‘Travelling’ policy: Contesting ‘global’ policy trends in educational accountability

Lesley Vidovich
Graduate School of Education
The University of Western Australia
lesley.vidovich@uwa.edu.au

Abstract:
The foundation of this paper is empirical research on accountability policies and practices in both schooling and higher education sectors in a number of different countries within the last decade. However, the focus here moves away from specific empirical findings in particular national and institutional contexts to extract some of the emerging conceptual themes associated with ‘travelling’ policies on educational accountability. After exploring the notion of ‘travelling’ policies in a context of globalisation, the paper then focuses on the ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability. Based on a meta analysis of empirical findings, it highlights a series of contradictory directions in educational accountability policies which appear to ‘travel’ across national borders. A significant shift from ‘improve’ towards ‘prove’ forms of educational accountability is revealed, along with implications for the professional identity of educators. While it is acknowledged that educational accountability is vital, the prevailing mechanisms are challenged, and the paper argues the need to negotiate a transparent, hybridised educational accountability in which trust is embedded. Finally, the paper advocates critical and active policy learning, in contrast to uncritical policy borrowing, in establishing new negotiated settlements of accountability policies and practices suited to particular localised settings.

Introduction
The foundation of this paper is empirical research on accountability policies and practices in both schooling and higher education sectors in a number of different countries within the last decade. This includes research in Australia (e.g. Vidovich & Porter 1999; Vidovich 2000; Vidovich 2004), South Africa (Vidovich, Fourie, Van der Westhuizen, Alt & Holtzhausen 2000), England (Vidovich & Slee 2001), and recently as part of an Australian Research Council study in China, Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region) and Singapore (e.g.
Vidovich, Yang & Currie 2006). However, the paper moves away from specific empirical findings in particular national and institutional contexts to extract some emerging conceptual themes associated with ‘travelling’ policies on educational accountability, although it is certainly not the intention to gloss over localised contexts in the way ‘globalised’ policy trends play out in situ.

In subsequent sections of the paper, the notion of ‘travelling’ policies in a context of globalisation is introduced, followed by an explication of a ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability. Based on a meta analysis of empirical findings, the paper then highlights a series of contradictory directions in the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of policies on educational accountability and challenges the disempowerment of educators which has resulted. The paper concludes by arguing for negotiated hybrid accountabilities in which trust is embedded, and which are appropriate to localised settings.

‘Travelling’ policies in a context of globalisation

‘Travelling’ policy refers to those policies shaped by “globalising trends in pursuit of successful competition in the new knowledge economy … [and] supra and transnational agency activity, as well as common agendas” (Ozga and Jones 2006: 1-2). Prevailing forms of educational accountability are an example, *par excellence*, of a ‘travelling’ ensemble of policies, in a context of globalisation. Globalization refers to the greater interconnectedness of the world, and to the “diverse mobilities of peoples, objects, images, information and wastes” (Urry 2000: 185). Bottery (2006) maintains that although there are many different forms of globalization, it is the economic form which ‘captures the discourses’ of other forms such as cultural and political globalization. I would argue further that it is the coupling of the technical dimension of globalisation (compression of time and space) with the ideological dimension of globalization (the ascendancy of a market ideology to near-hegemonic status) that has brought a significant shift in the nature of education policy making in general, and accountability policies in particular, in many parts of the globe. Policy borrowing across national borders has been long-established, but arguably, it has been facilitated by both technical and ideological globalization which have accelerated the transfer of common policy discourses, if not policy specifics (Green 1999) across different territorial domains.
Earlier conceptions of globalization as an omnipotent, top-down pressure forcing unwanted changes on passive nation-states is too simplistic, and increasingly more finely nuanced understandings are being offered. For example, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) have presented a ‘glo-na-cal agency heuristic’ which emphasizes that organizations and individuals actively engage with globalization throughout global, national and local levels. Their approach is to emphasize the active construction of localized variations of ‘global’ policy trends. Similarly, Ozga and Jones (2006) distinguish ‘travelling’ policy from ‘embedded’ policy such that the latter is “to be found in ‘local’ spaces (which may be national, regional or local) where global policy agendas come up against existing priorities and practices” (Ozga and Jones 2006: 2-3). I will return to the tensions between ‘the global’ and ‘the local’ and between ‘travelling’ and ‘embedded’ policies later in the paper.

A ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability

Globalization provides the broader context for understanding the ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability. The term ‘policy pandemic’ moves Levin’s (1998) disease analogy of ‘policy epidemic’ one step further as the terrain for policy borrowing expands across continents and countries with very different historical, cultural, political and economic traditions and circumstances.

In an era of a global knowledge economy, education moves to centre stage in public policy making as it produces the human capital to enhance national positioning in the global marketplace. Such economistic discourses are associated with a policy push to create ‘world class’ educational institutions. Educational institutions and systems have been restructured to make them more responsive to both government intervention and market forces, simultaneously. This restructuring has featured the twin policy strategies of privatization (the transfer of public assets and functions to private companies) and corporatization (the restructuring and reculturing of the public sector to mirror private corporations). Corporatization in education, in theory, involves devolution of power from central authorities to ‘self managing’ institutions to facilitate rapid decision making in response to changing external environments. However, on the ‘flip side’ of devolution policies are another set of policies to enhance the accountability of local sites to central authorities in demonstrating achievement
of prescribed outcomes, which in general terms is the production of requisite human capital. As such, accountability policies have been significant mechanisms in achieving a repositioning of education to serve the economy.

Accountability is commonly understood as “answerability for performance” (Romzek 2000: 22). Ranson defines it in terms of “a relationship of formal control between parties, one of whom is mandatorily held to account to the other for the exercise of roles and stewardship of public resources” (2003: 460). With the acceleration of globalisation, and its associated market ideology, new forms of accountability have emerged in public sector policy since the 1980s and their impact has been the subject of much commentary. For example, Romzek (2000) has noted a movement from professional to political accountability, where the former is based on a high degree of autonomy for professionals making decisions around internalized norms of practice, and the latter reflects a greater responsiveness to interest groups such as politicians, clients and the public in general. Ranson (2003) details a transition from a prevalence of professional accountability to what he identifies as consumer, contract, performative and corporate accountabilities, and argues that this transition represents increasingly specific regulation which has the effect of atomising the public and empowering only limited sectional interests. Many different types of accountability have been articulated in the literature, but for the purposes of this paper, the two more traditional forms of professional (to peers) and democratic (to the community in general) accountability are distinguished from newer forms of managerial (to governments) and market (to customers) accountability, as explored further in the next section.

Contradictory directions in the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of accountability policies

From previous research by the author (cited in the Introduction) – in which educators (both school teachers and university academics as well as education managers) were interviewed about the changing nature of accountability policies and practices in their country and educational institution – some meta level themes can be extracted. In particular, contradictory ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ consistently emerged in accountability policies which are presented below as a series of continuua between polar policy positions. Specific accountability
policies in different countries (and also at different times within a particular country) would be located at different points along each continuum.

The first continuum highlights tensions between externally and internally focused accountability; that is, between satisfying external stakeholders (especially governments and customers) or internal stakeholders (mainly professional peers). Whilst historically, internally focused accountability prevailed, the trend has been to increasingly legitimise the role of external groups in making judgements about the quality of education. Accountability policies often consist of a two stage assessment process with an internal self evaluation followed by an external audit. While many research respondents recognised the value of internal self reflections, they emphasised that it was the external audit, and associated public report (often a ‘league table’ style ranking), that carried the most weight and had the biggest implications.

The second continuum highlights tensions between upwards and outwards accountabilities. Upwards accountability places the emphasis on answerability to line managers within institutions, and ultimately to governments. Research respondents often reported tensions between upwards accountability and outwards accountability to the community. The trend has been towards redefining outwards accountability in market terms of being answerable to individual paying customers (students/parents and industries), rather than the more traditional democratic accountability to the community as a whole. Increasingly, much needed financial resources are attached to both upwards and outwards accountabilities, rendering them ‘high stakes’ in terms of rewards and sanctions. Upwards and outwards accountabilities are in a state of flux as government education funding in many countries is reduced in real terms and there is a greater need to attract private funds from the community, especially from student fees and industry sponsorship.

The third continuum highlights tensions between outcomes and processes assessments. The general trend has been to move from policy discourses about processes to outcomes as performance indicators have been further developed in response to criticism that outcomes measures have lacked validity and reliability. The push towards outcomes assessment raises issues of equity across education sectors given that traditional, elite educational institutions are usually endowed
with greater levels of inputs (both financial and human resources) and therefore they retain a significant advantage in producing higher levels of outcomes. In some countries, measures of ‘value addedness’ have been implemented, purportedly to overcome differences in the nature of inputs to different educational institutions.

The fourth continuum highlights tensions between quantitative and qualitative assessments. Research respondents often noted these tensions and bemoaned an increasing emphasis on ‘objective’ quantitative assessments over qualitative judgements. One might postulate that quantifiable measures such as scores in national/state exams and literacy/numeracy tests, as well as numbers of publications for academics, have undergone a process of reification where optimising numerical scores becomes the *raison d’être* of education. However, serious questions remain about the effect of ignoring qualitative judgments in a complex area such as education where many of the most desirable outcomes, such higher order thinking and future citizenship, are difficult to measure and may not fully reveal themselves in the short term.

The fifth and final continuum extends between ‘prove’ and ‘improve’ forms of accountability, and it summarises the four preceding continua. The trends noted in the previous paragraphs were towards *external* and *upwards* accountabilities, and a focus on assessment of *outcomes* in *quantitative* terms. I argue here that, together, this represents an increasing emphasis on the ‘prove’ dimension of accountability at the expense of an ‘improve’ dimension. With a preponderance of ‘hard nosed’, ‘prove’ forms of accountability it is no wonder we increasingly see references to the ‘terrors of performativity’ and ‘fabrications’ (Ball 2003), and to what Taylor Webb (2006) calls ‘choreographed performances’ to (superficially) meet the requirements of new accountability regimes.

Therefore, with globalization, corporatization and privatization, governments are not ‘rolling back’, but actively steering education policy (albeit ‘at a distance’) chiefly through accountability policies. The concept of government as ‘market manager’ is insightful here; that is, governments maintain centralised control of market mechanisms featuring competition. However, as the power of governments and markets augments so too do the challenges to traditional notions of the professional status of educators. Without access to policy power,
educators are reconstructed more as ‘technicians’ or ‘puppets’ of governments and/or markets. I argue here that the pendulum has swung too far away from policies which empower educators, and therefore the current ‘settlement’ on the nature of accountability policy requires contestation in the interests of restoring authentic education. But, what are the alternatives? Some possibilities are explored in the final section below.

Concluding discussion: Negotiating hybrid accountabilities embedded in local settings

In an era of globalization, accountability policies have ‘travelled’ across the globe to reach ‘pandemic’ proportions. At the same time they have become increasingly complex, with multiple accountabilities pushing and pulling in different directions. Managerial and market accountabilities have been layered on top of more historically entrenched professional and democratic forms in ‘the national interest’ of achieving a competitive edge in the global marketplace. The transition to new types of accountabilities represents an increasing sophistication of mechanisms as they are elaborated in greater detail; a “sophisticated network of surveillance” (Taylor Webb 2005). Yet at the same time these instruments are very ‘blunt’, in the sense that they fall well short of being able to reflect the diversity and richness of authentic education.

I am not questioning the need for accountability *per se*. Complex and multiple accountabilities are inevitable in these globalising new times. However, I maintain there is a need to actively negotiate a ‘hybrid’ form of accountability which renders different types of accountability relationships more transparent, and also better balances the ‘prove’ and ‘improve’ forms of accountability. This argument sits comfortably with O’Day’s (2002: 320, 321) push for a “synergistic interplay” or “thoughtful combination” of outcomes-based, bureaucratic/administrative accountability on the one hand and professional accountability on the other. However, we should note Taylor Webb’s (2005: 191) caution that early evidence of hybrid systems of accountability have suggested “an escalation of accountability politics” as the professional power of educators is eroded by a combination of governments and the corporate community. I would counter, though, that the power of educators has already been eroded, and therefore
educators need to re-establish a position at the ‘bargaining table’, and be actively involved in negotiating the form and function of hybrid accountability.

Ranson (2003) proposes a model of ‘democratic public accountability’, which is negotiated in the public sphere, and which involves collective deliberation, contestation, a strong sense of public good, shared understanding, and dialogues about accountability to create a ‘community of practice’. Trust is central in such a community of practice (see also Olssen, Codd and O’Neill 2004; Bottery 2006). Governments have demonstrated a distinct lack of trust in educators, and marginalisation of the voices of educators has been a recurrent theme in my empirical findings. An alternative is to reconstruct teachers as authoritative voices in policy making. Sachs’ (2003) notion of an ‘activist teaching profession’ suggests a way forward here. She argues for a democratic professionalism in which an activist teacher identity is based on democratic principles, negotiated, collaborative, socially critical, future-oriented, strategic and tactical. This activist teacher identity contrasts with an entrepreneurial teacher identity which Sachs associates with current prevailing managerial (economic) discourses and which promote an individualistic, competitive, controlling, regulative, externally-defined, and standards-led identity. Thus, critical and active engagement with all policy (including accountability) is essential, and as Angus (2004) articulates, the ‘agency’ of educators in policy processes is more than simply resisting hegemonic discourses as it also involves actively engaging with them, and potentially transforming them. “Policy is contested terrain” (Ozga, 2000: 1) and it ought to be contested if professional and democratic accountabilities are to be re-invigorated.

I conclude by returning to the phenomenon of globalization with which I began. Globalisation has contributed to a ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability, but we must examine closely the similarities and differences in purported ‘global’ trends across different countries. There is a need to analyze the dialectic between ‘the global’ and ‘the local’ (Marginson & Rhoades 2002) and between ‘travelling’ and ‘embedded’ policies (Ozga & Jones 2006) to highlight the agency of organizations and individuals in actively negotiating policies and practices appropriate to different settings. We have an opportunity for critical and active policy learning rather than uncritical and passive policy
borrowing. The standardization and homogenization which is promoted by a common drive to achieve ‘world class’ educational institutions, accompanied by uncritical borrowing as a ‘policy pandemic’ of educational accountability ‘travels’ across the globe, must be dislodged in the interests of authentic educational improvement.

References


