

ADDRESSING INEQUALITY THROUGH SCHOOLS FUNDING: A SHORT HISTORY

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Abstract

Since the mid-1980s, governments in Australia have been expected to demonstrate the effectiveness of public expenditure on schooling, with the increasing use of accountability instruments purporting to measure ‘school performance.’ Yet while local and international benchmarks reveal glaring inequalities in educational outcomes for students, the appropriate policy response remains contested, due partly to the absence of conclusive evidence that the provision of additional funding will ‘make a difference.’

This paper asks why there is a paucity of evidence on the effectiveness of equity funding for schools in Australia, in spite of fifty years of equity policies and programs. The authors review relevant literature and discuss the evolution of equity schools funding programs targeted at ‘disadvantaged’ schools and their communities, including major developments at the federal level, such as the Karmel report in the 1970s, National Partnerships Initiatives in the early 21st Century and the recent Gonski funding review. The influence of research and policy developments on the design, stated purpose and perceived effectiveness of equity policies and programs, as well as the impact of political and structural issues associated with the Australian federation, are discussed.

Introduction

This paper provides a brief history of equity funding in Australian schooling. We explore the evolution of the concept of ‘equity programs’ for Australian schools, the evidence that informed their initiation, and how context influenced their design and implementation, including accountability mechanisms. We illustrate how the concept of equity funding has changed since Australian colonial governments became involved in school education, through to recent federal government funding initiatives implemented in collaboration with state and territory governments. While acknowledging there are a wealth of equity initiatives implemented by all levels of government, our main objective is to explore the historical policy context which influenced the evolution of equity funding as an educational concept in Australia, with illustrative examples, rather than to provide an exhaustive list of all equity programs in Australian schools over two centuries.

We define equity funding for schools as a method of allocating public resources in a targeted way *with the goal of reducing inequality in educational outcomes* between social groups. Although there are many forms of equity funding which vary in scope, focus and implementation, all types of equity funding share the same broad aim of reducing inequality in educational outcomes between social groups, and thus fall within the definition of equity funding specified in this paper.

Early equity funding initiatives

Until the 19th Century, schooling in Australia was a privately funded activity, purchased by families who could afford it. As a result, an individual’s level of educational attainment, from basic literacy to a university degree, largely reflected his or her family’s relative wealth. Thus prior to government involvement, there was considerable inequality in educational outcomes between social groups. The

advent of government funding for schools, particularly the introduction of universal and compulsory schooling through the Public Education Acts from the 1870s¹, appeared to reduce inequality in educational outcomes as measured by levels of basic literacy. For example, whereas in 1881, over a quarter (26 per cent) of the New South Wales population had been unable to read, by 1901, this had declined to eight per cent (NSW Government Statistician 1906: 547). This improvement was assumed to be an outcome of government schools funding policy.

While government funding of public schools during the last quarter of the 19th Century was associated with less inequality in educational outcomes between social groups, improvements in equity outcomes were largely confined to lower levels of educational attainment². Patterns of participation and achievement at higher levels, such as the completion of secondary schooling and matriculation to university, remained unequal. Until the 1950s, State funded secondary schools were few in number, concentrated in major cities and usually charged student fees (Waddington et al. 1950: 55-56). Except for a federal defence department program to support the secondary education of children of dead or injured ex-service personnel after World War One³, government policy initiatives that could have reduced inequality in the outcomes of Australian secondary schooling were rare until the 1970s.

Targeting educational disadvantage

From the mid-1960s, a policy imperative to address inequality in the outcomes of schooling in Western countries gathered momentum, in response to research, political activism and government-commissioned reports (Anderson & Western 1970; Coleman et al. 1966; Eckland 1964, 1965). When the Australian Labor Party won the Australian Federal election in December 1972, it responded to these concerns. The terms of reference for the Interim Committee of the Australian Schools Commission, chaired by Professor Peter Karmel, which asked the Committee to

. . . make recommendations to the Minister for Education and Science as to the immediate financial needs of schools, priorities within those needs, and appropriate measures to assist in meeting those needs. . . (Karmel 1973: 1)

In response, the Karmel Committee's Report emphasised the policy goals of achieving equality of opportunity for students, diversity in schools provision, and devolution of school management. It recommended targeting funding to address 'disadvantage' through programs for Aboriginal education, migrant education, isolated children, socio-economically disadvantaged schools and schools in country areas, teacher training, and special education for students with a disability (Karmel 1973: Table 14.3). The federal government responded by expanding its specific purpose payments to the states under Section 96 of the Constitution to include a set of targeted programs with equity objectives. State governments were expected to use this funding for the purposes defined for each program by the federal government through its new Australian Schools Commission. The targeted programs were heavily inputs-based, focusing on how money was to be distributed between schools and systems, with guidelines for what it could be spent on, yet with no mechanisms for monitoring whether the programs were having an impact.

The Karmel Committee had expressed concern about providing funding on the basis of inputs alone,

¹ While Australia's colonial governments provided some funding to private and community-based schools from the early 19th Century, universal state school systems were established under the "free, secular and compulsory" Education Acts, introduced in: Victoria 1872; Queensland 1875; South Australia 1875; New South Wales 1880; Tasmania 1893; and Western Australia 1893 (Austin 1961).

² Although the legislated terms of compulsory education fell within the range of four to fourteen years of age, until the 1950s, completion of primary school was usually sufficient grounds to gain exemption from further years of schooling (Ling 1984: 48).

³ The Soldiers' Children Education Scheme assisted children whose fathers had been killed or permanently incapacitated by the First World War through mentoring and financial support from 13 years of age. Of the 19,461 clients approved for assistance between the wars, some 46 per cent completed secondary school and most of the remaining students completed vocational training or agricultural studies. Less than 15 per cent of the Scheme's clients dropped out (Repatriation Commission 1937: 23).

but concluded that lack of adequate data ruled out the possibility of allocating equity funding on any basis other than the “degree of disadvantage of groups of pupils in particular schools” (Karmel 1973: pars 5.8, 5.9 & 5.10). While the Karmel Committee acknowledged “the limitations of dealing with inputs of educational resources and ignoring outcomes”, it said it expected the Schools Commission to pursue the task of gathering data on the impact of its programs (Karmel 1973: par 5.11).

Yet throughout the 35 - year life of federal targeted programs for schools, data was not collected in a systematic way on the impact of the Commonwealth government’s equity funding initiatives. While evaluations indicated the types of activities that were funded and provided anecdotal evidence of impact, there was no quantitative evidence to demonstrate that federal equity funding through targeted programs had led to improvements in the participation, retention or achievement of students deemed ‘disadvantaged’. Lingering doubts about the Constitutional legitimacy of the federal government’s role may have contributed to the lack of data on program impact. As education was a residual power under the Australian Constitution, state governments could argue they were not obliged to share information with the Commonwealth about the performance of schools. Moreover, the fact that federal funding was usually pooled with state funding and thus indistinguishable at the school level, made it difficult to isolate any “impact” of federal funding alone.

The Schools Commission nevertheless worked assiduously to raise awareness of educational inequalities and to identify new priorities for equity funding (McKinnon 1984). Between 1972 and 1974, the Schools Commission presided over a rapid increase in Federal spending on schools (*Commonwealth Budget Papers 1975-76*) but when budgetary restraint was imposed from the 1975 budget onwards, equity funding was the biggest casualty. Thereafter, spending on targeted programs declined markedly as a proportion of total federal expenditure on schooling – from 52 per cent in 1973 to less than 18 per cent by 1998⁴.

Public accountability, new federalism and neoliberalism

The last two decades of the 20th Century were marked by reform in public sector management practices in Western countries, where “new managerialism” promised public sector managers more autonomy over decision-making, in return for increased accountability regarding the impact of their activities and the outcomes achieved (Considine and Painter 1995; OECD 1995: 33; Uhr 1998: 164-169).

Changes in public sector management occurred alongside a renewed interest in ‘new federalism’ in Australia which aimed to reduce overlap and duplication in service provision between state and federal governments. The federal government’s tendency to intervene in policy areas beyond its constitutional responsibility, through the mechanism of specific purpose payments under Section 96 of the Constitution, was raised repeatedly as a reform priority, with expenditure on schools frequently identified in new federalism policy agendas. As ‘new federalism’ was pursued in fits and starts over several decades, it engendered subtle changes in federal-state relations, “towards collaborative, as distinct from arms-length, patterns of inter-governmental relations” (Painter 1998: 1). For example, in 1989, having abolished the Schools Commission, the federal government collaborated with State and Territory Education Ministers to develop an agreed set of *National Goals for Schooling* along with an annual *National Report on Schooling* to publish data on expenditure by both federal and state governments and educational outcomes (Australian Education Council 1989).

During the 1980s, the concept of public education came under sustained public attack, particularly by individuals influenced by neoliberal ideology which championed market-based systems for the delivery of public services, such as Charter Schools (Mathis, 2016). A report commissioned by US

⁴ Targeted programs, including the needs-based Capital Grants program, had comprised 52 per cent of total Commonwealth schools outlays in 1973 compared to 18 per cent in 1998. The proportion of the Federal schools budget allocated to recurrent funding for private schools increased from 48 per cent in 1973 to 82 per cent in 1998 (DEETYA 1998).

President Reagan declared that the ‘mediocrity’ of American public education was a threat to national prosperity and tantamount to an ‘act of war’ (Gardner, D.P. 1983). In the UK, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher dismantled local boards of education, cut public funding and introduced an inspectorate for public schools. In Australia, the most comprehensive neoliberal reform of public schooling occurred in Victoria with a program of school closures and management devolution implemented by the Kennett government (Caldwell and Hayward 1998).

The limited published data on public expenditure and student achievement was harnessed in support neoliberal policy agendas. For example, after comparing average costs per student and average student achievement, an American economist concluded, “the rapid increases in expenditures on schools of the past three decades have simply not been matched by measurable increases in student performance” (Hanushek 1994: 18). In Australia, Clare and Johnston (1993) used data in the *National Report on Schooling*, to conclude that the higher level of average expenditure per student in some states and territories must reflect inefficiencies in service delivery, and therefore savings of \$700 million per year could be achieved if all States reduced their expenditure to the level of the lowest spending State. A South Australian Commission of Audit, employing a similar logic, said that if South Australia's student: teacher ratio was reduced to the ratio in New South Wales, 2000 teaching positions could be abolished in South Australia with no adverse effects. (South Australian Commission of Audit 1994, Section 12.5)

In 1993, a House of Representatives Standing Committee, chaired by Mary Crawford MP, produced a report which stated, without supporting evidence, that “10 to 20 per cent of children finish primary school with literacy problems” (HRSCEET, 1993 p.v). In response, in its May 1994 White Paper, *Working Nation*, the Labor Federal government announced that it would provide \$3 million to conduct a survey of literacy levels in schools in 1996. When the federal government changed in 1996, the new Minister for Schools, Dr David Kemp, expanded the scope of the National Literacy Survey to include the setting of national literacy and numeracy benchmarks (Management Committee 1997). The federal government subsequently negotiated the introduction of an annual National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the results of which are now published on the MySchool website.

Productive schools research

Education researchers have long been interested in the nature of effective schooling. Yet the product of such research was never used systematically to inform policy priorities in distributing public funding. One explanation is that education authorities traditionally assumed that best practice in teaching simply needed to be disseminated widely in order to be taken up in classrooms. Systems therefore promoted innovation in pedagogy and curriculum, experimenting with new school structures and delivery and revising curriculum, and providing incentives for teachers and schools to innovate and experiment, while never thinking to measure the impact of such reforms (Fullan 2009). Yet the persistence of inequality in educational outcomes from schooling finally suggested that fundamental policy reform was needed (OECD 2008; 2012).

In Australia, as in other countries, the educational level of a child’s parents continues to have a significant effect on the child’s educational attainment (Shavit & Blossfield 1993; Rodriguez and Tamis-La Monda, 2011; Melhuish et al., 2008; Chesters and Watson, 2012). This relationship is established well before the school starting age and participation in schooling does not appear to close the socio-economic gap in literacy and numeracy achievement. Children at the bottom of the distribution for achievement at the end of their first year of school continue to be ranked low in successive years, while children ranked highly when they are young remain at the top of the scale. The longer a child attends school, the wider the achievement gap becomes. At best, it appears that the experience of schooling has no effect in reducing existing socio-economic inequalities. At worst, pre-existing social and educational inequalities appear to be exacerbated by the experience of schooling (Lamb 1997; Rothman and McMillan, 2003; Teese et. al. 2007).

In the 21st Century, education researchers have been able to use improved data on student achievement

to identify schools that appear to have a positive impact on the achievement of students from low-socio-economic backgrounds, and have studied the characteristics of such schools. Studies of productive schools serving low-SES communities indicate that students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low performing teachers while students placed with low-performing teachers for several years in a row suffer an educational loss that is largely irreversible (Reeves, 2008). Effective teaching research also highlights the importance of teacher expertise in areas such as content, pedagogical and curriculum knowledge as well as classroom management and communication skills which support both sophisticated planning before lessons and a rich improvisational repertoire during class (Yates, 2005). Teachers' social-emotional competencies, such as compassion, empathy, reflectivity and resilience, also appear to be associated with teaching performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Studies of school leadership also suggest that the skill, knowledge and behaviour of school principals influence student learning, and thus overall school performance because such leaders prioritise activities which develop and support effective teachers (Robinson et. al., 2008).

Australian education systems appeared slow to act on such findings, as new public sector accountability practices revealed.⁵ In the early 2000s, Australian government auditors began to ask whether education systems were achieving their stated policy objectives. In 2007, the New South Wales Auditor-General criticised the NSW education system for making little progress since 1999 in improving the educational outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged students (Department of Education and Training/the Audit Office, 2008). Two years later, the Victorian Auditor-General criticised Victoria's expenditure on literacy programs, pointing out that the Department could not demonstrate any impact of targeted expenditure on reducing the gap in literacy outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Victorian Auditor-General, 2009).

Once Australia's education systems were held to account for the effectiveness of their schools, the design of equity funding programs began to change. Traditional questions of resource distribution were accompanied by a new focus on 'what works' in terms of supporting effective teaching. As the OECD (2008) emphasised that the achievement of equity goals in schooling was central to education's role in supporting a national economic objectives, policy perspectives also shifted at the federal level.

National Partnership Agreements

In 2008, a newly elected federal Labor government capitalised on trends in new federalism to implement National Partnership (NP) Agreements with state and territory governments (Council of Australian Governments, 2008). Negotiated under the auspices of a strengthened federalist body – the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – the NPs in education replaced the federal education programs funded through specific purpose payments under Section 96 of the Constitution which had been in place since the Karmel report.⁶ Under each NP Agreement, state and territory governments were expected to allocate additional funding to schools in both the government and non-government sectors to pursue both equity and quality goals. Targets were set and a proportion of funding was held back to 'reward' states that delivered on nationally significant reforms (Council of Australian Governments, 2008, 2009; MCEETYA 2008, Attachment B p.12).

Premised on the assumption that targeted funding should have a positive impact on student learning outcomes, the National Partnerships Agreements directed additional funding to support improvements in three broad areas: Literacy and Numeracy; Teacher Quality; and Low Socio-economic status (SES) school communities. Under the Low SES School Communities NP, schools serving low socio-economic status communities received a substantial injection of additional resources to build teaching

⁵ In line with principles of new managerialism, Australian government auditors now seek evidence of program effectiveness (ie. how program funding contributes to the achievement of stated policy goals) in addition to their traditional role of ensuring that funding is directed to its intended recipients.

⁶ Most Commonwealth targeted programs for government and private schools were rolled into National Partnership Agreements from 2009 in line with the new federalism policy agenda to reduce the number of specific purpose payments ('tied grants') in education.

capacity and support improvements in student learning. Schools were expected to apply the additional funding to one or more of six agreed 'reform areas'⁷ which reflected contemporary thinking about 'what worked' in 'turning around' low-performing schools in disadvantaged communities (Department of Education and Skills 2007; McKinsey and Company, 2007; OECD 2008). Some \$1.5 billion (from 2008-09 to 2014-15) was allocated through the NP for Low SES School Communities the introduction of significant and far-reaching reforms based on school improvement research many of which had industrial implications (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Schools were also supported to employ specialised staff to help implement the agreed programs of school improvement (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2011, p 5).

National Partnership Agreements also mandated the comprehensive collection of data on school inputs and outcomes. The first NP Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy mandated the publication of schools' results in the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) on a new MySchool website managed by a new Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Agency (ACARA). Financial information on school's total income from public and private sources was also published on the MySchool website from 2010. Evaluations of NPs were commissioned by both federal and state and territory governments. For example, the NSW Department of Education and Communities commissioned separate evaluations of each of the six reform areas under its National Partnership for Low SES School Communities. The National Partnerships Agreements therefore generated one of the most comprehensive data sets ever available for research and analysis of the relationship between equity funding and student learning outcomes in Australian schools.

The Gonski funding model

In 2010, the Federal Labor government established a six-member review panel, chaired by businessman David Gonski, charged with re-designing schools funding from 2013. The intention was to build on the National Partnerships model to include core funding by state and federal governments for both public and private schools and to roll in the large federal recurrent grants program for private schools which had long been the subject of controversy (Anderson, 1993; Buckingham, 2000; Watson and Ryan, 2010; Watson 2003; Hogan, 1984; Teese 1989). The government's purpose in establishing the Gonski review was to bring all schools funding, including the federal funding of private schools, and equity funding under one funding agreement which would be "transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent educational outcomes for all Australian students." (Gonski et al., 2011: 225). This was consistent with international trends that portrayed the achievement of equity goals as inherent in high quality education systems and equity goals should influence the allocation of all schools funding, rather than be pursued through specific programs (OECD 2012: 6).

The Australian federal government justified its policy direction in these terms, stating that "Socioeconomic factors play a stronger role in determining student outcomes and life chances than they should. . ." (Australian Government, 2010: 6). In a speech as Education Minister to the Sydney Institute on 15 April 2010, Julia Gillard argued that National Partnership Agreements had "changed the politics of education" and had made "high expectations the central feature of education policy in this country – high expectations for every student, regardless of their background, the type of school they go to, or the barriers that they might face to educational achievement" (Gillard, 2010, p.3).

The Gonski review's final report recommended a new funding system that would apply to both public and private schools, whereby all schools would be eligible for a relatively small core amount per

⁷ The six reform areas were: (1) Incentives to attract high-performing teachers and principals; (2) Adoption of best practice performance management and staffing arrangements that articulate a clear role for principals; (3) School operational arrangements that encourage innovation and flexibility; (4) Provide innovative and tailored learning opportunities; (5) Strengthen school accountability; and (6) External partnerships with parents, other schools, businesses and communities.

student, supplemented by larger amounts allocated on the basis of student characteristic to be expended in line with School Improvement Plans (Gonski et al., 2011). In its last months in office in 2013, the Federal Labor government negotiated with State and Territory governments to accept a version of the Gonski Review's proposed funding model – the National School Improvement Plan – and promised substantial increases in federal funding for in the expectation of funding commitments from state and territory governments over a six year period. While three states and territories refused to sign up to the Plan before the Commonwealth's deadline, the Australian Education Act was introduced in 2013 and saw the largest remaining federal specific purpose schools program – the recurrent grants program for private schools – rolled into the National School Improvement Plans from 2014 (Australian Government, 2013).

Since the election of the federal Coalition government in 2013, the long-term future of the Gonski-led funding model has become uncertain. After an initial impulse to abolish the funding agreement in 2014, federal education Minister Christopher Pyne then promised to honour the funding commitments, but only for the next four years (instead of the six years negotiated previously). The federal government also dropped the requirement that state and territory governments should contribute specified levels of funding to match the federal funding commitments, thus removing the previous funding certainty for schools and systems (Kenny, 2013).

While there is now a substantial amount of data on patterns of student achievement in Australian schools, its potential to inform education policy remains is constrained by ideological agendas. For example, evidence of an 'achievement gap' was used by the federal Labor government to justify targeting additional resources to support school improvement on the assumption that funding activities associated with improved student learning *will make a difference* (Australian Government, 2010: 6). Equally, evidence of an 'achievement gap' is used by the current Coalition government to support arguments *against* funding increases, citing the achievement gap as evidence that funding *won't make a difference* (Hurst 2013).

Summary

While the broad goal of equity funding – to reduce inequality in educational outcomes between social groups – has never changed, the design and delivery of equity programs for schools has evolved. Australian colonial governments' implicit purpose in establishing public education systems in the late 19th Century was to reduce inequality in educational outcomes between social groups. Yet the way in which public funding should be used to pursue this goal remains poorly understood. During the first century of government involvement in schooling, public sector auditing practices required education systems to account for program expenditures, not the achievement of policy objectives. Thus little data was collected that linked the input of resources to the distribution of student learning outcomes. When evidence of disparities in educational outcomes emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, governments designed equity programs to target additional resources to groups of schools on the assumption that this would lead to improvements in the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students. While these targeted programs may have made a difference, there was no systematic collection of data to illustrate the extent to which equity funding was achieving its purpose.

From the 1980s, the adoption of new public sector management principles led to questions about the effectiveness of schools funding in achieving stated policy goals. Improvements in the collection of data on student achievement revealed the persistence of disparities in educational outcomes between social groups. While this evidence of an 'achievement gap' was used by neoliberal ideologues to argue that equity goals would be served better by market mechanisms, it was also used to drive policy reform within education systems. Education research on 'what works' in meeting the learning needs of disadvantaged students was increasingly used to inform how equity funding was allocated and how equity programs were evaluated.

The National Partnership Agreements of 2007, with their significant injection of public funding for activities associated with improving school productivity, their clear specification of desired equity

goals, and their mandated collection of data on student learning outcomes over several years, generated one of the most comprehensive sources of data ever collected in Australia for examining the impact of targeted equity funding for schools. Data on the impact of the National Partnerships Agreement for serving low-socio-economic status communities has the potential to shed light on the question of whether equity funding for schools makes a difference, as well as indicating the circumstances in which equity funding is most likely to be effective.

Given the determination of neoliberal ideologues to play down the potential of equity funding to make a difference, the existence of data through which the impact of equity funding on student learning can be thoroughly explored, is the most valuable resource available to researchers interested in the future direction of public policy for Australian schools. Such research is vital if we are to move beyond simplistic public debates about schools productivity driven by ideology rather than evidence.

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