

Public Education and the Remutualisation of Australian Society

By Associate Professor Alan Reid,
University of South Australia.

Introduction

Resourcing education from public funds is a political act. It involves making choices between opposing demands, based on competing sets of values, assumptions and beliefs. Any consideration of school resourcing is value-laden — whether it is a concern with the total amount of money allocated by State and Commonwealth governments for education (as against, say, health, defence, or social welfare), or with the division of available funds between or within schooling systems. And invariably these values and beliefs relate to questions about the purposes of education.

The excellent collection of papers edited by Emeritus Professor Peter Karmel (2000) represents this point in action. The contributions reflect a broad spectrum of views about school resourcing, each of which is premised, either explicitly or implicitly, on a particular set of beliefs about the purposes of education. In combination, the papers stand as a reminder that we need such reference points if we are to engage in informed debate about educational funding. It is to be hoped that the inaugural Year Book of the Australian College of Education will help to generate a national conversation about the purposes of education in the 21st century, and about the relative weight that we should give to each of these purposes in a postmodern world.

In this paper I want to contribute to that debate by linking an examination of current Commonwealth Government policy as it relates to school resourcing, with a critical analysis of what this policy assumes to be a major purpose of education. I will argue that contemporary policy is marginalising the social purposes of education — especially that purpose which connects the contribution of schools to the making and sustaining of Australian democracy — and that this is posing a significant threat to our democratic system, given the dramatic growth in inequality in Australian society. In particular, I maintain that we need urgently to consider the current balance of funding between public and private schools.

Education as a social good

The key to understanding Commonwealth education policy lies in the discourse through which that policy and the debates around it are framed and expressed. We are in the middle of a significant shift in the discourse (and therefore the values and assumptions) that sustained the Australian approach to education policy, and specifically education funding, in the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century public education has been constructed as being a social or public good, which is to say that there was broad agreement that public funds should be expended on establishing and maintaining schools because society got something back in return. Of course there was frequently disagreement about what that ‘something’ represented, and often it served particular sets of social interests. But the debates and struggles around these issues were always conducted within the understanding that education served social purposes.

After World War II, for example, increased expenditure on education was justified on the basis of the imperative to skill and educate workers in the new manufacturing industries and burgeoning public sector, and to satisfy the needs of new immigrants for English language instruction and incorporation into Australian ‘culture’. Public schools were seen as vital elements in the process of nation and community building. Even the Whitlam decision in the early 1970s to continue to fund

private and Catholic schools on a systematic basis was taken, and justified, from the perspective of education as a social good. Poorly equipped Catholic schools were seen as an affront to the Australian notion of a 'fair go', and thus it was argued that schools should be funded on a needs basis. For the next twenty years the sporadic public/private debate was conducted within a broad settlement that education was a public good. All of that changed in the mid-1990s.

Constructing education as a commodity for individual consumption

With the election of the Howard government in 1996 there has been a fundamental shift in the way public education is conceived of and talked about. This shift in educational discourse is the key to understanding the contemporary politics of public education and the associated resource issues. In broad terms, the notion of the collective public good in relation to education has been abandoned. Permeating every policy and associated political statement on education (and every other social welfare area such as health and the justice system) is a focus on the individual, now constructed not as a citizen but as a consumer. In this new scenario, education has become a commodity that confers benefits (mostly economic benefits) upon individuals.

Having moved from a largely social to a largely individual rationale for public education, the logic of operating in an education market where individual consumers can make individual choices is compelling. And associated with this, of course, comes all of the machinery of the market, including the necessity to develop brand images and to sell these through public relations exercises.

At the centre of this new discourse lies the concept of choice. Choice has become the key to the new educational nirvana. It is founded on the right of parents to choose the educational environment which best suits the needs of their child, whether the school of their choice is in the government or non-government sector', ... [and it] leads to diversity, which, in turn, allows freedom of expression, accommodates diverse beliefs and values, stimulates innovation and promotes greater accountability for schooling outcomes to parents and to the wider Australian community (DEETYA 1997, p. 2, quoted in Ethell & Dempster 2000, p. 39).

What is important here is that the rationale for choice is couched in the democratic rhetoric of rights, freedoms and diversity. On the surface it is difficult to contest: after all, who can oppose people having choices in a democracy? But once accepted, significant consequences follow. Once choice becomes the dominant motif, it becomes possible, indeed logically necessary, to blur the distinction between public and private schooling. The maintenance of such a distinction can be constructed as an impediment to freedom of choice and so as fundamentally undemocratic. How has this sleight of hand been achieved in policy terms?

The story of how the Howard government has set about blurring the distinction between public and private in order to privilege the funding of the private system is by now well known (Reid 1998; Ethell & Dempster 2000).

First, the abolition of the New Schools Policy opened up the education 'market' by removing the existing systematic requirements for planning, which had been based on an optimum use of existing facilities. Then, having created the possibility for an expansion in the number of private schools, the Government fashioned the mechanism of the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment scheme (EBA) to enable funds to flow from public to private schools to support the increased student numbers. Thus, since 1996 the Commonwealth Government has sought to use its funding powers to systematically establish a single education market where parents and students, now defined as consumers, ostensibly are 'free to choose' the school that best suits their individual needs. All of this is justified

through a legitimating discourse of individual rights, most obviously underpinned by the concept of freedom of choice.

Such an approach establishes and legitimates a policy climate in which an increase in funding to private schools appears natural and unproblematic. The effects on Commonwealth funding for education have been stark. Certainly there has been an increase in Commonwealth spending on schools as a proportion of GDP from 0.65 per cent in 1995–96 to 0.75 per cent in 2000–01. But the growth has been almost entirely in the funding of private schools. Thus, in 1996 government schools received 42 per cent of Commonwealth Government funds, in 2000 they receive 34 per cent and in 2003 they will receive 32 per cent (Davidson 2000). Each year, as a consequence of the EBA, the public system loses funds even as its numbers increase.

Does this matter? That is, if all schools are in the same education market, does it make sense to differentiate on the basis of public or private? I intend to argue that it matters very much, indeed that it goes right to the heart of the functioning of our democratic system. But to develop this argument I need to return to the fundamental questions about the purposes of education.

Public education and its democratic purpose

It has long been argued that public education has an important democratic purpose. In part this claim refers to the development of the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for young people to become active citizens, usually through curriculum approaches such as citizenship education. In this form there is no obvious reason why the same democratic capabilities cannot be developed in private as well as public schools. But the claim also refers to the nature of public schools. In this context, the argument is that public schools (free, compulsory and secular) are themselves microcosms of the broader community, representing a far wider range of people, backgrounds, cultures and experiences than exists in private schools. In these diverse communities, it is argued, public students are better placed to develop those capacities, such as tolerance and an appreciation of difference, which are so important to democratic life. That is, public schools are central to the making of democratic publics.

Ken McKinnon and Suzanne Walker (2000) represent the view that such a position no longer holds because of the changing nature of non-government schools. In their interesting contribution to the Karmel collection they maintain that since most (not all) private schools have broad enrolment and low fee objectives, then it is not accurate to describe these schools as catering for a significantly different type of student than do public schools. For this reason, and the fact that all schools follow state-mandated curricula, McKinnon and Walker maintain that:

while strong claims can be made for common public schooling, a claim that only those schools within the public system can be the legitimate guardians of common universalising and democratising ideals goes too far ... The overwhelming majority of those [non-government] schools do teach common values. (p. 81)

If McKinnon and Walker are right, then there is no reason, at least connected to this purpose of education, that we should disturb current funding arrangements in relation to the balance of funding between public and private schools. Nor is there reason to challenge choice as being at the heart of funding policy: indeed, according to McKinnon and Walker, the ‘processes for eligibility for funding should begin there’ (p. 83). However, in my view this position is based on a flawed assumption. While the authors recognise that education systems are changing, they assume an unchanging democratic system. That is, their analysis appears to take for granted the structures, processes and values that make up Australian democracy. And yet the analysis (and thus the implications for

funding public education) alters when these are recognised as being dynamic rather than fixed. It is to that task that I now turn.

Australian democracy in a globalising economy, polity and culture

Usually when arguments are made for the democratic purpose of public education, the reference point for democracy is the sovereignty of the nation state. It is clear that the argument can no longer be couched in these terms. Although there are disputes about the relative power of the nation state in a globalising world, there has been a fundamental shift in the fulcrum of power. As Marginson (2000) puts it:

Globalisation does not create a single political world — it does not abolish the nation state — but it changes the conditions in which nation states operate. (p. 25)

These changed conditions — economic, cultural and technological as well as political — are altering our social and political practices in quite fundamental ways. It is important that they are analysed and understood in order that we can respond to them in ways that are consistent with our most important values. What impact are they having on our political life?

The economic policy response to globalisation has been to embrace the ideology of the free market. In Australia we have called this approach economic rationalism and it has involved deregulation, privatisation and a wholesale commitment to the efficacy of the market. It has had a dramatic effect on Australian society. Inequalities in wealth and opportunity are growing at a rate that threatens our social compact. In the past twenty years, the average incomes of the most affluent 10 per cent of Australians increased by between three to six times those at the middle and bottom of income distribution (Kelly 2000, p. 19). And many Australians don't even figure in these calculations. Our official unemployment rate hovers around 10 per cent with a youth unemployment rate in some areas of 25 per cent. Some are warning that Australia is becoming a society of 'gated' communities where the wealthy exclude themselves from the rest by building walls around the fortresses where they live and employing private security patrols (Kerr 2000). People are becoming more and more disillusioned with our politicians and the political process. This makes fertile soil for the sort of politics of hate and division represented by groups like One Nation. Little wonder that Paul Kelly has titled his recent book on the state of the nation: *Paradise Divided*.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that, although there had to be an economic response to globalisation, economic rationalism is creating unsustainable costs to our social and political life. And it is not only producing material inequalities. Neo-liberal policies are reducing the amount of social capital in Australian society, that is, those non-contractual relationships and links between people that are based on social rather than commercial needs (Putnam 1993; Cox 1995). Our sense of community is being eroded as goods and services are privatised, as those institutions we own in common are systematically removed or downgraded, and as we are cast in the mould of consumers rather than citizens. The individual is supreme. This is compounded by the effects of globalising cultures that also threaten our social capital in unusual and contradictory ways. I will provide three random examples to illustrate this point:

1. One of the paradoxical effects of globalisation has been to cause some people and groups to look inwards and retreat to the immediate and local as a way of coping with the new environment. Often, rather than creating a rich sense of community, this can become an introverted localism which at best ignores the interests of the wider society, and at worst excludes and denigrates those who are different from the local norm. Around the world we are witnessing the regrowth of a sort of tribalism as ethnic groups within nation states assert their

identity, often at the expense of broader notions of a cohesive but diverse community made up of many groups within a nation state. Given the delicate balance of multiculturalism in Australia, these are worrying trends and they have real implications for the functioning of our democratic system.

2. Technology in a postmodern world is changing the ways in which we relate to one another. As increasing numbers of people access the Internet on a daily basis, as we are subjected to a barrage of information from different forms of media, as we surf the net and cross dozens of pay TV channels, so we are all caught up in a process of redefining what community means. This is not necessarily a negative phenomenon: for many people it has opened up new vistas and interests. But it is also having an impact on what it means to belong to a local, regional and national community. To what extent does it reduce rather than expand our common interests, our shared concerns, our common goals and aspirations? Is it possible that we will have more in common with some groups in cyberspace than with the citizens of our geographical communities; and, if so, what does this mean for our understanding of the public and for the practice of Australian democracy?
3. In the past twenty years we have seen the rapid growth of single issue politics. Of course this may have a number of positive effects, not the least being an increase in the numbers of people actively involved in democratic life. But it might also promote a fractured and divisive view of social and cultural life, with a tendency to focus on the particular rather than the interconnectedness of the whole. What are the implications for our political system?

These three examples are sufficient to illustrate the point that globalisation is changing the culture and practice of Australian democracy. It is not all gloom and doom. Undoubtedly the new environment promises many possibilities and opportunities. But just as certainly it can divide our society and weaken those elements of it that have been so important to the creation of one of the world's most tolerant, diverse and peaceful societies. In particular, it appears that the postmodern world is eroding the sense of community and the social cohesion that are the very lifeblood of a democracy. How might this be recaptured? I will argue in the final section that public education is crucial to sustaining and enhancing our democratic way of life.

Public education and Australian democracy

As I described earlier in this paper, education has not been immune from government policy shaped by the market ethic. The shift from conceptualising education as a social good to an individual good has been facilitated through the ideology of choice which now lies at the heart of government policy in relation to education funding. It has resulted in what Lyndsay Connors (2000) refers to as the 'demutualisation' of schooling, by which she means the loss of that sense of reciprocity, altruism and 'love of strangers' (p. 72) that characterises an education system governed by a commitment to the common good. In a commodified education system, the dominant ethos is that of self-interest.

There is now enough empirical research around the world for us to understand the social effects of constructing education around choice (Whitty et al. 1998; Lauder & Hughes 1999; Campbell & Whitty 2000). Such research has demonstrated that marketised schooling systems result in a loss of the diversity of student populations and a significant growth in the disparity of resources between schools. And these differentiations are invariably organised on the basis of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and race.

If a major social purpose of education is to nurture our democracy, then surely we need to organise schools, as key social institutions for the development of an active citizenry, in ways which are consistent with, and indeed promote, those attributes, cultures and practices that make up

democratic life. Organising schools on the basis of choice is to elevate individual needs and wants above community needs, and to ensure that some benefit more than others. It is surely to promote a culture of selfish individualism where the dominating motif is competition and greedy self-interest rather than cooperation and mutual benefit. How can we afford to do this at a time when, as I argued in the preceding section, the glue of our democratic life is coming unstuck? Never have schools as mutualising institutions in our society been more needed than now.

However, while the claim that we should return to a greater emphasis on the social and democratic purposes of education may be a sufficient reason to jettison choice as the *raison d'être* of funding policy, it says nothing about the balance of funding between the public and private systems. This argument turns upon the connection between the demands of our changing democratic processes, and the nature of public and private educational institutions themselves.

If my analysis of some of the dangers facing Australian democracy in the new century is broadly accurate, then it is clear that as a society we need to take urgent action. We must find ways of replenishing our supply of social capital and remutualising our civic life. What might be done? Anthony Giddens (1999) speaks of the need for 'democratising democracy', by which he means that we must deepen and widen the ambit of democracy. His suggestions include devolving power; making our political processes more open, transparent and participatory; and finding ways to engage in democratic practices beyond the nation state. But he also argues that:

the democratising of democracy also depends upon the fostering of a strong civic culture. Markets cannot produce such a culture. Nor can a pluralism of special interest groups ... Building a democracy of the emotions is one part of a progressive civic culture. Civil society is the arena in which democratic attitudes, including tolerance, have to be developed. The civic sphere can be fostered by government, but is in turn its cultural basis. (pp. 77–78)

What might comprise this civic culture? Wiseman (1998) argues for the need to: 'oppose the atomistic individualism of competitive "market citizenship" and to defend and reclaim the significance of interdependence and cooperation' (p. 120). For Richard Sennett (1998), this means more than a shallow sharing of common values. He maintains that people are bound together more by verbal conflict than by verbal agreement, at least immediate agreement. This means that we have to engage in rigorous processes of communication through which:

differences of views often become sharper and more explicit even though the parties may eventually come to agreement: the scene of conflict becomes a community in the sense that people learn how to listen and respond to one another even as they more keenly feel their differences ... Strong bonding between people means engaging over time their differences. (p. 143)

There is not the space here to extend this argument. But even in this shorthand form it is clear that as a society we need to attend to the processes of civic life if we want our democratic system to thrive in a postmodern world. And it is here that we need to reassess the centrality of our public schools to this process. The fundamental importance of public education lies in its very publicness. That is, public schools are open to all. No one can be denied access. As a result, public schools are public spaces which are microcosms of the communities in which they exist. In addition, because they are secular places, they do not promulgate specific or narrow points of view or represent sectional interests. In short, they provide perhaps the only place in our society where people can be inducted into a civic culture of recognising and vigorously engaging with their differences. It is difficult to do this in more homogeneous student communities.

McKinnon and Walker (2000) contend that such a task can also be achieved by private schools, many of which cater for as broad a range of students as the public system. In my view this is overstating the case. A number of research studies demonstrate that students from so-called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds are far more strongly represented in public than in private schools (e.g. Mukerjee et al. 1999). But even were this not so, an apprenticeship in democracy should occur in the absence of imposed world views or sectional interests. Again this is a defining characteristic of public schools which may not necessarily apply to all private schools. Of course, while the diversity of the student population of public schools is an important precondition for developing the critical citizenship capabilities of students, it is not a sufficient condition. School climate, curriculum and pedagogy are obviously central elements. But my point is that it is from this starting point that we should be considering school resourcing. On what basis, and at what cost to our democracy, do public schools receive a reducing share of the Commonwealth dollar?

Conclusion

Any debate about education funding must take as its starting point an understanding about the purposes of education. Such a debate is urgent in Australia, since we have in place models of funding that assume education to be a private commodity rather than a social good. Once that purpose is accepted, we have lost the capacity for education to respond to pressing social needs.

In this paper I have argued that we need to reevaluate the central contribution that schools make to the sustaining and enhancing of democratic processes in Australian society. I have suggested that a number of the effects of globalisation and the neo-liberal policy responses to it are widening inequalities in our society and endangering our civic culture. Schools are central to overcoming these dangers. In particular, I have argued that, given the nature of public schools, it is they that should be leading the charge to remutualise Australian society. This is something that can't be achieved through the pursuit of private interests. As Hobsbawm (2000) points out: 'There are social goods that can only be provided collectively in the common interest' (p. 106). The most important of these is public education, and it must be funded properly.

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