Professional Voice
Volume 9 Issue 1 | Autumn 2012 | RRP $10
ISSN: 1445-4165

EQUITY
and disadvantage

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Published by
Australian Education Union Victorian Branch

Printed by
Total Print

Printed on recycled paper

Cover: 310g ReArt Gloss
Text: 105g ReArt Matt

Annual subscriptions
$25 within Australia (free to financial AEU members). Please contact the AEU Publications Unit on 03 9417 2822 for further information. A subscription form is available in the back of this issue or downloadable from www.aeuvic.asn.au/publications.

Back issues
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ISSN:1445-4165

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Editorial: The Reproduction of Disadvantage

John Graham

The disparity in academic achievement between students from different socio-economic backgrounds forms the substance of this edition of *Professional Voice*. Over the past few years this disparity has climbed the education priority ladder in Australia. Federal and state Labor government rhetoric about equity and social inclusion, fall-out from national and international testing programs, and the Commonwealth's Gonski review of school funding have all contributed to this new focus. It also reflects an international shift in the notion of educational equity. Instead of the so-called level playing field approach of equal access to educational opportunity, equity in schooling has become the obligation to recognise and meet different educational needs. A recent report from the OECD — *Equity and Quality in Education* (2012) — describes the same shift in terms of student "failure", which is now seen as institutional failure to provide "fair and inclusive education services" rather than as an individual's personal shortcomings.

One important measure of the equity of a schooling system is the impact of socio-economic status background factors on student outcomes. The less evident the effect of a student's background on his or her schooling outcomes, the more equitable the school or schooling system is considered to be. Using OECD assessment data, Australia is described as having a relatively high quality but only average equity education system which means that "students from disadvantaged backgrounds are consistently achieving educational outcomes lower than their peers" (Gonski 2011). This is in contrast to countries such as Finland and Canada which combine high quality with high equity and give hope that the seemingly immovable gap between the literacy and numeracy achievement of students from different SES backgrounds can be narrowed.

The size of the SES-linked gap between Australian students was documented in results from the 2009 PISA international testing program for 15-year-olds. The high correlation between a student's SES background and their test performance was evident in each of the

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three curriculum areas — reading, maths and science. In reading, the average score of the fourth (the highest) SES quartile of Australian students was 30 points ahead of those in the third quartile, 58 points higher than those in the second quartile and 91 points higher than those in the lowest quartile. The same pattern of performance was seen in maths (90 score points between highest and lowest SES groups) and science (96 score points). "The 2009 PISA report examined average achievement for each socio-economic quartile and found that there was a difference in scores between students in the highest and lowest socio-economic quartiles that equated to almost three full years of schooling." (ACER 2010)

The effect of SES background is also evident in Australian Year 12 results and post-school destinations. In 2009, 56% of students from low SES backgrounds attained a Year 12 qualification compared to 62% from middle SES backgrounds and 75% from high SES backgrounds. In 2010 the university access rate for students from low SES backgrounds was 17% compared to 35% for students from high SES backgrounds.

Disadvantage in education related to social background is a function not only of student SES characteristics but also of the average SES characteristics of their schools. In Victoria, the Auditor-General reviewed literacy and numeracy achievement in Victorian government schools over the period 1998–2007, providing a longitudinal analysis of the effect of SES background on student achievement in schools with differing social compositions. The report (2009) concluded that the achievement gap between students from schools categorised as high and low SES within the public school system represented 15 months of learning at Year 9. This gap had not narrowed over the 10-year period of the audit for either literacy or numeracy.

Other studies have calculated the degree of influence of school SES on student achievement. The Gonski report quoted unpublished research carried out on NAPLAN results which found that at all tested year levels (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) school concentrations of high SES students were an advantage for individual student performance and concentrations of low SES students were a disadvantage. After reviewing the New South Wales Department of Education and Training study of the relationship between student SES and school SES, and doing a similar study in Victoria, Richard Teese concluded that "the higher the social mix of students, the better the performance of a student — from all social backgrounds." In a separate study using OECD PISA data, Laura Perry and Andrew McConney estimated that low SES students who attended one of Australia's richest schools improved their PISA test scores in literacy, numeracy and science by an average of 57 points — the equivalent of one year of schooling. Similarly, highest quartile SES students who attended one of the poorest schools dropped 54 points in reading, 56 points in maths and 52 points in science.

The OECD report *Equity and Quality in Education* (2012), in commenting on research showing that disadvantaged schools tend to reinforce students' SES inequalities, noted:

> *This represents a double handicap for disadvantaged students, since schools do not mitigate the negative impact of the students' disadvantaged background and on the contrary amplify its negative effect on their performance. Furthermore, evidence also shows that in countries where schools tend to be more segregated, the impact of the school's socio-economic intake is higher.* (p107)

Why the SES background of students has a greater impact on student performance in Australia than in many other OECD countries with a similar SES status and values was explored in the Nous Group research paper for the Gonski review. Its explanation centred on the nature of the Australian schooling system. Australia has a relatively stronger concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools compared to similar OECD countries. A third of Australian students are in schools where the average SES of students is below the average SES of the country. This concentration is above the OECD average. In addition, almost 60% of the most disadvantaged students are in these schools, which is substantially higher than in any comparable OECD country and well above the OECD average. The concentration of disadvantaged students in Australian schools is seen as an outcome of school choice policies and the high number of select-entry schools.

Another recent OECD study — *School Choice and Equity* (2012) — found that Australia has the highest degree of school choice of any OECD country. Ninety per cent of students are in secondary schools whose principals report that they compete with two or more schools, compared to the OECD average of 60%. Finland as a high quality/high equity country has only 43% of its schools in this situation. Australia also stands out from most of its OECD peer countries because of the high percentage of students in non-government schools. In 2009 Australia had 30.5% of its students in private schools compared to the OECD average of 10.5%. Australia is further distinguished by the high levels of household expenditure and relatively low levels of public expenditure on education. In 2008 only 44.5% of pre-school expenditure came from public sources as compared to the OECD average of 81.5%. In the schools sector, the Australian figure was 81.7% as compared to an OECD average of 91%. When public spending is separated into public and private institutions, Australia becomes even more anomalous. It spent 11.6% per student below the OECD average on public schools and 3.2% per student above the OECD average on private schools. Only Estonia, Israel and Korea have this same profile of publicly funding below the average for public schools and above the average for private schools (OECD 2011).

This combination of policies promoting school choice and significant private school subsidies is described by the OECD study on school choice as the policy setting most likely to encourage greater segregation by SES background. In Australia this segregation is clearly evident in the social composition of the student population in public and private schools. In 2010 government schools had 36% of students in the lowest SES quartile and 22% in the highest quartile, Catholic schools had 21% in the lowest quartile and 29% in the highest quartile and independent schools had 13% in the lowest quartile and 47% in the highest quartile.

When Watson and Ryan analysed the impact of choice and increased funding for non-government schools between 1975 and 2006, they found that it had changed the enrolment balance between the public and private sectors and the SES profile of public schools. Almost 60% of the enrolment loss of students from public schools to private schools came from the highest SES groups. Public schools retained the same proportion of students from low SES backgrounds while having a smaller proportion of high SES students. Teese's analysis of the same impact at the local level in Victoria found in each district studied, non-government schools had a greater proportion of high SES students and a smaller proportion of low SES students than competing public schools, while public schools had a disproportionate share of socially and academically disadvantaged students.

What can be done to reduce the influence of SES background on student achievement? The OECD's *Equity and Quality in Education* report acknowledges that education policy alone cannot address the fundamental problems of disadvantage. A more whole-of-government approach is required. Policies to address disadvantage in education need to be aligned with related policies in health, housing, welfare, justice and social development. Changes at the education system level however, should be made to avoid or remedy practices such as early tracking, grade repetition, school choice policies which encourage segregation and low quality VET programs — all of which amplify social and economic disadvantage and are conducive to school failure. Of particular relevance to Australia is the recommendation that school choice should be balanced by limiting its negative impact on equity. Of equal importance is the need to have system-level funding strategies which guarantee access to quality early childhood education and care for disadvantaged families, take account of the higher costs of educating disadvantaged students and use a weighted funding formula to ensure support for the most disadvantaged.

The report further details five areas of policy improvement which research has shown to be effective at the school level in addressing the needs of disadvantaged schools. Many of these recommendations are consistent with the findings of the Gonski report. School leadership should be strengthened and supported, including with professional learning

programs which assist leaders to meet the particular challenges in these schools. Steps should be taken to stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning — promoting and using data to identify at-risk students and intervening early; supporting struggling students through practices such as coaching and mentoring, counselling and transition support in the move to secondary schools; implementing after-school and holiday programs for extra academic and social activities; and providing smaller schools and smaller class sizes linked to appropriate changes to classroom practice.

Teacher quality is identified as a core component of any improvement plan for disadvantaged schools but, unlike some other recently publicised research, the report does not concentrate on this factor to the exclusion of all others. It calls for policies to attract, support, develop and retain high quality teachers in disadvantaged schools, including strategies to align teacher education programs with the needs of these schools, mentoring of teachers, improved working conditions and adequate financial incentives. The fourth area of reform identified in the report is the use of effective classroom learning strategies which emphasise high expectations, flexible and diverse pedagogical strategies, the systematic linking of learner-centred teaching approaches, assessment and the curriculum and a common curriculum with clear learning goals. The final area is the need to prioritise links with parents and the community and improve communication strategies to align school and parental effort.

One of the enduring themes of educational theory is the way in which society reproduces its stratification through the education system. The official rhetoric of equity and equal opportunity for all delivers the reality of unequal outcomes reflecting the socio-economic background of students. This social injustice is deeply entrenched in the social values, institutional structures and politics which underpin Australia's schooling system. Many of the educational developments over the past decade, no matter how well-intentioned, have reinforced rather than improved this situation. The possibility of a root-and-branch reform to address the concentration of disadvantage and inequitable school choice policies is seen as too hard by the main political parties. A very modest step forward may come from the implementation of the Gonski report's recommendation of greater investment in disadvantaged students and disadvantaged schools and, therefore, the public sector of education. Given the present political zeitgeist however, even this small step may be very hard to take.

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Equity and the simplification of educational policy

Alan Reid

The election of the Rudd Labor Government in November 2007 resulted in equity returning to centre stage in education policy. The new federal minister of education, Julia Gillard, committed the government to such priorities as lifting retention rates to Year 12 or equivalent to 90% by 2020; sharply increasing rates of participation in higher education for students from "disadvantaged" backgrounds; and raising literacy and numeracy outcomes, especially for Indigenous students where it declared a target of halving the attainment gap in Year 12 by 2020.

I applaud this commitment to equity which has continued into the second term of the Labor Government. However, it is intriguing that despite its visible presence in policy rhetoric, there is no articulated government view about the meaning of equity. In its absence, equity in education has been shaped, by default, by the dominant educational ideology which, under the Rudd/Gillard governments, has rested upon three major premises.

The first is that the major purpose of education is to prepare young people for the workforce. That is, education has a largely, though not solely, economic purpose. The second is that schools and school systems operate best when they compete against each other in an education market where the winners are those who best meet the need of the "consumers" (parents and students). The third is that the best way to achieve quality in education is through "transparent accountability" which ensures that information about schools is provided to enable consumer choice, and that schools are motivated by systems of rewards and punishment (eg Lingard 2011; Savage 2011).

This triumvirate of policy positions has given equity a very individualistic policy frame in education. It involves an identification of which students are at risk and the formulation of policies which ensure that these students in particular are the beneficiaries of choice and accountability in order to "close the achievement gap".

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The central tools in this process are standardised tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which are used as benchmarks to assess both the achievement gap itself and the educational progress made. This has meant that the Government has remained in thrall to the endless display of graphs showing Australia's place in PISA test results; accompanied by the mantra that the Australian education system is "high in quality but low in equity", or that Australia has a "long equity tail" (McGaw 2008).

However, the identification by PISA or NAPLAN of the disparity between the educational outcomes of, say, Indigenous children or children from low socio-economic backgrounds and children from more affluent backgrounds (something about which the education community had been aware for decades), has not led to more detailed research about the causes of such inequalities, but simply to assertions about what strategies are needed to close the achievement gap, which invariably involve greater accountability, rewards and punishment.

If these strategies resulted in improved equity outcomes, they might be defensible. But, as I have argued elsewhere (see Reid 2011), ignoring the complexities involved in the concept of equity has resulted in policy "solutions" which are simplistic and therefore counterproductive to equity outcomes. Just as such approaches have manifestly failed in other parts of the world, so too will they fail in Australia. One of the major reasons for this is the simplification of policy processes, a matter to which I will now turn.

Policy simplification

Lindsay Tanner's recent book *Sideshow* shows how and with what consequences public policy debate generally is being dumbed down in Australia. One might have imagined that education would be one area in our society that might model how to conduct nuanced and sophisticated policy development — and yet the dominant policy discourse in education is based upon a simplification of complex issues. Let me offer some examples:

- *The causes of identified problems are rarely explored* and there is often a leap from problem to solution (indeed, sometimes it is a solution looking for a problem), with little use of research, or at best selective use and at worst abuse of research findings. I could give dozens of examples here, but one that is troubling me at the moment is the way in which research about the effects of quality teaching and teachers has slipped into the mantra that teachers are the sole and determining influence on learning, as though factors such as context, socio-economic status, and resources don't matter. The so-called education reformers in the United States are fond of telling the world that breaking poverty can be totally achieved by dedicated and quality teachers.

- *There is a language of certainty*. How often does a politician tell us that "it is the right thing to do"; and how is it that standardised test data has achieved the status of sole arbiter of educational quality or measure of educational improvement, as though the data is able to provide some objective or scientific proof? Why is qualitative data gathered in specific contexts at particular times dismissed as being "soft"?
- *Strident over-claiming about the benefits* invariably accompanies any new policy — such as the claims that the first draft of the national curriculum is of "world class status" (whatever that means); or the chest-thumping that occurs when standardised test results show a small improvement.
- *Professional educators, far from being trusted, are often blamed, and rarely consulted*, except about the detail of policies that have already been determined.
- *Policy makers increasingly take account of the views of people who have no expertise in education, such as business people, economists, journalists and lawyers*. In the US, for example, the heavy hitters in the corporate world — such as Gates, Walton, Murdoch, Broad (collectively forming what Diane Ravitch calls the "billionaire boys club") — have entered the field, not just as donors of private funds, but as *designers* of education policy. Using the "achievement gap" as their justification, they have poured buckets of money into schemes based on education markets and "transparent accountability". Their "solutions" have been picked up by successive governments and turned into failed policies, a prime example being *No Child Left Behind*. Let me provide an example of how this plays out in the public sphere. It involves one of Australia's most famous exports: Rupert Murdoch.

A case study of policy simplification

In November 2008, Rupert Murdoch presented the 2008 Boyer Lectures which he entitled *A Golden Age of Freedom*. One of his seven lectures was dedicated to education. Remember that this is an American businessman who has been living in America for the past 25 years; and talking shortly after the first onslaught of the Global Financial Crisis — just as we were learning about the sheer naked greed of the financial and corporate sectors.

Murdoch started his lecture by bringing to bear his deep expertise in education, and his detailed understanding of the Australian education system over the past quarter of a century, to say:

> *The unvarnished truth is that in countries such as Australia, Britain and particularly the United States,* our public education systems are a disgrace. *Despite spending more and more money, our children seem to be learning less and less — especially for those who are most vulnerable in our society.*

His evidence for saying this is not revealed, but having said it — that is, having dismissed the entire public education systems in three countries — he goes on to apportion blame and then propose strategies for turning things around. The blame part is easy. It is of course the public school educators who are responsible for the parlous state of education:

> *... there is a whole industry of pedagogues devoted to explaining why some schools and some students are failing. Some say classrooms are too large. Others complain that not enough public funding is devoted to this or that program. Still others will tell you that students who come from certain backgrounds just can't learn.*

This deeply researched accusation opens the way for his solutions for educational reform, which he bases upon an equity rationale — predictably using the language of "closing the achievement gap". His reasons for wanting to close the gap have nothing to do with making a fairer society or better democracy; they are purely economic: the global economy needs skilled human capital, and "...as a general rule, the more education you have, the more you are going to earn in your career".

What is needed, says Murdoch, are at least three strategies. First, higher standards need to be set. The implication here is, presumably, that educators are setting low or inadequate standards — again, an unresearched accusation. But given that the question of standards is a vexed one in the education literature, it is interesting to note Murdoch's contribution to the debate. For him, standards in education mean that:

> *...we ought to demand as much quality and performance from those who run our schools as we do from those who provide us with our morning cup of coffee.*

I will leave it to you to ponder what that actually means — but it is an important benchmark because his second strategy involves holding schools to account and closing them when they fail to reach these standards. This leads into his third strategy which proposes that corporations should get heavily involved in schools, especially at the lower levels, because:

> *... corporate leaders know better than government officials the skills that people need to get ahead in the 21st century. And businessmen and businesswomen need to take this knowledge and help build school systems that will ensure that all children get at least a basic education.*

That is, they should privatise schools.

You can see in all of this some of the techniques described above — certainty; constructing educators as the enemy; describing a problem without any evidence and then proposing solutions; transferring business models to education and so on. One wonders what Murdoch would say if we told him how to run his media empire. Perhaps his energy might have been better spent advising his colleagues in the business world about the ways in which they had contributed to the GFC and what strategies might be put in place to prevent it from happening again.

Since he made that speech, Murdoch has outlined plans to make News Corporation a leading provider of educational materials within five years, with about 10% of its total revenue deriving from that source. He has recently established an education division to spearhead this push; and spent $360 million acquiring a 90% interest in Wireless Generation, a company which produces software for assessment, curriculum instruction and compiling student test scores and other student information for school districts and state governments.

The recent scandals certainly haven't stopped Murdoch from his push into education. Last month he was the keynote speaker at the National Summit on Education Reform, organised by Jeb Bush — another non-educational "expert". We can expect more speeches from Murdoch outlining the problem with education and promoting the ways to overcome them in order to "close the achievement gap", because many of his solutions are the basis of profit generation. Here's how News Corporation describes the plan:

> *News Corporation's Education Division is focused on individualised, technology-based content and learning opportunities that support world class student and teacher performance, as well as digital assessment tools for K–12 students in the United States that help eliminate the achievement gap.*

My argument here is that it is difficult to develop sophisticated policy approaches to address complex equity issues when the education debate is being simplified in these ways, and when those designing the solutions are also trying to turn a profit.

Conclusion

While equity has (thankfully) been brought back to centre stage in the national education agenda, it is a narrow, emaciated and individualistic version of equity. It is characterised by simplistic understandings of the nature and causes of educational disadvantage; and policy processes which are counterproductive to the achievement of equity.

The Gillard agenda assumes that bridging the equity gap is simply a matter of making standardised test results public, encouraging competition between schools, and motivating teachers and principals through systems of reward and punishment. Unfortunately it doesn't happen like that. The fact is that questions about equity and education are incredibly complex. Learning outcomes are influenced by a range of social and cultural as well as educational factors, many of which are deep-seated. These have to be identified and worked on over time. There is no quick fix.

What is galling is that the Johnny-come-latelies — the businessmen, lawyers and politicians; the instant experts in areas in which they have no expertise or knowledge — are destroying the hard-won gains of educators over the years. A genuine approach to equity in education would reject a policy discourse which simplifies complex issues; which blames teachers and schools; which ignores processes of research and inquiry; which jumps from problem to solution without using evidence; which transplants failed policies from another country; which marginalises educators from the policy process; and which is constructed in such haste that the system is always in policy catch-up mode.

In short, if the Government is serious about equity, its policy processes must:

- Be based on a developed and articulated view of equity and social justice
- Be thorough and systematic and recognise the complexities involved in achieving better educational outcomes for "equity groups"
- Be based on research and inquiry, and be deeply appreciative of the contexts in which educational practice operates
- Allow for trial and evaluation before being spread widely
- Avoid the trap of reinforcing the very inequities that policies and strategies are designed to address
- Trust the profession and make it a central partner in the decision-making process.
- Be wary of hyper-inflated claims about closing the achievement gap.

That is, greater equity in education demands hard work over a long period, not quick fixes. Educators need to join the debate to ensure that policy developed and implemented in the name of equity in education genuinely delivers a fairer education system and contributes to the making of a fairer society.

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This is an edited extract from the inaugural Hedley Beare Oration, organised by the Northern Territory chapter of the Australian College of Educators and presented at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Darwin on November 7, 2011. To obtain the full version of this paper, email alan.reid@unisa.edu.au.

Rescuing from the darkness

Equity and the early years

Tony Vinson

A career of researching and working in the social realm has made me only too aware of the crushing impact of social disadvantage in its various forms on the life satisfaction and happiness of many individuals and families. I was aware from my early employment in the gaols and parole service, and then later my involvement in crime research, of the legal vulnerability of people of limited education. Fifty years later around two-thirds of the prison inmates in my state, New South Wales, are still functionally illiterate. Here in Victoria, 2% of the postcode areas which are characterised by low educational attainment yield 25% of prison admissions. My doctoral study of low birth-weight babies showed me that educational and other related forms of disadvantage of parents can begin to have ill-effects on some children even before they arrive in the world.

But it was the experience afforded by my chairing of two waves of the Independent Inquiry into NSW Public Education that pulled the educational threads of my earlier work into a coherent pattern. Here I came face-to-face with many children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds totally lacking in those precursor experiences that help to prepare the majority of us for productive participation in preschool and early formal schooling.

Meeting these children and their teachers and parents and then meeting the children's counterparts as they struggled academically and behaviourally in later primary years confirmed for me that I was confronting one of the springs of social disadvantage through these children. I know that this fact is well known to the children's teachers but am apprehensive that people and politicians generally grossly underestimate both the range and severity of the educational impediments involved.

Over five decades of working in related fields, nothing has struck me as more tragic than meeting little children in disadvantaged areas at the beginning of their formal schooling who

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have never held a pencil or a book, whose speech is confined to a few words, whose self-identity is stunted even to the point of gender uncertainty. Children from such a background have few opportunities to rehearse the conventions of print, the structure of texts and letter recognition or to achieve phonological awareness. Moreover, young children with little experience of conversation find it difficult to acquire the use of de-contextualised oral language of the kind that is essential for participation in school talk. Failure to overcome this initial deficiency can, as teachers know, have major flow-on consequences for a child's education — and life prospects, as social practitioners are aware.

To remain unaffected in the presence of these children would require some form of emotion-protecting armour — perhaps a variation of the Malthusian philosophy, "It's unfortunate but the disadvantaged will always be with us."

Fortunately I have not found many teachers who take refuge in such attitudes. Furthermore, the research evidence stands totally against our having to remain resigned to the inevitability of early disadvantage becoming one's destiny. The evidence of the good return that awaits serious investment in the education and care of disadvantaged youngsters could hardly be more compelling. Technically sophisticated studies have found statistically significant benefits extending over decades from quality early education and care programs. Particularly striking have been the sustained benefits with respect to not only educational progress, but labour market outcomes, welfare independence, and pro-social behaviours. The estimate of societal gain is a sevenfold return on each dollar invested. And the available evidence indicates that the economic returns from investing in early development programs are larger when higher risk populations are targeted.

My focus here is not in creating special treatment programs operated apart from schools but the kinds of family outreach and teacher support needed to make standard early education teaching and programs maximally effective in educationally disadvantaged communities.

So what gets in the way of children from disadvantaged backgrounds getting off to a good start, and what can the teachers do about the obstacles to effective learning? Here are some of the barriers that teachers directly involved with children from disadvantaged backgrounds have emphasised during my time in their classrooms.

Some of the 4-year-olds cannot form intelligible sounds. They need a lot of individual help to hear and say words. Their parents have very limited language and cannot help them much. Professional speech help would be good but in reality it falls on the shoulders of the teachers. The associated delay in phonic ability impedes their reading development. Some

speech development results in little interaction with teachers. In these cases the teachers are thrown back on their own resources in trying to overcome the problems in preschool. They try by my reckoning some pretty basic remedies, like modelling the annunciation of sounds that the children have never heard spoken correctly — vowels and "h" sounds, medial sounds, pronouncing the "g" at the end of words.

Teachers point out that it makes learning a word more difficult if you have no knowledge or experience of what it denotes. Some children have never left their suburb let alone travelled, say, to the city. What is said to them has been largely directive. What they utter consists largely of nouns and labels with few connective words. There's been an absence in other words of conversation in their lives.

I had it explained to me that on numerous occasions, when a child arrives with a vocabulary of only a few words, the parents and child are referred to a regional health centre; but an 18 month delay can take place before they are provided treatment. One principal added: "We don't set out to be social workers, but if we don't attend to the children's social needs, little or no learning is going to take place.

The way we organise the beginning of school education can eliminate or halve the influences that cast a long shadow on people's lives. A few youngsters will recover from a bad start. Many others will not. Their problems will simply compound. I studied the geographic distribution of different forms of disadvantage in Victoria and NSW, culminating in a national study. From the area-based studies, one can inductively build the picture of an unfolding biography of people who have had incomplete schooling. As they grow older, their physical and mental health are more likely to suffer. They will swell the ranks of the unskilled and unemployed. They will have higher rates of homelessness, substance dependency and crime. From the social point of view, we should regard early stage education as being a major nursery of young talent and social character.

That being the case, a wise society should be interested in hearing from those bearing the major management responsibility about what they need to discharge their duties effectively. With the cooperation of the NSW Primary Principals Association late last year, I had the opportunity to put that question to the principals and early education teachers of NSW public schools with preschools attached. The principals and teachers were asked specifically to rank aspects of the operation of their preschools that posed the greatest difficulty in achieving their goals for the children enrolled.

Responses were obtained from 51 state-run preschools, constituting a good cross-section of the relevant schools. Thirty-one were located in the Sydney metropolitan area,

the bulk of the remainder were located in other urban areas of the state. It needs to be kept in mind that a fraction over half of the responding schools (26 out of the 51 or 51%) have catchment areas that include a locality that is in the top 20% most disadvantaged places in New South Wales when postcodes are ranked on 25 indicators of disadvantage. The majority of the other areas served by the responding preschools were not well-off, thus fulfilling what I understand to have been the policy intention in this regard — an intent also given expression by the priority given to applicants from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Nine topic areas and a residual "other" category were presented for ranking. The principals built out the picture of the challenges faced with comments of a more specific nature.

Most serious difficulties identified by preschools Each principal was asked to choose two issues within their preschool	% of 51 preschools
Health/Developmental	
Support for children with a disability (24)	47%
Delays obtaining specialist services for children's speech (18)	35%
Delays obtaining specialist services for other health problems (14)	28%
Lack of appropriate learning materials (5)	10%
Physical structure	
Difficulties associated with physical structure of preschool (13)	25%
Parental	
Parents/carers unwilling to become involved in children's preschooling (5)	10%
Staff	
Opportunities for professional learning (6)	12%
Skill level of early childhood teacher (2)	4%
Lack of involvement of other teachers from primary school (2)	4%
Other (13)	26%

The first three issues under the heading "health/developmental" were ones that had been well and truly emphasised in an earlier 2007 review. Concerning support for children with disabilities, one principal said: "We need support for children with extreme behaviours or other issues, for example, possible autism."

In relation to children with speech difficulties, one comment, "Access is slow unless parents seek private interventions," echoed many other responses that I had reported in

2007 and which were repeated in this survey. Reminiscent of those earlier remarks was the statement: "We have a lot of students with speech issues that are not identified until they are enrolled in preschool. The waiting list for speech services is many months and can extend into years." Another school stated: "Our school funds a speech therapy service each week at a cost of $22,000 per year. This indicates how importantly we view vocabulary and sentence structure development." One principal claimed: "The majority of our children present at preschool with speech difficulties. Few have access to speech therapy. Some are on the four-year waiting list and some parents believe the child will 'grow out of it'."

Many principals and teachers believe that the only sure way forward is to locate speech pathologists within clusters of schools so that they can provide necessary direct services to children in need of that help and work in a concentrated way as partners with early childhood educators. In the interests of individual and social wellbeing, why don't we heed that message?

The need for more support in accessing specialist services for children's health care is described by one principal as "almost impossible to get on a regular or even irregular basis". One principal described "horrendous waiting lists for specialist health services, such as paediatricians, child psychologists and other mental health professionals".

The physical structure of some preschools captured the attention of one in four of the respondents. Some preschools have been purpose-built but many existed before the present era. The following is typical of the comments made under this heading: "Our preschool was established in the 1970s. Preschool education has changed dramatically and, indeed, many of our problems — for example, toilets, line of sight, supervision, gates and kitchen, would not meet Community Service's standards."

Finally, the "other" category consisted mainly of financial difficulties which had not been specifically listed among the challenges that the principals were asked to rank. One principal said: "My local community cannot afford the daily payment, [a problem] which I have been unsuccessfully working on since 2007." Another anticipated the consequences of a new Department of Education and Communities preschool fee policy and said: "It would impact significantly on my preschool. Our fee is currently $7 per week. Talk that fees will rise to $30 will mean that many families in my community will not be able to access the service."

I was asked to participate in the People's Parliament that preceded the last NSW state election. It was my privilege to put the only resolution to gain unanimous support from that assembly. It was that in the course of the next parliamentary term a number of exemplary models of integrated service to educationally disadvantaged preschoolers and their families

should be created for later emulation in similarly disadvantaged schools across the public system. My present belief is that even one demonstration project could help to cut through the muddled thinking that surrounds this issue. Apart from school staff there would be a need for support services in areas such as speech, hearing, vision, and behavioural difficulties, and family functioning generally, so that timely interventions could be made when problems are most open to correction. This effort would embrace both government and non-government organisations working collaboratively with the school management.

This proposal, endorsed unanimously by the People's Parliament in the interests of consistency of educational opportunity, has yet to result in concrete action. Instead, the only mention of consistency has been the announcement that fees are now charged at publicly owned preschools to (quote) "ensure consistency" across the early childhood education and care sector.

Given the social location of the majority of our NSW state preschools, to insist in this instance on anything like market fees is a case of being "penny wise, pound foolish". A substantial number of the parents in the areas served by public preschools could be deterred by the fees from sending already disadvantaged children to them. Savings by way of reduced costly juvenile justice orders alone could be expected to go a fair part of the way to covering the income foregone — and that's before later criminality, economic dependence, physical and mental health and other manifestations of disadvantage are taken into account. A sensible society would, of course, be using consolidated community connections to bring vulnerable families and children into school communities, not discouraging their involvement.

At stake is nothing less than a test of our claimed belief in giving every child a genuine chance to succeed in life. Unless we are reconciled to a future in which some individuals have disadvantage piled upon disadvantage from the beginning of their lives and an ever-increasing number of human disposal institutions to contain the inevitable consequences, we must insist on a high-quality, adequately funded approach to the early education of all of our children.

Our generation should not be remembered for the number of gaols that we bequeath. It could be remembered for rescuing the souls of our most vulnerable children from the darkness that Victor Hugo lamented. Our sense of justice, our obligations to all of our children demand nothing less.

Victoria's Third Wave

The Coalition and state education reform

John Graham

In November 2010, after 11 years of Labor rule, Victoria voted in a Liberal/National coalition government. The election result was very close (a one seat majority) and generally unexpected. The new regime looked and acted like an accidental government. Its election platform was a disconnected set of oppositional complaints and one-off initiatives. In stark contrast to the previous Kennett coalition government of the 1990s, there was no sense of a coherent plan that a hungry opposition had been waiting years to implement.

School education typified this state of affairs. The election policy platform for schools proposed a few quirky initiatives and then tried to differentiate itself from the Labor Government by talking vaguely about more discipline, more school autonomy, more money for private schools and higher standards. In other words there would be a fine-tuning of the existing government's policies rather than a brand new broom sweeping through the portfolio. Complicating all of this, the new government decided on an uncomfortable break-up of responsibilities between two ministers. One was called the Minister for Education (a Liberal) while the other became the Minister Responsible for the Teaching Profession (a National). Both ministers tried to keep a low profile throughout most of 2011, particularly after the Government announced that $481 million would be removed from the public education budget.

In November 2011 however, close to one year to the day after coming to office, the Minister for Education, Martin Dixon, used a formal lecture at Melbourne University to articulate his government's new vision for Victorian schooling. It was the minister's chance for a "headland" speech after a year of small target inactivity, interrupted only by negative publicity about program cutbacks. In the speech he implied that the "inactivity" was in fact a process of careful deliberation presaging a "new dynamic" for the state's school system and a "third wave" of Victorian school reform.[1]

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According to the minister, the first wave of reform occurred in the 1990s when the Kennett Liberal/National Government introduced its *Schools of the Future* policy which devolved educational, financial and administrative management responsibilities to schools. This was accompanied by "supportive" departmental frameworks covering curriculum, resources and accountability. It made the Victorian school system, Mr Dixon enthused, a global leader in devolution — quoted, researched and visited by people from across the world.

He described the Labor Government's policies from 2000–2010 as the second wave of reform. Looked at positively, it was about "capacity building" and centred on improving school leadership and developing a common language around school improvement. These benefits, however, were totally outweighed in the minister's view by a reduction in the level of autonomy enjoyed by schools. School leaders and teachers were disempowered and distanced from decision-making through "progressive layers of hierarchy". Unlike the Kennett era, there was no "professional trust" of principals, teachers and school communities. The Baillieu Government's third wave of reform would reinstate "a culture of professional trust", restoring the purity of the Kennett Government's policies and reversing those of the Labor Government which had watered them down.

Rewriting history should always be left to professional historians who understand the crucial role of evidence in historical interpretation. The notion that *educational* responsibilities were devolved to schools in the 1990s is sheer fiction. The bundling of administrative responsibilities on to schools was accompanied by a heavy-handed increase in central control of curriculum and a significant diminution in professional autonomy. A rigorous censorship process was implemented to curb any public dissent from government school employees; and teachers, principals and schools were punished in various ways for speaking out against government policy or trying to preserve pre-Kennett views of the importance of school-based curriculum programs.

It is also hard to argue that the Kennett devolution of administrative responsibilities to schools was intended to improve the public system when it was accompanied by the closure of over 300 public schools, the elimination of 8000 teaching positions and huge reductions to school support services. The imperatives for the government were fiscal and ideological rather than educational. The cuts and restructuring of the public school system offered a convenient means of balancing the state's budget and the opportunity to open up more space for the growth of the private sector. The drastic nature and effect of the Kennett policies can be seen in the figures for spending on public school education in the 1990s. Over the first four years of the Coalition Government, Victoria fell from being the third highest spending Australian state or territory on public school education in 1992–93 (109% of the

Australian average) to the lowest spending in 1996–97 (97%).[2]

The notion that the Labor Government's "second wave" reforms made major changes to the Kennett devolution is also dubious history. On balance, the level of school self-management did not decline during the Labor years. While there were changes to administrative and financial procedures, some tinkering with regional support and accountability structures and increasingly complex compliance mechanisms, the key features of the self-managing school during the Kennett years remained. Many of the changes from 2000 were linked to a more sophisticated IT environment, a mild recognition that there is a "system" of public schooling and not just a set of individual government-operated units, and the willingness of the Labor Government (unlike its predecessor) to sit down and negotiate an enterprise bargaining agreement with the union. Teachers and principals were able to publicly criticise government policies and, in a real sense, the level of "professional trust" rose significantly (rather than declined) from the dark censorship of the 1990s.

The one area where the level of devolution did decline after the Kennett Government was defeated, was in the move from school self-management to school self-government. On coming to power, Labor immediately wound up the Schools of the Third Millennium (SOTM) program — the radical next step of devolution introduced into Victorian public schools in1998 through the Education (Self-Governing Schools) Act.[3]

The idea of SOTM was to weaken and eventually eliminate the system of public schools and remove the distinction between the public and private sectors. Under SOTM public schools which opted to become "self-governing" acquired many of the powers exercised by private schools. They became semi-corporate entities standing outside of various systemic regulations covering public schools. SOTM school councils, rather than the department, became the employers of teachers and principals, with hiring and firing powers, able to set the terms and conditions of employment and develop their own staff salary packages. These schools had "education service agreements" with the department, were encouraged to develop curriculum specialisations, own property, make investments, engage in commercial partnerships and raise as much private funding as possible. Had the Kennett Government won the 1999 election the expectation was that all public schools would eventually be brought into the SOTM experiment.

There is no clear indication as yet that "third wave" reforms will involve a return to the full-blown school self-government model. The three "non-negotiable" principles of the new reform package are: choice, local decision-making and school–community integration. As principles they represent little change from the agendas of the previous state Labor

government or the present Federal Government. They fit into the prevailing political view that the best way to improve schools is to encourage a robust school market based on consumer-led accountability. The main difference between the two Labor governments and the proposed third wave of reform is that they also laid claim (in theory at least) to a fourth principle — equity or social justice — which serves to modify the others.

There is mounting evidence that this fourth principle will play almost no role in the Baillieu Government's education reforms. Cuts made to the budget for public schooling during 2011 centred on reduced funding for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) which has a crucial role in retaining educationally disadvantaged students in public schools, the elimination of literacy and numeracy coaches in underperforming, low-SES schools, a reduction in funds for Reading Recovery — the statewide Year 1 early intervention program for students who are falling behind their peers — and the abandonment of the previous government's commitment to rebuild decrepit public schools.

Minister Dixon started off the section on "choice" in his Melbourne University speech by playing down his responsibility for the public school system. He was the minister for *all* Victorian students and would support whatever choices and "sacrifices" (the code word for private school fees) were made by parents "to ensure their children participate in a high quality education". Choice would be enhanced by fostering the growth of the non-government school sector and encouraging government schools to develop specialisations. To further this aim, the non-government school sector would receive an additional $239.5m in recurrent funding over five years and government schools $2.5m in grants over four years (to develop specialisations). Add to this disproportionate treatment of each schooling sector the government announcement in May 2011 that the public school system would have its overall funding reduced by $481 million, and it quickly becomes clear that the school market envisaged by the minister is one where there are relatively fewer students in public schools.

Further evidence that a bias towards private schools is state government policy was to be found in the Victorian Government's 2011 submission to the national (Gonski) Review of Funding for Schooling. The submission revolves around opposition to any reduction in federal funding for non-government schools, particularly when it may lead to an increase in students enrolling in Victorian government schools:

> *A reduction in funding for non-government schools may also result in some parents withdrawing their children from or delaying their enrolment in non-government schools. For every one per cent of students moving from non-government schools to the government system, Victorians would be required to spend an additional $17.6 million each year.* (p12)[4]

The logic of this position is that students in the public sector of schooling are a cost burden on the taxpayer and any increase in the proportion of students going to government schools should be opposed because of its impact on the budget bottom line.

Victoria is the only state or territory to support the retention of all aspects of the present SES funding system for non-government schools, including the widely criticised AGSRC funding base and the above-entitlement "funding maintained" scheme, and wants it all to be fully indexed into the future. Even the Western Australian Government, with a similar neo-liberal political complexion, wants reform of the present school funding system and its submission points out the consequences of not changing it:

> *The growth in the number of non-government schools also results in a steady depletion of government school enrolments, as market share is progressively eroded over time. As noted in the report, this results "in a further drift to the non-government sector by those who can afford it, while those without the economic or social capital are left with no option but to send their children to schools which are achieving ever diminishing educational outcomes.* (p14)[5]

In a recent report on public schooling and national school funding commissioned by the states and territories, Richard Teese analysed the nature and level of residualisation of public schooling across Australia. He found that there had been a substantial transfer of students from the upper end of the socio-economic status spectrum from public to private schools. In the period from 1986 to 2006 the overall percentage of students in public primary schools fell from 76% to 71%, but students from the highest SES quartile fell from 74% to 63%, while students from the lowest SES quartile stayed the same at 82%. Over the same period in secondary schools the overall percentage of students in public schools fell from 75% to 62%, the highest SES quartile from 63% to 47% and the lowest SES quartile remained the same at 78%.[6]

In further analysis of the distribution of students in selected local areas in Victoria, Teese found that "choice" operated to differentially distribute high and low SES students across sectors. Non-government schools had a significantly higher density of high SES students and a lower density of low SES students than government schools located in the same area. In disadvantaged urban areas public schools lost their academic "pilot" students through this process, so that their student profile comprised a disproportionate share of socially and academically disadvantaged students. This outcome undermined the academic attainment of students from low SES backgrounds as they no longer learned in classrooms which had the broad mix of students, including those from well-educated homes, which research has shown enhance their achievement.

Teese's analysis demonstrates that governments which place choice at the heart of their reform agenda will further disadvantage the education futures of low SES students and undermine the viability of the public schools most of them attend.

> *Choice has not enlarged the educational opportunities of the poor. Indeed the tendency for choice to segregate children in the lower bands of socio-economic status has created worsening conditions for the populations who most depend on the effectiveness of public schools. Growth in public and private spending in the non-government sector has operated to remove more culturally advantaged children and young people from the public systems, leaving these systems less supported culturally by a balanced mix of students from different family backgrounds.* (p42)

In the 1990s, as the Kennett Government market reforms gained traction, schools within the public system were increasingly divided into winners and losers, while the system as a whole, faced with Coalition Governments at both state and federal levels, began to haemorrhage even more students into the non-government sector. As far as these governments were concerned such outcomes were positive evidence that the market mechanism was working. It seems that the present state government is wedded to the same ideology. It shows no commitment to the notion of social justice, the public school *system*, or the need to concentrate resources on the most educationally disadvantaged students. The key difference between "third wave" and "first wave" reforms is as substantial as the packaging date.

Notes

1 Dixon M, November 2011. *Victoria as a Learning Community*, http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/commrel/about/learningcommuityspeech29NOV.pdf

2 Department of Education and Training Victoria, May 2002. *Summary Statistics for Victorian Schools*.

3 Education (Self-Governing Schools) Act (repealed 2000), http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Domino/Web_Notes/LDMS/PubStatbook.nsf/f932b66241ecf1b7ca256e92000e23be/DF3507F2724A2D57CA256E5B00213C85/$FILE/98-028a.pdf

4 Victorian Government, 2011. Submission to the Gonski Review. http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/SubResearch/StateSub/Documents/Victorian_Government.pdf

5 Western Australia Government, 2011. Submission to the Gonski Review. http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/SubResearch/StateSub/Documents/Western_Australian_Government.pdf

6 Teese R, 2011. *From Opportunity to Outcomes: The changing role of public schooling in Australia and national funding arrangements*, Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne.

What's wrong with this picture?

Australian policy views of educational disadvantage

John Smyth

Before we can realistically claim to address educational "disadvantage" we first need to be really clear what we are talking about – or we will come up with the wrong policy solutions to what are in effect poorly understood "problems", or different problems altogether.

In Australia, to put it bluntly, we have gone off half-cocked. We have been intellectually lazy, and our chickens are coming home to roost. Instead of doing the hard analytical work of thinking through the complexity of poverty and disadvantage in all its facets in the Australian context, we have opted instead for the lazy option of borrowing inappropriate ideas (mostly failed) from elsewhere, and then trying to apply them to the Australian setting. The consequence of this impulsive action and lack of preparation has been that we have produced a monstrous policy failure. We have tried to take notions like "social exclusion" from the UK and graft them onto the Australian social and educational context.

I use only a little licence here when I say that, broadly speaking, the approach has been to: map the problem statistically (see Vinson, 2007); redline the neighbourhoods and communities that are considered to be blighted; and then develop a targeted program of intervention – such as Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria – designed to recuperate and fix their deficiencies. The supposed effect will be that neighbourhoods and communities that have been "excluded" from participating in the good times, will be restored and re-vitalised so as to become more like the rest of us (meaning the middle classes).

The reasoning is that people who are "disadvantaged" just need to be helped to overcome a few hurdles – the major one being their ill-prepared state of "job readiness". They need to be given some work-ready skills and helped to make "better" lifestyle choices and decisions, or else treated punitively, as with the failed attempt in Aboriginal communities to

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quarantine welfare payments to curb truancy, an ill-thought out initiative that was doomed to failure from the start.

As Levitas (2004) argued of this failed view in the UK, poverty is seen as a largely individual failing, and what people so labelled need is a kind of moral conversion so that they can make themselves more "marketable". This is an enchanted wonderland view of the issue; how to go about addressing it?

Individualising the problem in this way reflects an impoverished, one-dimensional view of what it means to be poor, and one that needs to be robustly challenged. There are three major problems with it. Firstly, it implicitly assumes that poverty and disadvantage are individual dispositions or unfortunate states that people find themselves in as a result of things that have happened to them — such as unemployment, ill-health, accident, poor lifestyle choices, criminality, substance abuse or homelessness — or because they belong to a particular group that has been marginalised. All that is needed is some kind of a makeover to restore these people and rectify their "failures in the market place" (Levitas, 2004, p48). In other words, disadvantage is somehow about mending broken links.

Secondly, there is no sense here that causation might possibly lie in the way in which we allow societies to be structured so that social and economic structures and conditions further entrench and perpetuate advantage for already advantaged individuals, groups or social classes. This is covered up, for example, by continuing to talk about "meritocracy", as if people are able to be successful and make something of themselves entirely by dint of their individual efforts alone. This is to deny the way advantage and elitism are historically constructed, sustained and maintained by the way things are done.

Thirdly, in all of this, there is no sense that people who are so labelled as disadvantaged might actually have some worthwhile views about how they came to be in the situation they are in, or how things might be different for them. Notwithstanding, some people so categorised even unwittingly go along with the view that it is all their own fault.

So what does this mean for educational disadvantage? There are a multitude of ways in which we need to do some very serious rethinking of our approach to educational disadvantage in Australia. For example:

1. We could be much better at listening to and understanding the complex and difficult lives, experiences and aspirations of groups in schools and communities who may not present with conventional middle class mores and norms that mostly work for the already advantaged. In other words, students and parents who may appear in schools as being

the most "untidy" need to be given a serious voice, and their perspectives brought into the school. They need to be seen as a valued resource.

2. Dismiss the nonsense about school choice, which only works for the middle class who have the resources with which to be mobile, such as having a car. League tables like those implicit in the My School website work against those who are unable to shop around and move their children to so-called better schools. All schools should be funded, staffed and resourced so that children don't have to be pawns in some horrendous game of marketisation.

3. Notions of "high stakes testing" should cease immediately. They are part of the same neoliberal market ideology and have had such a damaging and traumatising effect in terrorising groups who are unfairly benchmarked against others who have had very different life chances and opportunities. In their place we need context-sensitive forms of assessment and reporting that enable so-called disadvantaged students to demonstrate their strengths and show how these might be used to further help them to develop and grow intellectually.

4. The idea that we can somehow successfully implement a national homogenised curriculum that will fit all students regardless of location, lives, or unique aspirations ought to be deposited in the junk bin of ideas from whence it came. It is a ludicrous proposal that can only have deeply damaging effects upon those already left out of the educational equation.

5. There needs to be a total rethink around how early childhood opportunities are made available to more than those who have a capacity to pay. In an affluent democracy it is appalling that a very sizeable proportion of the population is effectively denied access for their children to commence learning at an early age.

6. We need to quash stupid failed ideas such as parachuting untrained gifted neophyte graduates into disadvantaged schools, through ill-founded and borrowed schemes like Teach for Australia (from the UK and USA), and the fanciful notion that they can somehow turn these schools around. Instead we should properly fund teacher education and professional development *for all teachers*. In the process, we need to make teaching an attractive and valued profession, as it is in Finland, so that dedicated teachers can have the kind of security of employment necessary for the stable educational relationships crucial for these students.

7. Notions of streaming students into so-called vocational (or "hands-on") and academic tracks in secondary schools are a cover for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds being herded into insecure and low-paid jobs and steered way from occupational pathways that might lead them to better paid, sustainable job futures.

8. Concentrating efforts in disadvantaged areas on rewards (such as performance pay) and sanctions (punishing schools by "naming and shaming" them, forcing them to meet arbitrarily set targets, or appointing "super principals" to supposedly fix them) is entirely the wrong approach. It is done at the expense of understanding what is going on in the complex lives of these young people and the communities they live in.

9. Reject those snake-oil "professional development" schemes such as that of American entrepreneur Ruby Payne, which claim to offer simplistic solutions to structural problems of inequality. They peddle nothing more than thinly veiled, demeaning, and insulting notions of an underclass, under respectable-sounding labels like "culture of poverty". Instead, we should give teachers the resources to access real support for working with and getting to know their communities to come up with local solutions (with outside support). Successful teachers in these schools and communities have long understood the merits of having the time and space to work collaboratively with their colleagues and parents — something that seems to be totally absent from current policy processes.

10. Above all, we need a massive cultural change to begin seeing these schools and their communities as places with assets and strengths, rather than as basket cases or bundles of pathologies. Parents in what are regarded as disadvantaged communities have the same hopes and aspirations for the lives of their children as the rest of us — we just need to start recognising that and not put them into stereotyped or negative categories.

Perhaps if we start out with some of these ideas and rethink where we are heading in this country at a policy level, we might begin to turn around a situation in which increasing numbers of young people are being left behind by education systems that appear to neither care nor understand.

Unintelligent design
Why systems matter

Alan Smithers

Too often countries and states attempt to improve the quality of their education by concentrating on individual schools without regard to the shape of the overall system. This can have important implications for equity.

Take Victoria's new Specialisation Grants Program for example. It is supposed to promote choice and increase student engagement. This is all very well if you happen to live in Glen Waverley and want to be a pilot, but if you are in Bendigo it would have to be the visual arts. It is okay if you live in West Gippsland and want to specialise in Mandarin, but in Tallangatta it is ecology that is on offer.

Specialist schools can greatly enhance an education system if they are carefully designed into it. Some of the best education systems in the world — for example, those in Singapore, Japan and South Korea — are built around specialist schools. In many other countries there is a leavening of specialist schools. The Bronx Science High School in New York boasts seven Nobel prize winners among its former students. There is the celebrated Junior College in Utrecht, in the Netherlands. Victoria's John Monash Science School, the College of the Arts Secondary School and Maribyrnon Sports Academy could, in their fields, become world leaders. The crucial thing is that genuinely specialist schools recruit on talent in the specialism.

This is quite different from funding neighbourhood schools to adopt specialisms. In England, the attempt to do so ended in failure, when funding was withdrawn in 2011 by the new Coalition government. In fact, the program was never properly an educational enterprise. Rather it arose from pragmatic solutions to political problems.

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The Thatcher Government in the early 1990s found itself with two embarrassments: sponsors would not come forward in sufficient numbers to pay for the new city technology colleges that it envisaged; and it could not afford to fully fund "technology", a subject which had been invented and made a requirement of the new national curriculum. A government adviser, Cyril Taylor (later knighted on two occasions), then had the bright idea of creating a small pot of money and getting ordinary schools to bid to become technology schools.

When the Blair Government came to power in 1997 there were 222 such schools (out of about 3,400), including one or two in languages, sport and performing arts. It was doubted the program would survive. But it turned out that specialist schools were also the solution to one of Blair's pressing problems. He had almost lost a vote on selection by ability at his party conference in 1995 soon after becoming leader, and he was only rescued by a rousing speech from David Blunkett, his shadow minister for education, who promised no selection (later corrected to no *further* selection) under a Labour government.

With Blair in power, diversity became the watchword. It was essential, it was claimed, to have as many different types of school as possible to give parents choice. But happily it also provided cover for all the existing school types including the grammar schools.

Technology schools, re-branded as specialist schools, became the main instrument of diversity. Egged on by the body set up (under the now Sir Cyril Taylor) to oversee technology/specialist schools, which kept presenting results to show that specialist schools did much better than the rest — not surprising since good results were a requirement to become one — the government funded more and more schools to join the program. By the time Blair left office in 2007, 88 per cent of secondary schools bore a subject label of one kind or another. The schools had been eager to sign up mainly because of the extra funding — capital and revenue grants amounting to more than £600,000 ($900,000) over four years for a school of a 1000 pupils.

But, whatever the merits of trying to improve schools by giving parents more choice, England's specialist school labels did not help. They confused rather than facilitated. Because the schools were not allowed to select on talent for their specialism, their results mainly reflected pre-existing intake differences (which were often considerable and consistent). Far from the science schools obtaining the best results in physics, for example, they were behind the modern language and music schools. Some schools adopted specialisms because they were weak in that subject and hoped the branding and extra funding would bring in more and better teachers.

Parents could thus find themselves with a dilemma. If their child showed a particular talent and interest in, say, the sciences, should they seek out a school designated as specialising in the sciences, or should they opt for one known locally to be good but labelled a languages school? The specialist schools program had become a nonsense and was rightly jettisoned. The Labour Government in the end attempted to defend it as a generalised schools improvement program. (The emphasis under the Cameron Government has switched to taking schools out, or allowing schools to opt out, of local authority control as free standing academies, but that is another story.) England's secondary schools still have subject labels which, in most cases, bear little relation to what they are good at.

Victoria may be able to avoid these pitfalls. The relatively small sums involved in the Specialisation Grants Program seem intended to give individual schools a lift. But how is Victoria going to be able to ensure that all children have access to the same opportunities irrespective of where they live in the state? In the case of science high flyers, does this mean that John Monash should have a boarding element, or should there be science schools of similar quality within the geographical reach of all children? Is it right that the Specialisation Grants Program should benefit only children who live in particular places?

The important point is that the system should be designed as a whole. This does not necessarily imply a heavy top-down approach, but rather the creation of a framework of incentives which give shape and direction to the individual energies of schools. Rather fancifully, I think of this as the vital and elusive cage to hold together the products of nuclear fusion.

Another example of the importance of designing the system overall rather than just attempting to boost individual schools can be seen in the increasing use of school league tables. England, along with the United States, has pioneered this approach — and it looks as if Australia is following suit.

At first, in England, simply publishing school outcomes was thought to be enough. Exam results were published as league tables in the expectation that parents would take note of them and choose schools accordingly. With funding following pupils (they became a kind of voucher), the expectation was that parental choices would drive school improvement and, therefore, the improvement of the whole system. But this overlooks the fact that the greatest contribution to a school's results comes from the abilities of the children who go there.

In effect, school league tables turned schools into football teams, and headteachers (principals) into their managers. And what is one of the most important things a football manager can do? Assemble the brightest possible array of talent! Similarly, some of the most

successful headteachers found ways of recruiting the most able and interested pupils. For most schools, selection by ability was ruled out, but some socio-economic characteristics (in England eligibility for free school meals) correlate so strongly with it that they are almost an inverse measure of it.

Covert social selection was practised in a variety of ways which successive admissions codes have sought to counter. But it undeniable that some of England's most improved schools achieved their success, in part, by attracting able pupils who might otherwise have gone to neighbouring schools. Some schools have become so successful and popular that parental choice has become selection by the schools, but based on social characteristics rather than directly on education merit.

League tables were about informing parents but, under Blair, severe sanctions became attached to schools' exam results. Failure to meet specified targets could lead to the headteacher being forced to resign, and the closure or merger of a school.

The way these targets are specified, therefore, has a considerable impact on the behaviour of schools. In England the main measure for secondary schools is the percentage of pupils in Year 11 (15–16 year olds) achieving five GCSE qualifications or equivalent, including English and maths, at grade C and above. Dire consequences befall any school not reaching a floor target of 35 per cent. This is being raised first to 40 per cent and then to 50 per cent by 2014. Any school in the danger zone has to pull out all the stops to survive.

The good news is that the incentives and sanctions are having the desired effect. The exam results of schools and pupils have been going up year on year. But questions arise when one looks at how the improvements have come about.

Schools' behaviour appears to have been changed in three main ways. First, there is a concentration on pupils who would otherwise have got a grade D, to get them over the crucial boundary, with perhaps less concern for those easily able to get a C or above and those for whom a C was out of reach.

Secondly, pupils have been nudged into subjects where they were most likely to get the "magic" five good passes, irrespective of their interests and what they hoped to do in the future. This has been exacerbated by an explosion in "vocational" courses given an over-generous equivalence of four good GCSE passes. Entries have gone up from just 16,000 to over 500,000 in little more than five years. Fine, if these courses were assured ladders from school to work, but in fact most mean very little and do not lead anywhere.

A third consequence has been that tremendous effort has gone into training in test-taking techniques. The numbers produced by tests and exams are not like those from thermometers or rulers which are closely tied to what they are intended to measure. It is perfectly possible to push up exam scores without any underlying gain in education: by teaching to the test, for example, or advising on repeated revisions to course work. In England there are three main exam boards in competition, so grades can be raised by choosing the easiest, attending training courses sold by the examiners, and buying the chief examiner's textbook.

While exam grades in England have risen under the pressure of accountability, independent assessments of the learning have not shown the same improvement. In the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) triennial testing rounds, England has been, if anything, going backwards relative to other countries.

Incentives can become perverse incentives. The present UK government is attempting to deal with the cliff edge at the C/D boundary in England by making available a wider range of information. This year for the first time it has published data on the progress of pupils whose performance in the tests at age 11 was at "the expected standard", "above that standard" and "below that standard", in the hope that this will prompt schools to move beyond the C/D boundary. But that is still the measure to which sanctions are attached. It is also publishing information on the percentages of pupils achieving GCSE passes in six core subjects (including at least two sciences). The public is becoming overwhelmed by it all. Paradoxically, perhaps information overload is the way to take some of the weight off particular measures — which is often more than the exams can bear.

England's experience with specialist schools, league tables and floor targets underlines the importance of designing education as a system rather than just concentrating on individual schools. If the focus is only at the school level, it can be overlooked that the advance made by one school has been at the expense of another, perhaps by creaming off its intake. Designing the education system with equivalent opportunities for all pupils, and appropriate incentives to take schools forward in the intended directions, is at the heart of equity in education.

Preschool teachers' strategies for supporting resilience in early childhood

Ann Taket, Karen Stagnitti, Andrea Nolan and Siobhan Casey

What do we know about supporting resilience?

Resilience is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been researched now for over four decades in a variety of disciplines including medicine, psychology and education. The earliest research tended to conceptualise it as a character trait, understood as some form of innate toughness inherent in only a few individuals, a product of nature rather than nurture. Contemporary research into resilience emphasises instead that, although there may be biological and genetic components, resilience is more appropriately conceived of as a human capacity that can be developed and strengthened in *all* people.

From existing research we know that, despite the most challenging of circumstances, some children do exhibit resilience and go on to thrive and succeed. Our working definition is that resilient children are "those who thrive and develop despite challenging circumstances". A significant feature of this definition is that it points to the dynamic and contingent nature of resilience.

In terms of what is important in protecting and promoting resilience, research has identified biology, caregiver relationships and the psychosocial environment (the

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psychological and social characteristics of the setting, including the attitudes, feelings and values of both children and staff in the preschool setting) as significant factors in early childhood development and the development of resilience in young children (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Self-regulation has been identified as a critical individual characteristic, vital in the preschool and school years for the development of appropriate and adaptive social behaviour. Preschool children become more capable of refraining from forbidden behaviours and can carry out increasingly complex directions in their social participation with peers and adults (Bronson, 2000). A sense of autonomy and positive self-concept are also important (Werner, 1995). Positive and supportive caregiver relationships provide support to preschool children and can influence self-regulation by providing feedback about emotions and guiding children in positive solutions to participation with peers.

Preschools and schools are environments that can provide protective elements for children by affording opportunities for positive peer interaction, significant relationships with adults other than parents, and social-emotional learning.

The Supporting Resilience project

The Supporting Resilience project is exploring the conditions and characteristics of resilience in young children and their families and communities, and looking at the educational, health, work-related, or leisure interventions that support and foster resilience. A collaboration between Deakin University, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), VicHealth (the state health promotion agency) and Community Connections (a statewide NGO), the project has been funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Its aim is to investigate the phenomenon of resilience in depth in the context of significant periods of transition for children and young people. The study as a whole follows three different groups of children through key transitions: from preschool into primary school, from primary into secondary, and into the post-compulsory period. Our findings will expand knowledge about the role of the environment, relationships within educational settings and interagency relationships in promoting and protecting resilience.

What we present in this paper is based on our initial analysis of the 27 children in our early childhood cohort.

These children were located in four preschools in Victoria (one metropolitan, one regional and two rural). All four are in areas judged to be relatively disadvantaged, with SEIFA scores in the lowest quartile in Victoria for socio-economic characteristics such as access to

materials and social resources, and the ability of individuals to participate in society; and with 2009 Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) scores showing that at least 20% of 5-year olds in the locality to be developmentally vulnerable.

Over the past year we gathered data through interviews with preschool staff, with parents (mothers in all cases), through observation in the preschool setting, and through play and other assessments of the children themselves. Drawing particularly on data from interviews and observations, we can identify a wide range of strategies that preschool staff use to support and foster children's resilience.

Strategies for supporting resilience

In the remainder of this article we discuss these strategies under three headings: supportive relationships with adults; developing self-regulation; and promoting social-emotional learning. We then discuss the importance of the preschool environment. We illustrate the discussion with quotes from four interviews with preschool teachers: Alice, Louisa, Pam and Sarah (all names are pseudonyms). The strategies we identified were largely common across metropolitan, rural and regional locations in all the preschools in the study.

Supportive relationships with adults: In discussing how the preschool supports children and families through critical situations, one preschool teacher, Pam, talked about the importance of communicating with parents and children, and establishing an understanding of the child's family situation before being able to listen:

> *...and then just with the child once we ... have a bit of a background about the situation. Just listen to the child. I think listening and observing (are) really important.*

The importance of being aware when children need time to be listened to and have their feelings acknowledged was emphasised. These times are dealt with in a responsive manner as Alice explained:

> *We try and talk about it quietly. Not as a large group, just a good chance to call someone over one on one.*

Alice discussed the importance of supporting parents, listening to parents and reassuring parents who were worried about their child. The value placed on listening was reiterated by Pam who outlined the two most important roles of the preschool staff as being "keeping the children safe" and "just really listening".

Louisa spoke about re-emphasising the importance of the caregiver relationship: "We reaffirm their relationship with their parent or that person. You know, reminding them about the things that person might do for them." She also explained that the preschool staff saw their role as being available for the children when needed and "giving them guidelines and how to deal with situations that arise that they're not comfortable with".

Developing self-regulation: Self-regulation refers to the child's ability to activate and manage cognitive skills, emotions and behaviours to actively participate within their environment (Bronson, 2000). Sarah commented on the use of the ideas outlined in the Williams & Shellenberger (1996) ALERT program to help children to develop strategies to recognise states of alertness, hyperactivity and agitation versus calm.

One strategy set out in the ALERT program was:

> *... just releasing your energy, so you might push on the wall or take deep breaths. We do a lot of deep breathing and calm down. We have a calm area that the children can go to so it has fiddle toys and you just have a fidget, so calming yourself down that way.*

Sarah said a sensory-based program was a realistic and sustainable approach to learning for the children, helping to teach them to remain calm and cope with the challenges faced in the classroom.

> *It's very calming to start with. And, well, you learn so much through touch, and sight and feel, and sound, so I just think that the more that we can bring nature into the classroom, it's realistic. You know it's sustainable.*

The sensory-based program Sarah incorporated into her preschool involved elements of the ALERT program, such as fiddle toys in a quiet corner of the room and breathing exercises with music. Children had access to the quiet corner at all times so they could use it independently or with the guidance of the teacher. This program also involved the children creating and using a vegetable garden, and the use of more natural resources such as glass jars for painting.

Providing calm, reassuring conversations for children whose behaviour can escalate was also important. Pam commented that resilient children's behaviour often did not escalate to a point where "they have obviously [lost] focus", but the calming strategies were used to support self-regulatory development in the non-resilient children. Alice, whose preschool had children who arrived with very little English, talked about the strategies she used to help children to cope by themselves:

I like them to try and at least make an attempt to deal with the situation themselves. ... I think what I actually do is I teach them some skills. ... If that person is making a face, look somewhere else.

Promoting social-emotional learning: Teachers spoke about being a positive role model, making mistakes in front of the children and highlighting that making mistakes is OK. Sarah explains:

I think that really helps, a positive outlook, positive role modelling, positive attitude, positive language, and "you can try". You can do it. Keep trying.

She also spoke of accepting and acknowledging the children's feelings and helping them to acknowledge those feelings in themselves, "providing that calming environment and accepting children's feelings and emotions for what they are".

Another teacher also spoke of the importance of acknowledging how the children are feeling and providing them with the words to express these feelings in an effort to help them understand what they were experiencing.

Providing a little extra care when children are feeling a little more vulnerable was also important:

Even my resilient children occasionally go through sensitive times where they get more fragile and they just need that little bit more extra care. They may not cope so well if somebody takes a toy from them, or [they] like getting their own way all the time in which case they break down; but they bounce back so much more quickly.

All of the preschool teachers created books and stories that involved the children. The preschool-made books were usually about outdoor excursions or special activities that the children experienced. Teachers also created narratives about individual children with pictures of what they did when they came to preschool. The children could take these books home and show their families. These activities were among the many ways of facilitating the child's social-emotional understanding of what they were experiencing — integrating their emotional and cognitive understanding of what was happening in their life.

What was very evident in all four preschools was the intention behind the many and varied experiences provided within the settings. For example, many activities were set out for small group work where children could work alongside others or share materials; the

teachers would move around the different activities providing the support and modelling of appropriate social-emotional learning in an effort to further develop the children's skills.

The importance of the preschool environment

Many of the strategies discussed above were supported by features in the preschool environment, both indoors and outdoors. Whether the preschool was large and spacious or more limited in its space, it was obvious that a lot of thought and preparation went into making the best use of available space. Indoors and out, particular spaces and places were created for particular activities. Inside, play materials and art materials were placed to allow for easy incorporation into the range of activities within which staff acted to support pupils in developing self-regulation and promote social and emotional learning.

In conclusion

All the preschool teachers in the study spoke easily of the multiple strategies they used to promote resilience in the children under their care. They discussed environmental and social supports that they had in place to help them to deliver these. It is the interaction of the preschool staff, with the carefully prepared indoor and outdoor environments of the preschool, that enables them to support the development of resilience in the young children they work with.

The Supporting Resilience project is following the early years students across the transition from preschool to primary school. Later stages of the study will identify how primary schools support the development and maintenance of resilience in their students, and how families and community resources contribute in these processes. Similarities and differences between preschool and primary school strategies will be examined and discussed in relation to the transition process. It is the overall intention to identify the conditions and characteristics of resilient students, along with the educational, health, work-related and leisure interventions that improve individual and collective opportunities in life.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to all the preschools, schools, teachers, parents and students who have agreed to participate in this research; the work would just not be possible without all of you.

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From teacher's questions to students' questions

Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana

Questions are a teacher's trusted friend. Teacher-generated questions make it possible to cajole students to think in new ways, to assess and re-assess what they've said or written, to probe, ponder, explore, clarify and even inspire. That's quite an energising list of verbs, conjuring up images of an active, engaged learning environment.

There are many great educators who have long celebrated the use of questions in the classroom. They draw upon a range of practices and traditions, including project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, Montessori, and Great Books, all the while aiming to model, encourage, and improve the level of questioning in the classroom. In some of these particular pedagogical approaches, there's also an implicit and sometimes even explicit argument that can inadvertently impede students from asking their own questions. The argument suggests that to climb the mountain of Bloom's Taxonomy requires that students need to know how to ask "better" questions, or what might be called "higher order" questions.

We have seen, however, that the demand for higher order questions from the outset can actually prove counter-productive to students getting comfortable and proficient at asking their own questions. Indeed, we have seen that the actual skill of question-asking can be discouraged when, from the outset, the teacher is concerned that the students will not be asking "good" or "higher level" questions.

In the arena of idea production, in contrast, the familiar path to good ideas, as Einstein pointed out, is paved by having lots of ideas. Unstated, but clearly suggested here, is that along that path, there were a lot of not so very good ideas that had to be jettisoned.

Today, the practice of brainstorming ideas is simply common wisdom, even though it is a relatively recent entry into the world of idea-generation, emerging only several decades after Einstein's maxim. Brainstorming as a practice made room for and even honoured bad or simply weaker ideas, with an acknowledgment that they may play a catalytic role in the eventual production of a good idea.

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We need to apply Einstein's Theory of Relatively Good Ideas to the act of question-generation as well. Students can eventually get to "better" questions or to higher-order questions if we make it easier for them to learn how to produce their own questions, "good" or "bad". But making it easy for them to ask questions can be a challenge in and of itself — as any teacher who has asked "Are there any questions?" knows all too well.

We've been working on this challenge for two decades, trying to figure out the simplest way to teach anyone, no matter their educational, income or literacy level, how to ask their own questions. It's odd that we have had to spend so much time trying to re-create an ability for which many students demonstrate perfect competency when they first arrive at kindergarten. The insight into the importance of learning to ask your own questions actually came from parents in one low-income community, who told us they did not come to school or participate in their children's education because they "did not know even what questions to ask".

Our work with them and with many other people learning to think and act on their own behalf helped us eventually to tease out a simple, but rigorous process that produces remarkably consistent results. We call it the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), a step-by-step process that promotes divergent thinking, convergent thinking and metacognition.[1] People who have never before asked questions use the process and learn to produce their own questions, improve them and develop strategies for how to use them. The results are often transformational and have been demonstrated in many fields.[2]

Recently, we've worked closely with teachers and been impressed by how quickly they can take the QFT and integrate it easily into their ongoing classroom practice. A second grade teacher uses the process in a very straightforward way for students to study major weather events, develop questions to drive their research and shape their reports, all the while using the metacognitive aspects of the QFT to reflect on their own learning. A middle school social studies teacher has students use the process to lay the foundation for their month-long multi-media projects on ancient Egypt. A high school biology teacher uses the process early in a unit so the students can see what questions they are answering as they move along in their unit. A high school mathematics teacher adopts the process to drive his pedagogy, encouraging students to "think like mathematicians and turn answers into questions". And teachers at all levels use the QFT to help students "get unstuck" when they state, repeatedly, "I don't get it."

The obvious idea of the value of students learning to ask their own questions resonates strongly with so many teachers. But the QFT is also being used by more and more teachers because the students do indeed wind up asking "better" questions or "higher level"

questions, They get there through a process that started with divergent thinking, producing many questions. Then, they started to look more closely at the questions they produced and classified them into just two categories: open and closed-ended.

As they begin to see that they get different kinds and levels of information based on the kinds of questions they ask, students begin to develop a new, more sophisticated understanding about questions that their teachers have acquired through years of practice. The QFT provides an opportunity for students to prioritise their questions and that pushes them to assess the relative value of each question, the sequence in which they need to be asking their questions, and even to discover new questions that they need to ask as well. The students move back and forth between divergent thinking, convergent thinking and metacognition as they reflect on what they learned and how they learned it.

The use of the QFT has aspects of both an art and a science. The "art" draws on the teacher's tacit knowledge and well-developed skills for leading and facilitating individual and group learning experiences. Teachers need to generate a Question Focus (QFocus) that will replace a traditional "prompt". It functions the same as a prompt, but by calling it a QFocus instead, it makes clear to students that it will serve as the focus of their questions, not the teacher's questions. The QFocus should be simple and sharply focused so that it can serve as a jumping off point for students' questions.[3]

The art of the QFT and the art of designing the QFocus are complemented by the "science" of a rigorous protocol that produces consistent results in setting after setting.[4] This does not mean that every small group or every classroom will uncover new meaning or great leaps of learning every time the QFT is used. But, once the skill of question formulation is developed, it's like a muscle that gets stronger and more capable the more you use it.

Teachers who may feel uncomfortable at first making the switch from asking questions of students to students asking their own questions, are quickly persuaded by the changes they see in their students. When students learn to ask their own questions, they themselves become acutely aware of a change in themselves: "When I ask the question," a student in a Boston high school said, "I feel like I really want to get the information I need. It's different than just answering the teacher's questions." A student in a suburban middle school observed: "You learn more when you ask your own questions." And, most poignantly, a summer school student in a remedial program to prevent being held back announced a change in how he felt about himself as a student: "You know, I'm getting good at this question thing. It makes me feel smart."

These are students who not only feel better about their ability to think for themselves, but they also demonstrate to their teachers that they:

- Are more engaged in their learning
- Take greater ownership
- Learn more.

These are powerful outcomes that emerge when students learn to ask their own questions. As one science education blog emphasised:

> *The ability to ask questions is the genesis — the "big bang" — where learning really starts. It is that moment where information that has entered the brain mixes with other ideas and begins to synthesise new ideas. Questions demonstrate curiosity. Questions represent the beginning of discovery and innovation. The first step of the scientific method itself is the careful formulation of a question.*[5]

It's made possible in subject after subject, age after age and community after community around the world by teachers who commit themselves to ensuring that their students leave their classrooms knowing how to ask the kinds of questions teachers already deploy to cajole, inspire and engage the brain to think in new ways. Educators in many countries are also now sharing with each other examples of how they are using the QFT in their work.[6] There is a sense of great excitement for, as one teacher noted, the students not only know how to ask the questions she herself often asks; her students now "ask different and better questions than I've ever heard in my 30 years of teaching". She and other teachers have seen new sparks of creativity and curiosity and have made the use of the Question Formulation Technique a regular part of their teaching practice.[7]

Notes

1 Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (Harvard Education Press: 2011).

2 In health care, for example, see results of National Institute of Health randomised control trials increasing patient activation and engagement. www.rightquestion.org/healthcare

3 For resources on designing a Question Focus, go to http://rightquestion.org/ or see Chapter 2 of *Make Just One Change*.

4 *Make Just One Change*, p23.

5 http://www.scilearn.com/blog/6-steps-to-help-students-ask-better-questions.php

6 For information about the educators' network and more teaching resources see http://rightquestion.org/

7 *Setting Off and Sustaining Sparks of Curiosity and Creativity.* http://www.hepg.org/blog/69

Overview of the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

Step 1: Teachers design a Question Focus.

The Question Focus, or QFocus, is a prompt that can be presented in the form of a statement or a visual or aural aid to focus and attract student attention and quickly stimulate the formation of questions. The QFocus is different from many traditional prompts because it is not a teacher's question. It serves, instead, as the focus for student questions so students can, on their own, identify and explore a wide range of themes and ideas.

Step 2: Students produce questions.

Students use a set of rules that provide a clear protocol for producing questions without assistance from the teacher. The four rules are: ask as many questions as you can; do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions; write down every question exactly as it was stated; and change any statements into questions. Before students start generating their questions, the teacher introduces the rules and asks the students to think about and discuss possible challenges in following them. Once the students get to work, the rules provide a firm structure for an open-ended thinking process. Students are able to generate questions and think more broadly than they would have if they had not been guided by the rules.

Step 3: Students improve their questions.

Students then improve their questions by analysing the differences between open and closed-ended questions and by practicing changing one type to the other. The teacher begins this step by introducing definitions of closed and open-ended questions. The students use the definitions to categorise the list of questions they have just produced into one of the two categories. The teacher then leads them through a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of questions. To conclude this step, the teacher asks the students to change at least one open-ended question into a closed-ended one, and vice versa, which leads students to think about how the phrasing of a question can affect the depth, quality, and value of the information they will obtain.

Step 4: Students prioritise their questions.

The teacher, with the lesson plan in mind, offers criteria or guidelines for the selection of priority questions. In an introduction to a unit, the instruction may be, "Choose the three questions you most want to explore further." When designing a science experiment, it may be, "Choose three testable questions." An essay related to a work of fiction may require that students select "three questions related to the key themes we've identified in this piece". During this phase, students move from thinking divergently to thinking convergently, zero in on the locus of their inquiry, and plan concrete action steps for getting information they need to complete the lesson or task.

Step 5: Students and teachers decide on next steps.

At this stage, students and teachers work together to decide how to use the questions. One teacher, for example, presented all the groups' priority questions to the entire class the next day during a "Do Now" exercise and asked them to rank their top three questions. Eventually, the class and the teacher agreed on this question for their Socratic Seminar discussion: "How do poverty and injustice lead to violence in *A Tale of Two Cities*?"

Step 6: Students reflect on what they have learned.

The teacher reviews the steps and provides students with an opportunity to review what they have learned by producing, improving, and prioritising their questions. Making the QFT completely transparent helps students see what they have done and how it contributed to their thinking and learning. They can internalise the process and then apply it in many other settings.

When teachers deploy the QFT in their classes, they notice three important changes in classroom culture and practices. Teachers tell us that using the QFT consistently increases participation in group and peer learning processes, improves classroom management and enhances their efforts to address inequities in education. As teachers see this happen again and again, they realise that their traditional practice of welcoming questions is not the same as deliberately teaching the skill of question formulation.

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Interview: Linda Darling-Hammond

On teacher education, Teach for America and professional standards

Interview by John Graham

JG: *We've already talked about the way in which an American model has influenced Australia's national school and teacher accountability scheme. A second idea which the Australian Federal Government "borrowed" from the United States is Teach for America, which has been renamed here "Teach for Australia". What is your view of Teach for America as a teacher education program? For example, how does it compare with mainstream university programs?*

LDH: Well, why don't we start with the fact that Teach for America is actually a teacher recruitment program not a teacher education program. In the United States candidates are recruited for a two-year stint often from selective colleges and universities — sort of a Peace Corps model. Because states currently require it, they do have to complete a teacher education program while they are in the classroom teaching after their five weeks of training in the summer. But they don't generally have the opportunity to complete very good teacher education programs because the best schools of education won't engage in a model where you skip supervised student teaching; which is at the core of a clinically-based learning experience for teachers. They do get teacher education of a sort, but it is mostly a recruitment program.

What we found in the US is that they have been very successful in getting a lot of people to apply to take a job where they don't have to have any training before they enter. If you're in a bad economy it becomes even more attractive to get a job before you train and to be able to earn a salary and so they have a very effective model of recruiting. Their attrition rates are extremely high so by the end of the third year/ beginning of the fourth year all of the follow-up studies find that 85–90% of them are

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gone. So it adds to the churn in low income schools. The studies that compare them to fully certified teachers find that they do less well, particularly in elementary grades, particularly in teaching reading, particularly in teaching English language learners and Hispanic kids (who are the biggest group of English language learners in the United States).

The few that stay tend to catch up by their third year. The 10-15% who are still there tend to do as well, and sometimes even better at teaching mathematics, but we don't know if that is because the less effective ones have left or because the training they had made them better. But at the end of the day, while it is a very effective approach to recruiting it's not a very effective way to build a teaching force, particularly in low income and high needs communities. Studies show that the schools where Teach for America teachers are concentrated have much depressed achievement because teachers do not stay long enough to become experienced and create a stable teaching force, to create continuity in instruction and so on.

I think it is viewed by people in the communities where there are concentrations of Teach for America teachers as a net negative for the kids, as another part of the inequality that those kids experience. There are now actually more than 70 organisations in the United States — parents' groups and disability rights organisations etc — that have sent a letter to Congress and put forward a set of principles for the new reauthorisation of the ESEA [Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as No Child Left Behind] calling on the Congress to end the practice of allowing people to teach in high need communities, and particularly to students with special education needs and English language learners, who have not completed their training and who have not got the benefit of much stronger preparation and expectation of staying in the profession.

JG: *Given that Teach for America is not a satisfactory way of preparing teachers, what do you see as the main components of a quality course of pre-service teacher education?*

LDH: A good model that I know about here in Victoria, and I'm sure there are others here as well, is where you have got a very strong clinical curriculum alongside the course-based curriculum — where you're focusing a lot on how students learn, how they develop understanding, a range of pedagogical and instructional strategies, how to build curriculum, how to build assessment — but you're learning all of that while you are in the classroom with experts who really emulate those practices. You're in a setting where you can learn and apply and reflect and continue to learn, much in the way that medical internship and residency evolve. I think that to the extent that we can build settings like

teaching hospitals, schools that are designed to be places for state-of-the-art practice to be represented, and state-of-the-art learning for incoming teachers to take place, we can really move the profession forward.

We all learn by doing, as much as we learn by studying and thinking, and you've got to be modelled and literate in practice to be able to develop it in the most efficient way possible. There is also nothing as practical as a good theory, so understanding the theoretical base for that work is equally important. But we need to be sure that teachers can learn from their most expert colleagues and learn from the best research in a highly focused fashion. Otherwise what we end up doing is just replicating what hasn't worked. You go off with some cooperating teacher, it may or may not be effective, often it isn't, that's what you learn, you replicate that. You also have to go to places where equitable practices are happening, because if you go to places where schools are behaving inequitably, where some kids are expected to fail and they do fail, that's also what you learn as an incoming teacher. Creating the context where there is a strong emphasis on building best practice and equitable practice, and using that as the companion to the university course work in a tightly integrated way, is the goal of a good teacher education program.

Just to go back to the previous question, in Teach for Australia and Teach for America what tends to be eliminated is the student teacher experience, the experience of learning in the classroom of an expert veteran what it is that you do to become effective. You just have to imagine that.

JG: That's right. Teach for Australia people have a mentor but they're not in the classroom.

LDH: Even If the mentor comes in and watches you teach a little bit and they say we should try this instead of that. If you've never seen a really well-functioning classroom with sophisticated practice taking place when you are learning, it's very hard to replicate it by imagining it. We know how people learn to engage in complex activity — they need a framework. It would be like saying "look, become a surgeon because you like to cut, periodically we will come and check up on you and see how you are doing". But you'll never have the nurturing from somebody who can actually show you how to do it well and how to do it responsibly on behalf of the patient, and in this case on behalf of the children. We should not have to learn by trial and error on children.

JG: Part of the rationale used by governments for introducing Teach for Australia was to raise the tertiary entrance level of people going into teaching. There was a concern that the entry levels for teacher education courses were not as high as they should be.

LDH: Is that true? Because that is often said in the US and it turns out that it's not actually true. If it is true then the question that people have to ask is while you may need to attract more able people into teaching, why should you trade off between investing and attracting able people into teaching and the quality of training that they receive and the commitment to staying in the profession that they make? If you were doing what the medical profession did a 100 years ago you'd be putting resources and investments into attracting good people into a profession that they are committed to stay in and that they are getting well trained for. Those two things should not be at odds with one another or somehow inversely related. That doesn't make any sense; that's not how in the long run you build the profession.

JG: We discussed two so-called "success stories" (as defined by the Australian Federal Government) from the United States. What do you think Australia should be looking at in American education systems (either at national, state or local level) if it wanted to learn something positive from them?

LDH: One of the things I think we have done effectively, and that others can learn from, is the process of setting professional teaching standards to increase the capacity of the profession. I mentioned earlier the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. It was the first time that teachers had actually developed their own standards, developed their own assessment of teaching (not done by a testing company), that really created an authentic way to look at teaching. We now know how teachers get better in their practice and the fact that it drives greater effectiveness. In schools where many teachers take up that practice it drives whole school reform as well.

We've developed those kinds of assessments now for beginning teachers, and there are places where they are making headway on creating thoughtful assessments that can reflect backwards on improving the quality of preparation. Preparing institutions have to demonstrate that they can create teachers who really know how to teach and we can look forward to more successful teaching careers for people who go through that process. So I think that's a place where there has been significant work done.

JG: What about a second area that Australia could learn from?

LDH: I think we have in the United States some of the most heavily impacted schools with concentrations of poverty and new immigrants. We've had some wonderful educators who have created school environments that have been successful in that context. I think about the work in New York that was started by Debbie Myer and Cook and others who created a whole set of public schools. These are not charter schools

but regular public schools where they redesigned the schools, created smaller learning communities, more personalised settings, more integrated curriculum and performance-based assessments. We've now got many dozens of schools, probably hundreds of schools across the country, where a new design for education has proven to be successful for the highest needs students.

Where we fail in this and other innovations, and I can tick off many, is that we don't have thoughtful systems for scaling them up and making them more widely available and dealing with the underlying resource and capacity problems that would allow us to do this more routinely. The thing that people can learn from the United States is that there are great innovations of many kinds at a variety of schools. The Singaporeans come regularly to take our best innovations and they tell me they then go home and scale them up. So our challenge is to build a system that routinely values the education of all kids and values the education of all educators. But we certainly have useful things to contribute.

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