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POLITICIANS USING CURRICULUM AS A TOOL TO PUSH THEIR IDEOLOGY ONTO TEACHERS

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Steven Kolber, et al highlight the role of global think tanks, lobby groups, ideological entrepreneurs, and social media in the formation of Australian education policy; and provide us with some simple steps to stem the flow of 'fast policy'...

Have you ever been reading or watching the news about education and thought to yourself: "How on earth did the politicians come up with that idea? Have they ever spoken to a real teacher?" Our study (Heggart et al., 2023) examined this process, and found that a small number of actors are working to insert the ideas of overseas think tanks and lobby groups into Australia's media ecosystem with a view to influencing educational policy making and practice. In the study discussed below, we found that these ideas were being used to directly shape the latest revision of the Australian Curriculum. This raises serious questions about the role played by various think tanks and lobby groups in the formation of Australian education policy - and what teachers and their organisations might do about that.

FAST POLICY AND POLICY BORROWING

This is a feature of globalisation that has been written about in a general sense before (see, for example, Peck, 2015), but it hasn't been applied to the development of educational policy. In short, globalisation has meant that ideas can easily travel across borders and are ripe for adoption in new jurisdictions/countries even when they don't really make much sense in these new contexts. Education, central as it is to the concerns of parents, politicians and the wider public, represents a site that is especially vulnerable to this kind of influence, and popular and populist ideas can have a direct, and almost immediate, impact.

Fast policy and *policy borrowing* are two concepts that can be used to understand the ways that policies can be very quickly adopted from nation to nation. One of the challenges facing education, as a whole, is the lack of, or limited, evaluation of various policies. A thorough evaluation of different policies would indicate how successful each was, and question their relevance to the various parts of the Australian education system. Such evaluations are rarely implemented, however, due to a variety of reasons, including time constraints, disregard for the expertise of teachers, and a lack of political will to address the hard questions. This means that there are limited impediments to policies traveling from one jurisdiction to the next very quickly. In these cases, there is less attention paid to the educational value of the policy; rather, the important factor is that it is an 'announceable' for a politician. *Fast policy* is the way in which societies have adapted to globalisation in such a way as to allow for the simplification of policy development - so that policies themselves can be traded across borders.

Policy borrowing is a closely linked phenomenon. It is the idea that, like fast food, policies can be used in a 'grab and go' way without making many changes for context or local climate. While it is probably true to say that there might be good policies that can be adopted from other locations as examples of best practice, ideally after a period of consultation and contextualisation, the essence of fast policy is that this does not occur. Rather, policies are selected and deployed 'off-the shelf' - to the detriment of all involved.

A well-known example of this are the various 'Teach for…' policy approaches that aim to address teacher quality, and the teacher shortage, by fast-tracking teacher training. This approach began in the United States as 'Teach for America' and although it has had limited benefit for teachers or students, it has been adopted both in the United Kingdom (UK) as 'Teach First' and then later 'Teach for Australia' within most Australian jurisdictions. To reiterate the power of fast policy as a tool: there is very limited evidence

that any of these variants of the 'Teach First' policies have had any material effect on both teacher shortages or student learning outcomes. Despite this, the policies have been adopted and continue to be funded.

IDEOLOGICAL ENTREPRENEURS

The way education policy is formulated and implemented within the context of *policy borrowing* and *fast policy* is not simple; rather, decisions about policies are contested by various interests. One of the key features of *fast policy* is that it has enabled specific groups to have a global reach and influence - something that these organisations have been quick to capitalise on, through the formation of far-ranging matrices such as The Atlas Network. This means that at any specific time, there are think tanks and lobby groups, as well as individuals, that are seeking to influence the formation of policy *on both a local and a global scale.* Those who make a career out of attempting to influence policy are termed *'Ideological entrepreneurs'* within our study (Atwell et al., 2024). They are shaping and reshaping ideas, in this case conservative narratives with a focus on virality and reach, rather than any true pursuit of good policy. The educational sphere is fertile soil for the *ideological entrepreneur*, considering its inherently ideological nature. One way that *ideological entrepreneurs* seek to do this is by shifting the political frame.

POLITICAL FRAMING

Political framing is the way that politicians frame and reframe ideas until they become acceptable to voters. The Overton window is a rhetorical device used to understand this. Imagine the round window from play school, what's inside the circle is acceptable opinions to hold. Everything outside is less acceptable and more extreme, the types of opinions that might get one 'cancelled' online. The job of the policy influencer online (much as it was in legacy media) is to move more extreme ideas into the frame of the window. One way this can be done is by advancing extreme points of view on particular topics (such as Critical Race Theory in the curriculum, as we discuss below), knowing that this will be rejected, but recognising that it will allow for debate about the wider topic and, hence, shifting the window in the sought direction. Our research examined the way this played out in the recent revisions of the Australian Curriculum and especially in History. In order to understand the way that these ideological entrepreneurs work globally and locally, and the influence that this has upon politicians and policy, we need to examine the game board: social media.

THE GAME BOARD OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND OLD MEDIA

For many teachers, the use of social media is something that we could not live without as it is a source of resources, advice and connection. Social media has, due to its virality and scaleabiltiy, - as well as the algorithms that govern what is seen on social media - changed the way politicians and members of the public engage with topics of debate. Indeed, the slow decline of 'old media' and traditional newspapers style coverage also has an important role to play here. As more experienced journalists within education are less likely to remain in their jobs due to extensive layoffs (Waller, 2012), the ensuing shortage of experienced journalists means that think-tanks and other groups that appear influential by their presence in news and social media, can have a much greater impact upon public opinion. Politicians are quick to tap into the debates about popular topics being framed or discussed in a certain way and can thus lend legitimacy to points of views that are at odds with public opinion - regardless of how they are presented via social media. The case study below describes this process.

OUR CASE STUDY: FROM RUFO TO LATHAM

Ideological entrepreneur Christopher Rufo, from the Manhattan Institute, is where the story of Critical Race Theory (CRT) moves from an idea most closely explored within the United States to Australia and begins to have an impact upon the Australian Curriculum. Through analysing Rufo's online engagement, it is possible to track his attempts to capture and define the educational policy landscape. The graph below tracks the posts he made and articles he wrote about CRT over the course of early 2021.His writing, speaking and posting around CRT wasn't especially viral until he stumbled upon

the idea of linking schools and children with CRT, at which point this idea took off: he had 'gone viral'.

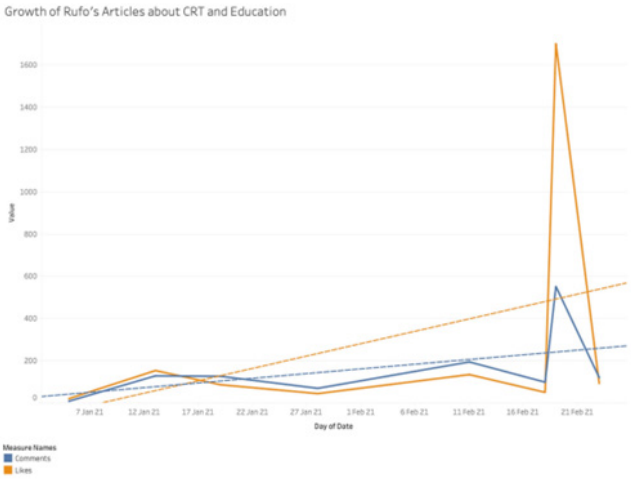

Fig. 1 The virality of Rufo's opinion pieces about CRT. Increased virality in February 2021 when he linked CRT to schools

Source: Heggart et al., 2023, Page 3

This virality was quickly seized upon by Australian politicians. In the same year, One Nations' Mark Latham pronounced that there would be no inclusion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the Australian curriculum. This was a strange announcement: there already was no mention of Critical Race Theory within the curriculum and, for the most part, the consultation phase of the latest version of the curriculum had concluded and all that was required was some proofreading and revision of the curriculum document. Yet, this set in action another revision by the Education Minister at the time, who suddenly started talking to various news outlets about patriotism and the need for young Australians to fight for their country - a marked departure from previous commentaries on the newest version of the Australian Curriculum. As a result, the almost-completed version was sent back for redrafting to reflect this new, hardline focus.

In this short example, we highlight the way that the ideas described above - policy borrowing, political framing and ideological entrepreneurship - are enacted across social media and have a material effect upon the Australian Curriculum. We note that the space itself is conflicted: there were battles between Mark Latham and various Liberal education ministers to seize the initiative about this topic, but the effect of these battles meant that the political frame of History and Civics and Citizenship Education shifted towards a focus on patriotism and duty. We can clearly see all of the elements of fast policy and ideological entrepreneurship in play here. Despite the obvious absurdity of an idea that didn't really hold sway within Australia, it should be concerning to teachers that the Australian Curriculum became an object of political interference so swiftly.

SO WHAT?

Considering how quickly educational ideas can be adopted from other contexts and cemented into policy, it is important for teachers, unionists, and activists to be aware of these processes. When considering the funding and support that back some of these idea factories, such as think tanks and ideological entrepreneurs, it can make us feel powerless by comparison. But there are clear pathways to becoming more aware of these processes through training, and by using such training to inform your actions both online and offline. Choosing the way to respond is important because ideas are supported and thrive upon virality. Consider the last time you saw a dramatic headline about teaching that you then read and shared with your online network or discussed with your colleagues. Giving these ideas traction in this way may, in fact, be feeding the very thing you are trying to stop. This could mean that you need to check the sources quoted, think about whose ideas are being platformed and whether you're helping or harming the situation by sharing them.

And if we were to learn these skills and apply them in our work, then we would also need to begin passing these same skills down to our students. It could even mean more teachers engaging around professional matters on social media, or unions taking a hold of this 'game board' as well and fighting the ideological war wherever it might be won. Alternatively, as schools can be relatively isolated from these kinds of debates, influential teachers in their contexts might engage their colleagues in 'counter-practices' early on that challenge these ideas before they have the chance to gain a foothold. As always there is a need for teachers to get their voices out into the world, but having the skills to recognise when, and how, this might best be leveraged is an important ability to develop.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steven Kolber is a Curriculum Writer at the Faculty of Education, within the University of Melbourne. He was a proud public school teacher for 12 years, being named a top 50 finalist in the Varkey Foundation's Global Teacher Prize. His most recent publication, 'Empowering Teachers and Democratising Schooling: Perspectives from Australia', co-edited with Keith Heggart explores these topics further. Steven has represented teachers globally for Education International, at the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the OECDs Global Teaching Insights, and UNESCOs Teacher Task Force 2030.

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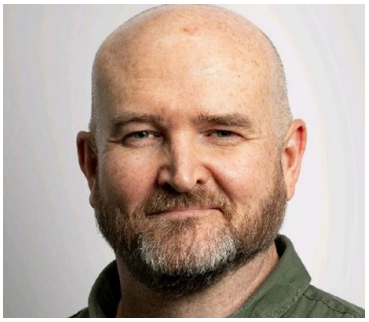
Dr Naomi Barnes is a Senior Lecturer interested in how crisis influences education politics. With a specific focus on moral panics, she has demonstrated how online communication has influenced education politics in Australia, the US and the UK. She has analysed and developed network models to show the effect of moral panics on the Australian curriculum and how it is taught. Naomi is also regularly asked to comment on how Australian teachers should respond to perceived threats to Australian nationalism, identity, and democracy. Naomi lectures future teachers in Modern History, Civics and Citizenship and Writing Studies. She has worked for Education Queensland as a Senior Writer and has worked as a Secondary Humanities and Social Science teacher in the government, Catholic and Independent schooling sectors.



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