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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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Governing Narratives: “local” meanings and globalising education policy

Jenny Ozga*

Abstract

New public management and the neo-liberal principles that sustain it have driven performance agendas in government across Europe and beyond. This has produced a loss of the traditional role of education in creating a coherent and persuasive collective myth of belonging, identity or purpose. This chapter discusses current developments in the policy technologies of performance management in England and Scotland in order to assess the continuing significance of “local” narratives in mediating global pressures for policy convergence. It compares the governing narratives that promote performance management in the two systems, concluding that self-evaluation is being installed successfully in Scotland where a Nationalist government has constructed a governing narrative that stresses collaboration and fairness, but England’s reliance on competitive individualism presents problems for the mobilisation of a persuasive governing project.

Keywords: policy, governance, nationalism, narratives

Introduction

This discussion focuses on the continuing importance of “local” narratives in making and understanding education policy, in the context of global pressures for policy convergence, especially in pursuit of the improved performance of education systems. The emphasis on improving performance and the introduction of various technologies to achieve this – including targets and benchmarks – have many consequences, but central to the discussion here is what Laidi (1998) calls the “loss of meaning”. Laidi suggests that the combined imperatives of individualisation and competition in the global market, inherent to the knowledge economy discourse, fail to create a coherent and persuasive collective myth of belonging, identity or purpose. The absence of a governing vision or “project” is reflected in much current policy discourse and is also reflected very clearly in accounts of the contemporary experiences and dislocations of young people, and of their strategies for creating meaning in the face of pervasive commodification (see, for example, Lindblad et al. 2002; Hansson & Lundahl, 2004).

These developments are highly significant for education, which has traditionally contributed to the creation of a common space of meaning, as Novoa puts it: “edu-
cation is, by definition, the space for the construction of national identity” (Nóvoa, 2000: 46). In this article, I discuss current developments in the policy technologies of performance management with reference to England and Scotland, as a way of exploring the significance of “local” narratives in mediating and translating global pressures for policy convergence around the principles of competition and individualisation. In particular, I argue that we may be witnessing a transition in education governance in some policy spaces in Europe from the “hard” repertoire of performance management techniques and technologies towards “soft governance” (Lawn, 2006), and I illustrate this argument with reference to the implementation of policies for self-evaluation in the two systems of England and Scotland. I suggest that self-evaluation has been more effectively installed as a governing strategy in the Scottish context, where the government has promoted a narrative of joint endeavour and collaborative improvement, inflected with historically embedded references to fairness, and looking to small social democratic states as models. This contrasts with the exclusive focus on a narrative of achieving “world class” competitive status in England, through data-driven performance management regimes, and where the installation of self-evaluation technologies is undermined by a lack of trust.

There are two points to note briefly here: first, my interest lies in exploring how governing strategies connect to governing narratives and do their work. Second, in focusing on “local” meanings it is not suggested that the global can be ignored: indeed building the Knowledge Economy/Knowledge Society is a project that has been re-energised in the context of global economic recession. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the KE/KS agenda and the changes it has brought with it in the structures and systems of education provision. The changes include, in very broad terms, a re-engineering of education as learning, and very substantial changes in the structures, systems and content of education provision-producing what may be termed the “de-institutionalisation” of schooling/education as it is shifted into individualised “learning” that is the responsibility of the learner to seek out and exploit for national and individual competitive advantage. An important consequence of this shift to individualised learning is that the combination of individualisation and performance management produces a heavy reliance on data: data fill the space between transnational agencies driving up performance (for example the OECD, the EU), and national governments, and also fill the space between national governments and their increasingly deregulated and devolved systems of provision (Ozga et al., 2011). In the remainder of the discussion, I will first review in more detail the ways in which education has changed in the context of the KE/KS, then explore the role of data in the governing of education/learning in England and Scotland, looking at the contribution made by analysis of a “governing narrative” to understanding differences in the performance management practices in the two countries [1].
The Knowledge Economy/Knowledge Society and Schooling

In Europe, most national education and training systems developed in the 19th and 20th centuries as negotiated settlements between nation-building states and education workforces who advanced agendas driven by enlightenment commitments to individual equality and collective progress. These agendas were framed by nation-building activities and modernist scientific rationality that sought evidence about populations and developed a professional workforce of state employees to deal with social problems. This framing of education systems oriented education/schooling towards “problem solving” in relation to what Dale (2009) calls “persistent problems” within capitalism: preparation of the workforce, disciplining identities to ensure social order and cohesion, and legitimising social ordering despite the existence of inequalities.

Education policy and the capability of national education systems, exercised through the teaching workforce, mediated contradictory imperatives without ever solving—or, indeed, directly recognising—the problems and tensions they created (for example, between meritocracy and equality, or between targeted and inclusive provision) (Ozga, 2000; Dale, 2009). National narratives were often devised to help manage the tensions between these imperatives and in England and Scotland, despite their proximity and shared membership of the United Kingdom, those narratives expressed some key differences (Arnott, 2005, 2008; Arnott & Menter, 2007). Systems of schooling, as well as strengthening national economies, addressing social problems and influencing the distribution of individual life chances sought to “define, replicate and ensure their national distinctiveness” (Dale, 2009 p. 373). Education/schooling in Scotland was an element in the assertion of continued distinctiveness from England, and played a particularly strong role historically in the shaping and support of national identity (McCrone, 1992).

The knowledge economy agenda translates learning/schooling into an instrument of governing that disrupts earlier institutionalised practices and norms. The preferred attitudes and dispositions encouraged by new knowledge practices are coherent across the range of institutions and beyond them, from early childhood throughout adult working life (itself extended). This is also a shift in governing practices, from institutionally-based governing to individual self-governance, informed by the constant self-evaluation of performance.

Governing by Data

The shift from government to governance or governing is summed up in the movement from hierarchy to network as the “model” of doing governing. Market mechanisms displace the state, there is the outsourcing of services to hybrid public-private organisations, and the increasing devolution of responsibility for self-management, choice-making and the management of risk to individuals and families and away from state institutions. Changes in governance and their relation to data can be tracked in a shift in Europe from government as an enabler of provision, then as a market
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regulator and more recently the driver of “integration” of action and delivery with a range of partners in the provision of services – often organised in networks of hybrid public/private providers (Lawn and Grek, 2009; Ball, 2010).

Policy work no longer operates within closed systems through bureaucratically organised, command and control processes. Rather, the work of making/fabricating governing occurs in complex “systems” in which co-operation and co-ordination must be managed. Governing through transnational networks is not constrained by path-dependent thinking on the national scale, as data construct policy problems and frame policy solutions beyond and across the national scale (Nóvoa and Yariv-Marsh, 2003; Ozga et al. 2011).

Data production and management were and are essential to the governance turn (Grek, 2009). Data enable the goal-governed steering of outputs and outcomes, accompanied by the monitoring of targets. New governance forms promote ways of controlling and shaping behaviour that mix material and discursive strategies: the discursive mobilisation of new norms and values is combined with external regulatory mechanisms (such as competitive indicators of performance) which together seek to transform the conduct of organisations and individuals in their capacity as “self-actualising” agents, so as to achieve political objectives through “action at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 2008). Knowledge and information thus play a pivotal role both in the pervasiveness of governance and in allowing the development of its dispersed, distributed and disaggregated form. Data support and create new kinds of policy instrument that have the purpose, in the words of Lascoumes and Le Galès:

...of orienting relations between political society (via the administrative executive) and civil society (via its administered subjects) through intermediaries in the form of devices that mix technical components (measuring, calculating the rule of law, procedure) and social components (representation, symbol) (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007:6).

These developments raise the question of how the relationship between education’s traditional nation-building role and its heavily economised current formation may be understood – how do national policies reflect and manage transnational pressures? In attempting to answer these questions, I suggest that the governing project or narrative is an important mobilising resource, and in the two countries – England and Scotland – that form the basis of the comparison discussed below, the quite divergent narratives may be seen to have a considerable impact on the policy shift in the process towards self-evaluation.

Data and Governance in England and Scotland

The economising agenda that drives the KE has been very strongly embraced in education policy in both Scotland and England. However, there are differences in the ways these policies are promoted and organised. The New Labour UK government was one of the most influential actors in pursuing the global agenda. Modernisation of educa-
tion policy in England tied education very firmly to the economy (DfEE, 1997) and promoted the use of data in order to enable the public to be informed, and to displace expert or professional judgment. Managerialism reinforced a technical and pragmatic approach to policy-making, pre-occupied with economy and efficiency. In education policy-making in England, these developments promoted service integration and sought to involve new partners, particularly private partners. Good management – following best practice – is assumed to follow from these developments, but there are problems of co-ordination and control, and of rising expectations. These problems were partly addressed by data use (Grek et al., 2009) and through the repertoire of evaluation and accountability mechanisms and agencies that developed from the 1980s onwards. It is well known that the growth of audit led to distortions of behaviour in relation to school performance testing (Goldstein 2004; Croxford et al. 2009). At the same time, the emphasis on performance against targets in the UK public sector without reference to consumer/citizen experience of using services reduced public trust in politicians, in public sector managers and in the “evidence” they produced to demonstrate improved quality and transparency: ironically, the more that data were produced and cited, the less value they seemed to have in terms of managing risk and delivering accountability (Raab, 2006; Anderson et al., 2009).

The search for a governing narrative in policy texts produced in the 1990s and 2000s in England produces repeated references to a world-class system creating competitive advantage by driving up standards of performance and becoming a world leader in data design and use to measure and monitor performance. There is no other narrative or statement of the “project”. Indeed, the data dream in England seems to have become the “project” of governing education (Lawn & Ozga, 2010). The size and complexity of this system led a senior EU data analyst (EU3) to describe it as “monstrous” [2]. Data grew in England from the 1980s onwards because of the policy pre-occupation with measuring attainment levels (of pupils, schools and the system). The proliferation of government guidelines and regulations for every aspect of schooling including management, examination performance, local authority provision of services, inspection, teachers’ performance management, target-setting, addressing underperformance, pupil tracking – all drew on data and all required the use of data in their implementation at the school or local authority level.

Data-based knowledge becomes, in effect, the governing narrative, and knowledgeable governance is presented as following from the collection and analysis of ever increasing amounts of performance data, in pursuit of world class provision. The analysis of key policy texts (Ozga, Grek & Lawn, 2009) reveals an account by government of its joint interests with mobile capital, while its regulatory instruments at all levels measure and compare performance, create governing knowledge and also, importantly, construct an image of governing through knowledge. Government presents re-formed, data-driven knowledge production as informing, justifying and legitimating policy and also clears the ground for the construction and circulation
of an overarching narrative of knowledge-policy relations, redefined in relation to
governance. This creates and sustains a narrative of constant, data-dependent activ-
ity. In the central government department for England, for example, a senior official
conveys the live nature and visibility of education stocks and flows:

“…..its interesting to reflect on how the work of a central government policy department has
evolved….. In fact actually we’ve been developing a concept here in the Department which
we’ve called ‘the bridge’ where we corral all of this data and information and at a glance now
across all local authorities in England you can go downstairs and look at a big screen and you
can look across all the key performance areas and that’s actually across all the social care
areas as well as education. So at that level we’re doing quite active performance management
of the system and that’s quite a powerful tool” (CP7 E).

In the final period of the New Labour administration there were some revisions to the
performance management system in England to make it “less prescriptive and more
strategic” (DfES, 2004: 9). The reduction of central prescription is likely to continue
following the change of government in 2010 to a Conservative-Liberal Democratic
coalition, which is hostile to target-setting. Whatever the direction of future policy for
performance management, the new UK government’s first White Paper for education
justifies its proposed restructuring of provision with reference to the need to catch
up on competitors, as this extract from the foreword by the UK Prime Minister and
Deputy PM illustrates:

“...what really matters is how we’re doing compared with our international competitors. That
is what will define our economic growth and our country’s future. The truth is, at the moment
we are standing still while others race past. In the most recent OECD PISA survey in 2006
we fell from 4th in the world in the 2000 survey to 14th in science, 7th to 17th in literacy, and
8th to 24th in mathematics” (Schools White Paper 2010:1).

The White Paper contains no governing narrative apart from that of achieving world
class status: indeed, it embraces localism, diversity of provision and deregulation to
a degree that makes it difficult to “see” a system of education provision in England. It
is not clear how commitment to improvement will be mobilised other than through
competitive individualism, backed up with hard performance measures. In this con-
text, the growth of self-evaluation as a policy technology seems problematic.

**Performance Management in Scotland: discursive positioning**

Although there are close parallels in education policy between England and Scotland
from the period of the post-war Keynesian welfare state, there is evidence of diver-
gence from the late 1970s onwards, when the Conservative-controlled UK administra-
tions re-made education in line with market principles. However, whereas England
introduced a National Curriculum with National Testing and a strong focus on hard
performance indicators, these approaches were successfully resisted in Scotland
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(Jones, 2003). Similarly, competition between schools was not promoted as strongly in Scotland (Adler 1997; Croxford & Raffe, 2007). Differences became more visible with the creation of a Scottish parliament in 1999, which has responsibility for education policy. Further, the election of a minority Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Scotland in 2007 marked a break from Labour party policy influence on the Scottish political scene, and brought about considerable change in style of government (Arnot & Ozga, 2010).

Decentralisation is a key principle of the SNP’s redesign of governance in Scotland, but it is promoted not in terms of a reduction of state interference (which is the neo-liberal/coalition rhetoric at the UK level) but as demonstrating maturity in the political process, following from political devolution, and enabling the growth of accountability and hence trust between government and its partners, local authorities and other stakeholders. In contrast to the data-driven and performance-focused agenda in England, since 2007 the Scottish government has attempted to “craft a narrative” of learning that connects to growing national capacity and independence through education. Thus, although the economising agenda is strongly present in their statement of National Priorities for education in the creation of “successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens”, it is aligned with references to selected aspects of national myth or tradition that connect to education’s role as a key institution in maintaining national identity. The traditional and historically grounded symbiotic relationship between education and nationalism provides resources which the minority administration seeks to exploit and which it also attempts to modernise.

The political context also shapes the contrasting orientation of Scotland to Europe: while England references global agencies like the OECD and the World Bank (Grek & Ozga, 2010) and is pre-occupied with its global positioning, Scotland’s SNP government seeks to discursively re-position a “smarter Scotland” alongside selected small, social democratic states in Europe, especially Norway and Sweden. In promoting this narrative or imaginary of Scotland, education policy is a key arena for the SNP because it combines the central, inescapable focus on the economy with the core principle of fairness that references embedded narratives of national identity. Education policy draws on established myths and traditions that reference the “public” nature of schooling in Scotland and its role in both the construction of “community” and in driving economic progress. The social democratic elements of this discourse refer to historically-embedded themes in twentieth-century Scottish education policy especially in the period of post-1945 social democracy (McPherson & Raab, 1988; Paterson, 2003). At the same time, as indicated above, within the increasingly globalised policy field, and responding to increased competitive pressures, education is a key policy arena for economic development. There is, then, a narrative that seeks to establish Scotland in a global competitive environment, but it is inflected with a sense of capacity and “local” i.e. national resources. The economic drivers of policy
are linked to the idea of a “flourishing” Scotland and an emphasis on community, fairness and inclusiveness. This is seen, for example, in an extract from the National Performance Framework, setting out key objectives:

Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.
Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.
We live longer, healthier lives.
We have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society.
We have improved the life chances for children, young people and families at risk.
We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others.
We take pride in a strong, fair and inclusive national identity.
Our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs (*TSG, 2007a, p. 12*).

Analysis of Scottish Government policy texts reveals a shift over time from early statements dominated by economic imperatives towards a more complex mix. For example, early statements by the former Cabinet Secretary for Education, Fiona Hyslop, stress the need to tie education to the promotion of sustained economic growth (*Hyslop, 2007a, 2007b*), but this changes to an emphasis on incorporating education’s capacity to address problems of poverty. In the “bridging” of economistic and flourishing discourses, the key shift is that of referencing poverty alongside wealth creation. Policy interventions are harnessed explicitly to the “fairer” agenda: the Scottish government discursively references and education system that was successful and worked well for most, thereby underlining Scotland’s tradition of meritocratic egalitarianism (*Grek et al., 2009*), while simultaneously underlining the obligation to help particular groups overcome their material disadvantages, and making links to knowledge economy priorities.

The particular character of performance management in Scotland is well illustrated by the development of self-assessment in education. New performance management arrangements require service providers to manage services and account for performance (*Crerar 2007: 16*). These developments are in line with parallel developments in England, though, as stated earlier, the narrative promoting change there is about reducing the public sector and involving new partners. In Scotland, there is reference to reducing bureaucracy through drawing on expert judgment, to evidence, to the building of trust and to constant learning from self-evaluation, not only in relation to education/learning policy and institutions, but more broadly as a key characteristic of governing.
School Self-Evaluation

School self-evaluation (SSE) is, then, only one example of a new governing narrative of the “learning” government in Scotland, working in partnership with schools and local government, and represents one element of a larger policy paradigm shift. SSE is about creating a school evaluation framework that claims to bring about constant comparison and improvement, broadly focusing on answering two key questions about educational practice:

“How good are we now?” in order to identify strengths and development needs in key aspects of teachers’ work and the impact it has on learners; and ‘How good can we be?’ in order to set priorities for improvement (HMIE How Good is our School (HGIOS) 2007).

Self-evaluation is used as a tool to encode school knowledge, create consensus and promote specific values that relate to the creation of self-managed and self-sufficient individuals (both teachers and pupils). The coding enables the apparent “light touch”, while co-opting schools further into the new networks of knowledge production. Further, the knowledge they produce is productive for the constant improvement of the system as a whole.

The growth of self-evaluation has been supported by a change in inspection practices through a move away from the use of attainment data along with inspection visits and towards use of the self-evaluation/self-monitoring processes. This shift emphasises the schools’ responsibility for their ongoing quality monitoring, evaluating and reporting processes. This is a shift that signals a move away from “hard” governance towards a softer, more attractive approach that draws participants in (Lawn, 2006). In this new regime, schools are discursively constructed as learning organisations where teachers and school leaders are responsible for constant self-monitoring and self-evaluation and for improving their school’s performance and attainment levels for learners within the context of responding to the ever changing and complex demands of their communities and society. The quality framework documented in “How Good is our School” (HMIE, 2007) extends the scope of assessment and evaluation so that the interrelationship of different aspects of a school’s provision is highlighted. This holistic view of school performance includes different kinds of knowledge gained from learners, staff, parents and community surveys. As a consequence, organisational managers and members are expected to identify and act on dissonant knowledge that highlights a lack of shared meaning or knowledge across the organisation: all aspects of the knowledge production process have to be brought into alignment: they need to play their part in constructing a seamless narrative, and they need to be seen to be guiding action. The inspection element requires school and teachers to demonstrate how this knowledge has changed their practice for the better.

This development is congruent with and reflects the story of change in governing style from central control to partnership – this is seen as in line with the policy approach to creating more confident individuals and, indeed, to building the capacity for political independence:
...so for decades you have had this top down approach in education which has been civil servants telling ministers, ministers then tell local government, local government then tell directors of education and directors of education tell head teachers and then head teachers tell teachers. There is this suffocation by direction ... So we are changing the education system, we hope, from one of dependence to one of independence and again that it quite a challenge ... you can’t be confident individuals if you think other people will do things for you. ... whether it is on a personal basis or a national... (SPM5).

Conclusions: The importance of narrative

In Scotland, school self-evaluation remains within the long established, KE-driven “project” of the improvement of school performance, but it shifts the focus from the regulation of performance associated with external mechanisms to a focus on the school, and on engendering in the school a commitment to the constant production and review of knowledge about performance that defines a “learning organisation” (Senge, 1999). SSE may thus be interpreted as reflecting the knowledge-economy paradigm in its most developed form: that is, as not simply pre-occupied with monitoring and measuring performance in order to improve it, but as transforming organisations (whether schools or businesses) into learning institutions that, through their constant production of knowledge about what and how they know, become sites of competitive advantage and also of “governing knowledge” (Ozga 2009; Ball, 2010).

SSE prioritises the importance of knowledge about knowledge, and supports a governing narrative of releasing creativity and energy in the schooling system, and building knowledge sharing, generation and retention into organisational processes. Self-evaluation connects to the wider agenda of economising schooling/learning through its role in implementing key ideas in the “economics of knowledge” (Foray, 2004) that link to the heightened significance of knowledge management and the redesign of organisations in “post-bureaucratic” forms as part of the redesign of governance through self-evaluation. SSE, it should be noted, also reduces costs because it is less reliant on external mechanisms to monitor performance, while apparently engendering relations of trust, transparency and openness within organisations that are claimed to be conducive to “real” learning. As noted earlier, the regulatory regimes associated with New Public Management have been criticised in terms of their costs and their installation of performative cultures of distrust within organisations, so SSE may be understood as a response to those problems. In its orientation towards collaborative learning, it fits well with the overarching narrative of learning government that is promoted by the Scottish government, while the overarching narrative of improvement in pursuit of fairness as well as wealth creation links references an embedded national myth about education in Scotland, and links it to a new, independent future.

The development of self-evaluation may be understood as an attempt to address governing problems created by a lack of trust and as a response to the immediate financial crisis by enrolling communities of practice in processes of constructing
comparabilities through an emphasis on learning and self-evaluation. In England, the data-driven regime of performance management demands processes of managerial accountability and the setting of targets, the use of incentives and threats and the constant measuring of results. These activities are focused on driving up performance, but do not connect to broader narratives that draw in citizens and professionals. As a consequence, it is possible that recent attempts by policymakers in England to recover or promote trust through more bottom up and self-generated forms of evaluation of performance are undermined by the weight of the work of data production and use and by the continued effects of managerial practices on relations with schools and teachers. The performance management regime in England remains, in Lyotard’s words:

“...a culture or a system of ‘terror’ that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change. The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established” (Lyotard, 1984: 46).

New governing forms combine material and discursive resources. In England, the discourse is entirely one of global competitiveness, and individuals are harnessed to the project through the contribution they may make to national success as well as through their own individual advancement. This competitive individualism may be inappropriate or inefficient in the propagation of governing through self-evaluation. In Scotland, the self-evaluation strategy is congruent with the overarching governing narrative of growing autonomy and collective improvement. The Scottish government is very reliant on discourse to manage its governing project and thus it is hardly surprising that a sophisticated narrative of collective engagement has been promoted since the Scottish national party formed a minority government in May 2007. In England, the absence of meaning that Laidi (1998) describes is exemplified in policy texts that repeatedly reference the KE script of world class performance. In Scotland, the governing strategy relies on co-option and collective identification, in England the focus remains on compliance and performance. In both cases, I suggest, examining the nature of the narrative enables us to better understand the development of policy technologies and the “governing project” in national contexts, framed by global developments.

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Endnotes

[1] The research on which this chapter is based draws on three independent but related research projects. The Fabricating Quality in European Education/Governing by Numbers (ESRC: RES 00-23-1385), project, the Knowledge and Policy project (EU FP6 IP 028848-2), and the ESRC funded project Education and Nationalism in Scotland, PI Dr Margaret Arnott (RES RES-000-22-2893)

[2] Quotations are from interviews carried out in 2009 with senior data analysts in Brussels and in England and Scotland for the research projects mentioned in footnote 1. The codes used in the interview quotations protect the identity of our informants.
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