SCHOOL
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Editorial: Understanding School Improvement

John Graham

This edition of *Professional Voice* moves away from the thematic approach we have used in the past. Previous editions have been structured around a set theme such as assessment and reporting, the organisation of learning, the middle years, social inclusion, partnerships with parents, school leadership, the national agenda etc. Each edition would offer different perspectives and a debate around its chosen theme and build up a complex picture of the issues involved. The disadvantage of this approach is that some readers may have had little enthusiasm for the theme chosen.

This time we were simply looking for good writing about current debates in education policy. By good writing we mean writing that questions taken-for-granted ideas, particularly those having a free run in the media and government policy documents, or which presents new and interesting research or fresh insight into the concepts which are regularly tossed around in contemporary education discourse.

So we have articles about Shanghai's PISA success and its wash-back on Australian schools, how to address social segregation in Australian schools, the implications of Gonski for disadvantage, a comparison of university performance of students from different school sectors, a study of school autonomy in New Zealand and the impact of My School on principals.

As it turns out some general themes emerge from the six articles. For example, four of the articles comment in various ways on the dominance of one-off literacy and numeracy testing in evaluating the quality of school education. Five of them observe education performance through the lens of equity and the redress of disadvantage. All of them in some way identify the effect of market ideologies on patterns of schooling and school performance. Other commonalities include the internationalisation of school and school system comparisons,

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the teacher quality agenda and the essential role of funding in any post-Gonski debate about improving school education. Collectively the articles paint a complex picture of the pressures on schools to "improve" and what that improvement might mean in the present political climate.

Bob Lingard and Sam Sellar's article looks at the new PISA "poster boy" — Shanghai — and the impact its pre-eminence is having on the debates about school reform in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2009 Shanghai (not China as a whole) entered the PISA international testing arena for the first time and ended up with the gold medal — its 15-year-olds were deemed to be the most literate and numerate in the world. The reaction in the three Anglophone countries was fairly similar; it fell somewhere in the spectrum between a wake-up call and a panic attack. The common line was a fear of falling behind in the race for economic superiority amid expanding globalisation (aka the "Asian century"). President Obama harked back to "space race" rhetoric and referred to another "Sputnik moment" and England's idiosyncratic Education Secretary, Michael Gove, saw the need for his country's education system to go on a "Long March" and have a "cultural revolution".

Australia's response was captured by a Grattan Institute publication, tactically named *Catching Up: Learning from the best school systems in East Asia*. Questioning the whole notion of resources making a difference to educational outcomes, *Catching Up* was strategically launched just two days before the Gonski report was released. It got huge publicity in a media looking for Gonski-related copy and successfully hijacked part of the media discussion about the first substantial review of school funding in 40 years.

The media, and various conservative politicians, ran with it as the simple, low-cost alternative to Gonski that would allow Australia to climb to the top of the international testing league table by copying the reputedly high performance education systems of Asia. The Grattan report argued that Shanghai's success had little to do with money or cultural values or out-of-school tutoring programs but was the result of better education policy. Lingard and Sellar point out that only by downplaying factors such as cultural values does the Grattan argument – that changing policy settings will make the difference – become valid.

They also note a linkage between the type of policies being ascribed to Shanghai by various politicians and associated think-tanks and the school reform agendas being pushed in the Anglophone countries. The policy settings in Shanghai are seen as far more sympathetic to these agendas than those of the previous "reference society" — Finland. They comment that the difference between those who continue to see Finland as their reference point and those who prefer Shanghai "likely results from political persuasion, with stakeholders emphasising systems and policy settings that reflect their preferred

reform agendas". More fundamentally, Lingard and Sellar describe the current embrace of Shanghai's education system, and before it that of Finland, as a case of "policy borrowing" rather than "policy learning". They also mention the irony of Australian politicians and others turning away from the educational progressivism of Finland to the highly competitive test-driven Shanghai for inspiration, while Shanghai education authorities themselves say they are looking to Finland for their education reform ideas.

The Laura Perry article dovetails into this debate. She compares Australia and Canada as a way of gaining a new perspective on the inequities in the Australian schooling system. She believes that Canada, another star PISA performer, rather than Shanghai or Finland, provides the best match with Australia. Like Australia, Canada is (mostly) English-speaking, ethnically diverse, has high levels of immigration and a culture, history and economy closer to that of Australia. Its school system is also more comparable to Australia's than those of Asia or Finland.

These similarities provide the basis to look at the significant difference in schooling equity between the two countries. The achievement gap in PISA between disadvantaged and privileged students and schools is significantly lower in Canada than Australia and Perry contends that this is the main reason why Canada is higher on the PISA league table:

> … Equity does not come at the expense of overall efficiency, or high calibre performance, or the achievement of privileged students. Instead, equity improves overall performance at the national level and improves the performance of low SES students and schools. It is a true win-win scenario.

Perry concludes that Canada has a more equitable performance than Australia because its schooling system is less socially segregated. Australia has one of the most socially segregated schooling systems in the developed world and research has made clear that school SES is a more important predictor of academic success than a student's social background. Compared with Australia, Canada has lower levels of school choice, a much smaller private-school sector and a relatively equitable school funding system. Perry believes that the political environment in Australia rules out any possibility of implementing policies to reduce the level of school choice or the size of the private sector, leaving funding as the one feasible policy lever available to governments to improve equity. This should be used not just to give schools more money but to decrease the funding disparities between them.

Bill Hannan also explores the issue of a social segregation in schooling but uses a very different method. Hannan's focus is those schools that have a concentration of disadvantage. According to the OECD, Australia has a greater proportion of these schools than other

comparable countries. Taking the Gonski recommendations as his starting point, Hannan considers school funding reform through the construct of a hypothetical government secondary school called Pariah College. Pariah College has a lot of poor students, an above average number of disabled students and many local parents avoid it. What can be done for Pariah College? Hannan suggests enough money should be given to the school to make sure that it is "free" to attend, to provide great programs to students and to be staffed "like a large rich school" so students have access to many options and small classes. It will also need to be governed, led and staffed by people who "think educable rather than disadvantaged".

Changes like these would make a positive difference to the "internal life" of this school. Externally however, the government policies that made this college into a pariah — choice and its associated education market — would remain. Like Perry, Hannan sees targeted funding increases to raise educational standards for everyone, but particularly for those who presently miss out, as the only feasible way forward. He concludes:

> Money for people who see all students as educable, have sound ideas about how to educate them and the freedom to realize their vision could bring about some change for the better.

Andrew Harvey and Catherine Burnheim provide some good news for those who support the value of public schools and who have long been dismayed by ill-informed and unrelenting attacks on their quality. Critics of public schools studiously ignore the very different SES profile of students in each sector and claim private school successes are the outcome of better teaching. Harvey and Burnheim's article is part of the growing body of research that contradicts this view. They report on their study into the performance of public and private school students in their first year of tertiary education at Monash and La Trobe Universities. They conclude that public school students with the same ATAR as their private school counterparts outperform them academically and have higher retention rates. While these results are consistent with earlier studies, their significance has increased due to the present demand-driven university enrolment system and the lowering of entry standards. The difference in academic success and retention between students from government and independent schools is most pronounced at the lower ATAR ranks. Harvey and Burnheim argue that their research supports efforts to widen access to university through strategies such as partnerships with schools, access schemes and bonus points in admissions. They believe these strategies should be bolstered, once students are at university, by upgrading support services such as scaffolded academic assistance.

Cathy Wylie's review of self-managing schools in New Zealand challenges the belief in the virtues of school autonomy. The Victorian Coalition Government has described school autonomy as one of its three "non-negotiable" education principles. It sees less systematised and more autonomous public schools competing in a school market against each other, and against schools in the private sector, as the best road to improved student outcomes. If this policy were research-based rather than a tenet of faith, Wylie's study would give its authors serious cause to stop and reconsider. She concludes that after 24 years of self-management in New Zealand the promise of school improvement has not been realised:

> School self-management has not been able to improve student engagement and achievement, or reduce gaps between students from poor homes and others, between the indigenous Maori and European New Zealanders….. If the challenges are to improve learning and achievement, reduce disparities in educational outcomes, and to develop schools so that they meet students' needs for new kinds of learning opportunities, then school self-management is not the answer.

Our final article is also about the effects of school marketisation. Roxy McGuire, as part of her PhD research, surveyed principals across the country to explore their "cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses" to the introduction of My School. She found that principals gave a big thumbs down to the website and to the so-called "transparency" policies (and politics) that produced it. Eighty per cent said that they did not trust the intentions underpinning My School and 75% said that they were convinced that the system did not have their school's best interests at heart.

These are damning conclusions and serve to illustrate the growing alienation of education professionals from the school "reform" ideology championed by their political masters. Understanding the causes of school improvement requires a peer-validated body of research, a two-way dialogue with teachers and principals and a capacity (and even more a commitment) to distinguish educational from political benefits.

Looking East
Three national responses to Shanghai's PISA performance (2009)

Bob Lingard and Sam Sellar

Shanghai has risen as a new PISA poster boy to challenge the preeminent position held by Finland's school system following its stellar "high quality/high equity" performances in PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006. Shanghai-China's dominant position in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 had significant effects on educational policy makers across the globe. In this paper we focus on policy effects in Australia, England and the USA.[1]

During recent visits to Australia, Finnish education policy maker Pasi Sahlberg criticised the policies driving change in Anglo-American education systems, which he refers to disparagingly as GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement). The success of the Finnish school system sustains opposition to the tenets of GERM (Sahlberg, 2011). Spurred by pressures to maintain economic competitiveness in the so-called Asian century, attention is now turning to Asia. References to its PISA results and the need to learn from top-performing Asian systems have been ubiquitous in recent policy debates.

However, in Australia, England and the USA the performances of Asian school systems have been used more as ammunition to further entrench and legitimise their education policy agendas. Meanwhile, policymakers in Shanghai and other Asian systems are looking West. In our view, there has been little substantive policy learning drawn from countries' PISA results.

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Sam Sellar is a postdoctoral research fellow in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. His research focuses on contemporary developments in schooling and higher education policy. He has recent publications in the *Journal of Education Policy*, *Comparative Education* and *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*. Dr Sellar is an associate editor of the journal *Critical Studies in Education*.

The OECD and PISA

The OECD was established in 1961 as a bulwark against communism and a showpiece for liberal democracy and capitalist market economies. The place of education within the organisation has changed dramatically since its establishment, particularly since the mid-1990s following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of neo-liberal global capitalism. A combination of developments contributed to the increased significance of education, including: new policy positions (for example, lifelong learning and knowledge-based economies framed by human capital theory); the creation of the Indicators of Education Systems (INES) program and the publication of *Education at a Glance*; the alignment of statistical data categories and data sets held by the OECD, UNESCO and Eurostat; and the emergence of PISA, which has become one of the OECD's most successful products.

PISA was launched in 1997 and assessments have occurred every three years since 2000. PISA measures the reading, mathematical and scientific literacy of a sample of 15-year-olds in each participating school system. The focus is on students' capacities to apply their knowledge in problem solving contexts rather than demonstrating mastery of the curriculum content taught in each system. Students also complete background questionnaires enabling analyses of relationships between performance and socio-economic status, and students' attitudes to learning.

PISA 2000 included 28 OECD countries and 4 non-member countries. By 2012 the number of participants more than doubled to include all 34 OECD countries, plus 31 non-member countries. PISA's reach now extends into new regions of Asia, South America, North Africa and the Arab Gulf.

Shanghai and PISA 2009

Shanghai-China participated in PISA for the first time in 2009. With a population of more than 20 million, it is one of China's largest cities. It has experienced a renaissance since the early 1990s and become a base for multinational corporate headquarters in China and a major financial centre. Shanghai's education system is a top performer nationally and a leader in terms of educational reforms. It is the only region of mainland China that has participated publicly in PISA. Its participation has enabled China to compare its top performing system with overseas education systems and provided a benchmark for internal education reforms.

Shanghai substantially out-performed all other OECD countries, partner countries and economies in reading, mathematics and science (see Table 1). Shanghai's schools are also comparatively successful at helping students overcome disadvantaged socio-economic

backgrounds, indicating that its system is top performing and more equitable than many others.

PISA 2009 performance, selected systems
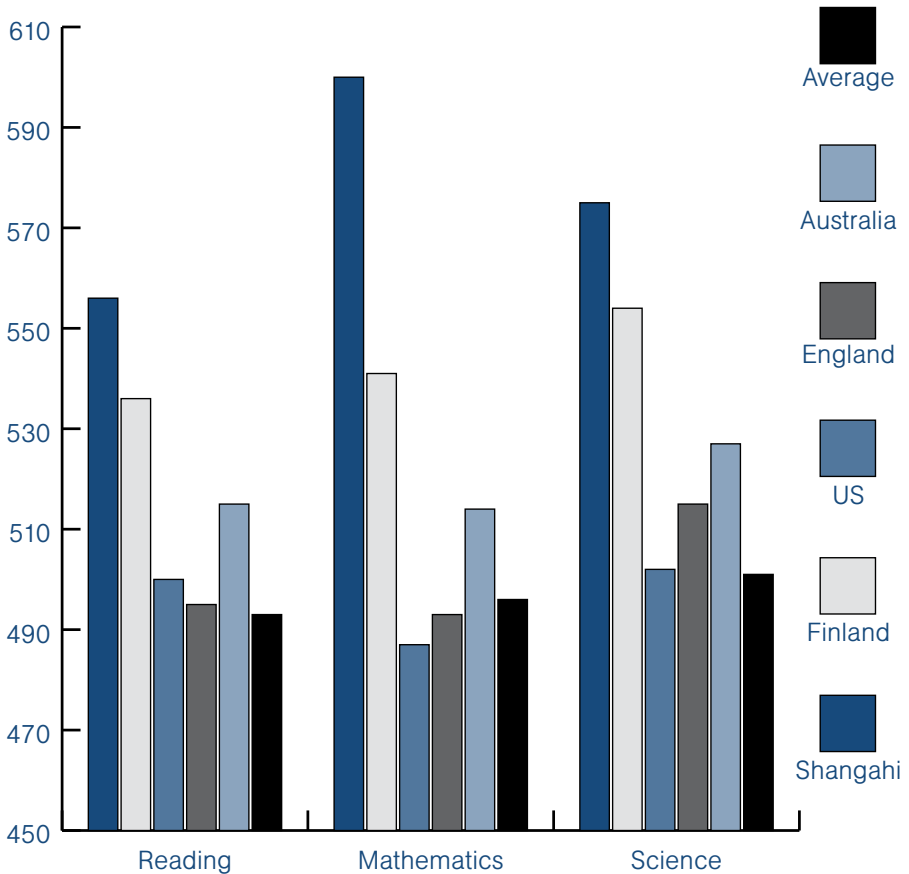
Shanghai's performance is likely attributable to cultural and policy factors (Tan 2013). China has a long history of exam-driven education dating back to the civil service exams of the 7th Century. Educational commitment, competitiveness and ambition are also prevalent social values associated with Confucianism. An exam at the end of secondary school determines university entrance. Shanghai parents place much value on education and expect their children to get high grades through intensive study and often with extra tuition.

Parents also pursue good preschool, primary and secondary schools for their children as a precursor to enrolment in a top university, and these school choice elements are manifest in the number of unofficial rankings of Shanghai schools on the web. The one-child policy and competitive culture of Shanghai for university places and jobs reinforce the value of academic achievement. As Simola (2005) has shown with Finland, cultural and historical factors contribute to performance in international comparative tests such as PISA.

However, these factors tend to be played down by the OECD and other analysts (for example, the Grattan Institute report on school systems in East Asia), who have instead focused on the effects of education reforms in China since the Cultural Revolution and more recently in Shanghai. We note that the value of PISA in influencing global education debates, and as an evidence for national policy making, depends on performance being at least partially attributable to policy and not simply to cultural factors. Shanghai's success has been linked to several policy settings from which other systems have been encouraged by the OECD and others to learn (see Tucker 2011). These include clear and ambitious goals embedded in a wider agenda to position the city as a global leader, and a focus on learning and instruction informed by research and professional learning. Shanghai's strategies for improving weak schools through pairing rural and urban schools to create professional learning communities, and by transferring teachers between schools and empowering experienced leaders in strong performing schools to manage poor performing schools, have also been widely discussed.

A mix of cultural, historical and policy factors offers the best explanation of system performance in PISA. Ironically, traditional approaches to education have likely contributed to the success of Shanghai's students in PISA at a time when contemporary curriculum changes involve efforts to move away from exam-driven approaches. Recent curriculum changes are a response to concerns that Chinese students are overly pressured and too focused on rote learning and exams, at the expense of creativity. Shanghai is trying to move away from transmission pedagogies toward curriculum more focused on 'real-life' problems. This has also been a concern in other Asian nations such as Korea and Japan, which are looking at Finland, with its high performance without high-stakes testing, for reform ideas.

'Looking East': Policy effects in Australia, England and the USA

Australia
Australia has been relatively outward looking in education policy and reform ideas. The Federal Government has recently turned to the US, particularly the data and accountability agenda of Joel Klein, former chancellor of the New York City Department of Education. Australian state and territory systems also borrow from and reference each other.

Australia has participated in PISA since 2000. Compared with England and the US, it has accorded its PISA performances a more central place in national policy debates, partly due to its close involvement in the OECD's education work. Australia has provided the two previous directors for education and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has longstanding involvement in the technical aspects of the testing. PISA is oversampled in Australia to provide results for state and territory education systems. ACER has analysed this data for education systems in Australia and used it compare systems.

Australia has performed relatively well in each round of PISA, generally ranking in the top 10 in reading, mathematics and science. However, it is now one of only four nations whose performances in reading and mathematics have declined, generating concern. *The Australian* (January 24, 2012) has prominently reported Julia Gillard's position that Australia needs to "win the education race" with other countries in its region. She said that "four of the top five performing school systems in the world are in our region and they are getting better and better", and Australian students must not become "workers in an economy where we are kind of the runt of the litter in our region and we've slipped behind the standards and the high-skill, high-wage jobs are elsewhere in our region".

The Nous Group report for the Gonski review of school funding and the recent Grattan Institute report on Asian education systems generated prominent media coverage. Both reports were framed in terms of Australia's performance in comparison with others. The Nous Group report draws attention to Australia's decline in reading and mathematics and the risk of "falling behind" Asian education systems, such as those of Shanghai, Korea, Hong Kong and Japan (Nous Group 2011, p. 7). The Grattan Institute report (Jensen et al. 2012, p. 2) begins with the statement that "today's centre of high performance in school education is East Asia". The influence of culture is downplayed and the importance of reform agendas in countries such as Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore emphasised. The report focuses on the Shanghai system, as do associated opinion articles and features in Australian newspapers.

These reports and subsequent media coverage have influenced politicians, policymakers and the public, whose attention seems to have shifted from looking "west" to the US and Britain for inspiration to "looking east" (or, in this case, north). However, we do not want to overstate the case here. There is a tension between those that continue to see Finland as an important reference point and those who are turning to Shanghai. This difference likely results from political persuasion, with stakeholders emphasizing systems and policy settings that reflect their preferred education agendas.

England

Historically, England has exported educational structures, policies and practices to its colonies. Like the US, it has tended not to look overseas for education policy ideas or it has looked across the Atlantic. English policymakers are confident in the quality of their education data and have been sceptical of the value of international tests such as PISA. However, more attention has been paid to England's PISA results since 2003, and particularly since the election of the David Cameron-led Coalition Government in 2010.

The political response to England's performance in the early rounds of PISA was ambivalent. The Blair government celebrated a relatively strong performance in 2000, but the 2003 results showed a decline in performance and were suppressed on the basis of a low response rate, even though it was only marginally lower than the rate in 2000. The 2006 results showed further decline in performance and received extensive, negative media coverage. This reflected the increasing international profile of PISA and the OECD's promotion of the program as important for national policymakers. It also illustrated the influence of media on politicians and policymakers.

The Conservatives used the decline in England's PISA performance to criticise New Labor's education strategies. PISA data was used to support a narrative of declining standards and to legitimise the need for change, in contrast to New Labour's claims of ever improving standards on GCSE targets and national tests known as SATS. Under New Labour, England focused on national data for improving standards, school choice debates and school effectiveness approaches.

The present Coalition Government's approach to education differs from its Labor predecessor and previous Conservative governments. Its 2010 White Paper began by emphasising the importance of international comparisons. England's PISA 2006 performance frames the positions set out in the paper, with the "Far East" and Scandinavia identified as systems from which England must learn.

This new emphasis on PISA results is also evident in speeches by the current Secretary for Education, Michael Gove. Following a visit to China, Gove penned a controversial opinion piece in *The Telegraph* (28 December, 2010) observing that "schools in the Far East are turning out students who are working at an altogether higher level than our own". He called for a "Long March to reform our education system" and, displaying a baffling understanding of Chinese education under Chairman Mao Zedong, "a cultural revolution just like the one they've had in China". In recent speeches, Gove has noted the need for England to learn from top performing systems such as Shanghai, and last year Foreign Secretary William Hague declared that "Britain is looking East as never before".

Historically, the US has looked outwards and inwards for ways to improve its school systems. In the early decades of the 19th Century, Horace Mann looked to Prussia to provide a model and justification for the creation of a mass, secular public school system in Massachusetts. It formed the prototype for schooling in other states. After World War Two, the US looked internally for reform ideas. Japan then became an important reference in the 1980s following the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report.

Barak Obama's presidency has involved an increasing focus on, and federal presence in, education. His activism in education is marked by his *Race to the Top* program, which replaced George Bush's *No Child Left Behind*, and his linking of federal school funding to performance management of teachers, a significant change. Darling-Hammond (2011, ix) says the features of these reforms include frequent high-stakes testing, increasing numbers of entrepreneurial charter schools, alternative routes into teaching and efforts to improve teaching by getting rid of teacher tenure, and the introduction of merit pay and sacking of teachers whose students perform poorly on tests. These changes are the antithesis of those instigated by Finland in recent decades.

The US has never done particularly well in PISA comparatively but this has not generated much public debate. But the response to the release of the 2009 PISA results was immediate. The headline in the *New York Times* (7 December, 2010) read *Top Test Scores from Shanghai Stun Educators*. The former head of President Reagan's Department of Education, Chester E. Finn Jr., was quoted in the report saying: "I've seen how relentless the Chinese are at accomplishing goals and if they can do this in Shanghai in 2009, they can do it in 10 cities in 2019, and 50 cities by 2029". Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said "we have to see this as a wake-up call" and "the United States came in 23rd or 24th in most subjects. We can quibble, or we can face the brutal truth that we're being out-educated."

The launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 symbolised Soviet progress in its "space race" with the US. The *New York Times* story in 2010 quoted President Obama saying: "Fifty years later, our generation's Sputnik moment is back. With billions of people in India and China suddenly plunged into the world economy, nations with the most educated workers will prevail." In his State of the Union address on 25 January, 2011, he said: "We know what it takes to compete for the jobs and industries of our time. We need to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world." America's "Sputnik moment" underpins its new East-looking policy focus.

In 2010, Arne Duncan commissioned an OECD report on lessons that could be learnt from the best performing school systems. The findings are collected in the book, *Surpassing*

Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems, Tucker (2011).

Allan Luke (2011, p.368) recently asked whether "American education is on the cusp of 'outside-in' reform – that the historical flows of expertise, innovation, educational science and policy from the United States have been reversed?" The commissioning of this research suggests the answer is yes.

OECD readings of PISA results stress the significance of policy and play down cultural explanations for different national performances. They also neglect the effects of inequitable school funding and structural inequality. Condron (2011) has demonstrated how poverty and inequitable school funding in the US are very significant factors in the poor comparative performance of US students in international tests in equity and quality terms. He shows how deep structural inequality is neglected in discussions of US performance in PISA and demonstrates statistically that if the Gini-coefficient of inequality in the US was the same as that of Finland, US performance in mathematics would improve by 25 points. Condron raises the significant issue of the impact of inequality and the need for broader policies to support improved US performance.

Conclusion

The concepts of policy learning and policy borrowing are often used to describe how policymakers look elsewhere for ideas about developing their school systems. They are now looking at education systems that perform best in international tests. These nations are described as "reference societies". Given the new focus on Shanghai we might more accurately speak of "reference systems" at sub-national levels. This shift is part of the rescaling of politics associated with globalisation.

Current reform agendas in Australia, England and the USA differ from those in Shanghai and provide an example of "externalization" (Schriewer, 1999): a process by which politicians and policymakers use Shanghai's performance to justify the necessity of further changes in their systems without any direct policy learning.

Few policy lessons were learned or applied when Finland was the PISA 'poster boy'. Central to Finland's outstanding PISA performance (in quality and equity terms) are several unique features, one being the high degree of equality as measured by the Gini-coefficient of Inequality. We stress its importance.

Also, Finnish students attend government schools and teachers have high status and

much professional autonomy. Teacher education is underpinned by research, a conception of pedagogy as intellectual inquiry and a focus on theory and practice. Teaching is an attractive career choice for high performing students. Education has been important in the creation of modern Finland, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Finland's success in PISA tests are the result of a 30-year reform project with complementary social and educational policies. Not much is made of these factors when policymakers reflect on the Finnish system.

Policy learning is important but policy borrowing is undesirable because the histories and contexts of particular nations must be taken into account. Policy learning demands the re-articulation of reform ideas instituted elsewhere. Shanghai students' strong PISA performances are the result of cultural factors and school reform agendas (Tan, 2013). However, in contemporary policy debates cultural factors have been ignored and policies referred to in *ad hoc* and inconsistent ways to justify reform agendas rather than to assist in real learning. As was the case when Finland was a reference society, Shanghai's performance in PISA 2009 is being used by policymakers in the three countries discussed here as ammunition to further entrench GERM.

Notes

1   For a fuller version of our argument here see Sellar and Lingard (forthcoming), Looking East: Shanghai, PISA 2009 and the reconstitution of reference societies in the global education policy field, Comparative Education.

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How to make Australia's education system one of the best

Laura B. Perry

Australia's education system performs very well in international tests of student achievement, such as the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA). But these tests have demonstrated that the system is not adequately serving three groups of students: those from indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds and those in rural areas. (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2008; Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, & Buckley, 2011). PISA has also shown that Australia has a much longer achievement "tail" than comparable countries. In other words, we have a large group of students who are underperforming. We are doing well but could be doing better. And some other English- speaking countries are.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard says she wants Australia's system to be one of the best in the world. She wants more accountability, efficiency and transparency and has focused on the work of teachers. But will her plans, which encompass standardised testing, league tables and merit pay for teachers, give us a better system? None of these mechanisms play a large role in the countries that perform better than Australia in PISA.

The countries that do better than Australia in PISA are Asian countries, then Finland and Canada. It is probably inappropriate to look too closely at Asian countries for inspiration. Yes, there are many examples of exemplary teaching in these countries but some of their cultural values are alien to Australia. For example, many Asian students spend most of their waking hours in school or studying at home, often with a tutor. This commitment to study would be considered unhealthy by many Australian parents, researchers and policymakers.

Finland has achieved global attention as one of the best performers in PISA but its students spend less time studying than those in many Asian schools. This makes it a good country to examine for insight, but Finland is also a small, fairly homogenous country, which some commentators argue makes comparison difficult (although I think these claims are

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overstated). This leaves Canada. Like Australia, it has an English-speaking heritage and high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity. Both countries have similar demographics, culture, history and economies. Their education systems are based on progressive and constructivist pedagogies, with similar teaching and learning practices. Both systems have a comprehensive secondary education system, meaning that students attend one type of high school rather than being sorted among vocational, technical and academic institutions as is common in Europe.

Barry McGaw, chairman of the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and chief architect of PISA, has said Australia should look at Canada for ways to improve the performance and equity of its education system (McGaw, 2010).

My research with Andrew McConney has shown that where one goes to school matters a great deal in Australia. Attending a school with a high socio-economic ranking (SES) is associated with higher PISA scores, and this holds true for all students, regardless of their own social background (Perry & McConney, 2010).

For a student from a middle class background, the difference in academic performance associated with attending a low versus a middle-SES school (a 16-point score difference, roughly three months) is not nearly as large as the difference associated with attending a middle versus high-SES school. Put another way, middle-class students who attend a middle-SES school are, on average, three months ahead of students from the same social background who attend a low-SES school. The same student who attends a high-SES school is seven months ahead of where she would be if she attended a middle-SES school. The gap is even greater when we compare the achievement difference between low and high SES schools. For a middle-class student, this performance difference is roughly 1.5 years. These findings suggest that high SES schools in Australia – the great majority of which are high-fee, independent schools – provide educational benefits that other schools cannot. This is problematic because they are accessible primarily to students from privileged backgrounds.

By contrast, our research shows that where one goes to school matters much less in Canada (Perry & McConney, 2013). High SES schools do not provide as much of an advantage as they do in Australia. More importantly, the academic performance of low-income students and the schools they attend is higher in Canada than in Australia, while the performance of privileged students is the same in both countries. Achievement gaps between disadvantaged and privileged students and schools are smaller in Canada than in Australia. This is an important equity outcome, and the main reason why Canada ranks higher on the PISA league table than Australia. Finally, the proportion of high performing students in PISA is the same in both countries (but the proportion of low performing students is higher in

Australia). This means that equity does not come at the expense of overall efficiency, or high-calibre performance, or the achievement of privileged students. Instead, equity improves overall national performance and the performance of low SES students and schools. It is a win-win scenario.

Why is the Canadian system more equitable? While we lack direct evidence, it is likely to be because it is less socially segregated. A much larger proportion of students attend a socially mixed or average school in Canada than in Australia – 56% in Canada vs. 38% in Australia (OECD, 2010). Australia has one of the highest levels of social segregation between schools in the developed world, higher than Britain and the same as the US. Finland has one of the lowest levels of social segregation between schools, with 63% of all students attending a socially mixed or average school.

Research has shown that school SES is a larger predictor of academic performance than a student's social background (OECD, 2010; Sirin, 2005). Regardless of their own social background, students who attend a school that enrolls many students from privileged backgrounds tend to have better educational outcomes than students who attend a school that primarily enrolls students from disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2004; Palardy, 2008; Sirin, 2005). School socio-economic composition is important because it is closely linked with learning environments and resources. On average, higher SES schools have more resources and more positive learning environments than do lower SES schools (Chiu & Khoo, 2005; OECD, 2005). This is why many researchers argue that the best way to improve the educational outcomes of low-income students is to integrate them in socially mixed schools (Coleman et al., 1966; Kahlenberg, 2001, 2012; OECD, 2005).

Why is the Canadian education system more socially integrated than Australia's? It is likely that education policies linked to marketisation play a role. By marketisation I mean three systemic factors: the degree to which school choice operates; the size of the private education sector; and the equity of school funding. Just as in a supermarket, where customers choose from a wide range of differently priced products, education systems can also be similarly organized, to greater or lesser degrees. The Canadian system is relatively unmarketised, with low levels of school choice, a small private sector, and relatively equitable school funding formulas. At the other extreme, Australia has high levels of school choice, one of the largest private education sectors in the world, and inequitable school funding formulas.

The Canadian case suggests that the best way to improve the performance and equity of the Australian education system is to reduce social segregation between schools. How can this be done? The three levers that policymakers can use relate to school choice, privatization, and funding. Removing parents' ability to choose a school goes against cultural

norms in Australia and contradicts the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Reducing the private sector is another way to go but again, this is not feasible in Australia, with its long tradition of private schooling. So that leaves school funding as the main way to reduce segregation. Remove qualitative differences between schools and parents will have little incentive to shop around for schools, which often results in social segregation. This is the approach that Finland chose in the 1970s when it changed its school funding policy.

The Gonski Review showed that many lower SES schools receive inadequate funding (Australian Government, 2011). But giving needy schools more money without addressing the inequity of funding between schools will not solve the segregation problem. We need to reduce funding disparities between schools if we want to reduce social segregation. As long as some schools receive a lot more funding than others, parents will continue to believe that one "gets what one pays for". Many parents who can afford the premium will choose the better-funded school. And thus the vicious cycle of segregation and superior resourcing continues.

Can a large private sector be reconciled with equitable school funding? Yes, to a certain extent. Holland, New Zealand and Britain, and some provinces in Canada, all have a robust non-government school sector but also lower levels of school segregation than Australia. They have achieved this by banning or dramatically reducing the ability of publicly subsidised non-government schools to charge fees. In these countries, non-government schools can be funded publicly or privately. They can receive the same per-pupil funding for operating costs as do government schools, but must adhere to the same curriculum and reporting standards and cannot charge fees. Or, they can charge student fees and lose all public funding. They can be integrated into the government sector while retaining their independent status, or they can be truly independent. The rationale behind this funding policy is that the state should support non-government schools but not elite schooling.

The problem with school funding in Australia is that many schools access private and public money. These schools are usually high-fee independent schools that primarily serve privileged students.

Do we continue to use public money to subsidise elitist education benefiting the few students who already have many advantages? Or, do we want to use limited public money to create an education system where all students can reach their potential regardless of the school they attend? If we are serious about making our education system one of the best in the world, the answer is clear – use precious public dollars to reduce differences between schools, not exaggerate them.

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Funding Pariah College

Bill Hannan

With the exceptions of the Opposition and the Government, the Gonski review of school funding has been well received. With his customary venom, Christopher Pyne condemned it as another campaign in an unending class war. The Government was studiously non-committal about funding, the point of the matter.

The elite school lobby was not its usual shrill self, no doubt keeping its powder dry in case the Government's promise that private schools would not be worse off meant they would not be better off either. In their lamb-like way, the Catholics followed suit. Government school lobbies were enthusiastic, and the media, normally pro-choice and wealth, were this time subdued or downright enthusiastic.

Few in the media put it better than Stephen Long, the ABC's economics commentator. The central message in the Gonski report, he wrote, was not in its guarded language but in the data from which one could justly conclude that "the public money that goes to elite private schools is subsidising the sons and daughters of the plutocracy" and that "government schools (and quite possibly many Catholic schools) are significantly underfunded".

"It is also clear," Long added, "that the decline in Australia's school performance on international rankings coincides with a skewing of Federal Government money away from government schools and towards independent schools — instituted by the Howard government and continued under Rudd and Gillard."

This inequality, so well conveyed by Gonski's charts and graphs, is a huge challenge to our national principles and particularly our treatment of children. Our rhetoric promises the best for all young people. Our practice continues the selective ways of the past.

Bill Hannan taught English and languages in Victorian secondary schools and went on to write school text books in these areas. He became a leader in the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and edited its influential journal, *The Secondary Teacher*. His curriculum expertise was later recognised by his appointment as chair of Victoria's State Board of Education and assistant chief general manager of the Victorian Education Department. He has written many texts on education including *The Best of Times* (2009), the story of the great expansion of Victorian secondary schools in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was unfortunate that in rescuing Catholic schools from collapse, the Whitlam and succeeding governments also chose to subsidise rich private schools, but at the time it did not seem to most to be counter to the ideal of good schools for all. It took a couple of decades for the doctrines of choice and market forces, bolstered paradoxically by the rhetoric of disadvantage, to undermine that ideal. But undermined it was, with the result that the old selective ways are still with us in slightly changed forms.

Can changes in funding do much to alter educational selection or counteract the worst effects of competition applied to schooling? It's doubtful. The Gonski report proposes a persuasive simplification of the present obtuse funding system, in the hope that transparency might generate more justice, but review members were forced to pursue greater equality through a large increase of money for schooling the so-called 'disadvantaged' groups. Most of the new money recommended by Gonski would go to schools where the "disadvantaged" congregate. Since disadvantaged schools are typically those avoided by families who can exercise choice, the idea is that extra money properly spent will improve the school's performance.

Educational disadvantage is not a new idea but it is forcefully outlined and becomes an argument for putting more money where it's needed. Are students with various disabilities, properly funded, bound to be disadvantaged in schooling? Why should we consider being bilingual, as most ESL students are, a disadvantage? Is either of these circumstances comparable to indigeneity or living in remote locations? Which leaves poverty, a circumstance that can sometimes be remedied by money but which can also be associated with the more intractable circumstance of lack of educational drive or stimulus in the home. Rather than lump these together under the rubric of disadvantage, it seems to me better to refer to each as specific programs. This is, after all, the way extra funding should be allocated. Providing general grants for 'disadvantage' has not worked. Measures for properly funding a disabled student, running a top ESL program, reducing or compensating for the now considerable costs of schooling, do work. Where we lack ideas is in educating indigenous students, those in remote locations and those with inadequate support at home.

Imagine an urban school with few indigenous students. Call it Pariah College because it has a lot of poor students, more than the usual number of disabled students, and many local parents avoid it. What can money do? Unless locals change their prejudices it cannot expect a different mix of students. With enough money, however, it can provide well for those with disabilities and deliver a red-hot ESL program with a dispensation from the Anglo-centric NAPLAN. It should also, as our forefathers promised, be free. It should feed its students and staff well, as happens in some other countries.

After that we get into more difficult territory, requiring ideas and political will. Pariah College needs to be well run. Everyone concerned with it, staff, parents, governors, bureaucrats, has to be optimistic, to think educatable rather than disadvantaged. Its leaders need to be much better connected to the community and to people of influence. The council will decide whether to put all its faith in a principal or in a leadership group and should have the power, in consultation with school leaders, to appoint and remove staff.

Money doesn't buy good teachers but it can be used to reward them. All staff should get extra pay simply because they commit to a school with seriously low performance. They should have time to pursue further knowledge and qualifications and to share their experience with teachers generally. They should have five-star accommodation, individual offices, the latest technology, a top chef, personal trainers, housing near the college if they want it and so forth, just as though they were in a rich school. They should also have aides to relieve them of a lot of routine jobs and help with tutoring individual students. And so on — you get the picture.

Pariah College should be able to develop its own curriculum. State, national or international frameworks should be used as guides only. It should be lavishly staffed in areas such as arts, crafts, trades, sports and languages. In other words it should be staffed like a large, rich school, not a small, poor school — more like the elite schools that, as Stephen Long says, "spend millions each year to give their students the best: top class sporting ovals and stadia, swimming pools, libraries, and in some cases music rooms replete with Steinways".

Pariah College should be responsible for its own testing and reporting, supervised and guaranteed by an expert external group provided by the state and answerable to it and the school council. It may need to break from the traditional straitjackets of school organisation and school times. Calculating so many teachers for so many students in standard class groupings is stupid. The proper measures are not class sizes and fixed-time lessons. Time on task and student grouping for particular tasks should determine staffing and times. Some learning can occur in large groups — watching a film is an obvious example, as is singing — some in groups of 10 or 20; some in small groups, some as individuals. School architects now seem to understand this, so someone must be briefing them. For most at Pariah College the school day, indeed the school week, should probably be longer.

The general picture is clear: Pariah College should be well governed, well led, well staffed, well organised, well taught, well resourced and responsibly autonomous. This is by and large what Gonski suggests about the internal life of "disadvantaged" schools.

What of external influences? Our college is after all a pariah partly because of government policies. Today's governments praise selection, promote choice and publish figures that sort the alpacas from the sheep from the goats. In this world, low performance corresponds with "disadvantage" as measured by socio-economic and language background (except in the handful of selective academic schools where the proportions of students with non-English speaking backgrounds are very high: 77% at Melbourne High, and 89% at MacRob).

I don't see this policy framework changing. The implementation of a national curriculum won't improve the lot of disadvantaged schools or their students. It may worsen it. Thus, the biggest external improvement could be for the federal government to forget about education policy and confine itself to handing over lots of money and collecting statistics (from a wide variety of sample tests) and for state governments to encourage schools to run themselves. Money is usually a good substitute for policy.

Had state education departments already sorted out their ideas on funding, school staffing, school governance, school autonomy and school facilities, we would not have needed more from Gonski than a sensible streamlining of the way funds are calculated and distributed. Had the ALP not panicked by promising rich schools that they wouldn't miss out, Gonski might have been able to recommend a bit less immediate spending, but it is extremely hard to work out how much money would be needed to correct our present serious inequalities. Unfortunately, money is our only hope. The dysfunctional system we now have with its layers of private, public, parish, posh, pretentious, popular and pariah is not likely to change all that much. Whether pariah schools improve their image, which tends to be what they now try for, is of minor consequence. Whether they continue to be named or avoided as "disadvantaged" is also of minor consequence. The key task is to raise educational standards for everyone, but especially, as David Gonski says, for those who presently miss out. Money for people who see all students as educable, have sound ideas about how to educate them and the freedom to realise their vision could bring about some change for the better.

Loosening old school ties:
Understanding university achievement and attrition by school type

Andrew Harvey and Catherine Burnheim

In Victorian universities, government school students are over-achievers. Following the work of Dobson and Skuja (2005), research has focused on the relationship between tertiary rank (ATAR), school type and university achievement. Results consistently suggest that, once at university, a government school student will out-perform an independent school student with the same ATAR.

The following study, part of collaborative research between La Trobe University and Monash University that involved examining data from both institutions, confirms the substantial gap in university achievement related to the type of secondary school attended by students. University retention rates are also higher for students from government schools compared with those from independent schools with equivalent rankings.

What are the implications of these findings for teachers, schools, and universities, particularly as access to university broadens? For teachers and schools, findings suggest an ongoing need to encourage aspiration and expectations among students. Students need to be realistic about their likely ATARs but also optimistic about their likely success at university if accepted.

Schools need to work with universities to develop alternative entry pathways. Universities may need to acknowledge the differential performance of government and non-government school applicants when setting their admissions policies to ensure that the negative effects of school type on ATAR are mitigated.

Andrew Harvey is director of the Access and Achievement Research Unit. Dr Harvey has published widely in areas of higher education policy, including issues of access, attrition, regionality, and teacher education. Other research interests include nationalism, identity, and Latin American culture. Andrew's previous roles include director of regional operations at La Trobe University, deputy director (academic) of the Bendigo campus of La Trobe, and executive officer of the Australian Council of Deans of Education.

Catherine Burnheim is manager of Partnerships and Pathways in Access Monash, Monash University. Dr Burnheim's role includes managing TAFE partnerships and access programs for non school-leavers. She has previously worked at RMIT University in policy and community engagement roles, and at La Trobe University as a policy adviser. She holds a PhD in higher education policy from the University of Melbourne.

Most importantly, evidence suggests that students from government schools with low ATARs are significantly more likely to succeed than equivalent students from independent schools. This finding has implications relating to the Federal Government's aim for 40% of people aged between 24 and 35 to hold a Bachelor degree or higher. Demand-driven funding has led to increased university places. Increased access has been achieved partly by lowering entry barriers, raising questions about academic standards and quality of student performance.

Achievement

Recent research by La Trobe and Monash universities discovered substantial differences in achievement by school type. Tables 1 and 2 show first-year student success rates at the respective universities, based on weighted average marks. At both universities, government school students outperform students with similar ATARs from the other school sectors. At La Trobe, there is an average difference of five marks between government and independent school students who enter the university with equivalent ATARs between 60 and 90. At Monash, a similar difference exists, highlighting the relative over-achievement of government school students given their tertiary rank.

Table 1: La Trobe University 2010 first-year weighted average mark for secondary school leavers by ATAR band and school type
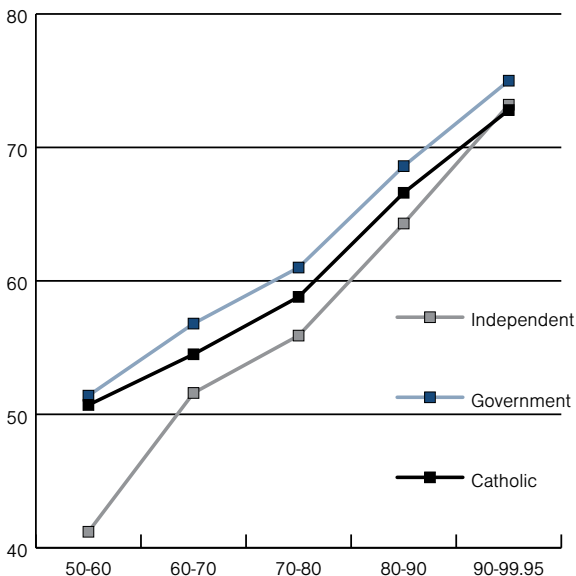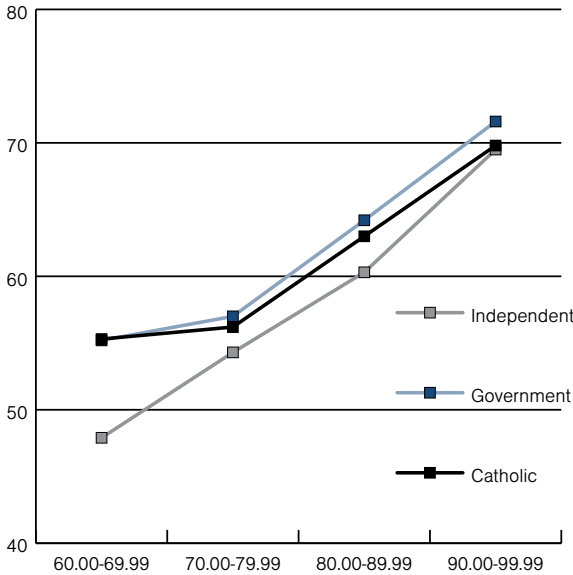
Table 2: Monash University 2010 first year weighted average mark for secondary school leavers by ATAR band and school type

This achievement data is consistent with earlier studies, but its significance has arguably increased. In the demand-driven system, many universities have lowered their entry standards, with ensuing debate about the appropriateness of accepting students with relatively low ATAR scores. For example, Deakin University's published cut-off ATAR for secondary teaching/Arts fell from 81 in 2010 to 51.55 in 2013, resulting in 250 extra first-round offers. At the University of Ballarat, the published ATAR cut-off for teaching fell to 43.35 in 2013 (Preiss & Butt, 2013).

Enrolment growth is imperative for many universities, but lower entry barriers may encourage students who are not academically ready for higher education. Are universities setting some students up to fail?

There is some correlation between ATAR and achievement, although this varies by discipline and institution, and correlation appears to be strongest for students with ATARs over 80. Students entering university with a rank of 90 or above are likely to average more than 70 in their first year at both universities.

However, the story at the lower end of rankings is different. At La Trobe, government school students with an ATAR between 50 and 60 usually pass their first year of study, but independent school students in the same ATAR band are likely to fail.

Similarly, there is a relatively high failure rate for independent school students at Monash with ATARs below 70.

Differences in university achievement by school type are relatively small among the best-performed school students. By contrast, school type is a significant indicator of success among those with relatively low ATARs.

Having a relatively low ATAR may be a risk in terms of university achievement, but this risk appears to be lessened when the students hail from government schools.

Although universities are trying to attract students with relatively low ATARs, these students are often reluctant to accept a university offer. Our study of university applications in regional Victoria in 2010 found that the applicants with ATARs between 60 and 69 received more offers than the 80-89 ATAR cohort, but these resulted in fewer enrolments.

Similarly, the 50-59 ATAR cohort made more applications and received more offers than the 90-99 ATAR cohort, but again recorded fewer enrolments (Harvey et al. 2012). The impact of stratification is powerful and continues past the point of offer. School achievement affects not only the chances of receiving a university offer, but the likelihood of accepting an offer. Even though their prospects of success at university are high, many government school students are still reluctant to enter university if they receive a relatively low tertiary rank. This suggests that psychological and cultural barriers to entry persist.

Retention

Andrew Norton has highlighted that attrition rates for university students with low ATARs are relatively high. Drawing on evidence presented in the Base Funding Review, Norton (2012) argues that ATAR might predict completions better than it can predict achievement. If students with relatively low school achievement are unlikely to complete a university degree, should they be encouraged to apply? This dilemma is underlined by evidence that many students who begin a degree but do not complete it receive little financial benefit (Tinto 2012: 1). Non-completers do not receive a significant wage premium over those who never undertake a degree and are often demoralised or stigmatised by their experience (Lomax Smith et al. 2011: 76).

Data from La Trobe and Monash indicates that there is a correlation between ATAR and attrition. Commencing students who receive a rank above 80 are highly likely to remain at both institutions. But analysis of students with low ATARs shows different results.

At La Trobe, commencing university students from independent schools who receive an ATAR between 50 and 60 are about 10% more likely to withdraw than government school students with equivalent rankings. Independent school students within all ATAR bands face a higher risk of attrition but the gap between school sectors is most prominent in the lower bands.

Similarly, differences in retention by school type at Monash are most visible at the lower end of the ATAR spectrum. Catholic school students at both universities record similar first-year attrition rates to those of government school students.

These findings should be treated with caution: they pertain to two institutions only and they measure only institutional retention, excluding students who transfer to other universities.

Further analysis is required to determine whether these patterns are repeated in other universities. If the attrition gap between government and independent school students is a consistent phenomenon, it may have implications for school curriculum and pedagogy, and the nature of universities' engagement with independent schools.

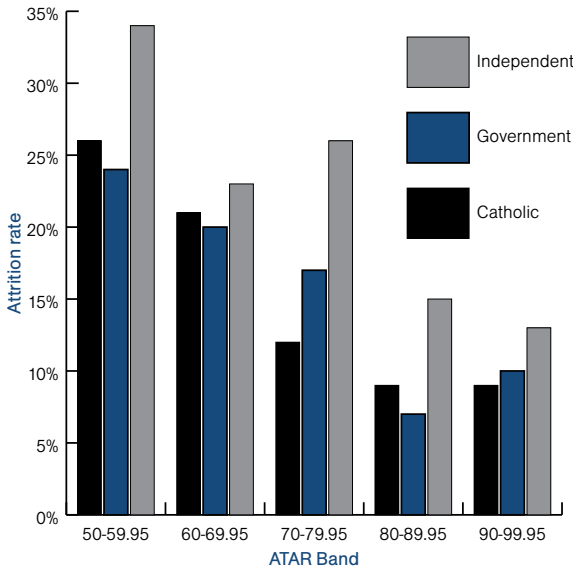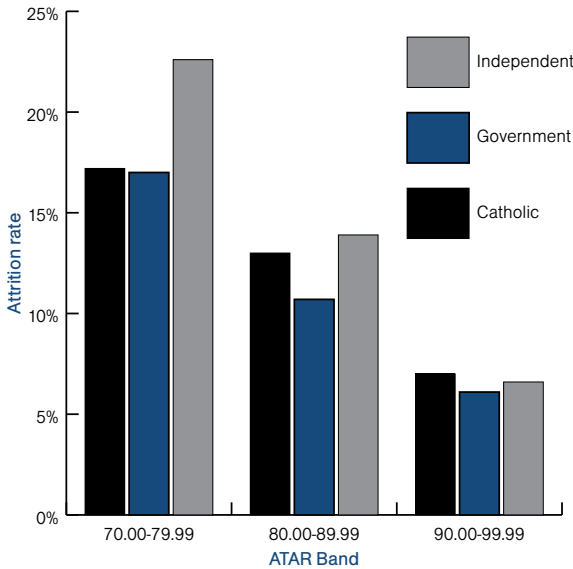Table 3: La Trobe University: attrition of commencing students by ATAR and school sector 2010

Table 4: Monash University: attrition of commencing students by ATAR and school sector 2010

Inputs and outputs

The impact of socio-economic status (SES) on ATAR is well documented. The relatively high SES of independent school students contributes to their comparatively high ATARs. As the Nous Group report for the Gonski review of school funding argued, when the SES status of the school and student are considered, "performance differences at the individual level between those attending government and non-government schools disappear" (2012). Although non-government schools produce higher results overall, this is due mostly to the students' backgrounds rather than the schools.

Nevertheless, schools do not simply reflect the SES status of their cohorts. In a previous study (Harvey et al. 2012), the authors found substantial differences by school type in the preferences of prospective university students from regional Victoria. Applicants from independent schools were much more likely than government school applicants to move to Melbourne to study. These pronounced differences by school type were not explicable by SES. High SES students were only slightly more likely to move than low SES students, yet students at independent schools were overwhelmingly likely to move. The data suggest that there are powerful cultural factors within the school sectors that influence student preferences. Similarly, SES status may not fully explain gaps in university achievement and attrition.

Implications

Differences by school type identified by research may be useful to inform strategies for university access, achievement and retention. The relatively strong performance of government school students with lower ATARs at university supports the continued promotion of broad access to higher education through strategies such as school partnerships, access schemes and bonus admission points.

Further broadening of access may help compensate for the apparent relative disadvantage of government school students in accessing higher education.

Supporting government school students' access to higher education is not a substitute for continued efforts to raise student achievement. More work is required to ensure that more students complete Year 12 and do so with the expectation of further study.

Retention in Years 10 to 12 at government schools fell from 82.7% to 81.3% in the decade to 2012. (DEECD 2012, p.24). The equivalent retention figure for independent schools in 2012 was 95.5%. Recommendations by the Gonski review of school funding aim to ameliorate government school disadvantage.

It is crucial that teachers, families and school staff encourage students to consider higher education. Government school students also need to be encouraged to apply through the Victorian Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) where appropriate. More transparent information about achievement, attrition, outcomes and access is important. Similarly, students could be further advised about the different pathways available, including VET and enabling programs, which can improve a student's preparedness for university and reduce the risk of attrition. Strengthening the resilience of applicants from independent schools is a further challenge.

For universities, our analysis suggests two lessons for supporting student achievement and retention. First ATAR is linked to achievement and attrition in the two universities studied. Secondly, students from independent schools with relatively low ATARs face a comparatively high risk of failing units or withdrawing from university study.

These findings suggest that some students with relatively low ATARs may require scaffolded academic support and support from university services. Knowledge of students' educational background could be useful in planning required levels of support.

However, it is important that universities do not make assumptions about students based on their educational or demographic backgrounds. Normalising the use of academic and support services on campus could be more useful than targeting specific groups. For example, some universities are taking preventative rather than remedial action by integrating sessions on mindfulness and resilience, as well as study skills, into their core curricula.

Also useful are early warning systems that identify students at risk of withdrawing, such as those who have not submitted assignments, accessed emails, or used the university's learning management system. Reducing attrition requires evidence and ethics: universities need to understand the factors influencing retention and success, but to avoid stereotyping or stigmatising students.

All students need to be encouraged to be ambitious and fulfil their potential. University study should be a real option for all students, regardless of their SES or school-sector background. Our study confirms that students' ATAR-measured school performance is a useful but insufficient predictor of success and retention in further study.

Increasing the supply of higher education graduates remains a national priority. Providing all individuals with the chance to realise their potential is equally important. The secondary and tertiary education systems must work to achieve both goals.

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A cautionary tale:
Self-managing schools in New Zealand

Cathy Wylie

In 1989, all of New Zealand's then 2700 state and state-integrated schools became self-managing. Central to this change, encapsulated in *Tomorrow's Schools*, was the assumption that government rules were schools' biggest hindrance. Freeing schools from their ties to education boards (primary schools), the inspectorate and Department of Education (secondary) would also make them accountable for their performances.

Public opinion was mixed and included concerns that inequality would grow between schools in different areas. Principals and teachers generally shared these concerns and, with the new boards of trustees (each school has its own governing board elected by parents), successfully resisted the initial plan to bundle all a school's staff and operations funding into one grant.

Several working groups investigated this "bulk" or "full" funding. All concluded that while it theoretically provided schools with more flexibility, it would undermine equality of opportunity, one of the key intents of the *Tomorrow's Schools* plan. Bulk funding would allow some schools to attract and retain experienced and capable teachers, and teachers in shortage areas, at the expense of other schools and their students.

In 1994, the chairman of the last of these working groups, who was also the chief executive of one of NZ's largest banks, told the then government that he doubted that all schools had the capacity to self-manage. Also, the onus on schools to self-manage without any support while competing with other schools for students (funding) was creating "a degree of inertia and uncertainty in schools" that was impeding progress.

He said NZ was unique among OECD countries in having no intermediary structures between schools and the centre, and suggested that "many functions such as property management, equity funding, sharing of best practice, risk management and dispute resolution could well be managed in regional support units" (cited in Wylie 2012, pp. 126-127).

Cathy Wylie is a chief researcher with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Her work focuses on policy and its impact on teaching and learning, and how change occurs in schools. Her recently published book, *Vital Connections*, analyses the impact of the shift to self-managed schools in 1989, and the difficulties this has created for addressing key educational issues, including inequality.

Two decades later these warnings about the cost of school self-management continue to resonate. Even without full funding, school self-management has soaked up time and energy in financial and property management at the expense of student learning. NZ principals spend more time on administration than do many of their international counterparts. Competition between schools for students and laissez-faire approaches to allowing over-subscribed schools to set their own zones and enrolment policies in the 1990s created winners at the expense of others, often those in low-income areas. Even without full funding, schools serving low-income and rural areas often struggled to attract and retain teachers and principals and were on their own in dealing with the problem.

Schools were on their own far more than they had been in trying to improve student learning. Freeing schools from "the bureaucracy" gave them more freedom in allocating funding and staffing (secondary schools already had these freedoms) but the bureaucracy had delivered support and connections that schools relished.

Feedback from inspectors and advisers, the chance to be put in touch with another school working on similar things, and learning about good practice in other schools were benefits that ended abruptly when school self-management arrived and the department was restructured. Several leaders of the ministry that replaced the Department of Education in the 1990s have said it was a mistake to have restructured the department at the same time that schools were set adrift.

The new Ministry of Education was primarily a policy agency and too lean to be able to work effectively with schools. The new agency charged with conducting three-yearly reviews of each school, the Education Review Office, offered none of the support that school leaders sought.

The result was that schools could and did get into difficulty. The proportion of schools that did not remain within the three-yearly ERO cycle (NZ has so far resisted labelling schools in terms of "risk" or "failure") remained fairly consistent year to year, between 16 to 20%. Although schools serving low-income areas and small and rural schools are more likely to struggle to meet ERO standards, they are not the only schools that run into problems. Nor does the struggling group consist of the same schools every year. The consistency of the 16 to 20% figure indicates little improvement in schools' capacity to self-manage. Even now, with the Ministry of Education doing more to help schools with their planning and reporting, and ERO being more ready to support schools that do not remain within the three-year review cycle, many schools are still struggling. Because schools are self-managing they can also continue to refuse support unless things are so clearly bad that the Government appoints a commissioner to replace the school's board of trustees.

Separating schools from education agencies has made it more difficult to share and build knowledge in the system. More than half of NZ's principals would like more career opportunities within education. Ironically, the greater demands that self-management imposes on principals means their salaries are now higher than those in government agencies. But the jobs available in government agencies have also become less attractive to school principals and curriculum leaders. This has resulted in much erosion of schools' experience and knowledge necessary for effective system leadership. Increasingly, important roles in the still largely policy-focused Ministry of Education have gone to people without strong educational experience, creating problems in policy and operational design.

The shift to school self-management was heralded as cost saving on the premise that savings would be made on the bureaucracy. Analysis at the time by two management consultancies in England and NZ that properly implemented school self-management was more costly was ignored. There was an assumption that schools could source cheaper services and materials: sometimes this was true. But individual schools lacked the purchasing power that education boards and the department had had. Schools paid more or selected cheaper options that proved not to be in the long-term. ICT provision has been a big problem. Schools have made decisions they came to regret and interoperability of systems has stymied information sharing.

School funding has been a perennial difficulty for principals. They have become increasingly reliant on their own fundraising to cover the extra costs of self-management and rising expectations of what schools should deliver. Fee-paying international students have often been crucial to secondary schools' viability, although that income source has proved vulnerable when economic downturns overseas reduce international student numbers. In 2012, a quarter of secondary principals reported that, in order to lift enrolments, they spent more on marketing their school (to local and international students) than they would like, and 10% more on property than they would like (Wylie 2013).

NZ state schools cannot legally charge fees but most ask parents for donations. In high-income areas, hundreds of dollars are sought and most parents pay it. In low-income areas, annual donations sought are as low as $30, with less than half the parents paying it. Although schools in low-income areas do get additional funding per student, the total revenue per student (after adding school-raised money) is often lower than that of students in high-income area schools. Schools in low-income areas find it hard meeting the needs of their students with the funding they receive. Schools in middle-income areas envy the additional money that poorer schools get and the extra money that high-income area schools can raise.

School self-management has resulted in much greater competition between schools for students. Many schools, particularly in high-income areas, have enrolment zones to safeguard local admissions, with any spare places allocated by ballot. Schools had much latitude to set their own zones in the 1990s, resulting in the growth of schools in higher-income areas at the expense of those in middle and low-income areas. Although that power has been restricted somewhat, it left a legacy of government-funded school building expansion and school reputations that continue to influence families. Schools in low-income areas have often had to grapple with declining or volatile rolls, particularly at the secondary level, making it harder to offer a full range of courses and extramural opportunities.

The *Tomorrow's Schools* rationale was that schools would naturally cluster to share good practice and resources. But competition between schools and time demands of self-management undermined this. Additional government funding was given to school clusters to encourage collaboration but they often dissolve when funding ends. Some clusters have endured but they are the exception rather than the rule.

The cumulative effect of NZ's experience of school self-management has been corrosive. It has not improved student engagement and achievement, or reduced achievement gaps between students from poor homes and others, or between indigenous Maori and European New Zealanders.

Gains at the national level have come from the shift to a standards-based qualification system in secondary schools and from particular initiatives and research-based professional development rather than structural changes. Certainly there is some innovation occurring in individual schools but because schools are not well connected it has been harder to disseminate good practice than it was before self-management.

If the challenges are to improve learning and achievement, reduce disparities in educational outcomes and to help schools meet students' needs for different learning opportunities, school self-management is not the answer.

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Collaboration and competition:
Government school principals respond to the *My School* web site

Roxy McGuire

"Competition between schools for market share is encouraged [in the current educational climate]. However, at the same time, schools are expected to cooperate with each other and share … and form partnerships."

– Stephen Ball, *The Education Debate* (2008).

A system in which schools compete for students makes "it possible for governments and educational regulatory bodies to locate blame for 'poor performance' or 'ineffectiveness' at the local and/or school level" (Rowe, K., Turner, R., & Lane, K., 2002, p. 166) rather than acknowledge research, including that published in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, which posits that there is "a large body of evidence which demonstrates that the single most important predictor of subsequent achievement in school is obtained by using measures of intake" (Goldstein & Spiegelhalter, 1996, p. 395).

My 2011 research explored government school principals' experiences of collaboration and competition following the launch in 2010 of the *My School* website, a tool enabling comparisons of schools' academic performance.

Responses were mixed, with experiences of one or the other, or both, but almost half of the 523 principals surveyed said the web site had had no impact on their collaboration with other schools or competition with them.

A total of 523 principals responded to the 105-item survey; 390 principals responded to some or all of eight open-ended questions; and 17 principals were interviewed. The principals reported a wide spectrum of ICSEA ratings and NAPLAN results.

Roxy McGuire is juggling the demands of a school-based job with post-graduate study. Her article for *PV* is part of a PhD in progress at the University of Melbourne. She can be contacted at mcguire.roxy.r@edumail.vic.gov.au. Additional results from this research can be found in the March 2013 issue of *Australian Educational Leader* and the Summer 2012 issue of the *Principal Matters* journal.

Principals from all states and territories responded in numbers roughly proportional to the number of government schools in each jurisdiction, except for Victoria, which was over-represented, and NSW, which was under-represented. Of the respondents, 50.7% were female; 58.5% were aged between 47 and 57; and 64.2% had been a principal for between one and 10 years.

The schools represented were rural (36.7%); remote (6.1%), outer-metropolitan (20.8%) and metropolitan (36.3%). Primary principals made up 65.6% of respondents, 21% were secondary principals, with the remainder a mix of middle, senior secondary, P-12, special and alternative school principals.

The findings reported here focus on principals' responses to seven survey items about *My School's* impact on collaboration and competition. Principals were also asked to respond to the following: "How has the *My School* web site affected the levels of collaboration and competition between schools?"

Almost half of the principals who responded to this question said it had had no effect on levels of collaboration or competition between schools. Slightly more than half of the principals who responded spoke of changed levels of collaboration and/or competition between schools.

Quantitative results from the survey items and a selection of principal quotes from the qualitative data are listed below. Principals were asked to respond to the statement "The *My School* web site initiative has caused me to ..."

22.3% of principals reported feeling less isolated from other principals following the launch of *My School*.
- "We're all working away trying to improve as much as we can and we share our data and we're collegial around that."
- "What it's done is helped state schools' improvement push to realise that it's much more beneficial if we can work together collaboratively versus just continue to create work in isolation."

26% of principals contacted other principals within their like-school groups (as defined by ACARA) to discuss possible strategies for improvement.
- "We have actively sought out other schools that are performing better than our students ... as our Year 3 results are not as good as other year levels."

Asked whether they would contact like-school principals to discuss strategies for improvement, principals said:

- "I think I wouldn't do it … because every context is unique."
- "No, no. I think because that's an artificial connection, it's not a real connection."
- "For me to ring up someone and say, 'you know, I've noticed your results are really good, can you tell me how you did that?' I would think that they would have a 'you're a bit loopy' response."
- "I would consider that because I think we have to keep our minds open."
- "I cannot see any sense in me ringing XY College and asking why their results are better because their entire methodology is totally different to ours, so why would I ring them?"
- "It's rubbish. I haven't done it and I'm not aware of anybody that has."
- "Yes … I've got more in common with the like-schools than I have with the high school down the road."

31.3% of principals felt a greater sense of connectedness with other principals through their shared experience of the *My School* web site.

- "I have heard colleagues comment that they think other schools may be cheating in some ways – excluding kids at risk, assisting with test answers in NAPLAN. Principals in high ICSEA schools with top results are able to strut – lower data school leaders feel embarrassed.

   "The results may have nothing to do with the competence of the principal – but they feel justified in elaborating on their programs that have brought such success and that may have little relevance in another, lower ICSEA school. Having said that, there is a feeling of collaboration between principals in my area and we are all trying to work together."
- "Principals are very supportive and protective of their colleagues, especially when the media try to write a sensationalist piece of writing about a school's results."
- "*My School* has encouraged an atmosphere of trying to tear other schools down, rather than having schools work together."

Principals spoke of a camaraderie between principals of schools with low NAPLAN results.

- "If anything there is a shared camaraderie among principals of low performing schools."
- "This is actually a positive as we have shared the reality of the difficulties inherent in addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities."

40.1% of principals now collaborate more with other principals about school improvement.

- "Principal groups have been formed to discuss and share improvement strategies and results, etc. Very worthwhile. Some principals have become more competitive. I haven't."

A divide between government and independent schools featured in a number of comments.

- "I feel a greater sense of competition with the private sector. I feel there is an unfairness when they can choose their students and I can't as a public school. This has NEVER worried me before but does now. It is an unfair playing field."
- "There is more of a sense of we need to work co-operatively rather than competitively if public education is going to get a good guernsey in this state."
- "I am glad someone is asking about *My School* as it doesn't actually help improve outcomes but just emphasises the divide between private and government schools."

49.1% of principals trust that their principal peers would be open to supporting their attempts to improve their schools.

- "It's increased collaboration and discussion and openness, but with that comes that element of competition and I don't think you can ever get rid of that because that's what the system is about … we are still judged by communities, by departments, by the system on how well we are performing, so whilst those measurements exist, we will continue to be competitive and continue to want to be seen as better than the school next door."
- "Obviously if your school is performing magnificently, that would make you feel very proud and pleased, and there have been some principals at network meetings who have shared their data, which has been particularly good, and have actually provided other principals with strategies that have been used to improve it.

   "In some cases it has made school leaderships more guarded but I do not see any evidence that it has really opened up professional conversations. There has been some progress at network level but my concern is that the current State Government's fixation with a very nebulous policy of 'choice' will further reduce collaboration and increase wasteful competition."

59.8% of principals shared their feelings about their *My School* experience with other principals.

- "In terms of coming to a common understanding of what the web site's trying to achieve and information we're putting out about ourselves, the collaboration and reading and understanding and analysing has been good. We're actually looking at the data sets and saying, 'okay, this means this, and who are we being compared to?'"

- "A system already exists which is more of a mentoring system where principals support each other, share ideas, and even though the system pits us against each other for our jobs, there is still a level of professionalism which means we'll support our colleagues if they ask for it or seek advice if they want to, and I do that stuff all the time."

A number of principals described façades they and others have put up.
- "I work collaboratively with the other schools in my district because that's how we do business in the regions. The competition amongst schools, state and non-state, is alive and well, even though we put on a face of professionalism and collaboration."
- "Even when the talk is about open and collaborative discussion there are murmurs about schools with poor performance and gloating about high results when it is clear that SES is the main determining factor."
- "It has damaged principal collaboration and increased competition. Schools protect their effective strategies in case another school gets better results in NAPLAN. Principals say they collaborate but they don't."
- "I don't discuss it with principals of surrounding schools – they all have different cohorts of students and will have much better data, so can feel smug about 'their' achievements."

54.2% of principals feel increased competition with other principals.
- "The more competitive you make it and the more high stakes you make something, as I say, the more people will cheat … The decision then is, do I cheat? Because at the end of the day … I suspect that I'm not going to be as successful as you want me to be, but it means my job. So it then means whether I'm going to have enough money to keep my family and my life and everything that I'm used to."
- "The effect of schools advertising improved or high NAPLAN results is to raise the level of competition between schools in an area."
- "We've always collaborated and had a shared responsibility for all of our students. This web site has now introduced a higher level of competition that is remarkably unhelpful."
- "Cut it out – prins are now cutting each other's throats."
- "Judgments are made of other principals' capabilities. As a beginning principal, I am reluctant to ask for help."
- "Has been almost impossible to foster a discussion. Many colleagues still refuse to discuss ICSEA.
- "Schools are looking over their shoulder at what other schools are doing with NAPLAN, and rumours abound about unethical practices."
- "Schools have become more competitive as they try to gain increased enrolments due to NAPLAN successes."

- "I know of one school nearby where the kids did the test the day before and then did it again the next day on the actual test day, and you hear stories like this all the time."
- "From my observations some principals have been quite competitive by bragging or even fudging the results."
- "*My School* has actually given us a lot of enrolments because parents have looked at those [private] schools and compared the results and seen that there's virtually no difference – and they can come here for $30 a year compared to $14,000 a year, so my attitude has been ameliorated by experience."
- "In the primary schools there's even been a lot of poaching."
- "I know of schools that regularly tell parents of students who may have a [learning] difficulty that their school is full or zoned or that their school doesn't suit students 'like yours'. They don't want to have students who are low performing endanger their NAPLAN results because the results are publicly viewed."
- "The better schools become more competitive and don't want to associate with the poorer performing schools, making life a lot more difficult and isolated."
- "I feel sad for other neighboring schools with poor data. However, they do need to do something about it."
- "*My School* has significantly increased negative competition. Why would I want to share all our secrets to success with my colleagues down the road? Why would a 'like' school achieving better results than me want to support us?"

My research made clear that Australian principals experiencing increased competition as a result of *My School* and a "strategy of markets, testing, and unilateral accountability" (Shirley, 2009, p. 146) have important stories to tell that should be heard by all relevant parties.

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Interview: Bill Hannan
On the past and present of public education

Interview by John Graham

JG   What are the qualities of a good school system?

BH   A good school system serves the public good before private interests. In a public system this means that the system is obliged for provide for all-comers, as far as possible on a local basis.

JG   What is a good school?

BH   A good school believes that all its students can succeed if they work and it negotiates curriculum and ways of learning with them.

JG   What is your view of the national curriculum? Do we need one? Does it improve on existing curriculums?

BH   What we have seen so far is ill-conceived in that a national curriculum should focus solely on those elements of schooling that clearly need to be uniform. Beyond generalities about literacy, which are commonly accepted anyway, it offers no justifications for itself. It might in parts be superior to what we already have, but unless we know why we need uniform curricula in any curriculum area at state or national level we're left with pious slogans about national excellence. My reading of present efforts is that a uniform national curriculum is being devised to enable national assessment of its outcomes, which in turn will fuel the ideology of choice.

JG   How would you contrast/characterise approaches to curriculum development in the 1960s and 1970s in Australia/Victoria with today's approaches?

Bill Hannan taught English and languages in Victorian secondary schools and went on to write school text books in these areas. He became a leader in the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and edited its influential journal, *The Secondary Teacher*. His curriculum expertise was later recognised by his appointment as chair of Victoria's State Board of Education and assistant chief general manager of the Victorian Education Department. He has written many texts on education including *The Best of Times* (2009), the story of the great expansion of Victorian secondary schools in the 1950s and 1960s.

BH   School-based curriculum as we called it had two important features: the school had the power to plan a curriculum to suit its students and their locality and two, it allowed for negotiation of the curriculum with students and the wider community. In many cases, it also flowed into assessment practices that recognised success for all who worked rather than inevitable failure for some. On the other hand, many schools found this open slather without guidelines and examples too difficult to implement, however much they liked independence. Model general curricula with plenty of examples would have helped.

JG   *Debate about "teacher quality" has been constant in recent years. It's framed in terms of how to improve educational outcomes. The 'answer' for many pundits and politicians is the need for "better" teachers. Is it a relatively new debate or a long-running one?*

BH   It's probably relatively new. The push for improving teacher quality in the 1960s and 1970s came from teachers (especially the VSTA) and was generally resisted by politicians and deplored by the media. The current focus on teacher quality tends alarmingly towards punitive action under the management rubric of accountability and performance – what was known early in the first century of public education as payment by results. On the positive side, arguments for improving teacher training via more teaching practice, longer internships etc, as well as arguments for improving school organisation and favouring student control over their own leaning seem to me to be very constructive. Unhappily, governments, unions and the profession have yet to figure out how to move on ineffective teachers who've somehow got through training and stayed in schools.

JG   *Governments are calling for performance pay, teacher evaluation by student test results and other teacher "accountability" measures. Will such measures improve teaching standards? What do you think governments and education authorities should do to improve teaching?*

BH   Payment by results is stupid and was sensibly got rid of long ago – not that that has stopped it, like so many other things, from being hailed as an innovation. Governments and education authorities, including unions and professional bodies, should obviously continue their efforts to improve training and in-service teacher development. Governments should pay teachers a lot more, preferably in the context of agreement to make school organisation more flexible and to introduce methods of learning that involve students in decision-making about their own learning and that make the most of new learning technologies.

JG   *Can anything positive be said about the State and Federal governments' "transparency" agenda, exemplified by My School, national standardised testing and league tables? What impact is it having on school standards?*

BH   It is entirely negative and has already in many places turned the tests into the curriculum. Schools and teachers should boycott NAPLAN and My School and support a national program of light testing (by sample) that provides reliable data.

JG   *Australia's comparative performance in international tests has become a big education story and being used to rationalise proposed changes in education. What do you think about these comparisons? Should we be trying to "reform'' our school system because of them?*

BH   We should do better no matter what other countries are doing but there are few — if any — conclusions that can be drawn from examples of other countries. We tend to import ideas from Anglophone countries that do worse than we do.

JG   *Backed by both major political parties, the concept of "choice" has become entrenched in Australian education. How did we get to this point in the government/private school debate and is there a way out of it?*

BH   In a democracy, choice is an obvious outcome of freedom and, in practice, at odds with equality. So the best hearted among us want freedom for ourselves and equality for other people's children, provided that most of them don't mix with ours.   Choice is basic to our public discourse and once it is invoked, however ineptly, it is impossible to get out of it. All a government could do is try to regulate it as it tries, for example, to regulate commercial activity. Far from regulating choice, governments at present encourage it, via My School for example, and appear to give no thought to its consequences. It could perhaps be regulated some day via a well-thought-out policy favouring local schooling.

As I remember, choice first appeared in education in the form of the Schools Commission's Choice & Diversity project early in the 1980s. The idea was that schools were, or should be, diversifying, which in turn raised questions of how parents and students might choose. As part of the project I interviewed many parents in Brunswick. From this data I reported that parents were not interested in diversity or choice. What they wanted was for all local schools to be good schools.

Sometime in the 1990s governments appeared to adopt a perverted form of this, basically by offering choice between good schools and the rest. The good schools soon became selective or partly-selective schools. Other schools nearby began to be avoided and to languish. The idea of local schools that had sustained the government system since its foundation gave way to parents and schools cherry-picking, essentially on the grounds of academic performance. Clearly choice of this sort is a right parents are entitled to exercise. Governments, however, are there to serve the public good, not, as now, to encourage the increasingly dysfunctional exercise of private good.

Behind the encouragement of choice is a fantasy that selective government schools can halt the government-sponsored rush to private schools. New South Wales typically decreed from the centre that the state would consist of groups of schools in which one was selective and the others 'comprehensive'. Victoria, also typically, sat back and let it happen. The effect of the drift on private schooling has been negligible but the damage to public schooling, in both principle and reality, has been immensely damaging.

JG   *The 'choice' agenda also involves public schools becoming individual players in an education market rather than being part of a cohesive and cooperative system. You have compared what is happening in the public schools' sector with what occurs in the corporate world. Can you explain the differences and what you see as the problems with developing a competitive public school market?*

BH   It is very hard to come to grips with the assertion that an institution that depends almost entirely on public money can be imagined as a market. If, however, we humour the marketeers for a while, we need to figure out who's competing with whom in this market. The education system that the market idea inherited consisted of a large number of centrally run units: some largish, some very small, some with high prestige, some officially described as disadvantaged. Throwing all these into an imaginary market was bound to result in some prospering and some going to the wall. No attempt was made to organise this market into competitive units with reasonable chances of survival. In real markets corporations with many local branches – banks or supermarkets, for example – do not operate in this way either internally or in competition with rival corporations. We don't find some bank branches with money and some branches without. We don't find some supermarkets with well-stocked shelves and other supermarkets with nothing much to sell. We don't publish information praising some clients and denigrating others. In short, if the idea of schooling as a market has any substance, no one proclaiming it has figured out how it's supposed

to work. At the moment it does not work like any markets we see about us. We can imagine how it might be made to work, sort of, but it's too silly a proposition to bother with. It is much more sensible to imagine a system of good local schools.

JG   *How would you mark the Rudd/Gillard governments' "education revolution" policies?*

BH   I would give them A- for effort and hunt about for a consoling phrase on performance. I would recommend that their advisers be expelled.

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The second of our three-issue survey looks at developments including the new early years framework, effective literacy programs and the national reform agenda, plus analyses of early intervention and phonics programs.

PV6.1: Post-compulsory Education

This is the first of three issues each looking at different phases of the education continuum. Articles look at developments and issues in TAFE, higher education, technical and vocational education and training.

PV4.1: Teacher Quality and Quality Teaching

Includes Andy Hargreaves on teaching in the knowledge society, and the implications for schools of globalisation; Leonie Rowan and Chris Bigum on the challenges of measuring quality in teaching and education; and Lyndsay Connors on the part that class still plays in education.

PV3.3: Leadership

PV's look at developments in school leadership includes Alan Reid on the need for school leaders to move beyond managing by embracing research and inquiry; Roma Burgess on the challenges facing women in becoming leaders; and collaborations between schools in the UK.

School improvement