Federalism, Public Education and the Public Good

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October 2012
Whitlam Institute Perspectives

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Alan Reid, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of South Australia, is one of the most influential educators in Australia. In 2004 he was named by the national magazine the Bulletin as one of Australia’s ten leading educators. His research interests include educational policy, curriculum change, social justice and education, citizenship education and the history and politics of public education. He has published widely in these areas and gives many talks and papers to professional groups, nationally and internationally.

Alan is also involved in policy development at the state and national levels. In 2004/5 he was appointed by the Minister of Education to be a member of a three person panel which reviewed the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE); and he was engaged by the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) to lead the development of a system-wide culture of research and inquiry. He won the 2002-3 DEST National Research Fellowship and was based in the federal department of education (now DEEWR) in Canberra for twelve months where he conducted research on the national curriculum and provided policy advice. Prior to that he was Dean of Education at the University of South Australia for three years.

Alan’s contribution to education has been recognised through a number of awards: in 2004, the Australian College of Educators awarded him the inaugural MacKillop Medal in recognition of his distinguished services to education and made him a Fellow of the College; in 2009 he was awarded the Alby Jones Medal by the Australian Council of Educational Leaders (SA) in recognition of the excellence of his achievements in educational leadership; in 2009 he was made a Life Member of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA); in 2009 he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Australian Council of Educational Leaders (ACEL) which is presented annually to an educator whose ‘contribution to the study and practice of educational leadership is assessed as most outstanding at the national level’, and he was also made a Fellow of ACEL; and in 2009, the title of Professor Emeritus was conferred on him by the University of South Australia. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) on Australia Day, 2012.

The Whitlam Institute gratefully acknowledges the support of Hawker Britton.

Hawker Britton

Editing: The Whitlam Institute
ISBN: 978-1-74108-228-9
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Foreword

The Gonski Review and its final report, Review of School Funding [2011], is something of a watershed in the making of education policy and the public debate on school funding. Notwithstanding the quite proper attention being paid to issues of education quality, equity, performance and outcomes, the debate has focused on the educational settlement that lies at the heart of public funding for non-government schools.

Yet, as Professor Alan Reid points out in this very thoughtful paper, substantial discussion of education and the ‘public good’ or the ‘common good’ is almost entirely absent from the policy discourse. The foundational purposes of education may be assumed but are unstated.

Professor Reid’s paper seeks to ‘address this silence’. In doing so, it challenges us to consider ‘public education’ as being much more than government-owned education and to appreciate that the ‘public good’ is not served solely by ‘public schools’. There is a freshness to the conceptual framework that he offers: his notion of public education which ‘renews the public’ I found particularly interesting. Having said this it would be a mistake to see this paper as an abstract reflection. On the contrary, the implications are real and, in the context of current debates, quite immediate.

The paper is an elaboration of a presentation Professor Reid delivered in Sydney on 1 May 2012 at a seminar on ‘Federalism, Education and the Common Good’, which is available to watch on our website www.whitlam.org. That seminar and this paper are products of the ARC supported project Federalism and Australian Schooling bringing together the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, the Whitlam Institute, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Foundation for Young Australians.

The project has been conceived, inspired and led by our friend and colleague Professor Jack Keating. Jack died on 21 July this year after a lifetime of service to education and social justice. This project is one small part of his rich and enduring legacy.

Eric Sidoti
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Federalism, Public Education and the Public Good

Introduction

When Australia was federated in 1901, Section 51 of the new constitution confirmed by omission that Australian schools were the responsibility of State and Territory governments. For almost a century until the early 1960s this responsibility focused on financing and running public schools which were understood as being public goods. During this time, the concepts of ‘public education’ and the ‘public good’ became one of the constant features of Australian education and have remained so, although their representation in education policy and practice changed as Australian society changed (Hyams & Bessant, 1972).

Some of the changes to the concept of public education have been as a consequence of the shifting nature of federalism. The first shift occurred when the Federal Government began its financial involvement in the Australian schooling system in the early 1960s. Initially this was confined to the provision of funds for libraries and science blocks but, from the 1970s onwards, it expanded to involve more systematic funding of schools through grants to the States (Connell, 1993; Wilkinson et al, 2006). The big story in this change however was that as a result of intensive lobbying by the Catholic and Independent school sectors, federal funds were directed to private as well as public schools. Nothing was ever to be the same again in Australian education, not least the understanding of public education and its connection to the concept of the public good.

Subsequent changes in the relationship between the States and Territories and the Australian government have quickened pace over the last 30 years (Lingard, 2000; Keating, 2011). In particular, the Federal government began not only to fund aspects of education in which it had an interest, but also to dictate policy through financial levers such as the threat to withhold or withdraw funds from States which failed to toe certain policy lines. Since the election of the Rudd/Gillard Labor governments in 2007, this approach has been conducted through the velvet hammer of ‘cooperative federalism’ via the mediums of COAG and MCEEDYA. For example, States and Territories have signed up to a national curriculum, national teacher standards, and a range of National Partnership programs with specified performance outcomes. These and other programs have been described by the Federal Labor government as comprising an ‘education revolution’.

The extent to which such policy constitutes a ‘revolution’ is debatable (Reid, 2009), but what is beyond dispute is the fact that it has shifted the balance of responsibility for education between the States and the Australian government, and changed the focus and nature of education funding. This shift has significant implications for the concept of the ‘public good’ when applied to ‘public education’. And yet in policy discourse there has been little or no explicitation of what these terms mean in the contemporary context. It might have been expected that such an analysis would be present in the Gonski Report (Gonski, 2011), for example, which is the big education story of 2012. And yet in the 285 pages of the report, one searches in vain for the words ‘public good’ or ‘common good’ or even a definition of public education beyond the origin of its funding, despite the obvious importance of these concepts to the work of the Review. Instead, the meaning of public education is assumed and the relationship between these concepts and the non-government schooling system (Independent and Catholic) remains unexplored. It is difficult to know how a review of funding in Australian schools could be conducted in the absence of such significant reference points.

This paper seeks to address this silence in the policy discourse by exploring possible ways to understand the meaning of ‘public education’ and its relationship to the concept of the ‘public good’. The first half of the paper argues that the concept of ‘public education’ goes beyond being simply synonymous or interchangeable with terms like ‘state’ schools or ‘government’ schools. It has a specific meaning which needs to be teased out because that meaning has implications for policy and practice conducted in its name. In the second half of the paper I will explore some of the implications which flow from a deeper understanding of the term ‘public education’.

The concept of public education

Public education is one of the key institutions in our society, holding together the sites of the state, civil society and the economy, by fostering the capacity of people to function in these arenas. That is, schools are the prime agencies for the development of capacities for social practice (Connell, 1995).

But public education is not a one dimensional concept. I want to suggest that there are at least three dimensions which make up the concept of public education. These dimensions are clearly interrelated but the emphasis given to each is shaped by the education settlement at any one time, which may highlight some aspects over others (Freeland, 1991; Carlson, 1995).

Public education as a public good

The first and most prominent dimension relates to ‘ownership’. In this usage, public education is the same as a public utility: owned by the state, funded from taxes provided by the public, and run or managed by the state on the public’s behalf. When public education is discussed in the public sphere it is this meaning that is dominant. It is the question of ‘ownership’ which defines the sector.
In the Gonski review report, for example, the index for ‘public schools’ refers the reader to the term ‘government schools’ which is used throughout the document (Gonski, 2011, p. 282). That is, the essences of the schooling sectors are differentiated by their ownership rather than by any other characteristic.

Of course within the ambit of ownership, ‘government’ schools are ascribed characteristics which go beyond their funding source. Since the 1870s, although the form and nature of public schools have changed over time, three famous concepts have been used to define public education – free, compulsory and secular (Meadmore, 2001). These words capture the settlement around public schools in Australia: that every local community in Australia – metropolitan, rural and remote – should have well-resourced public schools, available to all at no cost. That is, they are non-exclusionary and secular places – schools for the public – where children and young people from all social backgrounds can mix and learn.

However, making ‘ownership’ the central feature of the definition of public schools narrows the possibilities for defining its meaning. Thus it doesn’t help to answer questions about the kind of education that should lie at the heart of public schools. Its three ascribed characteristics – free, compulsory and secular – offer no hints, for example, about the focus of the curriculum or the nature of the relationship between public schools. Thus, the curriculum for compulsory schooling could be narrow or comprehensive; or public schools could compete for ‘custom’ or they could cooperate.

Nor does it help to identify what community expectations there might be about what were previously called ‘private’ schools but which are now state-subsidised schools, or how much public money these schools are entitled to expect. As a result, questions about the share of funding between public and private schools, or about the type of accountabilities that should be in place when private schools receive public funds, are answered idiosyncratically. The answers depend on the context of the time or the interests of the responder, rather than any understanding of the ontology of public education.

In my view these issues can be addressed if two other dimensions of public education are brought front and centre.

**Public education FOR the public good (ie serving public purposes)**

In this second dimension, the purposes of education are foregrounded. It is assumed that public education funded by public funds will serve public purposes. What does this mean?

Educational practice is always informed by its purposes – explicitly or implicitly. These purposes are the outcome of political processes, resulting in broad ‘settlements’ which shape educational discourse at particular historical moments. In a recent project, we summarised three broad purposes of education which intersect in different ways (Reid et al, 2011). They are:

- Individual purposes: to enable individuals to develop their abilities to the fullest so that they can reach their potential, live enriching lives, pursue opportunities and further their lives’ ambitions;
- Economic purposes: to prepare young people to be competent contributors to the economy as workers;
- Democratic purposes: to prepare all young people to be active and competent citizens in democratic life.

In practice all three purposes will exist in any education system. But at any historical juncture, one purpose is usually dominant and shapes the ways in which the other purposes are expressed and enacted in education policy and practice. It is this configuration that determines the extent to which the schooling system is working primarily to achieve public purposes, or to benefit individuals, or both (Labaree, 1997). However, it is difficult to make judgements about this without an appreciation of what constitutes public or private benefits and how they might be determined – and a clarification of these concepts turns upon what constitutes the public.

Much has been written about the concept of ‘the public’ and there are a variety of interpretations. Most writers agree that it is important to distinguish between ‘the public’, meaning the whole community – all of us – functioning in civil society and the public sphere and standing in relationship to the state; and ‘a public’ meaning a group of people with a common interest in a specific activity or performance (e.g., Warner, 2002; Hannay, 2005). In this paper I am referring to the former, but that is not the end of the matter! Some argue that it is no longer possible to talk about a single monolithic public in the public sphere, since the diversity and fragmentation of identities and interests in contemporary society make a nonsense of referring to the concept of the public in the singular. There are many publics (Warner, 2005). Nancy Fraser (1993) goes further, arguing that there are publics with power, and publics which speak back to power which she calls ‘subaltern counter publics’. For the purposes of my analysis, I will refer to the singular public, on the understanding that this assumes the multiplicity of publics and counterpublics that lie within it.

It is important to recognise that ‘the public’ is not simply the collective noun for a mass of individuals co-existing
in a society, which you might call ‘the people’. It means something much more because it assumes that as an entity, the public has an interest in the collective good – that is the benefits which derive to the group as a whole, and not just individual interests. Of course individual benefits can affect more people than just the individual who makes a decision. But such benefits are collateral and serendipitous. They do not derive from a whole group consideration of what is in the interests of the group as a collective entity. This is not to deny individual rights. It is to emphasise that since individuals are also members of communities, then the purposes of communities are central to us as individuals and as a collective. That is, individual rights and the common good must coexist. As Sandel (2005) points out in critiquing the priority of individual ‘choice’:

...we cannot justify political arrangements without reference to common purposes and ends, and ..... we cannot conceive of ourselves without reference to our role as citizens, as participants in a common life (p. 152).

Given this interest in the common good, being a member of the public means that people are in a communicative relationship with people they mostly do not know, and who come from a range of backgrounds, cultures and experiences. The public communicates in the public sphere about issues of common concern seeking to respectfully work through differences, and to influence and shape the policies of the state. Whether a proposal will result in public or individual benefits is one of the ways that the public discussion is framed. So, publics do not have a life of their own. As Feinberg (2012) argues:

Publics are not agents and thus do not act as a body. Rather, governments when appropriately controlled are the agents of the public.

Governments act; publics, by setting a tone and developing norms of evaluation, influence and evaluate government action’ (p. 14)

This understanding of ‘the public’ suggests that rather than there being an existential conception of the ‘public good’, it is arrived at through a process of discussion in the public sphere and so it changes over time. The matter of determining the nature of the process is, therefore, the prior question in any consideration of the public good.

For the process to be consistent with the ontology of the public suggested above involves more than a simple aggregation of individual desires and aspirations. Such a ‘majority’ view approach is a very weak version of arriving at the public good because it starts with individual interests, and public benefits are derived only coincidentally. Yet it is this weak caricature of the public good that is the dominant version today. Shaped by the ideology of neo-liberalism with its stress on markets, choice, and competition, this version understands people to be consumers whose political engagement is largely confined to voting every three years. The public is simply a group of individuals who make individual choices.

In education, many policies at State and national levels have embraced this ideology. Thus education markets and policies based on choice promote parents and students as consumers who seek to maximise individual benefits from the education system. This, in turn, fosters competition between schools as they vie for custom. There are a number of pragmatic concerns about this approach which have been well documented. These include the fact that it hasn’t resulted in improved learning outcomes in such countries as the UK and the US from whence they have been copied; they result in huge disparities of resources between schools; they have tended to residualise public education; they destroy the sense of community and neighbourhood of school communities, and so on (e.g., Hursh & Martina, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). But from the perspective of education FOR the public good they have an even more devastating effect. Such approaches further entrench a distorted view of the public and the public good by privileging individual self-interest.

The more powerful version, and one that is more consistent with the ontology of the public described above, is posited on the idea that the public good is greater than the sum of its individual parts, and is arrived at through rational, respectful and critical deliberation among the public. It seeks to maximise the benefits for society as a whole. In education this would result in policies which promote collaboration and a sense of community rather than individual competition. In the last section of this paper, I will explore some of the implications for education policy of assuming this version of the public good. First though I will return to the question of an education FOR the public good and the three purposes of education described earlier.

I have argued that three purposes of education – individual, economic and democratic – will usually be present in education policy and practice, but it is the emphasis that is placed on each and the interrelationships between them that will determine the extent to which they are likely to achieve public purposes. However, the prior question in relation to the public purposes of education is how such purposes are determined and whether or not they strengthen or weaken the communicative relationships between the public. There is no magic formula – the purposes will change over time – but the nature of the policy discourse shapes the focus and determines whether the emphasis is on the individual or the public good.

For example, under the Howard government from 1996-2007, the focus on school choice and education markets emphasised individual rather than community desires and values and so was directed more to individual than public benefits. Under the Rudd/Gillard governments since 2007, the emphasis of education policy has been on its economic contribution (the development of human capital), thus constructing a very narrow version of the public good. In both these cases, education policy is based on an emaciated version of the public good.
I have suggested that a public education worthy of the name should have much sturdier public purposes. This makes consideration about what constitutes the public purposes of education in education policy and practice – public education for the public good – the second dimension of the concept of public education. Since there is no fixed definition of the public good, the process for determining its meaning is crucial. Failing to consider this dimension of public education can result in policy and practice which is antithetical to the very idea of ‘the public’. However, when the public is understood as comprising people in communicative relationships, respectfully engaging in intergenerational conversation about matters of common community concern, it brings into view an historic role of public education. It is to this third dimension to which I will now turn.

Public Education which renews the public.

The two previous dimensions of public education presume the existence of a public. However, as I argued in the preceding section, the public is more than a group of individuals seeking individual benefits which may or may not have wider social benefits. It is an entity which has a set of collective interests (the public good) which transcend individual benefits. The communicative relationship between members of the public is not something which can be assumed. It requires of the participants certain skills, understandings and dispositions which need to be developed, practised, sustained and renewed. It is this task which primarily falls on our education systems.

Thus the third dimension of public education, indeed its historic role, is that of renewing the public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions and understandings required to engage with others about the common good. Put another way, a key function of any education system funded by public money is to maintain and improve the conditions for deliberation and debate in the public sphere. It is this aspect which has, in my view, been most neglected in educational discourse.

If this role for public education has always been important, it has never been so crucial as at the current time. This is because there are a number of factors at work which are making the task of deliberation in the public sphere more difficult and more complex than it has ever been before. These include such challenges as the increasing diversity of the population; the fragmentation of the spaces for public discussion (twitter, bloggers, on-line single issue communities, multiple pay TV channels and so on); the commercialisation of the public sphere (Sandel, 2012); the impact of globalisation; and changing identities, including the construction of citizen as consumer. All of these factors and more are combining to make it more difficult to engage in communicative relationships, if not to residualise the public sphere (Sandlin, Burdick & Norris, 2012). Michael Sandel (2010) suggests in the US context that “(W)e need to rediscover the lost art of democratic argument”. Barry Jones (2012) goes further when he bemoans the standard of public debate in Australia:

Paradoxically, the age of the information revolution which should have been an instrument of personal liberation and an explosion of creativity, has been characterised by domination of public policy by managerialism, replacement of the ‘public good’ by ‘private benefit’, the decline of sustained critical debate on issues leading to gross oversimplification, the relentless ‘dumbing down’ of mass media, linked with the cult of celebrity substance abuse and retreat into the realm of the personal, and the rise of fundamentalism and an assault on reason. The knowledge revolution ought to have been a countervailing force: in practice it has been the vector of change (Jones 2012, p. 2).

As Jones implies, many of the factors which are threatening the democratic functioning of civil society and its public sphere also contain within them the seeds of its rejuvenation. For example, the promise of the new technologies is that they can enable people, previously divided by time and space, to communicate and discuss matters of common concern, with greater access to information than ever before. In terms of the public good, they are neutral when they arrive in our midst since they can be put to work in ways which may erode or encourage discussion between strangers (Jarvis, 2011). It is the public that decides consciously or by neglect which way it will go. And to a large extent it is the democratic capabilities of the public which will determine that.

Put simply, the vigour of the participation by the public in discussion in the public sphere is a function of the skills, understandings and dispositions that the public can bring to bear in that arena. It is the quality of the communicative relations between strangers that can revive the public sphere as well as sustain it. And how is this quality assured? Our systems of education are the primary mechanisms through which the public is renewed. If education places a greater emphasis on the individual purposes of education than it does on its public purposes, then the public sphere can be only be diminished as people lose the capacity for communicative relations and for thinking beyond individual interests. These are high stakes.
The implications for pursuing the public good in Australian education

So far in this paper I have tried to tease out a more elaborated version of public education than that which is currently used as the basis for education policy and practice. I have argued that the concept of public education has at least three dimensions: as a public good, for the public good, and to renew the public. If the analysis is accepted, there are some significant implications for education policy and practice which I explore in the last section of the paper.

The implications for public and ‘private’ schools

First, the analysis has a number of implications for how we understand what have been called public and ‘private’ schools and for the terminology which has been used to describe them. It suggests that schools fully funded by the public are ‘government’ or ‘state’ schools when they are defined solely in terms of ownership and governance by the state. The education settlement in Australia is that every community in Australia should have well-resourced government schools available to all. But these schools can only be called public schools when they meet the other two criteria of the definition of ‘public education’ – that is when they serve public purposes primarily, and when they consciously pursue the goal of renewing the public.

Private schools can never be public schools since they cannot meet the first criterion. Even if they are publicly subsidised, they are not owned by the state with governance arrangements determined by the state. However, private schools can meet the other two criteria – serving public purposes and renewing the public – although as I will suggest in the next section, these tasks are made more difficult for them by such things as the composition of their student body, fees and governance arrangements.

What does all this mean? If you subscribe to the analysis of the public outlined in this paper, it means that government schools, funded by Federal and State governments, should be striving to enhance their role as public schools rather than being just ‘government’ schools. Policy and practice should be shaped to this end. At the same time, since private schools are in receipt of public monies, they should be required to serve public purposes and to renew the public – and be accountable for doing so.

The implications for education policy and practice

As a consequence of the above, a central task for education systems or schools in receipt of public monies involves identifying the characteristics of a schooling system which renews the public and serves public purposes. These characteristics should be consistent with the aspiration to develop in young people the skills, knowledge and dispositions to engage in intergenerational conversation with strangers in the public sphere about matters of community concern. There are a number of aspects of schooling which need to be considered for this key educational aim to be realised.

Curriculum of schooling

The most obvious mechanism through which to renew the public through education is the intended and enacted curriculum. This means ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to develop the capabilities needed to live full, productive and contributing lives as citizens, family and community members and workers; and particularly to participate in the deliberations in the public sphere. The processes for identifying a curriculum which serves these public purposes should involve the community as well as educators in discussing what should be taught to equip students for life in the 21st century and arriving at a broad set of public principles that would inform curriculum development. Of course it is the knowledge and expertise of teachers – that is those charged with the delivery of the official curriculum – which should be brought to bear when designing and enacting a curriculum based on these principles.

In the course of a community and professional discussion about the principles to inform a public curriculum for the 21st century, I would mount the argument that such a curriculum should be broad and comprehensive at least in the compulsory years; include cross-disciplinary study as well as lay a foundation in the disciplines; recognise the diversity of student interests, backgrounds and abilities but be non-hierarchical; and connect to the life-worlds of students. Unfortunately, these broad public curriculum principles are at odds with the current trends at the national level where the focus on NAPLAN and PISA scores will inevitably narrow the curriculum, as has happened in other countries such as the United States (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Nicols and Berliner, 2007). The principles also challenge the structure and the processes of development of the Australian curriculum in ways I have described elsewhere (Reid, 2011; Reid, 2012). A curriculum which is genuinely public would make the public purposes of education the starting point for discussion and the reference point for its development.

Culture of schooling

A healthy civil society demands a public which can work, in democratic and respectful ways, across the multiplicity of social and ethnic differences which exist in a democracy. Whilst the skills and dispositions required to do this can be named in the official curriculum, they can just as easily be subverted by the norms, values, and beliefs of an educational system or institution. That is, the messages exuded by the culture of an organisation – famously described by Philip Jackson (1968) as the ‘hidden curriculum’ – need to be consistent with its stated aims. From this perspective, public education systems and schools, and private schools funded from the public purse,
must pay heed to the messages of the hidden curriculum. In my view, they should ensure, for example, that students learn to work respectfully and productively with diversity; that they promote collaboration rather than competition; that there is a climate of trust, respect and good will; and that democratic practices are modelled and give the least powerful a real voice in deliberation.

Unfortunately it seems to me that many aspects of the current education agenda are at odds with these public cultural values. Much of this can be put down to the dominant neo-liberal ideology of choice and managerialism which pervades every aspect of public policy. Thus, accountability strategies seek to reward and punish; the ‘cult of management’ (Jones 2012) sidelines community discussion about educational issues; the education market pits school against school and reinforces individual benefit at the expense of public benefit; diverse state school communities are residualised through funding models; and teachers are invited to compete rather than collaborate through proposed performance pay schemes. It is hard to know how government schools can strive to become public schools by pursuing the public good (in the sense suggested by this paper) if the culture of their organisations is saturated with the ideology of individualism.

**Structures of schooling**

If, as I have argued, a healthy public sphere requires members of the public to be in communicative relationships, then a public education which seeks to renew the public must have this as a common goal. That is, it would be pointless for some schools to be working to advance their individual interests at the expense of other schools. Unfortunately this is what happens when schooling systems are constructed around choice and competition. In the name of quality, such policies invariably favour those school communities which are already replete with cultural and financial resources, whilst further disadvantaging those without. Individual schools which break this pattern are held up as examples of the efficacy of this individualistic approach. What it hides is the destruction of local community and the paring back of the idea of the public good to one in which individuals act in their own self-interest. By substituting government aims (acting on behalf of the public) for the primacy of parental aims, it is only a small step to make the charge that state education is simply a state monopoly, as the historian Niall Ferguson argued in his recent Reith Lectures (Ferguson, 2012). Once that move is made, the concept of the public good is reduced to being simply a product of individual desires.

It is hard to see how an approach which erodes a sense of community, diminishes the communicative relationships of the public, and creates an education system of winners and losers, can be seen to advance quality and equity. The alternative is to replace an approach which puts schools in a competitive relationship, with an approach based on collaborative networks of schools where the health of all schools is a concern for all. In such a system, the failure of one school is the failure of all. Not only would this build a sense of community or neighbourhood and so facilitate communicative relationships, it would also ensure that the pursuit of quality is not advanced by promoting inequality. Importantly, it would better support the role of schools to renew the public and pursue public purposes.

This is not to say that it is inappropriate to give schools the autonomy to shape the official curriculum to meet the specific needs of students or to make staff appointments. But such approaches need to be organised within a philosophy which encourages schools to collaborate and share, not advance at the expense of others. Using the analysis in this paper, the label ‘Independent Public Schools’ which is currently being used in Western Australia, is a contradiction in terms. True public schools are not independent, they are networked; they cooperate to build a quality public education system overall, not compete to create a system where there are shining beacons of success sitting alongside schools which are struggling or failing. The failure elsewhere of attempts to privatise government schools – Charter schools in the US and Academy schools in the UK (Education Policy Response Group Report, 2012) – should surely be a salutary lesson to State and Federal governments to avoid such an approach in Australia.

**Funding of schooling**

The ways in which schools are funded is central to achieving the sort of public education outlined in this paper. Education funding has been a running sore in Australian society for many years. The tensions resulting from the changing nature of federalism has produced a strange hybrid where States and Territories spend the bulk of their funding on government schools; the Federal government puts the bulk of its funds towards ‘private’ schools and systems, and increasingly seeks to direct education policy; and the States and ‘private’ schools try to minimise the extent of direction from the Federal government and maximise their autonomy. The funding resolution at any historical moment has been based on an uneasy settlement around three principles – universalism, need, and entitlement (Keating, 2012) – by which is meant:

- the principle of universalism: that there should be free, secular and compulsory state schools funded by State and federal governments and available to all in every local community in Australia. These schools should be inclusive, comprehensive, well-resourced and staffed by the best quality teachers. This principle is obviously a strong public purpose;
- the principle of entitlement, meaning that despite the existence of government schools for all, public

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1 This observation was made by my friend and colleague Professor Jack Keating during a conversation with him in May 2012. Jack’s untimely death occurred just two months later, and he leaves a huge legacy of contributions to educational thought and practice which will be drawn on for a long time to come. In this instance, I must bear responsibility for the interpretation and application of Jack’s idea.
funds should be directed towards funding ‘private’ schools to enable those taxpayers who wish to exercise ‘choice’ (based on, say, religion or culture) outside the government system, to do so. This principle is obviously very much premised on private benefits;

- the principle of need, seeking to ensure that any funding formula should aim to reduce and then eliminate inequality of educational outcomes between schools. This is a strong public purpose.

Since the 1970s education funding policy has been hampered by the difficulties of federalism, and the shifting consensus around which of the principles should be emphasised. The outcome has been a confusion of funding polices and formulae which is both dysfunctional and unjust. In April 2010, the Gonski Review Panel was charged by the Federal Labor government with the task of sorting out this mess, and it submitted its report in December 2011.

The Gonski Report\(^2\) tries to mediate the competing public and private purposes inherent in the three principles, and to reduce or eliminate the confusions contained in the current funding approaches. Thus it proposes the integration of Commonwealth and State and Territory allocations, using a national resource standard administered by a National Schools Resourcing Body with capital grants fed through State and Territory authorities. Government schools are to be fully funded to the standard; and ‘private’ school public funding is be affected by the level of private contributions to each school. Importantly, the resource standard will be supplemented by loadings for those schools which carry the vast majority of students with backgrounds of social disadvantage or special needs (mostly government schools). The report calculates that an extra $5 billion per annum of public funds should be allocated to bring all schools up to the resource standard. In these ways the report imparts a public sensibility to school funding by reinforcing the public good principles of universalism and need. For those who believe that education is the central ingredient of a healthy Australian democracy, this is to be applauded.

At the same time, the Gonski Panel was forced to bow to the Federal government’s insistence that no private school would be worse off under the new funding arrangement. Given the unjust aspects of the current funding system, this demand to a large extent undermines the emphasis on equity that has such a strong presence in the report. Instead, it brings the principle of entitlement to centre stage, so leaving the tension between Keating’s three principles unresolved. Thus ‘choice’ remains a strong element in the proposed funding arrangements, to some extent diluting the public good aspects referred to above. If this is unchecked, it is possible that despite the new structures the emphasis could return to the private rather than public benefits of education. In my view this potential weakness in the Gonski recommendations can be addressed by requiring private schools in receipt of public funds, to demonstrate that they are striving to achieve the agreed public purposes of education and that their policies and practices are consistent with renewing the public. This means more than signing up to the Melbourne Goals of Schooling (MCETYA, 2008) along with some minimal regulations and standards. It requires a set of principles and associated forms of accountability, agreed to by the community, which enunciate the expectations of ‘private’ schools to contribute to the public good.

Let’s take an example of how this might work in practice. Through a process of community discussion it might be agreed that a major feature of healthy public discussion involves the capacity to engage with diversity. This is because the quality of discourse in the public sphere is partly dependent on how people talk with and respect others from different social backgrounds and cultures. If the public task of schools receiving public funds is to renew the public, then the capacity for intercultural understanding would be a key focus of the curriculum, culture and relationships in any school. This is clearly not beyond the scope of ‘private’ schools, but it could be argued that students in schools which are organised around homogeneity of religion, culture or socio-economic status find it more difficult to learn about and practise intercultural understanding. As a consequence, these schools could be required to demonstrate the steps that they are taking to address what might be a barrier to teaching with this end in mind. It might include opening up the school’s enrolment policy; or involve working in collaboration with a neighbouring government school on a curriculum or community project so that students from different backgrounds mix and share. There are a number of models of such collaborations that already exist and these could be disseminated and used as the basis for professional development and professional discussion. The point is that public funds would be dependent on the achievement of public goals, and those private schools unwilling to strive to achieve them would not receive public monies.

The recommendations of the Gonski Review Report are consistent with many of the public criteria proposed in this paper. These include the establishment of a public and transparent resource standard as the benchmark for the public funding of all schools; the recognition that the government sector, as the universal provider of schooling, should be fully government funded; the addition of financial loadings based on levels of disadvantage; and the proposal to increase the overall amount of money going into the schooling sector. However, if the intent of the Gonski Report is not to be undermined, attention should be paid to those aspects which could dilute its public benefits. I have given just one example, suggesting that from the perspective of education for the public good, greater attention should be paid to what public expectations there are of private schools in receipt of public funds.

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2 At the time of writing (August 2012), the Labor Government was considering the recommendations of the Gonski Report.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the familiar concept of ‘public education’ has at least three characteristics which need to be understood so that education policy and practice is consistent with them: public education as a public good; public education for the public good; and public education for the renewal of the public. I have suggested that educational discourse relies mainly on the first characteristic and ignores the other two. An urgent task for Australian society is to clarify what is meant by each of these dimensions in order to ensure that education policy is focused on the public good. In the absence of this clarification, contemporary education policy will continue to privilege individual self-interest and so distort public education. It has been argued that a deeper understanding of the concept of ‘the public’ will help to ensure that state schools are always striving to be true public schools; and that state-subsidised ‘private schools’ contribute to the public good. Only in this way can public education help to fulfil its historic role of renewing the public and so rejuvenate an eroding public sphere.
References


Gonski, D (2011) Review of Funding for Schooling, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra


