch proclaims that she became disparaging of NCLB as test scores became the critical variable by which to judge students, teachers, principals and schools:

Somehow our nation got off track in its efforts to improve education. What was once the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward. No education experience was needed to administer such a program. Anyone who loved data could do it. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators; it often generated higher test scores. But it had nothing to do with education. (Ravitch, 2010, p.16)

This excerpt from Ravitch unveils the effect of what Ball (2003) terms 'performativity'. Ball (2008) speaks of performativity as one of the interrelated neo-liberal policy technologies, along with the market and managerialism, which are changing the nature of traditional state-centred education provision. He argues that when these technologies are employed together, they align public sector organisations with the methods, culture and ethical system of the private sector. Indeed, together, these technologies produce a 'devolved environment', where the role of central management rests on 'monitoring systems' and the 'production of information' (Ball, 2003). It is this new environment that engenders what Lyotard (1984) calls the terrors of performativity. Drawing on and developing beyond Lyotard (1984), Ball (2003) defines performativity in the following way:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or

value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. The issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial (p.216).

In essence, policy technologies of performativity seek to define performance and subsequently evaluate schools (that is, teachers and students) based on their ability to meet these performance indicators. Central to this, as described by Ball (2003), is the rendition of complex, multifarious social processes into simplified judgements. Indeed, Ball (2012, p.31), characterises performativity as the ‘quintessential form of neo-liberal governmentality, which encompasses subjectivity, institutional practices, economy and government’. It would seem that performativity is the central technology of neoliberal forms of the self-responsibilising individual, positioning us to work effectively and improve within a framework of judgement, where such improvement and effectiveness are indicated of us by measures of quality and productivity (Rose, 1999; Ball, 2012). As Ball (2012) highlights, the ‘self-managing individual’ and the ‘autonomous organisation’ are produced within the technologies of performativity, where educational practice is being progressively reduced to an array of statistics, evaluations and modes of competition, where performance information is routinely collected, disseminated and published. The outcome of these individual processes combines to produce a key technique of neoliberal management that uses ‘comparisons and judgements in place of interventions and direction’ (Ball, 2012, p.31).

When all these factors are compounded: the emergence of a global education policy field; the propagation of particular standards and indicators of performance by multinational organisations and NGOs; the resulting audit culture or policy as numbers paradigm where nations are driven to implement high-stakes standardised test regimes and consequential accountability structures in the name of global economic competitiveness; and the ensuing performative environment where teachers, schools, systems, States and Territories and entire nations are positioned under a mantra of measure, then punish or reward, it seems obvious why the public sector of schooling is increasingly turning to the private sector for various kinds of services. Indeed, if we return to Murdoch’s comments at the beginning of this paper, it is quite perceptible that the business world has been awaiting the emergence of such a context. Not only have many of the complex processes of schooling been rendered into a ‘set of common standards’ (Murdoch, 2011) or ‘calculabilities’ (Ball, 2012) where market information can be easily generated, but it is now ‘possible to translate educational work, of all kinds, into contracts articulated as performance delivery, which can be opened to ‘tender’ and thus to competition from private providers’ (Ball, 2012, p.32). Here then, we see the entry of private providers and edu-businesses into education, where they are increasingly supplying schools with a vast array of educational services.

The rise of edu-business

The private sector has had an extensive history of involvement in public service delivery; indeed, private companies have long acted as suppliers to education. However, this has evolved from the mid-1990s, where specialty services involved things like food service and transportation (Burch, 2009), to now include school improvement and management services, charter schools and voucher programs, increased contracting of public school support services and public private partnerships (see Ball & Exley, 2010; Saltman, 2009). Many of the arguments for privatisation derive from standard market theory, which suggests that the higher the competition across suppliers, the higher the quality of product and the lower the production costs (Burch, 2009). As Burch (2009) advises, from this perspective the outsourcing of functions previously performed by the government creates a competitive market for public services, increases the quality of those services and reduces costs for taxpayers. This is straightforward enough, and is a development increasingly seen throughout school systems around the world. But because of this wide-scale proliferation, the reservations of Apple (2001), Ball (2012) and Burch (2009) should be considered. As Burch (2009) argues, private, for-profit firms are becoming the major suppliers to school systems for an array of educational services, where technologies of neoliberal governance have helped firms providing a variety of accountability products to make fast and deeper inroads into educational markets. Indeed, Burch (2009, p.23) notes 'by some reports, schools and local governments now spend approximately \$48 billion per year to purchase products and services from the private sector'. As Ball (2007) explains, this type of privatisation is a convergence of interests, where the public sector is gaining expertise, innovation and decreased expenditure from the private sector and the private sector is also benefiting from increased business opportunities and significant financial returns. As such, Ball argues, the private sector is now embedded in the 'heart and sinews' of state education services, where the policy-making apparatuses of the state are routinely contracted to edu-businesses. The outcome of this development is that new policy communities, which inform policy decisions about education, are emerging which are significantly influenced by business interests. As Apple (2001) summarises, this is causing a shift in public policy's centre of gravity, where the ideologies of neoliberalism are remaking education to fit the needs of the market. As such, there is a compelling need for more transparency around who these edu-businesses and private providers are; the services they are providing to governments and schools; and the effects they are having on the 'public' processes of schooling.

While Burch's (2009) work, focused on the US context, provides some indication of the financial and operation reach of some of the largest for-profit firms in the education industry and the breadth of responsibilities being transferred from the public to the private sector, as yet, no parallels have been drawn between NCLB and the Race to the Top programs in the US, where the ties between education contracting and federal programs have been wound tighter, and similar effects that may be occurring here in Australia due to the processes of the Education Revolution, and more specifically NAPLAN and My School. Indeed, through her research, Burch calls for further in-depth qualitative

research to examine the interplay between edu-businesses, governments and schools. She also proposes that large-scale quantitative data on school or vendor practices would provide a comprehensive and representative picture of the changes described. Here, it is necessary to engage with Ball (2012) and Ball and Junemann's (2012) recent work for guidance as to how such an analysis can be formulated in a practical and meaningful way. Ball and Junemann (2012) have contextualised the need for further research into new policy networks and edu-businesses under the premise that discussion of education markets remains at the level of abstraction, where little is written about the actual buyers and sellers, forms of labour, constraints and regulations in lived concrete markets. While Ball (2012) notes that markets are complex phenomena, he argues that all market processes are amenable to sociological analysis and that such analysis reveals central features of this process. Through their research, Ball (2012) and Ball and Junemann (2012) have undertaken three sets of activities: extensive internet searches around particular edu-businesses; interviews with some key edu-business people interested and involved in education (and attendance at some related meetings and events); and the use of these searches and interviews to construct 'policy networks', that is, a mapping of the form and content of policy relations within the education policy field. Together these constitute a methodology known as 'network ethnography', which as Ball and Junemann (2012, p.13) warn, employs techniques and approaches which are being 'tried and tested and will need further elaboration and development'. While this too needs further affirmation with future research, it is worth demonstrating in a stylised capacity, how basic Internet searches can significantly contribute to understanding the current engagement of edu-businesses in the Australian education market.

As established, schools have had an extensive history with private providers for a range of functions. However, since the introduction of the Education Revolution in 2007 by the Rudd/Gillard federal labor government, one could argue that the institutional landscape of P-12 education service delivery has shifted dramatically within Australia. Interestingly, and as Lingard (2010) has previously established, Kevin Rudd argued that the Education Revolution did not support neoliberal ideals of increased marketisation, despite the fact that the Education Revolution is largely characterised by an emphasis on data and measurements - a culture of performativity and a policy as numbers paradigm - where every student must be tested via NAPLAN in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, with these test scores reported through My School. Such public accountability measures are central to what constitutes high-stakes testing, and are located within neoliberal frameworks and market-choice discourses (Lingard, 2010). With such high-stakes testing for students, teachers and schools it seems clear why edu-businesses and private providers are being increasingly contracted to provide a 'competitive edge'. Take for example a Google search with the parameters 'help to improve NAPLAN results'. This quite general inquiry returns over 76,000 hits, with six of the first ten results directing you to products, books, practice tests and professional development seminars which all promise improved NAPLAN results for students. The following promotional text is from the first website, a company offering a workshop to classroom

teachers for AUD\$245 + GST:

School academic performance has never been under greater SCRUTINY and never before has access to your school's performance been so PUBLIC. Attending this workshop is an opportunity to change teaching practice for the better in your school and make NAPLAN tests an opportunity for your school, to show how great results can be achieved through strategic instruction. AND the threat to your school's reputation can then become an opportunity to stand out as an example of academic excellence... These goals really can be achieved. It's easier than you might think. **Your commitment is just one professional development day.** The return on this investment continues, month after month, year after year. **REAL change** using **REAL strategies** that are easy to implement and so practical that any competent teacher can turn poor results around. **It sounds almost too good to be true, but year after year, our workshop participants walk away empowered and inspired to deliver instruction in a way that brings incredible results they never thought were achievable** (Literacy Solutions, 2012, <http://www.literacysolutions.com.au/workshops/beyond-naplan.php>).

This edu-business is solely constructed around the processes of NAPLAN, and if we direct our gaze to the elements of the text that the business has emphasised on their website with capitals and bold font, it seems that this particular provider is capitalising on the 'terrors of performativity', leveraging the need to succeed on NAPLAN tests with the 'solutions' they can provide. As Burch (2009) argues, policy is being written into the market in the context of market processes and nowhere is this more apparent than in firms' statements to shareholders and potential investors.

As Ball (2012), advises edu-businesses are now directly engaged with education policy in a number of different ways, which include new modes of philanthropy and aid for educational development, market processes of capital growth and expansion and the search by businesses for new opportunities for profit. He offers a range of examples of edu-businesses, neoliberal advocacy networks and policy entrepreneurs who he argues are participants in this new policy space. However, one example in particular is of significant importance to the Australian context. Ball (2012) highlights *Pearson Education* as the world's largest, for-profit, education company, which is a subsidiary of *Pearson*, and a sister company of *Penguin* and the *Financial Times* newspaper. *Pearson* also owns a number of other businesses across education – *Prentice Hall*, *Longman*, *FT Press*, *Dorling Kindersley* and *Ladybird* - with its net income in 2011 being reported as £956 million (AUD\$1.5 billion). As Ball (2012) observes, *Pearson Education* operates across all three educational 'message systems': pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Indeed, a brief tour of the *Pearson Australia* website can tell you that *Pearson* offers a range of learning solutions, that are, 'customised solutions that draw on our full range of assets and capabilities' in: Technology and Services, Teaching and Learning; Testing and Assessment; Qualifications and Curriculum; and English Language Teaching (Pearson, 2012). Under Testing and Assessment, for example, *Pearson* offers a range of services:

World-wide, we are involved in more aspects of test delivery than any other company. Our teams manage all aspects of delivery, from producing the tests on paper or onscreen; managing learner registrations; organising distribution; running invigilation; marking, collecting and collating results; and reporting to students, teachers and parents alike. Our solid reputation is founded on speed, security, accuracy, reliability, and the transparency of our test management services. Our credentials and capabilities are first rate. We manage the administration of the national curriculum tests on behalf of the UK Government for over 24,000 schools with 1.2m learners and involving over 11,000 scorers. We manage the administration of tests for over half the USA State-wide testing programs and administer the NEAP program nationally. And we manage the administration of tests in 75% of the States in Australia administering over a million assessments each year.

While *Pearson* sees this work as ‘improving schools’, other commentators, like Ravitch, see it quite differently. Ravitch in a recent blog post entitled ‘The United States of Pearson?’ (2012) writes,

It is widely recognized by everyone other than the publishing giant Pearson that its tentacles have grown too long and too aggressive. It is difficult to remember what part of American education has not been invaded by Pearson’s corporate grasp. It receives billions of dollars to test millions of students... With the U.S. Department of Education now pressing schools to test children in second grade, first grade, kindergarten – and possibly earlier – ... the picture grows clear. Pearson will control every aspect of our education system.

Seemingly, processes of education and testing in Australia are set to follow a similar path. As of March this year, *Pearson* was awarded a contract by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to develop the literacy and numeracy items for NAPLAN (Pearson, 2012). Furthermore, Pearson is set to administer the NAPLAN tests in all the States and Territories, and further still, analyse and report on these results in every State but Queensland. Surprisingly, these processes of test development, marking and data analysis have been overseen by the Australian Education Research Council (ACER), a not-for-profit organisation, since NAPLANs inception in 2008. Why the Australian federal government would choose to move these processes from a not-for-profit organisation based in Australia, to a global for-profit firm operating throughout school systems around the world is an important question that deserves considerable investigation.

What is particularly concerning about this move from the Australian Government is highlighted by Burch (2009), when she indicates that the activities of private firms are relatively opaque. As she displays, subsidiaries are given independent names so it is generally difficult to see that a single, for-profit company is providing an array of educational services under seemingly different businesses. For example, in Australia, *Pearson* is particularly successful at ‘branching’. As defined by Burch (2009), when a firm sells a school an assessment, it also gains entry to selling that school a curriculum linked to those assessments. Thus as you look across firms, the trend overtime is

selling across different segments of the market, as opposed to focusing more exclusively in one area. So while on one level, *Pearson* is responsible for developing, administering and analysing the NAPLAN tests, on another, a quick search on the *Pearson Australia* website of “NAPLAN help” returns 4811 products, all of which are available to purchase. Take for example the ‘Strategic Spelling’ series available for lower, middle and upper primary levels for AUD\$44.95 each, which develops spelling strategies through explicit teaching instructions, weekly spelling routines and assessment activities.

While there is nothing inherently erroneous with *Pearson* providing these educational services and resources, if we return to Murdoch’s comments at the beginning of this paper, it seems *Pearson* is only one of a multitude of businesses now seeing education and schooling as a significant opportunity for profit. Indeed a report by Malkani (2004) suggests that the education sector of *Pearson* was able to offset a difficult year for *Penguin* and the *Financial Times*, despite a weak US dollar, to keep *Pearson* on track to meet market forecasts, with operating profits up 7 per cent from the previous year. As *Pearson* analyst Paul Richards comments, while ‘pre-tax profit forecasts were being shaved by GBP5m to GBP405m to account for the weakness at Penguin... the major upside is that the US education market is incredibly strong’ (cited in Malkani, 2004, p.1). These sentiments are similar to those expressed by Murdoch who has been quoted saying that ‘when it comes to K through 12 education, we [*News Corporation*] see a \$500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed by big breakthroughs’ (cited in Mencimer, 2011, online). Indeed, Burch’s (2009) research, which reports some of the annual revenue figures for publicly traded edu-businesses seemingly supports this claim. Take for example, *K12* a for-profit firm that leases web-based online learning supplies to schools. As Burch reports, ‘in 2001, K12 had annual revenues of \$47 million. In 2002, (the year that the law [NCLB] was passed), that figure had increased to \$69 million. By 2006 K12’s annual revenues had reached \$116 million, an increase of approximately 60% in five years’ (p.28). It is perhaps this unfettered, unimpeded and unregulated potential for edu-business growth that we should be most concerned about, as few commentators, whether for or against increasing trends of privatisation, would agree that for-profit private providers and edu-businesses should have the same accessibility to education as public agencies.

Conclusion

Through this review of literature, aided with examples of contemporary edu-business activity found through generalised Internet searches, we can see the emerging edu-business community that Burch (2009), Ball (2012) and Ball and Junemann (2012) refer to. It also presents the pressing need for further research into this community. Such research needs to transcend well established notions of privatisation as deeply embedded within the public processes of schooling; move beyond micro-level

analyses of how accountability, competition and choice have effected individual schools; and surpass queries that ask whether privatised reform initiatives have accomplished what they set out to achieve. As while these are important questions, none of their answers explain the rise of edu-business. Thus, there is a need to ascertain what edu-businesses are currently interacting with schools and governments; the breadth and extent of education services being supplied to schools; and how these developments may be impacting the 'public' processes of schooling within the Australian context. It seems likely that the profitability of the education industry will continue to grow over coming years, and as the number and variety of business opportunities continue to expand, there is a need to pay particular attention to the effect that this corporate community is having on national education policy processes. In unveiling the complex and opaque work of edu-businesses there seems to be considerable worth in taking up Ball and Junemann's (2012) call to refine the research approach of network ethnography. As even through the generalised Internet searching presented in this paper, it appears that network ethnography is an exciting new way to conceptualise and research the rise of edu-business in the contemporary field of education policy.

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