From Social Justice to 'Literacy For All': Australian variations on a global theme.

Miriam Henry and Sandra Taylor

School of Cultural and Language Studies

Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of changing conceptualisations of equity within education policy in Australia in recent times. Questions are raised about the significance of the shift to a literacy focus. At the commonwealth level, literacy appears to have become a surrogate for other forms of educational and social disadvantage, connecting to a number of global discourses including the potentially narrow discourse of 'literacy for the knowledge economy'. At the same time, there are continuities with older framings of equity drawing on an Australian tradition of reform, and significant State-based variations in how literacy/equity is defined and taken up in policy, reflecting local histories and conflicts. At a more theoretical level, the study raises questions about the globalisation of education policy making and the significance of this for conceptualising and researching notions of national interest and the connections between the so-called local and global.

Introduction

This paper reports on a study of changing conceptualisations of equity within education policy in Australian schooling in recent times. At the Commonwealth level there has been a shift towards a focus on literacy, linked to the broader global context of education policy making. The paper explores how this shift towards a focus on literacy in the Commonwealth's approach to equity has impacted on state policies dealing with equity and disadvantage. In particular we were interested in how policies were framed, how notions of equity were being defined, and how programs were funded and monitored.

The study is located within the field of critical policy analysis which examines the effects of economic, political and social contexts upon education policy development and implementation (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry 1997). The frame of reference of critical policy analysis draws attention to the sources and distribution of power and raises questions about the shaping and timing of policy agendas, the tenuous relation between policy objectives and policy outcomes, and the 'winners' and 'losers' of policy decisions and implementation processes. Such questions are pertinent to this study given our theoretical concern with understanding not just the 'facts' of policy objectives and how programs are financed and monitored, but also the circumstances and forces which help to shape the particular ways in which policy goals are formulated and taken up in particular settings.

The study was conducted in Australia in 1998, and is based on interviews with key players (mainly education department officers) and an analysis of documents relating to equity policy and programs within the Commonwealth arena and in selected states - ACT, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, and Victoria. These states were selected because of the different histories and approaches they represent, as well as their relative accessibility to the researchers. The state documents by and large pertain to developments during the mid 1990s - prior to the Commonwealth's move in 1997 to make literacy the key equity focus.

Hence information about subsequent changes was obtained through the interviews. Eighteen interviews were conducted in all, mainly face to face, though a few were conducted by telephone. In some cases two or three people met with us and were interviewed together. The interviews were approximately one hour in duration and were taped and summarised later. Interviewees who are quoted in the paper are designated by their location only and are not named.

The following sections of the paper review some of the background to recent Australian approaches to equity policy, changing conceptualisations of equity, and funding issues. We then summarise the trends in policy developments and approaches within the Commonwealth and selected states, and identify some unresolved policy issues which are raised by our findings. The final section of the paper raises some theoretical questions about the impact of the new global context on Australian education policy and its local variations.

Background to the study

Equity policy developments in Australia

Constitutionally, education is the responsibility of the states. However, the Commonwealth has taken an increasing interest in schooling, extending its reach initially via supplementary funding for special projects and the development of Commonwealth polices, and later through national policy and curriculum frameworks. Much - though certainly not all - of the impetus for the development of equity policy and programs has come from the Commonwealth. The Schools Commission, a quasi autonomous body set up by the Whitlam Labor government to provide independent advice to government on schooling, played an important role as a catalyst for reform throughout its existence. In addition, the Australian Education Council (AEC) and the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MYCEETA) have facilitated Commonwealth-State relations in equity policy making, particularly in relation to the development of national policies.

Equity issues moved on to the Commonwealth policy agenda in the 1970s under the Whitlam government when a number of groups were identified as being 'educationally disadvantaged' and needing special attention. A number of Commonwealth Special Programs were set up - the Disadvantaged Schools, Aboriginal Education, Country Areas and English as a Second Language Programs - to address these inequalities. The *Disadvantaged Schools Program* (DSP), established in 1974 and continuing until 1997, was the most important and longest running of these programs. The DSP aimed to improve participation and outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Since its inception it has provided extra funding to schools serving the poorest 15% of students, calculated by a socio-economic status index using Australian Bureau of Statistics data. For example, a total of $69 million was allocated in 1997. Distribution of funds was submission based and most states developed their own mechanisms for managing the program and distributing funds (Connell, White and Johnston 1991, Lingard 1998). The most important features of the DSP were that it :

> ... focused on whole-school change and improved school-community relations rather than on 'fixing up' individual deficit students. ... Instead of individual pathology and 'blaming the victim' assumptions, there was a focus on how school structures, curricula and padagogies contributed to the reproduction of educational disadvantage across generations (Lingard 1998, p. 2).

The Commonwealth Special programs were maintained through a number of successive governments until the early 1990s when these programs were brought together in the process of 'broadbanding' into the Commonwealth's *National Equity Program for Schools* (NEPS). This program had four main elements: Access (ESL and Special Education components); Equity (Disadvantaged Schools and Country Areas General components); National Priorities (Literacy and Learning, Students at Risk, Gifted and Talented, and Early Literacy components); and Incentives (Gender Equity and Students with Disabilities components) (DEET 1995).

In the Gender Equity component there was an attempt to take account of intersecting aspects of disadvantage and the administrative guidelines of that component stated: 'The objective ... is to provide financial incentives to enhance the learning experiences of girls in schools which are isolated or characterised by concentrated levels of students disadvantaged by low socio-economic status' (1995, p. 81).

The National Strategy for Equity in Schooling (NSES) was endorsed by Commonwealth and state ministers in 1994 and released in 1995. Six categories of students whose educational outcomes are significantly lower than those of the population as a whole and 'who require additional support and resources to improve their educational outcomes' are identified (MCEETYA 1995, p. 71). They are: students with disabilities, with learning difficulties or behavioural disorders; students at risk of dropping out of school; students from backgrounds of low socio-economic backgrounds or living in poverty; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students from non-English speaking backgrounds; and students who are geographically isolated.

The document also makes the point that these groups are not mutually exclusive and that strategies are needed to help address the issue of 'multiple disadvantage'. NSES identified priorities for action and required annual reporting and monitoring of agreed performance measures by school systems. A mid-term review was also planned for 1998.

However, this review did not occur. In 1997 there was a significant change in direction by the Commonwealth and a change in its funding rationale, and equity priorities were marginalised at the expense of a focus on literacy and numeracy. Further, in a context of economic rationalism and school based management (Lingard 1998), there was increasing concern through the 1990s about the effectiveness of equity programs. Two studies were commissioned to look into some key issues concerned with targeting and funding of equity programs (Quin et al. 1994, Ainley et al. 1995). These are discussed further in the section on funding issues below.

Another development was the shift from targeted approaches to the 'mainstreaming' of equity issues, paralleled by a shift from specific purpose programs to 'broad banding'.

Early approaches to equity used a targetted approach. While there have been differences in nomenclature between states and over time, the groups commonly identified have been: girls; isolated and rural students; homeless students; students living in poverty; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students with disabilities; students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The Commonwealth has not usually included gifted and talented students as an equity target group, but some states have, for example Queensland. There have been only minor changes to the way these groups have been defined over time,

though, as mentioned previously, girls are no longer included among the equity target groups.

While different systems evolved different administrative arrangements in relation to these groups, some general observations can be made. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has had separate funding and administrative arrangements within all systems. In general, sub-sections within generic equity units were established to develop policy and programs for each of the targetted groups, each with own funding base. In 1996, when the Commonwealth broadbanded equity, some states adopted this change in their own structures while others continued to fund separate programs for identified target groups. Broadbanding was criticised by some as a cost cutting exercise which reduced the Commonwealth's commitment to equity because accountability for spending money on targeted groups disappeared. Others argued that broadbanding encouraged cooperation between units previously working in isolation (e.g. cultural diversity and gender).

Changing conceptualisations of equity in policy

There are no absolute meanings of the concepts associated with equity and social justice and educational disadvantage. Rather, the terms are constituted historically and politically - reflecting struggles by social movements to influence policy agendas. The terms have different meanings in different countries and also within Australia - across the states - and have changed over time. Further, ' ... these constructions never constitute a coherent set of ideas but rather a pragmatic expression of what appears feasible' (Taylor et al 1997, p. 132).

Two aspects of social justice are important: the economic and the cultural. Traditional approaches have mainly been concerned with economic inequality and about the *redistribution of resources*. More recently, more attention has been given to cultural aspects of inequality and the *recognition of difference*. Thus the terms which originally focused mainly on class inequalities have been reworked to address inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, disability and sexuality. There have been extensive debates about these issues during the 1990s and they will only be discussed briefly here, highlighting conceptualisations which have been relevant to developments in Australian education policy, noted above.

There are three main *redistributive* traditions of thinking about social justice: liberal-individualism, market-individualism and social democratic (Taylor et al 1997, p. 128). The main features of these conceptual approaches in policy will be briefly reviewed before discussing recent developments which make some attempt to go beyond redistributive approaches.

Liberal-individualism

Within this view, there is a focus on ensuring individuals have equal opportunities to access education. This is the distributive justice model, based on the assumption that 'a uniformly resourced system would ensure that socially disadvantaged children would use their abilities to climb by means of schooling into the upper echelons of society' (Johnston 1993, p. 108). It is seen as a 'weak' approach to equity policy: critics argue that the focus on the individual rather than the system is based on a deficit view of underachieving individuals, for example, as seen in programs for improving girls' access to non-traditional areas of study. However, this conceptualisation has underpinned the general approach to Australian schooling and

funding, certainly until the time of the Schools Commission, and is a view which surfaces at times of conservative (Coalition) governments, e.g. in the Fraser years 1975 - 83. It also resonates with liberal feminist approaches which promote EEO policies and practices.

Social-democratic

Within this view, there is a focus on needs, and a more collectivist and cooperative image of society. The aim is to produce equality of outcomes in schooling between social groups. Educational inequality is seen as linked to the way society is structured: some groups will perform better or worse than others in education because of the way education is linked to privilege in the social structure along lines of class, gender, race and ethnicity and geography. In this context, strategies are required for making curriculum and assessment more inclusive, breaking down barriers between school and community, making school relationships more democratic - in all, a whole-school approach. Johnston (1993) uses the term 'compensatory justice' to describe this approach: 'If ability was socially constructed, and if it was possible to identify the social and cultural factors that led to success at school, then surely it was incumbent upon a socially just society to make those qualities available to all children regardless of their social circumstances' (p. 109). This approach underpinned much of the Schools Commission's work, in particular the Disadvantaged Schools Program.

Market-individualism

This approach has become increasingly popular in Australia in recent years with Labor as well as conservative governments, and has become dominant in most western countries through the 1990s. Economic considerations are paramount and the market is regarded as the main provider of social justice. Thus this is a residual rather than a primary approach to equity, where only the most needy are targeted and supported, as in the charity models of social justice adopted in previous times. As Beilharz (1989) notes, social justice understood in this way, becomes not so much a universal ethical principle as an administrative principle. The model once again focuses on individuals rather than groups, inverting the deficit argument by arguing that labelling individuals in terms of (disadvantaged) group affiliation constitutes a form of stereotyping. In this individualistic focus, structural elements of disadvantage tend to be underemphasised, though the identification of 'equity target groups' as an administrative principles continues.

More recent approaches to equity, social justice and disadvantage do not reject, but attempt to go beyond a redistributional approach.

Justice as mutuality

A relatively recent conceptualisation is referred to by Gewirtz (1998) as 'justice as mutuality'. This (neo-Fabian) approach is strongly linked to discourses of citizenship, inclusivity and social capital, and is about the redistribution of responsibilities as well as resources, and '... is also about shifts in the nature of participation, it is about a restructuring of power relations in society' (Gewirtz 1998, p. 473).

These views have some adherents in Britain and Europe (see Levitas 1996, Lister 1998) and have been circulated in the media in Australia (Cox 1995). However, they have not been particularly influential in education policy debates except in the broad concern about the role

of public education. The conceptualisation is 'about reimporting a social conscience into capitalism, curbing its worst excesses, without seeking to dismantle capitalist power structures' (Gewirtz 1998, p, 474).

Recognition of difference

Recent approaches to equity and social justice reflect an understanding that class, gender, ethnicity and so on, cannot readily be separated, and that the older redistributive models did not take account of the complexity of the issues and of the way the different dimensions of inequality are interrelated. In addition, they did not adequately take account of difference *within* social groups, or of cultural aspects of injustice. As a result, new paradigms have been developed which focus attention on the recognition of difference as well as the need to address economic inequalities. These issues are complex, because redistribution and recognition of difference often need to be pursued simultaneously in addressing social injustices. For example, race inequalities have a socio-economic component which demand a redistributive approach, as well as a cultural component for which a recognition approach is necessary (Fraser 1997). There are additional complications because some strategies dedifferentiate social groups, while others enhance group differentiation. Fraser usefully tries to resolve this dilemma by identifying two broad approaches to remedying social injustice that cut across the redistribution-recognition divide, which she calls 'affirmation' and 'transformation' (1997. p. 23). Young (1990) has also attempted to integrate the distributional and recognition paradigms, proposing a broader conceptualisation of social justice based on freedom from five aspects of oppression - exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.

Coming from a different perspective, Connell (1993) also argues that any theory based solely on the distributional paradigm is inadequate as it focuses on the 'how much' rather than the 'what' of education. Hence he advocates 'curricular justice' where the curriculum is developed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged.

Drawing on these various perspectives, Sturman (1997) attempts to reconceptualise social justice to include a distributive component, a curricular justice component and non-material component, with a focus on the least advantaged. In relation to the distributional component, Sturman argues that this should focus on adult opportunities derived from schooling: students should be able to take advantage of post-school opportunities, and group inequalities should not be attributable to schooling processes. In this context, he emphasises the importance of literacy and numeracy in the early years for later success. In relation to curricular justice, Sturman advocates a common curriculum and curriculum reorganisation to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged. Finally, in relation to the non-material component of social justice, access to decision making and developing skills for democratic participation in society is highlighted, together with a counter-hegemonic curriculum to actively counter oppression, eg racism (Sturman 1997, pp. 116-18).

In discussing the essential features of social justice in education, Adams et al (1997, p. 3) argue that social justice in education is both a process and a goal:

> The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We

envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacity), and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and society as a whole.

Policy approaches then have reflected differing conceptualisations of equity and social justice, sometimes bringing different elements together in an eclectic mix, as will be seen. As Sturman suggests, '... social justice appears to be .... at yet another crossroads in the politics of education' (1997, p. 104), with debates about the appropriate approach to be taken, and in particular what should be the appropriate target for programs and funding: individual disadvantaged students, recognised target groups, schools or regions.

Changes in terminology used also reflect the changes in conceptualisation of the issues. For example, the language of disadvantage, once seen to denote a social-democratic view of equality, became identified with deficit views and hence is rarely used now. Rather, 'equity' has become the catch-all phrase to denote concerns with social justice. 'Disadvantaged groups' became referred to as 'equity target groups' or 'target groups', and recently 'student subsets'. 'Social justice' as a concept tended to surface in the Labor years, state and federally, and faded with the demise of Labor in the mid nineties. 'Equity' as a term has survived in most systems, perhaps because of its connotations with 'fairness', while social justice has begun to reappear in some states.

Funding issues

The key issues associated with funding of equity programs were usefully highlighted in a Discussion Paper on 'Defining a Disadvantaged School' produced by the ACT's Ministerial Advisory Council on Government Schooling (1997). They were identified as:

> • funding objectives (whether funds should be devoted to enhancing the general welfare of financially disadvantaged students, or literacy and numeracy in educationally disadvantaged students, or to expand educational experiences and improve broad educational outcomes for disadvantaged students);
>
> • defining disadvantaged students and disadvantaged schools;
>
> • measuring economic and educational disadvantage;
>
> • the appropriate use of funds, and 'spreading' versus 'lumping' of funds (that is, whether funding should be across as many schools as possible or to schools identified as the most disadvantaged) (MACGS, 1997).

A report commissioned by the Commonwealth, *Review of Allocative mechanisms for Commonwealth Equity Funds for Schools* (Quin, Ashenden and Milligan 1994) reviewed the national allocative mechanisms of the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS) and investigated 'whether the mechanisms could be made more efficient and effective in meeting educational need' (p. ix). Citing a prior OECD report, it suggests:

> The most important question, therefore, when designing a model of financing, is how to distribute, among the various allocators of finance and spending agencies, the control and accountability functions and responsibilities, and

how to reconcile the desire for local autonomy with the need for equitable
provision of education between local areas with unequal tax bases, while
preserving at the same time the schools' autonomy. This sounds like an
impossible task .... (OECD 1991a, p. 57, in Quin et al, p. ix).

The report examined the way target groups were defined and whether allocations reflect
current needs, and found an imbalance between the scale and educational impact of poverty
and the relative allocations to NEPS components; recommended that NEPS should retain its
current approach of making separate allocations to target groups, although noting that such
an approach may encourage a view of equity as the province of special action while leaving
the mainstream untouched. Again it used OECD sources to support its argument: 'The
"group" focus can prove invaluable in its emphasis on concrete, real-world matters and its
sensitivity to particular needs and problems rather than compounding together all
disadvantages, risks and sectional concerns' (OECD 1991b, p.3, in Quin et al. 1994, p.49). It
also argued that ways need to be found to target more accurately multiple or interacting
forms of disadvantage; and observed that little progress had been made in reform of
resource allocation and advocates radical reform, giving the example of the Netherlands
where additional teachers are allocated by weighting students according to social and
cultural backgrounds (Quin et al. 1994).

Another report, *Socioeconomic status and School Education* (Ainley, Graetz, Long and
Batten 1995), commissioned by MCEETYA, focussed on socio-economic disadvantage and
school education. It reviewed literature on the relationship between socioeconomic status
and education, conducted an empirical investigation into measurement of socioeconomic
status, and reviewed provisions for students from low socioeconomic disadvantaged
backgrounds across the states in 1994. At the outset, the report defines 'socioeconomic
status' - overall social position - as determined by educational attainment, employment and
occupational status, and income and wealth. (1995, p.ix). 'Social disadvantage' or
'disadvantage' is defined more broadly and refers to other attributes: ethnicity and language
proficiency, Aboriginal background, gender, family structure, geographical location, and
residential mobility (p. x).

It noted that while some states had developed their own indexes to measure disadvantage,
the Ross Farish index was most commonly used. It recommends the use of a common index
and procedures by education authorities. It also noted that: 'All education authorities were
encouraging schools to look beyond the acquisition of material resources to thinking about
how to use resources to improve learning outcomes and how to monitor those outcomes'
(Ainley et al. 1995, p. xiii). State provisions are summarised in Chapter Six of the report, and
the key aspects highlighted at the time provide background to the current study. Thus for
example: in NSW the equity focus was on achieving equal outcomes among groups, with
33% of funds being spent on literacy and 25% on numeracy programs; in Victoria there was
an emphasis on literacy, with funding going directly to schools; Queensland placed an
emphasis on social justice and whole of school improvement, moving away from a deficit
approach and building on diversity; South Australia had developed a Social Justice Action
Plan and was using a school card scheme; in the ACT there was again an emphasis on
literacy (Ainley et al 1995).

Discussion of findings

The Commonwealth focus on literacy

The centre piece of government policy is the *National Literacy and Numeracy Plan*. The thinking underlying this plan is conveyed in *Literacy for All: the challenge for Australian schools*. (DEETYA 1998). It is predicated on the assumption that 'Australia will go a long way towards countering other forms of educational and social disadvantage if strong foundational literacy and numeracy skills are successfully taught to all children' (p. 7). It states that funds will be 'directed particularly to schools with a high proportion of students educationally disadvantaged in terms of their literacy and numeracy outcomes' (p. 11), and calls for systems 'to set priorities for resources which place the acquisition of effective literacy and numeracy at the centre of the whole enterprise of schooling' (p. 43).

The document indicates that targetted funding for 'educationally disadvantaged students' will continue. Factors associated with 'placing educational outcomes at risk' are socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, low parental expectation, disability, language background other than English, family or personal difficulties, geographic isolation, Indigenous background and gender' (p. 6). However, the document warns against a deficit view, arguing that ' ... it is essential to avoid perspectives which confuse difference with deficit. The term 'at risk' implies a commitment to providing support when it is most needed, not a deficit view of students, nor a labelling and subsequent reduction of expectations for students ...' (p. 17). Major 'at risk' groups identified are: NESB students and Indigenous students. Another section deals with discrepancies between home - school literacy practices, but without explicitly mentioning socioeconomic status.

There is a strong emphasis on the early years of schooling - citing various state initiatives which provide:

> ... powerful metaphors for the importance accorded to literacy acquisition in the early years, and to the perception that literacy is the foundation of further progress in education: First Steps (Western Australia), Flying Start (Tasmania), Cornerstones (South Australia), Keys To Life (Victoria) the Year 2 Diagnostic Net (Queensland), and Getting the Foundation Right (New South Wales) (p. 35).

Student outcomes are to be measured against 'agreed national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy, against which all children's achievements in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 can be measured' (p. 21), hence the establishment of a Benchmarking and Assessment Taskforce under the direction of MCEETYA to develop these. Year 3 assessment was to commence in 1998, and year 5 'as soon as possible':

> Systematic assessment information, through the establishment of benchmarks, assessment and reporting ... provides an accountability framework for reporting on expenditure on public education, and on student learning outcomes. Within this framework, schools and systems will be able to provide objective outcomes information ... to parents and caregivers in order to help inform their choices (p. 22).

Target groups are still to be reported on in state annual reports. Schools are to provide a

detailed plan showing how students will meet minimum acceptable literacy standards; and education authorities are required to use rigorous state-based assessment data on literacy and numeracy outcomes - where this is available - as a basis for allocating funds. The document states: 'It is recognised that moving towards allocating funds to schools on the basis of literacy and numeracy outcomes may occur progressively in the context of an increased national focus on the collection and reporting of outcomes data' (p. 12).

National trends

It is difficult to make direct comparisons among the states as each state deals with equity issues in its own particular way. There are considerable differences between the states in: the amount of funding targeting disadvantage; the proportion from Commonwealth and state sources; the programs to which funding is applied; and numbers of students participating in the programs from each state (MACGS 1997, App 2, p. 1).

In addition, our overview of trends is reliant on policy documents made available to us and on the particular individuals we interviewed. In neither case were these strictly comparable across the states. Our research then documented key developments in equity approaches in each state, rather than providing a comprehensive account of those approaches. The overall picture emerging from this mosaic of state and Commonwealth developments can be summarised as follows:

1. There are considerable differences between states, reflecting local histories and politics. Thus Victoria and the ACT have adopted a strongly individualistic view of equity, and both have gone a fair way down the devolution road, hence facing the problem of how to ensure schools' compliance with centrally determined equity goals. The focus in both states on outcomes data, and in Victoria on performance agreements with schools, may provide a means of doing this. NSW, South Australia and Queensland adopt a more structural approach to equity, and all have moved in various ways to an outcomes focus in order to expend funds and effort. However, in these states there is a greater interest in qualitative assessments of equity performance and, related, ongoing interest in the processes which might promote better outcomes.

2. The shift to an outcomes focus seems to have occurred everywhere albeit in different forms and underpinned by somewhat different assumptions.

3. The Commonwealth's literacy agenda has certainly contributed to reframing state approaches, though to what extent remains difficult to say at this stage. Thus, for example, New South Wales and South Australia in particular have appropriated the language of literacy to sustain an ongoing commitment to social democratic versions of equity - the former reflecting current Labor approaches including a whole of government strategy for social justice, the latter reflecting the legacy of the Dunstan reform years and possibly the result of a recent departmental restructuring to form the Department of Education and Children's Services - bringing education and child welfare areas together in a single government department. By contrast, Victoria, the most vigorous embracer of economic rationalism at state level, and Queensland with its chequered equity history, have moved furthest down the path of pushing equity into the framework of school-based management and global budgeting - in which context literacy testing already occurs.

To what extent, then, does the current literacy focus represent a change of direction in equity policy - to what extent does it represent 'the same game under a slightly different set of labels' (SA)?

From the DSP to Literacy for All: continuities and discontinuities.

The Commonwealth's current literacy focus appears to do two rather new things: make literacy a surrogate for other forms of educational inequality; and conceptualise educational disadvantage in terms of individual rather than group characteristics. However, the new approach both links with, and departs from, older conceptualisations. Hence individualistic, older social democratic and new difference-based approaches sit somewhat uneasily side by side in many of the policy documents and approaches. Such eclecticism reflects institutional histories and changing contexts as well as the incremental nature of policymaking and the way competing discourses are 'stitched together' in policy documents and approaches.

Individuals and groups

In the Commonwealth minister's view and implicit in the notion of 'literacy for all', individuals are abstracted from their social background - an individualistic view:

> Dr. Kemp strongly believes that not every kid from a low ses has a literacy problem. The same goes for those from non-English-speaking background. He says that you don't stamp the kids on the basis of their backgrounds. Where the needs are you target the money rather than simply on the basis of background. You don't make assumptions that background therefore means you have extra educational needs. (Commonwealth)

In keeping with this view*, Literacy for All* warns against a deficit view of 'at risk' student groups (DEETYA 1998, p. 17). At the same time, funding and reporting requirements continue to be based on the identification of targetted disadvantaged groups, e.g. 'students from non-English speaking backgrounds' or 'Indigenous students', reflecting the more structural view which was epitomised in the prior long-running Disadvantaged Schools Program (Lingard 1998).

This conflation could be interpreted as policy eclecticism, or a good example of competing discourses within policy. It might also reflect an awareness of the limitations of a simple group perspective discussed by Sturman (1997). Sturman suggests that the group approach may often lead to stereotyping and 'the broad assumption that because a group is tagged as 'disadvantaged' so must be all the individuals. In other words, individual attributes and needs may be overlooked as everyone is given the fact of the group' (Sturman 1997, p. 113). He also points to the danger of an escalating number of target groups, giving rise to a 'competing victim' and competitive advocacy culture within equity work units, so that little interaction occurs at a theoretical or policy level between the discrete units.

Sturman suggests that a 'basic line of attack' to deal with disadvantage, does not focus on groups but 'around a cluster of issues to do with attendance, language skills, physical surroundings, school climate, personal states and conditions that allow for sustained work - consistent with Victoria's 'at risk index' (1997, p. 114). He emphasises that a group analysis is useful for reporting, monitoring and systemic policy purposes, arguing, however, that it must be applied with care due to the potential for stereotyping and lowering expectations for some groups of students.

The South Australian *Equity Strategy* provides another example of how old and new

conceptualisations have been brought together, particularly around the questions of recognition of difference. Hence the *Equity Strategy* claims to have 'moved beyond the simplistic response of locating responsibility with the individual' and 'understands how responding to the needs of the individual is dependent upon understanding *their relationship to and within the group*'(emphasis added. Similar understandings of the complex relationship between individuals and groups and of differences within groups comes through in many state approaches to gender equity). At the same time, and reflective of former DSP approaches, the South Australian Strategy recognises how systemic factors such as 'curriculum offerings, personnel practices and organisational structures contribute to the construction of barriers to the access, participation, achievement and retention of many groups of learners' (DECS undated, c1998, p. 4), and funding and reporting requirements remain based on the identification of groups disadvantaged in terms of educational access or outcomes as with the earlier DSP.

Literacy as a surrogate for other forms of educational disadvantage.

The DSP, with its 'whole school' approaches to tackling problems of disadvantage was often seen as the reference point - approvingly or otherwise - against which the new literacy focus was judged. However, it is perhaps necessary to be cautious about overstating the achievements of the DSP. One long-standing DSP activist, for example, argued that the Program 'never delivered on whole school change' (NSW); another that the DSP had become 'tired', its passing unmourned (Commonwealth). In fact, the DSP moved through a number of phases and according to one interviewee, among DSP activists there were tensions between those arguing for procedural-based social justice (that is, for schools to be more humane, fair and democratic), and those supporting attainment-based social justice (improved student performances). Thus it could be argued that there are continuities between the latter strand in the DSP and the new literacy framing.

For some, then, the literacy approach represents a significant loss because it does not directly address the complex mix of ingredients which lie behind poor literacy and poor school performance:

> With a literacy tag, a lot of the other things that were possible to do [with the DSP] tend to be tenuous in terms of the linkages, for example supporting kids on excursions, breakfast programs - a whole range of things that impact on kids' learning. (ACT)

Poverty and class factors

In this context, the lack of attention to factors of poverty and low socio-economic status was a particular concern, with some arguing that in the new focus, 'poverty has become invisible' (South Australia), and the pool of money for students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds reduced. It was suggested that this was because the new approach did not recognise:

> ... that low income has a differing impact from, say, a middle class family whose child just hasn't learnt to read or write because of other factors. So money now has to be spread across more kids than those coming from low income backgrounds. ESL dollars are also more thinly spread around to other kids. (ACT)

Others disagreed. For example, one former DSP activist argued that poverty, far from being neglected, was now a mainstream issue:

> But the mainstreaming of poverty is taking away its potency as an activist issue. In that sense, people see it as dropping off the agenda. There is no longer an emotional bind among people working on the issue. (NSW)

This interviewee did not agree that the literacy focus negated questions of social structure, arguing that class factors in particular had become a central reference point in thinking about equity issues, including literacy:

> Socio-economic issues - class - six or seven years ago, no-one would have understood this apart from DSP people. Now at the top of the system, class is recognised as one of the key determinants of educational outcomes ... This is not to say that it is clear what to do about it - people's politics determine different strategies. But it is now recognised that you can't have a literacy strategy without being concerned with issues of low socio-economic status. So the literacy strategy has a clear strand to do with that. But the key point is that there is recognition that these social variables have to be addressed by the system. (NSW)

Thus for some, the new literacy focus complemented rather than negated older concerns with educational disadvantage, with 'an influx of new schools' helping to create a 'culture of CLP -- they're [DSP and CLP] not mutually exclusive' (SA).

Monitoring and assessment

The requirement for outcomes to be measured against outputs, defined in terms of performance on standardised tests of literacy (and numeracy), cuts through many of the complexities of administering equity-oriented programs for 'whole school change'. While there are advantages here in terms of monitoring and assessment, there are complexities around assessing literacy nationally given the different state histories and approaches, as well as the longer-term danger that, in the pressure to perform well on standardised national tests, broader educational goals may be distorted.

<u>Assessing literacy</u>

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter the debates around definitions of literacy, but simply to note that, among the states, there is no clear view about the parameters of literacy funding and assessment given that previously differentiated Commonwealth funding (e.g. for DSP, ESL, students at risk, etc.) now has to be spent on literacy. While there was suspicion in the states that some of their equity-related initiatives would no longer be funded, DEETYA interviewees indicated that literacy funding could be used in a variety of ways provided states - or schools - could argue that links existed between the initiatives they wished to fund and improved literacy outcomes.

The states have agreed in principle to outcomes-based reporting against standardised literacy tests at years 3 and 5. To further this process, MCEETYA established a Benchmarking and Assessment Taskforce to generate nationally agreed standards, a far from straightforward task given the different policy approaches in each state and given an underlying ambiguity of purpose: whether the tests are aimed at differentiation (to highlight 'good' and 'bad' schools in order to assist the process of parental choice) or diagnosis (to

assist schools and systems to determine problem areas and remedies). Despite a vigorous politics of benchmarking, the underlying rationale appears to have been accepted. As one state administrator acknowledged:

> ... the interesting point now with the emphasis on literacy and assessment is that in the past -- say 5 - 10 years ago -- none of the schools [in this state] would have touched that with a barge pole - but they have gradually come more to the view - the Commonwealth view - that we have to be more accountable (ACT)

What this reflects perhaps is the extent to which the outcomes-based accountability processes of corporate governance have become normalised within education systems over the past decade or so. Certainly, as was seen, Victoria is investigating the possibility of establishing performance agreements for schools with an emphasis on outcomes in order to be able to respond to the Commonwealth's questions. It has also set up processes for benchmarking against 'like schools'. This has provided 'information that schools have never had before - making use of more and more for ongoing monitoring of performance' (MCEETYA). This approach also supports the stated Commonwealth aim of providing 'objective outcomes information' to inform parental choice.

Significantly, outcomes-based performance is not (yet) linked to funding:

> That's the huge, huge issue and we don't know the answer. That's why nothing has really changed. Because to make the shift to link outcomes with funding would be the huge shift. No one is ready for that. We don't have the data to do it, or the framework. We're starting to explore the issues. (Commonwealth)

In other words, there are as yet no mechanisms for deciding whether schools will be rewarded (i.e. given extra resources) or punished (have funding withdrawn) for poor literacy outcomes. In this respect, Australia has not gone down the British road of identifying 'failing schools'. Rather, as one interviewee expressed it, systems were 'likely to remain in a purgatory position which allows the Commonwealth to make judgements either way' (Commonwealth).

Questions about the nature of the information that is being provided need to be explored. It is not clear what the outcomes data is telling, nor is it clear that the basis on which it was collected is valid or reliable.

Lack of valid data systems.

As one interviewee put it, it is not possible to 'get evidence of change when there aren't valid systems for collecting evidence [which are] comparative and verifiable, sophisticated in what they are judging. This isn't there' (NSW). Part of the problem here is that, despite the Commonwealth's claims, not all state systems and schools have data bases which will enable a ready identification of the information sought. And even if they do have them, as one interviewee pointed out:

> ... they may not be well maintained. As schools become more and more resource-stretched and pressures on teachers increase, finding bodies to maintain data bases is not easy - particularly given that many teachers are hostile to the changes and see little benefits to be gained by the gathering of yet more data for DEETYA. (NSW)

What is the data telling?

Improved literacy scores on standardised tests may be due to various (not necessarily desirable) factors including: better teaching to the test, more sophisticated responses to a testing regime (like ensuring that problem students do not attend school on testing days), or improved teaching and learning in schools. Standardised testing cannot reveal which of these is happening. As one interviewee put it:

> Even in high DSP/ESL schools, equity-based funding constitutes a tiny fraction of the money which goes into that school. Therefore it's impossible to isolate the factors which contribute to the outcomes in the kids at that school. Plus there are the broader social influences. Therefore within existing systems, it's not possible to come to any conclusions about the effects of [particular] programs. (NSW)

From a rigid outcomes perspective, the processes by which results are obtained are deemed irrelevant. However, the Commonwealth is still interested in, and has commissioned research on 'what makes a difference' (Commonwealth), and for the states, qualitative assessments of how outcomes are achieved remains important.

Qualitative indicators of equity

Qualitative assessments of progress in implementing equity initiatives are concerned with evaluating inputs and processes as well as outcomes. For example, NSW attempts to clearly identify 'the pressures which schools need to resolve [against which we] can identify more tangibly what the outcomes and indicators could be in light of what we want them to achieve' (NSW). An example of this might be:

> ... units of work which integrate multicultural perspectives into learning areas, taught and assessed as though they were part of a key learning area. So, it's not a question of 'doing very well', but of being satisfied that a school has gone through the full process of implementation. (NSW)

Another example:

> DSP (in NSW) has set up a system of peer support and review. So schools with common programs across the state meet together and talk on the basis of a range of indicators around an identifiable area - and say what they have found, what worked well ... what their experience was, etc. In that process, the district superintendent gets a feel for how well things are working. (NSW)

One South Australian interviewee argued that the outcomes approach was useful for diagnosis: 'There are some CLP schools that are performing significantly better than other schools ... there's something happening within those schools that we ought to be promoting' (SA).

The Social Justice Review (1995), carried out by Quality Assurance Directorate in Queensland, points to another form of outcomes reporting. Here the concern is with practices rather than outcomes, based on the assumption that '... the identification of areas of school practice requiring improvement was very likely to lead to improvements in student outcomes for students from the least advantaged groups' (unpaged). This review aggregated the results of over 200 schools and demonstrated the use of benchmarks to measure aspects of procedural justice and levels of inclusivity in decision making, diversity of staffing

and the quality of parent (and citizen) participation. This review provides perhaps the only example of the development of outcomes measures for procedural justice.

An outcomes reporting framework alone delivers ambiguous results in terms of furthering equity goals. For those interested in more process-oriented assessments, outcomes reporting can nevertheless be used strategically. As one interviewee put it, 'the main thing is to support schools to collect information in strategic ways and as a system do it without making it the be all and end all' (SA). Another argued that the outcomes approach 'has taught us to be strategic - a bit cold and hard… responsibility lies with teachers and principals. ... In the bureaucracy, performance based funding has helped us to be focussed and strategic. We have tried to look at it as a positive thing ... [that people] needed to be accountable' (SA).

Silences and tensions

What about the boys?

While gender remains one of the categories to be reported upon, gender equity has been mainstreamed in all systems. The process has coincided with a shift from the education of girls to gender equity, reflected in the replacement of The National Policy for the Education of Girls with the National Gender Equity Framework which promotes understandings about the social construction of gender. However the system wide focus on literacy is likely to enhance the focus on boys' education, given that boys traditionally perform less well than girls on literacy tests. The downplaying of numeracy outcomes (where girls traditionally do worse than boys) does nothing to provide a more balanced analysis of gender. The other obvious limitation of a focus on boys is that it often does not include an analysis of 'which boys?'. As a result there is a failure to recognise that in schooling and in other broader social and economic outcomes (income, employment, housing etc) it is affluent boys who are most privileged (Teese et al 1995).

How this shifting focus will be enacted is not clear given that it has been driven by both pro-feminist and backlash politics. Post-structuralist feminist accounts argue that the education of girls and boys exists as a relationship pivoting around questions of gender construction. This approach informs the gender equity strategies of Queensland and South Australia, for example. These complexities are not likely to be tapped by the literacy framing. There is a further danger that, if boys are seen as the new disadvantaged, literacy-based definitions of equity will result in remedial education programs for boys rather than, say, a consideration of constructions of masculinity which enshrine poor literacy, or of the relationships between gender, socio-economic status, cultural diversity, isolation and literacy outcomes.

Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) Policy

For some, the broader question of funding for public education was the most central equity issue needing to be addressed. This issue is related to the question of EBA policy which sees funding from the state system flowing to the independent school systems at a relatively disproportionate rate. With the proportional increase in the numbers of students enrolling in the private schooling system there are fears that the state system will become 'residualised' - serving only those that cannot afford a private education, and with students with learning and behavioural problems and/or special needs who may not be accepted by the independent schools with their variety of selective enrolment procedures. This issue was seen to have the capacity to increase inequality in the education system and have more impact than any relatively small Commonwealth equity programs. Sturman (1997) also identifies the extent of funding of non-government schools as an important social justice

issue and argues for adequate funding of the public education system. (See also Reid, 1998)

School-based Management

One-line or global budgeting systems are accompanying various forms of school-based management occurring in all states. Unless guarantees for equity spending are built in or accountability measures are required, equity is likely to remain precarious in most schools and school systems. Tensions exist when centrally funded programs based on numbers of students in target groups are administered by a 'self managing' school.

Also significant are the pressures on schools in devolved systems driven by principles of competitive markets and consumer choice. For example, the Literacy Plan proposed funding for 'high quality research' and professional development for teachers. However, the assumptions underlying the standardised testing model also propounded in the Plan may work against this. For instance, as noted earlier, literacy testing may result in a reductionist pedagogy described as 'teaching to the test'. That is, there may be tensions between the 'high quality' research agenda and what schools might seek in terms of professional development, namely recipes for boosting literacy scores given the pressures on schools to perform in a competitive system.

Further, while the competitive environment may encourage a 'whole school effort' in order to achieve good results and hence higher rankings on the league tables (NSW), it may also enhance the gap between so-called good and poor schools in terms of performance - a gap which may have little to do with the quality of teaching and everything to do with broader social and economic variables. In a marketised context, so-called underachieving schools are in danger of becoming even more residualised, hence contradicting policy intentions of 'good literacy outcomes for all'. In this context, moves by NSW to 'claw back' devolution in order to regain some central control over professional development are significant.

Intersectoral approaches

'Whole of government' rhetoric still seems poorly applied to equity policy and approaches, yet intersectoral work is probably particularly pertinent to those students most at risk. This is the interest of the Australian Centre for Equity in Education, established in 1995 aimed at joining education, community health and social services to provide approaches capable of picking up the groups most excluded from education. Its advocacy for 'full service schools' points to an alternative direction to that offered by national literacy testing:

> We're trying to work out how work at school can be supported by different ways of funding through the various systems. We're seriously trying to put the money together to address the complex range of problems in schools. There's lots of lip service for this, for example the 'whole of government' rhetoric. Some of this is useful. For example, housing has taken on educational issues and health. ... What we're hoping is that that kind of approach at various levels will push people to see that it's more than literacy that we have to focus on if we want better outcomes.

The student voice

None of the documents and few of the interviews addressed student participation in decision making, with the exception of NSW which has an appointed officer to coordinate a statewide student council made up of student representatives from schools councils across the state.

This is of major concern in a system that is required to educate students and suggests a significant gap in equity policy.

Conclusion

The extent to which the new framing will change what the states and individual schools do is difficult to judge. For although the processes of national policy making have encouraged a more cooperative relationship between the commonwealth and the states, there is still a degree of mutual suspicion, and a strong sense of ownership of schooling by the states. Each state has its own micro-climate, conflicts and history of program development in equity around which commonwealth agendas are adapted and 'worked'.

Perhaps the most significant system-level trend has been the shift from an essentially needs-based funding approach to one looking for 'literacy (and numeracy) outputs' (NSW) - more in terms of what it might yield in the future than in terms of present practices.

While some are somewhat critical of the shift to a literacy focus, others see scope for a better focussing of resources and effort and a possibility that equity matters might now be addressed more centrally by schools and systems. As one interviewee put it, knowledge about 'making a difference' is no longer the sole preserve of equity programs, and that aligning equity objectives more closely with mainstream objectives could help overcome the marginalisation of equity:

> This can be as trivial as a director being able to tick the achievement of an objective which was in fact achieved through the DSP. In the past, someone responsible for school reform would be struggling with this with a relatively small amount of discretionary funds, and the DSP would have a relatively large amount of discretionary funds, and they wouldn't be able to get their hands on that money. So when we adjusted our work so that our objectives met their objectives - which was not too difficult - then what we were doing could be seen to be a contribution to their work. ... The crux is identifying common objectives - moving away from idea that equity programs are grains in the sand in the oyster of the system which might produce a pearl. Being in the margin resulted in marginalised status. Bringing our objectives together has helped to overcome money jealousy. (NSW)

This view connects to some extent with another view about mainstreaming, though coming from a different direction:

> I want to be in the mainstream - in the planning, delivery, accountability and reporting frameworks that will be used - to have equity embedded in that, but visible enough to have it in there rather than a model which says: we've done our mainstream stuff, now let's put our equity stuff in there. The first one is much harder to do, because you risk a lot -- but in the long run, you can have more effect ... (QLD)

The study highlighted some complex issues which require further analysis. First, there is the question of reconciling individual and group perspectives and, related, the question of what constitutes a deficit policy stance. There are claims and counterclaims here. For example, Luke et al (forthcoming) argue that the current literacy approach constitutes a return to the individual deficit subject. Minister Kemp claims that the target group approach unfairly labels individuals on the basis of group stereotypes. Underlying these competing claims is the broader problematic of addressing difference and equality simultaneously.

Second, to what extent is a literacy focus a useful 'organiser' for addressing education and social disadvantage. Luke, Lingard, Green and Comber (forthcoming) argue that the current literacy focus neglects the structural dimensions of educational and social disadvantage. While this may be true, this study also points to the considerable conceptual range in the way the literacy agenda is 'worked' by the various states. Much depends therefore on how programs are implemented at state and local levels, the extent to which the states may become captive to a reductionist literacy pedagogy in face of standardised testing demands, and on the various ways literacy results and funding may be linked.

Finally, there is the issue of school-based management. This study did not attempt to examine policy and program implementation at the local level. However, given the increasing emphasis on various forms of school-based management and global budgeting, how individual schools address problems of educational equity and disadvantage, and what mechanisms state systems put in place to assist and monitor local initiatives are obviously critical issues.

At a theoretical level, the study illustrates aspects of globalisation's homogenisation processes and ideology. The Commonwealth shift in its approach to equity reflects in many ways broader global policy trends in education policy. To elaborate, in Australia, as elsewhere, governments have adopted neo-liberal ideology as 'the only viable policy option in the face of economic globalisation':

> As a result, government policies have attempted to assert market forces rather than the state as the major steering mechanism for desired policy outcomes. In such a model, the chief function of the (competitive) state then becomes ensuring the international competitiveness of the putatively national economy, with the production of a better educated and trained, more flexible and adaptable workforce as a central policy goal of the state (Luke et al. forthcoming).

Accompanying this version of human capital theory has been the advocacy of new forms of governance concerned to achieve more 'efficient' outcomes at lower costs. Education systems have been restructured with tighter steering over a narrower policy agenda accompanied by a culture of performativity: the management, measurement and comparison of performance of individuals (and systems and nations) within a global market economy. There is a focus on outcomes as measured through quantitative student performance indicators and benchmarks in the emerging 'competitive-performative postmodern state' (Luke et al, forthcoming).

It could be argued that the Commonwealth's literacy focus demonstrates a playing out of human capital theory and the new forms of governance. Minister Kemp has highlighted literacy skills as a key to national efficiency in promoting the government's policies. In addition, the emphasis on quantitative student peformance outcomes, school and system benchmarks and national testing in the Commonwealth's literacy policies is consistent with the new culture of performativity.

However, the study has shown the need to be cautious about globalisation determinism. The Commonwealth approach includes (contradictory) elements from more social democratic traditions in equity policy in Australia. Further, in responding to the Commonwealth, the states have built on their own histories and traditions of reform in developing their own policies and programs. The particular policy mix of social democratic and neo-liberal approaches has resulted in a wide variation of approaches among the states investigated, yet all reflecting in some degree the neo-liberal approaches. Furthermore, the focus on literacy needs to be seen historically: literacy 'crises' appear from time to time, and tend to

be 'manufactured' for political purposes. How effective this 1990s focus on literacy will be in redressing educational inequalities, remains to be seen.

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