

Contemporary Issues of Equity in Education

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Edited by

Susanne Gannon and Wayne Sawyer

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

SUSANNE GANNON AND WAYNE SAWYER

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Education has been one of the great social justice projects of modern democracy. However the equity principles underpinning the provision of high quality education for all – access to good schools, challenging and engaging curriculum, committed teaching and engaged learning and appropriate resourcing – are currently under assault. Although each national and local context has its own particular variations, many of the factors eroding educational equity can be tracked across hemispheres and sectors and characterise wider social, political and discursive shifts. The economisation that is associated with neoliberal incursions on all aspects of life has impacted directly on the school sector and manifests as increased privatisation and discourses of choice that privilege those who have the social, cultural and economic capital to choose. Those who do not, often remain in schools that are becoming increasingly residualised (*Reid*). At the same time, socio-cultural factors that have long been known to impact directly on educational access and outcomes are bracketed out (*Sellar and Lingard, Reid, Brennan*). Students are re-cast as individualised clients whose success is contingent on individual desire and aspiration, even when aspiration itself can come to be experienced as unrealistic (*Zipin and Dumenden*). The democratic promise of schooling itself becomes re-conceptualised as a future understood in terms of contribution (or not) to the economy, private wealth (or not) and consumer participation (or not).

In curricular terms, the policy assemblage that reaches into the everyday practices of schools brings about an odd coupling of innovation discourses around “21st century learners” with high stakes testing that shuts down curriculum innovation, increases risk aversion, enhances in-school and between-school competition and replaces teacher autonomy and professional judgement with compliance through standard(s)isation. This book rejects these moves and argues for renewed engagement with broad principles of social justice in education across all these areas. These issues are not around class or SES alone. They exist at the intersection of a

number of key factors: class, certainly, but also race/ethnicity, gender (*Reid*), sexuality (*Ferfolja and Ullman*), language background (*D'Warte and Somerville*) or backgrounds of trauma such as from refugee experiences (*McCarthy, Vickers and Zammit; Naidoo*).

The research into educational equity that we present in this collection was first presented at an *Equity in Education* symposium held at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, in late 2013. We include practitioner research, policy critique, curriculum analysis and theory across a range of educational domains, and we have tried to have these talk to each other within and between the chapters of the book. Those names italicised in brackets here represent the chapters in this volume dealing with the specified issues. Much of the research in this book was conducted in partnership with colleagues in schools. We are committed to the notion of teachers-as-researchers and to the work of teaching as high level intellectual work (*Mayer and Sawyer*). As academic researchers we are grateful for, and feel privileged by, the opportunities these teachers have given us to work alongside them, to listen to their views on schooling, to talk to their students, and to engage in scholarly work with them.

This book deals with issues that resonate globally as ideological wars around education in the present. Neoliberalism, the school choice agenda, marketing and economising schooling, naming and shaming schools, inequitable outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and positioning education in human capital terms – these are all international moves in the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM – see Sahlberg, 2011). However, the book largely reflects the positioning of these issues in Australian contexts. Australia is, in fact, an ideal case for examining such themes. Australia has “bought into” global education reform with an enthusiasm that is almost unique (Firth and Huntley 2014), even among Anglophone countries, who appear to be the strongest proponents of Global Education Reform. Between PISA 2000 and PISA 2012, Australia did, admittedly, move from being a high quality/low equity nation in PISA terms to a high quality/ high equity nation. Despite this, Australia still shows a stronger-than-OECD-average relationship between background and student achievement in PISA (*Stevens*). SES remains a highly important determinant of literacy outcomes in Australia, with almost one-quarter (23%) of students in the highest socio-economic quartile as top performers in reading literacy in PISA 2012 compared to 4% of students in the lowest quartile.

At the same time, we also take seriously the notion that teachers and their own professional education can make a difference in schools within

disadvantaged communities. Focusing on teacher standards as a way of diverting attention from inadequate school funding is a common policy move in those countries which have enthusiastically embraced the Global Education Reform Movement, but students from the communities represented in this book deserve each of: good public policy on education, good public policy on poverty (along with each of the other social justice issues dealt with here) and rich teaching practice (*Lampert and Burnett, Arthur and Orlando, Power, Zammit, Mayes and Sawyer, Brennan*) that includes appropriate induction of their teachers into the profession (*Lampert and Burnett, Gannon*). New ways of thinking about schooling for democracy are also in order (*Brennan*).

Australia has been particularly accepting of the increasing marketisation of education in the name of consumer choice, which, as has been known for a long time, acts to the benefit of the already advantaged (Ball 2002; Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 41). Successive Australian governments have directly and generously funded wealthy private schools with the consequence that Australia has moved towards increasing school segregation by SES (*Stevens*, see also Bonnor and Caro 2007, 116; Erebus International 2005, 13), at a time when "PISA suggests that educational inequality can best be tackled by making schools more similar to each other in terms of curriculum, resources, and students" (Perry 2008, 83). Australia runs a national standardised assessment regime at Years 3,5,7 and 9 which is made high-stakes by the publication of schools' results on the open access *My School* website, which in turn is readily and repeatedly turned into league tables by the Australian media and is strongly complicit in school choice and the increasing residualisation of public schooling in low-SES areas.

The University of Western Sydney where we work and where this symposium was held, has an unusual mandate to serve the interests of its local community, which includes large areas of social disadvantage. The schools with which we work within the Centre for Educational Research live daily with the consequences of the policy assemblage described above. The research itself which is reported in this volume has been conducted in volatile times in which schools and school systems have been grappling with a barrage of rapidly changing policy mandates. We are proud of the way the university consciously and systematically attends to its mandate and are continually impressed by the deftness, commitment and optimism of teachers and Principals in the schools of our region. We are particularly grateful for the crucial input of executive staff and teachers from the Department of Education and Communities in New South Wales, who opened our symposium with compelling accounts of the equity issues

that face them in the present, and shared some of their creative responses to these sometimes difficult conditions. We hope that the research presented in this book begins to address some of their provocations.

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CHAPTER ONE

EQUITY IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING: THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

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Introduction

In this chapter we examine how equity has been rearticulated in Australian schooling through the introduction of policies and technologies that enable performance comparisons between schools with statistically similar socioeconomic contexts. This is part of a broader policy move, in Australia and globally, to “bracket out”, or hold constant, questions of school and social context in order to focus policy attention on improving and measuring the performance outcomes of students and teachers. This rearticulation and bracketing out have occurred at the very moment when inequality within and between nations is growing (Atkinson and Leigh 2006; OECD 2011). We use the term “rearticulation” in the sense given to it in the work of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau—that is, we are interested in how the concept of equity becomes reconfigured through its connection with other elements of “economised” education policy discourses, such that the pursuit of equity is seen as complementary to the pursuit of “excellent” or “quality” educational outcomes and to economically efficient investment in human capital (see Savage 2011). We note how the concept of “equity”, with its usage etymology in business and economic discourses, has replaced concepts of “social justice” and the earlier “equality of educational opportunity” in education policy discourses.

Our argument is that while equity is a prominent concern in contemporary education policy globally, and has been a focus of recent schooling policy in Australia, the concept has been rearticulated, both discursively and through practices of measurement and comparison, as a

measure of student and teacher performance and as a policy problem to be addressed through improving teacher quality (see Lingard, Sellar, and Savage 2014). This rearticulation is contributing to a narrow policy focus on teacher classroom practices that, we argue, requires reinvigorated and complementary attention to school and social contexts through policy and funding. Later in this chapter, we will analyse the decontextualised teacher quality focus of contemporary education policy in Australia through a consideration of the Queensland Newman government's *Great Teachers=Great Results* policy, (which is almost an "ideal type" articulation of such a policy fetish) and the policies of the federal Abbott government.

There are many possible policy framings of equity in relation to education and these have changed over time and across contexts. This change is in part a discursive achievement, as the concept is rearticulated to designate different kinds of things and processes (for some recent discussions of such rearticulation see Gilbert et al. 2011; Lingard, Sellar, and Savage 2014; Thomson et al. 2013). In this chapter, we focus specifically on the definition of equity that now informs the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) education work and its influence within Australian education policy, including through its technical operationalisation in measures of schooling performance. Our argument here will be that the OECD rearticulation of equity is complemented by a similar discursive rearticulation of the concept in Australian schooling policy. The OECD's recent education work has focused on the relationship between two kinds of outcomes—equity and quality (or "excellence"). Quality here refers to measures of *performance*, generally determined through the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Equity is defined in terms of *fairness* and *inclusion*, where inclusion means "ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all" and fairness means "ensuring that personal and social circumstances—for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin—should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential" (Field, Kuczera, and Pont 2007, 11). Equity is articulated with performance and is conceived as both the achievement of a certain level of performance and a weakening of the relationship between performance and personal, social and economic circumstances (OECD 2013).

This concept of equity is one that fits with what Savage (2013, 187), drawing on Rose's (1999) account of neo-liberal governance, describes as a "neo-social" framing of education policy, in which we can see "a rejuvenated governmental interest in enabling healthy and positive social environments, but primarily for the sake of fostering greater economic

productivity”. For example, there has been a recent growth of interest in developing more sophisticated economic measures and this has generated attention to the measurement of social well-being (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009) and non-cognitive skills (Bowles, Gintis, and Osbourne 2001; Heckman, Stixrud, and Urzua 2006). These developments in educational measurement reflect a broader argument that reducing social inequality and increasing social well-being are economically efficient and better for social inclusion, which is also deemed to be more economically efficient than destabilising inequality, as in say contemporary Greece and Spain. Put simply, investment in policies and programs that increase the benefits of education for all is considered to “pay off” (OECD 2012). This concern for equity is subsumed within broader concerns for economic growth and the development of measurement capacities that can generate evidence to support policies for economic growth. As a result, we have seen a strengthening of the human capital framing of education and the emergence of a concept of equity focused on reducing barriers to efficient investment in human capital, but in which concerns for personal and social well-being and quality of life are nevertheless prominent.

The OECD’s definition of “equity” as “fairness” and “inclusion” can thus be seen as a response not only to social and economic problems, but also to problems of measurement. Measures of equity, when defined in terms of fairness and inclusion, enable assessment of the effectiveness of investment in human capital and form part of the broader project to develop more complex and complete measures of economic growth and productivity. This measurement work requires the creation of a vast infrastructure through which capital now continually gathers data to monitor its development and modulate its practices—what has been described as capitalism becoming a project of itself (Thrift 2005). Equity is now constituted as an important economic indicator and its measurement is part of larger ongoing assessments of the flows and stock of human capital within nations.

To understand the dominant conception of equity in contemporary education, and the effects of this conception in and through education policy, one must take into account the data infrastructure through which information about equity in schooling is produced (see Anagnostopolous, Rutledge, and Jacobsen 2013). In Australia, this infrastructure has developed rapidly since the introduction in 2008 of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which involves all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sitting literacy and numeracy tests in May each year. These data are published on the *My School* website, which then enables comparisons of school performance of various kinds—against

benchmarks, national averages and against what are called “like schools”. The latter kinds of comparisons are made possible by generating a set of sixty statistically similar schools, against which any given school can be compared. These comparable schools are determined based on sharing a similar ranking on an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). What is interesting here is the naming of the Index, so schools serving the poorest communities are seen as the least advantaged schools, rather than the most disadvantaged. This data infrastructure helps to frame how equity is understood in Australian schooling and how inequity is constructed as a policy problem. In short, by holding socioeconomic context relatively constant when comparing schools on ICSEA (a “like” school measure), differences in performance are attributed to differences in school and teacher practices only (see Power and Frandji 2010).

We argue that this narrowing of the definition of equity and debates about how to increase equity in schooling must be countered by reinvigorating attention to the impact of school and social contexts on educational opportunities and outcomes. In the following section of the chapter, we briefly elaborate our theoretical framework, before surveying the development of data infrastructures and the production of new policy spaces in Australian schooling.¹ We then examine how these infrastructures and the rearticulation of equity have helped to narrow the policy focus on to teacher practices as the primary site for reducing inequities in education. We note that we are not denying that teacher quality and quality teaching are important equity issues (Hattie 2009; Hayes et al. 2006; Dinham 2013), but that such a policy focus must be complemented by an appropriate assemblage of policies and redistributive educational funding. Dinham (2013, 94), for example, asserts that: “The biggest equity issue in Australian education is a quality teacher in every classroom”. Our position is that quality teaching is an equity issue, but that growing social inequality also needs to be confronted both within and without schooling (cf Anyon 2005). Skourdombis (2012) has provided a telling critique of

¹ We have pluralised “infrastructure” so as to signify the fact that there are various data infrastructures now within education. For example, there are the data infrastructures associated with all of the international comparison work of the OECD and the IEA. There are national infrastructures in Australian schooling linked to national testing and managed by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), but each state and territory schooling system in Australia also has its own data infrastructure. Our pluralising here picks up on the fact that at times there is a lack of interoperability between these infrastructures. This allows politicians and policy makers to “cherry pick” those data aligned with their ideologically driven policy desires, rather than what might be the case if we actually had evidence-based policy making (Head 2008).

this “classroom teacher effectiveness” turn in Australian schooling policy. The final sections of the chapter then examine research that shows the importance of attending to school and socioeconomic context in order to understand the production of inequity in schooling, as well as to develop interventions that stand the best possible chance of redressing inequities.

Theoretical framework: Data infrastructure and new spatialities of education policy

The rearticulation of equity as a measure of effective human capital investment requires a number of developments. These include the establishment of infrastructures for producing performance data and the constitution of spaces in which schools and systems can be compared in terms of the strength of relationships between socioeconomic factors and performance. This latter requirement is about creating commensurate spaces across borders of various kinds (national for global measures, state for national measures). To understand these developments, we draw on a cognate set of conceptual resources, including studies of data infrastructures and their development in education (Anagnostopolous, Rutledge, and Jacobsen 2013; Star 1999; Star and Ruhleder 1996), theorisations of new spatialities associated with globalisation (Allen 2011; Amin 2002) and the development of data-driven modes of governance (Ozga 2009; Ruppert 2012).

Star (1999) has argued for a relational concept of infrastructure that emphasises its constitution through the organised practices it enables. In this view, infrastructure is not an abstract thing, but a relational property that shapes how we act upon the world: “we see and name things differently under different infrastructural regimes” (Star 1999, 380). For example, testing regimes and administrative databases become infrastructure as they are used by policymakers and administrators to act upon systems and schools. Star and Ruhleder (1996, 114) argue that “an infrastructure occurs when local practices are afforded by a larger-scale technology, which can then be used in a natural, ready-to-hand fashion”. Here we are interested in understanding the use of data collected through large-scale assessments in education, particularly comparisons of school performance on literacy and numeracy tests, to focus attention on teacher practices in classrooms. As data are collected and used in this way they constitute a functional infrastructure in education from a heterogeneous assemblage of testing programs, data management systems, education policies, management practices and so on.

A significant moment in the development of this data infrastructure occurred with the founding of the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg in 1952 (UIE). The UIE hosted meetings from which emerged the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which began collecting data from international comparative assessments of educational performance in 1960 and which now regularly conducts the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). We have recently seen a dramatic growth in the reach of international large-scale assessments (Kirsch et al. 2013), with the emergence of the OECD's PISA in the 1990s marking another critical juncture, particularly in relation to the measurement of equity in education (see OECD 2013). There has also been an associated development of national testing and data systems within nations (e.g. Mintrop and Sunderman 2013), driven by the move to New Public Management and the rise of an audit and accountability culture (Power 1997; Strathern 2000). The development of testing programs and educational databases has also been accompanied by projects aimed at enabling the articulation and alignment of data infrastructure across different national and international scales (Grek et al. 2009). We can see the OECD's definition of equity and its influence within national policy discourses, including through operationalisation in measurement practices, as an example of such standardisation and the making of commensurate spaces across borders.

Two aspects of this development of data infrastructures are important for our theorisation of the rearticulation of equity in education and its effects in terms of narrowing the policy focus onto teacher practices in classrooms, which contemporary policy tends to call "teacher quality" and "teaching quality", although the distinction between the two is sometimes elided. First, educational testing enables the quantification of aspects of education and the storage, transmission, analysis and representation of data using algorithmic logics and computational technologies. This makes available data as "evidence" for policymakers and managers (Head 2008), drawing attention to what can be measured while eliding that which is not. Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier (2013) have dubbed this process "datafication" and point to its dramatic extension to many aspects of everyday life. Anagnostopolous, Rutledge, and Jacobsen (2013) have shown how data infrastructures in education give rise to "informatic power" by tying the logistical power produced by measurement and computing (see Mukerji 2010) with accountability systems driven by incentives and rewards. Data infrastructure thus emerges in relation to the

practices of performativity that are enabled and encouraged by datafication, comparison and incentivisation (Ball 2003).

Data infrastructures also enable the creation of relational spaces of comparison. In the first instance these spaces are cognitive, insofar as they are constituted as the possibility of seeing disparate things as commensurate and of making assessments of these things in relation to one another (Espeland 2002). The production of these cognitive spaces then gives rise to new spaces of power and governance that operate through comparison (Harvey 2012; Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003; Ozga 2009; Ruppert 2012). These spaces are topological, insofar as their defining feature is the relation between points, rather than the location of points in a predetermined space, which can be seen as a contrasting topographical conception of space. As Allen (2011, 284) has argued, in topological spaces “power relationships are not so much positioned in space or extended across it, as compose the spaces of which they are a part”. What matters here is where the objects of comparison are located in relation to each other within tables, scales, metrics or indexes that are endogenously produced through the act of comparison, not where they are located in relation to one another within an exogenous Euclidean space.

This theoretical framing, with its focus on infrastructures and new topological spaces of comparison and governance, enables equity in education to be understood at the nexus of a number of interrelated processes that are producing new problematisations within education policy (Webb 2013). Our focus here is on how equity becomes constructed as a problem of teacher quality and quality teaching when it is constituted as a comparative measure of performance in which school and social contexts are largely held constant. This enables the operation of informatic power in schooling through the introduction of accountability systems that hold schools and teachers responsible for reducing inequity, while eliding the responsibility of other agencies in relation to the production and perpetuation of inequities. This informatic power decontextualises the aetiology of, and solutions to, the intransigent problem of the inequality/performance nexus in schooling.

The technical framing of a national space of schooling: NAPLAN, ICSEA and *My School*

Current Australian schooling policy follows closely the definition of equity popularised in the education work of the OECD. For example, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians states that all Australian governments and all school sectors must “...provide all

students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location” (MCEETYA 2008, 7). This is equity as “fairness”. At the same time, National Minimum Standards have been specified for student performance on NAPLAN tests, signalling a concomitant intent to ensure equity as “inclusion” in Australian schooling. These definitions of equity are operationalised through a range of policies and practices, including NAPLAN, the *My School* website and ICSEA.

Introduced in 2008, NAPLAN involves Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students sitting for a battery of tests in May each year. Students are tested on their numeracy, reading, writing and facility with language conventions. NAPLAN data are used for a variety of purposes, including for the publication of school performance data on the *My School* website. *My School* is a publicly accessible and searchable database of almost all schools in Australia and it provides demographic, administrative and performance data on each school. One of the main purposes of the site is to facilitate comparisons between schools, ostensibly to enable informed school choice and to encourage policy learning from schools that are performing comparatively well.

As we have already noted, the development of the *My School* website included the creation of ICSEA, which provides the basis for selecting subsets of sixty schools that serve communities with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. ICSEA is a “socio-educational” index because it is composed of socioeconomic variables that are most strongly associated with performance on NAPLAN tests. The intention for using ICSEA as the basis for comparisons of school performance is to ensure the fairness of these comparisons:

ICSEA was developed to enable fair comparisons of NAPLAN results between schools on the *My School* website. By comparing performance in schools working with students with similar socio-educational advantage, it is possible to identify the difference schools are making to the students attending a particular school. The index also enables schools seeking to improve their students’ performance to learn from other schools with similar students. (ACARA n.d. 1)

By holding socioeconomic context constant, comparisons ostensibly focus on within-school differences, particularly the effects of teacher practice, effectively responsabilising schools and teachers (Simons 2014). As the ACARA quote above notes, this makes it “possible to identify the difference schools are making to the students attending a particular

school”. This is part of a broader trend toward actively “bracketing out” questions of school and social context in order to more effectively measure and change teacher practice (e.g. Hattie 2009).

The combination of NAPLAN, *My School* and ICSEA has contributed to the gradual establishment of a national schooling space in Australia. Within Australia’s federal political structure, states and territories have constitutional responsibility for schools; however, since the 1970s, the federal government has used its stronger fiscal position to exert influence in schooling through targeted federally-funded programs. Most recently, the Smarter Schools National Partnerships programs have provided the means through which the federal government has sought to drive education reforms through funding packages tied to the achievement of NAPLAN performance targets (see Lingard and Sellar 2013). The development and implementation of an Australian national curriculum, which is currently in process, is another policy lever through which the federal government is exerting influence in schooling.

The *My School* website contributes to this emergence of a national space of schooling. The sixty statistically similar schools that are identified as a comparative set for any given school may be located within any state or territory jurisdiction in Australia. The space of comparison established by *My School* is thus national in its reach and topological in character, insofar as geographically disparate schools are placed into relation and made directly comparable through the graphs and tables in which the website enables NAPLAN and ICSEA data to be visualised. Sets of statistically similar schools are constituted as topological imaginary spaces that cut across the geographical and political spaces of Australian federalism with real effects on policy and practice. These schools are said to be located in the same contexts.

There are two important and related features of the constitution of these spaces that must be noted: first, these spaces are produced through practices of measurement and comparison that bring to presence new representations of, and relations between, schools; second, and perhaps more importantly, these spaces are also constituted in relation to what is absent (Amin 2002). While these topological spaces of comparison make some things newly visible, and thus bring them to the attention of public debate and policy intervention, they also make other things invisible. As Thrift (2000, 222) has argued, topological space-times are actively produced and actualise new possibilities, but at the same time they are “always accompanied by their phantoms”. NAPLAN, ICSEA and *My School* effect a technical framing of equity that is constituted in relation to that which lies outside of this framing.

Conceptions of equity focused on breaking the link between performance and personal and social circumstances, and the operationalisation of this concept in the production of comparative spaces using NAPLAN, ICSEA and *My School*, are thus haunted by the important contextual factors that are not measured and represented. While attempting to hold constant socioeconomic context when comparing schools makes for fairer comparisons of performance on the one hand, it also, and somewhat perversely, makes absent socioeconomic factors that are recognised as important determinants of educational outcomes in the very construction of ICSEA. Variance in the performance of comparable schools is no longer attributed to socioeconomic context, as measured by ICSEA, or to other contextual factors not measured by ICSEA, and is instead attributed to differences in school structures and policies or teacher practices².

The topological spaces of comparison produced in Australian schooling through the development of new data infrastructures thus make absent questions of context at the very same time that context is made present in these policy technologies. And we note that this is occurring at a time of growing inequality (Atkinson and Leigh 2006; OECD 2011) and in an Australian context where we are seeing vigorous attempts to rhetorically decouple funding inputs and schooling outcomes. This is then coupled with a discursive framing of equity that focuses on improving schooling outcomes to increase the efficiency of investment in human capital. The result is that inequities in schooling are constructed as a problem of teacher quality—if two equally disadvantaged schools perform differently, then this must be due to one school having better teachers or better teaching than the other. Equity is thus rearticulated as a matter of improving teacher (and perhaps teaching) quality, rather than reducing growing social inequalities that are associated with the production of gaps in educational outcomes between more and less advantaged groups.

The link between SES and performance: An absent presence in current schooling debates

We have established the ways that governing through numbers functions through data infrastructures that enable international and national comparisons of performance (Lingard 2011). We have also

² We have argued elsewhere (Lingard et al. 2014) that the OECD's data work in and around PISA has similar effects—in this case giving priority to policy rather than contextual effects (Meyer and Schiller 2013).

demonstrated the resulting rearticulation of equity in education policy, which decontextualises the work of teachers and schools and holds them (solely) responsible for schooling outcomes and the performance of their students. The effects of what we have documented to this point “responsibilise” schools and teachers for student performance (Simons 2014). In this section, we document the large body of evidence demonstrating that context matters and that social inequality matters in terms of school performance. Yet, in contemporary Australian schooling policy this reality is elided in the focus on teacher quality. We also note here the important distinction, often neglected in policy, between teacher quality and quality teaching. While the former is related to the latter in terms of the necessary teacher thresholds of pedagogical content knowledge, the former does not straightforwardly determine the latter.

John Hattie’s *Visible Learning* (2009) provides a meta-analysis of more than 800 studies of which in-school and teacher practices have the greatest impact on student learning and has been an important academic, research-based backdrop to the current decontextualised policy focus on teachers and their classroom practices. Yet, we note that Hattie cautions in the preface to the book that he is bracketing out contextual factors in his review. Thus, specifically he states that *Visible Learning* “is not a book about what cannot be influenced in schools—thus critical discussions about class, poverty, resources in families, and nutrition are not included—but this is NOT because they are unimportant, indeed they may be more important than many of the influences discussed in this book” (Hattie 2009, viii-ix). We argue that the research evidence suggests that they are more important, as we will document below, and yet are often framed out in contemporary policy.

Drawing on Lauder, Brown and Halsey (2011), we can see the sociology of education as being a “redemptive project” that has sought to understand the role education plays “in the life chances of different groups in society” and how we can “best explain why some groups systematically win and others lose” (13). Within the sociology of education, there have been two competing ways of viewing this problem: one sees schools as reproducing inequality from generation to generation, while the other sees schooling as functioning in more meritocratic ways to open up opportunities for all, ushering in a society based on achieved, rather than ascribed, status.

Our argument is that contemporary policy in education, along with the impact of policy as numbers, neglects and denies this body of substantial sociological evidence. Additionally, while the level of inequality in the broader society declined across the post-war period of Keynesian social

policies, inequalities have grown since the late 1970s in the context of post-Keynesian, neo-liberal policy settings. The paradox we are pointing to here is that at this current time, such inequalities and their impact are elided from policy settings and considerations in education, yet during the late Keynesian period in Australia they were a strong policy focus (e.g. Whitlam's Disadvantaged Schools Program).

As Condrón (2011) has noted, "Schools are embedded within the economic systems of their societies, and where economic systems have high inequality, overcoming the impact of this inequality on students' learning will be more difficult" (54). Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) also argue that if a nation wants higher levels of achievement amongst *all* students "it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement" (30). Both Condrón and Wilkinson and Pickett demonstrate that more equal societies and systems have more equal schooling outcomes across social groups. Specifically, Condrón (2011, 53) demonstrates that:

Less egalitarian societies have lower average achievement, lower percentages of very highly skilled students, and higher percentages of very low-skilled students. In direct contrast, egalitarian societies have higher average achievement, higher percentages of very highly skilled students and lower percentages of very low-skilled students.

This reality is effectively denied in contemporary policy settings for schools and we will illustrate this denial through three brief analyses of (1) Queensland's *Great teachers=Great results* policy, (2) the policy approach of the current Australian federal Minister for education and (3) equity-focused analyses of PISA 2012 data.

Great teachers=Great results? The focus on teacher quality in Queensland schooling policy

The foreword to Queensland's *Great teachers=Great results* policy is written by the Premier and observes: "We know from international research that student outcomes are closely linked to the quality of the instruction they receive in classrooms" (DETE 2013, 1). The foreword continues: "Research is clear that higher funding in itself does not guarantee student success. The relationship between increased school funding and student performance is not consistent" (1). Additionally, "(w)e know from international research that student outcomes are closely linked to the quality of the instruction they receive in the classroom. As such, our teachers are the most important resource we have to give young

Queenslanders the best possible start in life”. We can see across these statements the establishing of the policy problem as “quality instruction” and not one of funding. What is exceptional about this policy document overall is its total exclusion of any consideration whatsoever of contextual factors such as students’ socio-economic backgrounds and Indigeneity, despite the plethora of evidence demonstrating their significance in schooling. The policy is about granting schools more autonomy, placing school leaders on performance based contracts and introducing performance bonuses for teachers—all of these policy solutions are derived from the way the policy problem is defined and from the decontextualisation of schools and students.

Improving standards: The focus on teacher quality in federal schooling policy

The federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne has asserted a similar stance with a policy focus on teacher quality. Thus, for example, he was quoted in *The Weekend Australian* newspaper (September 28-29, 2013): “Standards—not money—is the main issue facing schools, the new federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne has declared in a bid to steer the national debate away from school funding to a focus on teaching and student results” (5). He added: “The issue in education is not a lack of money, the issue in education is a lack of a fighting spirit about a rigorous curriculum, engaging parents in their children’s education. The argument around teaching shouldn’t be about industrial relations, it should be around: ‘Are our teachers as high a standard as they possibly could be, and if they aren’t, how do we get them to that point?’” (5). Again, we see here a focus on the quality of teachers and denial of the significance of funding. On that same weekend, the Minister was also quoted in the *Australian Financial Review Weekend* (28–29 September, 2013) in a story headed, “Pyne wants to give power to teachers” (7): “We believe in educational approaches around phonics (for learning reading) and direct instruction. We are not necessarily advocates for child-centred learning, whole language learning and critical literacy” (7). The Minister continued: “And we believe that the most important thing we can do is improve the quality of our teaching, because a good-quality teacher can produce terrific outcomes at a school with not necessarily great infrastructure, but the opposite is not true” (7). In continuing the narrative that teacher quality, not funding, mattered, Mr Pyne said he was deeply concerned that international tests showed a decline in results for Australian students despite the fact funding had increased by 40 percent: “Struggling students

appeared to be receiving the support they needed but too little attention had been paid to those in the middle and top of their classes”, he said. “The measure of our success is whether the return to orthodox education approaches starts to improve our standards” (7).

In both the Queensland policy and the federal Minister’s stance, we can see the prioritising of teacher quality and quality teaching, the denial of the significance of funding, and a deafening silence around matters to do with student equity linked to students’ backgrounds and schools’ clienteles. Interestingly, the federal Minister, while arguing to empower teachers, is also quite prescriptive about desirable pedagogies. On 19 February, 2014, he appointed a Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group. In the documents surrounding this Advisory Group, we again see the focus on teacher quality and quality teachers and neglect of context. The call for submissions webpage begins: “The Australian Government believes teacher quality is critical to the future prosperity of young Australians and the productivity of the nation. We intend to lift the quality and status of the teaching profession and believe that action needs to start when teachers are gaining their qualifications”. The Issues paper for the Group also notes the centrality of teachers, though to be fair it does describe the quality of teaching as the most significant “in-school factor” contributing to student learning outcomes. However, there is a silence about the implied out-of-school factors.

Excellence through equity: Australia’s PISA 2012 results

Australia’s PISA results on the 2012 tests received substantial media coverage, which focused particularly on the apparent decline in performance. Issues of equity received less coverage. A media release from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in relation to Australia’s 2012 PISA results noted that, “In terms of wealth, a difference equivalent to around two and half years of schooling separates the mathematical, reading and scientific literacy scores of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile and students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile” (ACER media release, 3 December, 2013). These inequitable socioeconomic differences were also apparent across the three literacy measures. Thus, in mathematical literacy students in the highest socioeconomic quartile had a mean score of 550 compared with a lowest quartile mean score of 463 (a difference equivalent to two and a half years of schooling) (Thomson et al. 2013, 21).³ In scientific literacy, students in

³ In PISA, 500 is the mean score across the entire sample for each assessment area.

the highest socioeconomic quartile had a mean score of 567 compared with the mean score of the lowest quartile of 479 (equivalent to two and a half years of schooling) (Thomson et al. 2013, 21). Finally, in reading literacy, students in the highest socioeconomic quartile had a mean score of 557 compared with the mean score of the lowest quartile of 471 (equivalent to two and a half years of schooling) (Thomson et al. 2013, 21). Also indicative of the significance of socioeconomic status is the observation in relation to PISA 2012 that: “When school-level socioeconomic background is also taken into account, the differences in performance across school sectors are not significant” (Thomson et al. 2013, 19). In Tasmania and the Northern Territory, the relationship between performance and socioeconomic background is stronger than the Australian average (Thomson et al. 2013, 26), indicating again the effects of socioeconomic disparities on school performance, given the poverty in many remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and the depressed economy and high levels of unemployment in Tasmania.

As well as describing systems on dimensions of quality and equity in respect of PISA performance, the OECD also releases subsequent data analysis of PISA results. For PISA 2012, this is reported in *PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity (Vol 11)* (OECD 2013). Again, this analysis demonstrates unequivocally the significance of socioeconomic background and poverty on student performance on PISA 2012, a situation ignored in the policy regimes of the Australian and Queensland governments. An additional measure of equity developed by the OECD is in respect of what they call “resilient students”. This category is defined as students in the bottom socioeconomic quartile who perform in the top two categories (top quarter) of performance on PISA. For all OECD countries in 2012, there was a decline in the percentage of resilient students in mathematical literacy: 6.4% in 2003 to 6.1% in 2012, probably reflecting the growth in inequality in OECD countries. For Australia, there was an even sharper decline in numbers of resilient students on PISA 2012, from (approximately) 8% in 2003 to 6% in 2012, also probably indicative of growing inequality in Australia.

In a reflective piece on PISA and poverty on Diane Ravitch’s blog, David Berliner, the distinguished American educational researcher, has recently argued that US research on the socioeconomic background/school performance nexus since the famous Coleman Report of 1966 has demonstrated that socioeconomic context has been found to account for about 60% of the variance in student performance. He suggests that research also shows that about 20% of the variance is due to schools, with about half of that due to teacher practices. Berliner’s observations suggest

that, in the US at least, context has about six times the impact of teachers. We suggest that the Australian situation is comparable and the OECD equity report on PISA 2012 supports our hypothesis here. PISA 2012 results show that for Australia the performance differences between schools, and within schools, explained by students' and schools' socioeconomic status is approximately 57% (for the USA the figure is 59%).

The last point we want to make from the OECD's subsequent analysis of PISA 2012 is in respect of social inequality and school funding. This is important, given the denial of the impact of inequality and of funding in both the current federal and Queensland governments' schooling policies. The OECD analysis suggests that inequality more generally has to be addressed to achieve more equal outcomes from schooling, noting, "Many factors related to socio-economic disadvantage are not directly affected by education policy, at least not in the short term" (44). The analysis also acknowledges the limitations of policies focused solely on schools for achieving more equal outcomes from schooling: "Better schools for disadvantaged students can help reduce socio-economic disparities in performance; but countries also need to consider other policies that affect families, such as those to reduce poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate housing, those to improve parents' education, and other social policies that can also improve student learning" (44). Finally, this analysis also shows that funding up to a threshold level makes a difference to student outcomes, but that beyond that threshold it is redistributive funding focused on schools serving the most disadvantaged communities that makes a difference. This is the very approach that both the federal and Queensland governments have rejected.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have demonstrated how new technologies of governance working through OECD and Australian data infrastructures, linked respectively to international and national testing, have rearticulated the meaning of social justice as equity in Australian schooling and done so in a most reductive manner. This reduction has been accompanied by complementary policy developments that also deny the significance of context to schooling opportunities, at the very moment that inequality in Australia is growing, with very real impacts in schooling. On this point, ACER Director Geoff Masters (ACER 2013) has commented, "During the period for which data are available, students' socio-economic backgrounds became a stronger correlate of average achievement". However, context

has been made an absent presence by new policy technologies and in new spatialities of education governance in Australia. We have shown how policy is thus decontextualising the work of schools and responsabilising schools and teachers, a reality well-documented in the research of Skourdoumbis (2012). To address inequality effectively in schooling, public policy must address that inequality directly and address it in schooling through redistributive funding and a plethora of associated policies. Quality teaching is only one element, albeit an important one, of the necessary policy assemblage for addressing inequalities through schooling in socially just ways.

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