

LINK 2a: Reassessing the public purposes of education

Alan Reid (University of South Australia), Jack Keating (University of Melbourne), Neil Cranston (University of Tasmania) and Bill Mulford (University of Tasmania).

Introduction

We are living through a period of significant educational policy change at national and state levels – as governments try to come to grips with the challenges thrown up by such trends in the contemporary world as globalisation, scientific and technological change, pressures on the environment, and increasingly diverse populations (Brown & Lauder, 2001; Mulford et al., in press). The response to these challenges has led to educational ‘reforms’ which invariably focus on single issues - pedagogy, organisational structures and processes, curriculum, teacher professional development, accountability and so on – and therefore rarely form part of a coherent whole. In our view, the current so-called ‘education revolution’ in Australia is just the latest example of disconnected strategies and policies searching for a rationale and coherence (e.g., Reid, 2009). Why does this happen?

In our view, the major reason for this piecemeal approach to education policy is that the prior question of the *purposes of education* – that is the broad intentions of overall education policy based on a set of values and assumptions and beliefs about the directions of education - is rarely made explicit or the subject of extended public or professional debate. At very best, purposes are expressed as political rhetoric and then forgotten, like the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) which was released with some fanfare in December 2008 and then promptly ignored. This is of concern if you believe, as we do, that purposes should determine the substance of strategies.

It is our view that at this point in Australia’s history there is an urgent need for a reconsideration of the purposes of education. Unless and until the question of purposes is faced up to squarely, so called education ‘reforms’ will continue to be contradictory, disparate and disconnected and so fail to address the issues of contemporary times. As Reimers (2006) argues: *If educational practice is only poorly coupled with larger societal goals, the core of educational practice can remain unchanged, fuelled by a self-referenced inertia ..*’ (P. 277). In this paper we want to come to grips with the concept of educational purposes, exploring the question of what it means in Australia early in the 21st century. We will conclude by arguing the case for a reassertion of the **public** purposes of education in educational discourse and practice.

The struggle over the purposes of education

Any educational practice or policy is informed by its purpose(s). Sometimes these purposes are explicit and transparent; sometimes they are implicit or even sub-conscious: but they will always be present. And they are not arrived at transcendently - the purposes of education invariably derive from a political process which, like any political process, involves a contest over, inter alia, values, ideologies and assumptions. These are represented in education

debates, in policy development and implementation, and in educational practice; and they are based on questions as diverse as the type of society we want, the best strategies to promote excellence in education, and the sorts of capabilities that should be developed in students. They are never resolved completely. Rather there is often a kind of policy ‘settlement’ (Hall, 1990), during which time a dominant purpose tends to shape – but not monopolise - the parameters of educational discourse.

The struggle over purposes and directions takes place in the presence of at least two central tensions. The resolution of these tensions at any point in time serves to shape the nature of educational purposes. The first tension, at the level of ‘content’, occurs at the interstices between conservation and aspiration. There are those who argue that the role of education is to serve society by conserving and reproducing the societal status quo; while there are others who assert that education is a major vehicle for change in our society by making it, for example, more socially just and environmentally sustainable. There are of course any number of positions that can be taken along this continuum.

The second tension lies at the intersection between private and public rights and responsibilities (Levin, 1987). On the one hand there is the right of parents to bring up their children as they see fit – choosing the values and environmental influences to which they want their children to be exposed. From this perspective the purposes of education are largely a private matter in the sense that they promote the interests of individuals. On the other hand there is the right of a democratic society to try to ensure, through a common schooling experience, that its future citizens are prepared to play a role in maintaining the society’s most essential political, economic and social institutions (Gutman, 1987). From this perspective the purposes of education have a strong public emphasis in the sense that they advance the interests of society as a whole.

It is the relationship between the public and the private purposes of education that is of interest to us in this paper. Of course there need not necessarily be a conflict between public and private purposes of education. Thus, the aggregated private benefits of school might make a person more productive and so a useful contributor to, say the economy (public). But so too can these purposes be at odds. For example, the official curriculum of formal schooling might require – as a perceived public benefit - that students learn to consider points of view with which the private values of families may be in conflict. As a consequence, parents may wish that their children are not exposed to such views. At this point there is a clash between public and private purposes.

As we have argued elsewhere, the history of education is largely a history of the struggle to resolve these tensions (Keating et al., in press). These struggles are rarely named as debates over the purposes of education – rather, these are assumed - but invariably the resolution to them shapes the prevailing education settlement, the nature of educational discourse and subsequent policy. This in turn determines whether there is an emphasis on the private or public purposes of education. In order to understand this process it is necessary to appreciate

the major ways in which these purposes have been represented in educational discourse and it is to that task that we now turn.

Representing the purposes of education

The struggle for a resolution to the tensions described above sharpens the kinds of questions that are asked about the role of schools – for example whether they exist to help remake society or to assist students to adapt to how society operates or to serve the individuals needs and wants of students. The ways in which questions such as these are answered help to determine the structure and processes of educational institutions and systems through at least three modalities of schooling (Reid, Gill & Sears, 2010). These are the *structure of schooling*, such as the ways in which formal schooling is organised and funded which contain hidden messages about the how the society is/should be structured, ordered and maintained; the *official curriculum*, such as the subjects which purport to teach the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for productive participation in the society; and the *culture and processes* of education systems and schools, such as class organisation and pedagogy, discipline structures, the nature of decision-making processes and relationships – all of which are educative. It is therefore important to consider in some detail how educational purposes have been and are represented and what the implications are for each of the three modalities.

We have used the work of a number of scholars (eg Labaree, 1997; Inglis, 2004; Goodlad et al, 2008) from England and the United States to arrive at three broad purposes of education – democratic, individual and economic - each of which is constructed from a particular perspective. We think that these purposes resonate with the Australian experience, although they have been played out in different ways at different times. We will describe each in turn, drawing on Australian examples to explain the implications of each major purpose, particularly in relation to the extent to which it represents a public or private benefit.

Democratic purpose

The first is a democratic purpose which is constructed from the perspective of the citizen. It refers to a society expecting its schools to prepare **all** of its young people to be active and competent participants in democratic life. We say ‘all’ to emphasise our conviction that contemporary democracy is not a hierarchical activity designed for special groups: it relies on the active participation of all citizens. If a healthy democracy depends on the collective judgment of the whole citizenry then it follows that all of its citizens should have the opportunity to engage actively in it and, following Sen (2009), should have the capabilities to so engage. Schools are a major vehicle through which these capabilities are fostered.

There are a number of implications that go with a democratic purpose. The first is that since this purpose is designed to benefit the society as a whole, it is a **public** purpose. That is, the outcomes of education go beyond individual interest, although clearly there are individual benefits that derive from being an active citizen. A democratic society depends on its citizens being in possession of a range of capabilities which enable them to contribute to the economy

the polity and civil society, and to lead productive and fulfilling lives. It does not advantage that society to have people who lack skills and understandings, who are alienated and disenfranchised or who act purely from self-interest – and so the aim is that all citizens have the capabilities for productive democratic functioning.

A second implication is that since educational institutions are a central agency in our society for the development of these capabilities, then the three modalities of schooling should be consistent with a democratic purpose. The most obvious is the official curriculum which in our view would be broad and comprehensive, canvassing areas of learning (and the associated skills) which are most likely to develop agreed capabilities for democratic citizenship and a love of learning. More than this, well resourced schools would be equally available to all; the process of decision making at the system and school level would be democratic; and personal relationships would model democratic, respectful and ethical behaviour based on trust and collaboration. Recognising that equality does not mean equal treatment, every effort would be made to ensure that those who are least powerful or who possess the smallest helpings of the dominant cultural capital are able to engage fully in education.

Clearly, the interpretation of these principles will vary within and across specific historical times and circumstances. In the 1970s in Australia, for example, real efforts were made to cater for an expanding and increasingly diverse student population and to enable students to stay longer at school. Thus, the democratic equality purposes of schooling were enacted and practised through policies based on philosophies of equity, access and participation. While these policies also served private purposes in the sense that they enhanced the life trajectories of individuals, they had a dominantly democratic public purpose which aimed at enriching the economic, cultural and political life of Australian society through a more broadly educated citizenry and workforce. This began to be diluted in the 1980s.

Individual purpose

The second purpose is constructed from the perspective of the individual. Its primary aim for schools is to provide individuals with a credential which will advantage them in the competition for desirable social positions; and it is often justified in terms of education providing a 'ladder of opportunity'. Hard work and ability, it is claimed, will enable people to achieve their aims and their life ambitions. This goal constructs education as a commodity which can be traded in, say, the labour market.

Another aspect of this purpose relates to values, cultures and beliefs. It posits that parents should be able to choose schools which are most consistent with their own personal religion, culture or beliefs. That is, rather than schools being vehicles inculcating the same broad values of the society, they have a more personal focus on the idiosyncratic beliefs and values of particular groups.

There are a number of implications of this purpose. The first is that since it makes the main focus the individual rather than society, it is a private good which serves mainly **private** purposes. This is not to say that self-interested individuals cannot make a contribution to society. There are times when the interests of society and the interest of the individual will coincide. But we will argue that the public good is much more than the sum of individual goods. The individual purpose will always privilege the interests of the individual and when these conflict with the public good, it is the private purpose that will prevail.

As with the other major purposes, a dominant focus on an individual purpose demands some consistency within and between the three modalities of schooling. The central concept is that of choice (Tyack, 2007). Schools are seen as a part of an education market where consumers (parents and students) select the product that best meets their perceived interests and needs. The role of an education system is to provide a safety net for those who fall between the cracks and to ensure that consumers are provided with enough information to facilitate choice. The curriculum will tend to be differentiated, tailored to the perceived interest and abilities of individual students; and schools are likely to be autonomous units, competing for custom in the education market.

In Australia, the most recent period where the individual purpose was the major purpose of education was during the decade of the Howard Liberal government from 1996 – 2007. This resulted from the emergence of neo-liberalism as the dominant policy discourse. In education neo-liberal ideology was based upon school choice and facilitated by a federal government funding regime which encouraged the development of a diverse group of new private schools. Schools were expected to win market share by appealing to and satisfying the needs and wants of individual ‘consumers’ (parents and students). Ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector were proposed to promote individual school accountability. But in the end it was the education market that was to impose the strictest discipline. There was some change to this policy settlement with the election of the Rudd government in November 2007.

Economic purpose

The third is an economic purpose which is constructed from the perspective of the employer and/or worker. Its primary aim for schools is to prepare young people to be competent and productive workers for the economy. To the extent that society benefits from an economy that is working well, then an education based on economic goals is a public purpose. But it is a public purpose that also has a strong private purpose since it results in economic rewards for individuals. It could be called a **constrained public purpose**.

There are a number of implications for the modalities of schooling when economic efficiency becomes the overriding purpose of education, not the least of which is that the vocational purposes of schooling are fore-grounded at the expense of a broader general education. There is often a return to the vocational-academic binary with separate and inevitably stratified curricula and even separate schools. Having an entrepreneurial or competitive disposition is

emphasised and the curriculum tends to privilege the life of the individual and consumer more than the active and engaged citizen (Nussbaum, 2010).

It is clear that the current Rudd Labor government has shifted the dominant educational purpose from an individual purpose (under Howard) to an economic purpose, with almost every major government document and statement emphasising the importance of education to the development of human capital (eg, ALP, 2007). For example, education is not a stand alone item in what is known as the COAG agenda - it is listed under the priority of productivity – and most of the strategies under the name of the ‘education revolution’ are justified in terms of their contribution to building human capital (eg Gillard, 2010). Students are seen as (potential) human capital to be enlisted in the cause of economic recovery and growth.

Although we have described each of these purposes discretely, it is important to recognise that they never exist in their pure form. They interweave and intersect, and sometimes contradict, in a variety of ways and configurations, depending on the nature of the policy settlement in any historical period. However, we argue that there is always a dominant purpose and that this shapes the ways in which policy and practice play out. The question of whether the right balance of public and private purposes has been achieved at any point in time is an important, although neglected, one in debates about public policy. In addition of course, the way in which a purpose is translated can vary greatly, depending in part on the ideologies that are brought to bear. For example, a democratic purpose based on a participatory view of democracy will look very different from one which adopts a view of democracy founded on confining citizenship to voting in elections.

Having described and analysed the broad field of educational purposes, we now turn to an argument for a return to a democratic purpose for Australian education.

An argument for a democratic purpose

As we pointed out earlier, during the period of the Howard government the dominant educational purpose was an individual one. The language/discourse of education policy was based on the private benefits of education as developed through education markets and individual choice. That is, the private benefits of education became the point of reference for the debate, inside a framing of individual choice. Elsewhere we have shown how this has played out and with what effects (Cranston et al, 2010).

The shift from conceptualising education as a social good to an individual good was facilitated through the ideology of choice which lay at the heart of government policy in relation to education funding. It resulted in what Lyndsay Connors (2000) refers to as the ‘demutualisation’ of schooling, by which she means the loss of that sense of reciprocity, altruism and ‘love of strangers’ (p. 72) that characterises an education system governed by a commitment to the common good. In a commodified education system, the dominant ethos is that of self-interest which erodes the ‘bonds of citizenship’ (Ichilov, 2009, p. 2).

There is now enough empirical research around the world for us to understand the social effects of constructing education around individual choice (Whitty et al. 1998; Ball, 2003). Such research has demonstrated that marketised schooling systems result in a loss of the diversity of student populations and a significant growth in the disparity of resources between schools. And these differentiations are invariably organised on the basis of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and race. The focus on individual choice within education markets began to create a number of tendencies in Australia, including competition both within and between public and private schools, the imperative to market schools, and the residualisation of public education

We contend that an emphasis on the private purposes of education is unhealthy for Australian society, not least because it runs the danger of producing self interested, competitive and culturally bound individuals who are more interested in their own self-advancement than they are in making a contribution to the common good. In a globalising world where the role of the nation-state is changing and societies are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, schools are needed more than ever for the important public purpose of forming active citizens for democratic publics - people with the will and commitment to shape, and participate in, an inclusive and democratic civil society and polity that are responsive to the new environment. As Goodlad argues in the American context, schools are the only institutions with the capacity to '*...provide the education necessary to the existence and renewal of a democratic public...*' (Goodlad, 2008, p. 11).

What then does a democratic purpose for schools entail in Australia in the 21st century?

Reassessing the democratic purpose of education

We have argued that over the past two decades, the dominant educational discourse in Australian education has tended to emphasise the individual and economic purposes of education at the expense of its democratic public purpose. However, returning to an emphasis on the democratic purpose means more than reprising what has gone before. Democracy is not a static process and there should be ongoing reassessment of the sorts of capabilities needed for active participation in democratic functioning in our society. In particular, we think that there are three aspects that require attention if the concept of the public good is to be placed at the centre of policy considerations.

Altering the dominant discourse in education

First, the nature of the discourse about purposes must change. We think that one of the problems is that there has been too great a focus on individual rights in public discourse which has tended to work against a community effort to articulate a conception of the good society. For both egalitarian liberals arguing for civil liberties within a welfare state, or libertarian liberals maintaining that the market and individual choice are the best ways to order society, the starting point is the separate individual pursuing his/her own ends. The logical conclusion of this philosophy is a neutral framework of rights which is agnostic in relation to purposes and ends.

We concur with the communitarian critics of rights-based liberalism that individuals cannot be separate from their context in this way. Since our identity as individuals also relates to our membership of the communities in which we reside, then the purposes or ends of those communities are central to us as individuals and as a collective. Sandel (2005) summarises it in this way:

(Communitarians) ... question the liberal claim for the priority of the right over the good, and the freely choosing individual it embodies. Following Aristotle, they argue that we cannot justify political arrangements without reference to common purposes and ends, and that we cannot conceive of ourselves without reference to our role as citizens, as participants in a common life.

From this perspective individual rights and the common good must coexist. This does not suggest a fixed and unalterable vision of the common good which denies diversity and change – indeed the opposite is true. The version of the common good at any point is need should be tentative and always open to scrutiny. Democratic societies need forums for thinking about and negotiating differences, not with a view to reaching agreement but with a commitment to recognizing that there are ways other than our own to view the world. As Kalantzis (2001, p. 13) puts it, negotiating the difficulties of living with diversity in global/local societies through promoting inter-ethnic dialogues is a new way forward for nation-building: *'Negotiating diversity is now the only way to produce social cohesion'*.

In our view, reinterpreting the common good and reinvigorating our public institutions is perhaps the most pressing challenge for Australian society in the 21st century. This demands citizens with the capabilities to engage in the sort of community debate that is required for this task. Since schools represent the only spaces in our society where young people can systematically develop the skills and understandings, respect and tolerance that is the lifeblood of a cosmopolitan democracy, it follows that revitalising a discourse of public purposes for education stands as an important first step.

More than this, the articulation and achievement of the public purposes of education should be seen holistically, rather than applied to disparate elements of the Australian education agenda. For example, the discussion about education funding is usually conducted in the absence of a consideration of public purposes, even when the focus is on what has come to be called the public/private debate. This has had a number of effects. By not making the concept of the public good the subject of ongoing critical scrutiny, the debate is narrowed to one focused on the competition for funds between education systems. Thus, when private schools are funded, the focus of debate is the funding mechanisms – so freeing private schools of expectations (beyond minimal requirements) about the relationship between public funding and the public purposes of education. And by not making the public good a central factor in the debate – it loses its potency. It doesn't get grounded. This leaves public schools themselves open to the ravages of neo-liberal regimes, including markets and competition.

After all, what's public about stand alone schools in competition? Put another way, marginalising the concept of the public good, has had the effect of releasing private schools from the burden of demonstrating that they are meeting public purposes; and instead placed pressure on public schools to act privately, such as branding and advertising in an education market.

Similar examples could be offered in relation to other policies that are developed and implemented in isolation rather than being assessed against a reference point of the public good. We think that one way to address this problem is to alter the dominant educational language and we suggest that the metaphor of an education commons presents one possibility. This concept comes from the environmental literature (eg., Lessig, 2001). Commons are community resources that are held in common and able to be enjoyed equally. When applied to social resources like education, it is possible to understand education as a public resource domain (a commons), which contains a range of public education resources - such as schools, universities and public facilities like museums - that are non-exclusionary. The right to them applies to all in the community. Preserving and enhancing the health of the education commons could be seen as the same as caring for the environment. Thus rather than seeing individual choices as being all important the focus would be on the health of the commons as a whole (Reid, 2003).

How does using a metaphor like the Commons help to reassert the notion of the public good into contemporary education policy and debate? The Commons is a spatial rather than a product metaphor. It suggests a public space where there is room to move, yet which is bounded. The public good is expressed in public principles – a charter for an education Commons - that set the limits of tolerance; and these public principles are defined by a rejuvenated version of the public good. Whilst there are many variations within the Commons, those educational 'resources' that go beyond the limit of tolerance are excluded.

If education policy making and practice are to be assessed against a number of public principles that define an education commons, the identification and content of these principles must become the subject of ongoing public conversation and debate. How might this be achieved? The first task is to clarify what is meant by the public purposes of education in contemporary Australia.

Clarification about the public purposes of education

Raewyn Connell (1995) describes the central work of schools as being the development of 'capacities for social practice', meaning those capacities which enable young people to acquire learning strategies both for themselves as individuals and to maintain these as the collective property of the society. That is a broad set of capabilities, including social and cultural capabilities and not just a narrow band of 'academic' studies, are central to future life opportunities; and for maintaining a healthy democracy (Giroux, 2005)

The capacity for social practice has economic, ideological and political dimensions. It includes capacities for work; for social interaction, involving culture, identity formation and

communication; and the ‘capacity for power’, by which Connell means the capacity to engage responsibly in the political life of a democracy (Connell, 1995, p. 100). The identification of such capacities is a starting point for discussion about the public purposes of education. Indeed, it should be central to the functioning of a healthy democracy. As Nussbaum (2010) argues

All modern democracies.... are societies in which the meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views, and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their own particular goals. What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 9).

The rapidly changing nature of the contemporary world means that this should be an ongoing public conversation: a complex concept like the public benefits of education must always take account of contemporary trends and circumstances. Elsewhere we have discussed some of the trends (Mulford et al, in press) that are impacting on the contemporary world and these provide some insights into the nature of the capabilities needed for productive participation in a democratic society. They include:

Capabilities for civic participation – including the capabilities needed to participate in political debate and public decision-making. This demands not only social, scientific and political understandings and skills for active participation that are sensitive to the local, national, regional and global dimensions of political and civil life, but also the dispositions to engage in reasoned and ethical ways.

Capabilities for social and environmental sustainability – including a deep understanding about the issues facing the natural environment and the social world and the interdependence of these; and the skills and dispositions to engage in working towards the sustainability of both.

Capabilities for intercultural understanding – including the understandings and skills to appreciate diversity and to communicate respectfully and generously within as well as across groups with different backgrounds, experiences and cultures

Capabilities for communication – including the capacity for expression through a range of media and modes (written, spoken, visual and other non-verbal forms of communication) and to understand and appreciate the communication of others.

Capabilities for health, well being and personal development – including the capacity to manage physical and mental health, understand gender and sexuality and build identity.

Capabilities for work – including the capabilities that enable people to participate in work in productive, creative and fulfilling ways, recognising the changing nature of the economy.

Capabilities for knowledge work – including the technical skills necessary to access and organise information, the meta-cognitive capabilities to engage in critical and reflective thinking and inquiry and the capacity for ethical thinking and reasoning.

We offer this list as an example only: we appreciate that there may be many other ways to express and represent the kinds of capabilities needed to live productive and fulfilling lives (eg., Sehr, 1997, pp 78-81; Soder et al, 2001; Reimers, 2006; Alexander, 2009). But our point is that such a list represents a set of understandings and skills which have the public benefits of education as their starting point, rather than the advancement of individual interests. In our view, if there is to be a shift to a democratic purpose of education, there is an urgent task of clarifying the ‘content’ of such a purpose for Australian society in the 21st century.

Representing public purposes in the three modalities of schooling

The third aspect that needs clarification is the vehicles through which the public purposes of schooling can be expressed. We say this because all too often a rhetorical flourish about public purposes attends the introduction of the latest strategy - only to be ignored by its detail and practice or to be contradicted by other policies or strategies. Earlier we argued that articulated purposes of education should be reflected in three modalities of schooling. If they are not then it is likely that a specific purpose will be thwarted by policies and practices that are inconsistent with it, or directly contradict it. In our view then, an important aspect of policy making in education is to identify the characteristics of each modality in relation to a favoured purpose. In the case of a democratic purpose we argue that the modalities would reflect the following kinds of characteristics.

Structure of schooling

Structures of schooling consistent with a democratic purpose would seek to ensure that there is an equality of educational opportunities and resources across an educational jurisdiction. Rather than schools competing against one another in an education market, schools in an education commons would support each other, working towards a goal of high quality for all. Whilst this might appear to be commonsense, it is not the way that the system works in a neo-liberal policy regime, where choice and competition are the norm. It demands different ways of looking at educational issues leading to different questions being asked in the policy making process. For example, a focus on the democratic purposes of education might lead to basing a consideration about funding schools in the education commons on the understanding that so called ‘successful’ schools are only successful because it is the more disadvantaged schools who bear the burden of teaching the most difficult-to-teach students. Far from lagging behind, it is these schools that are the real innovators, as Richard Teese points out:

In the end, the quality of a school system can be judged by the experience of the most vulnerable children in it. A real commitment to them is a real

commitment to all children everywhere in the system. It therefore must be supported by an intensity of effort, high expectations and solidarity in sharing resources (Teese, 2006: p. 21).

Looked at from another perspective, if we believe that the quality of teachers is one of the main determinant of successful educational achievements, would we allow wealthy schools to provide better pay and conditions in order to attract the best teachers and principals; or would we insist that if there are to be differentials in pay and conditions, these should in fact work in favour of the least advantaged schools?

Curriculum

The curriculum of schools consistent with a democratic purpose would ensure that all students are encouraged to develop the capabilities identified as necessary for a democratic society. This does not necessarily mean a common curriculum – although we think that this is required in the compulsory years of schooling. It is possible to have a differentiated curriculum which seeks to develop common capabilities. But it does mean that hierarchical approaches to curriculum structure which relegate some knowledge to ‘high’ status so rendering other knowledge as low status, are incompatible with democratic purposes - more so when we know that the participation in each at the senior secondary level is largely organised around socio-economic status.

It also means that serious attention should be paid to the ‘content’ of the curriculum. In our view, a curriculum that meets the challenges of living and working in the 21st century should be one that encourages cross-disciplinary work, is broad enough to build all the capabilities while enabling depth, embraces a range of assessment and reporting approaches, and recognises that curriculum content is not neutral, it embodies cultural and social capital.

Culture and processes

The cultures and process of schools and education systems should be consistent with a democratic purpose. There are many aspects to such a democratic culture: we will describe four. First it means that democratic processes should be a feature of every aspect of decision-making – in classrooms, staff rooms, schools and systems. That is, an education system serious about its democratic purpose should model democratic practices. Teacher, student and parental involvement in discussion and debate about key educational issues would be the norm. The benchmark against which this might be judged is the extent to which the voices and interests of the least powerful are at the centre of these processes. More than this, the social relations of such a system would eschew hierarchy and power, respect diversity and encourage civility, trust, collaboration, and good humour in all relationships.

Second, the substance of policies, strategies and approaches should not only be arrived at democratically but should embody democratic purposes. For example, it would be counterproductive to proclaim a democratic purpose whilst pursuing an accountability policy

based on an intention to lift standards by naming and shaming; or to implement a policy without providing the necessary time and resources for professional development.

Third, schools would operate in ways that value diversity through community building. This includes putting structures and strategies in place to promote inclusiveness, so that students are not cosseted in homogenous communities but are exposed to young people from a range of cultures and backgrounds. That is, assimilationist notions of diversity would be eschewed in favour of negotiating diversity while developing a sense of shared community. This might mean making formal and substantial connections beyond the school with a breadth of local, national and international communities and their knowledges. Young calls this the 'being together' of others (Young 1990).

Fourth, schools and education systems would be professional learning communities where educators and their communities would engage in rigorous and systematic inquiry into the issues, problems, concerns and dilemmas that confront them in their daily professional lives (Reid, 2004). This would be in contrast to mandated and standardised impositions on school communities of policies which deny the contextual knowledge of those communities and marginalise the professional expertise of educators.

We do not have the space here to flesh out the implications of each of these, but some recent work by the OECD (see Grootaert, et al., 2004, p. 3) provides a framework for conceptualising the connections. It argues for the importance of social capital to the development of cohesive yet diverse communities and proposes three forms of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking. Schools are the key producers of each of these three forms of social capital. They create spaces which should allow people to develop a sense of common community; of appreciation and respect for difference; and of a will to continue to develop the skills and understandings in order to use and expand social capital (building). Where aspects of school policy or practice are at odds with one or more aspects of social capital, it would prompt a review. For example, what happens if the population of a school is relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity or religious belief or socio-economic background? Whilst such a school might be capable of promoting bonding within the school community, what are the impediments to linking with others outside the school, and how might these be addressed by schools and governments?

Conclusion

In this article we have argued for a return to a focus on the purposes of education. After identifying three broad purposes, we made a case for a return to placing a public (democratic) purpose at the heart of education policy and practice. However, we claimed that if this is to happen there must be a reassessment of what such a purpose means in Australia in the 21st century. The remainder of the paper involved an exploration of aspects of the democratic purpose, particularly its 'content' and how it might be enacted.

To the extent that our paper has been speculative, it points to the need for research into how the public (democratic) purposes of education are understood and enacted in schools, by policy makers and by the broader Australian community. This is work that we intend to undertake. But we think that such research warrants the development of a theoretical framework within which it might be conducted - and that has been the focus of this paper.

The theoretical framework that we have developed has expanded on the public benefit outcomes of education and we have proposed the concept of an education Commons as one way to contest the individualistic discourse that has so dominated education policy making for the past quarter of a century. Such a concept causes us to think about the health of the commons as a whole; and to ask questions not about how schools might compete in an education market, but about how they can all contribute to collaborating and sharing and supporting one another in order to produce the very best educational outcomes for ALL students. This is a distinction of great importance because, as we have argued, the direction in which we move will shape the sort of democratic society we are and might become. Rather than privileging the individual and private benefits of education, education policy would be constructed to reflect such important public purposes as the enhancement of a tolerant and cohesive multicultural society.

This task has never been so urgent. If a major social purpose of education is to nurture our democracy, then surely we need to organise schools, as key social institutions for the development of an active citizenry, in ways which are consistent with, and indeed promote, those attributes, cultures and practices that make up democratic life. Organising schools on the basis of choice is to elevate individual needs and wants above community needs, and to ensure that some benefit more than others. It is surely to promote a culture of selfish individualism where the dominating motif is competition and greedy self-interest rather than cooperation and mutual benefit. Never have schools as mutualising institutions in our society been more needed than now.

References

A.L.P. (Australian Labor Party) (2007) *The Australian economy needs an education revolution: New directions on the critical link between long term prosperity, productivity growth and human capital investment*, Canberra, ACT: ALP.

Ball, S. (2003) *Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage*. London: Routledge.

Brown, P., & Lauder, H (2001) *Capitalism and Social Progress*, Wiltshire, UK: Palgrave.

Alexander, R. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge.

Connell, R. (1995) 'Transformative labour: Theorizing the politics of teachers' work' in Ginsburg, M. (ed) *The Politics of Educators' Work and Lives*, New York: Garland Publishing.

Connors, L (2000) 'Schools in Australia: A hard act to follow' in Karmel, P (ed) (2000) *School Resourcing: Models and Practices in Changing Times*, Canberra, ACT: Australian College of Education.

Cranston, N., Mulford, B, Reid, A, and Keating J (2010) 'Politics and school education in Australia: A case of shifting purposes' in the *Journal of Educational Administration* Vol. 48 No.2, 2010. Pp 182-195.

Gillard, J. (2010) *Australia's productivity challenge: A key role for education*. Keynote speech delivered at a breakfast forum of the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy on June 10, 2010: accessed on June 13, 2010.

http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_100610_130719.aspx

Giroux, H. (2005) *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life*, London: Paradigm Publishers.

Goodlad, J. (2008) 'A nonnegotiable agenda', pp. 9-28 in Goodlad, J., Soder, R, McDaniel, B. (Eds) (2008) *Education and the Making of a Democratic People*, London: Paradigm Publishers.

Grootaert, C., Narayan, D., Jones, V., & Woolcock, M. (2004). *Measuring social capital*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank, Working Paper No. 18.

Gutmann, A. (1987) *Democratic Education*, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Hall, S. (1990) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, London: Verso (2nd edition).

Ichilov, O. (2009) *The Retreat from Public Education*, USA: Springer.

Inglis, F. (2004) *Education and the Good Society*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Kalantzis, M (2001) 'Recognising diversity. *The Barton Lectures. Part 3*' In Sunday Special Radio National. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Keating, J., et al

Labaree, D. (1997) Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals, in *American Journal of Educational Research*, Spring, 1997. Vol. 34. No. 1, pp 39-81.

Lessig, L. (2001) *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*, New York: Random House.

Levin, HM (1987). 'Education as a public and private good' in *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 6. No. 4, pp. 628-641

MCEETYA (2008) *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, Canberra: Australian Government.

Mulford, B., Cranston, N., Keating, J., and Reid, A (in press) 'The forces impacting on Australian schools and some implications for school leaders', in Columbus, F (ed) *Educational Change*, N.Y: Nova Science

Nussbaum, M (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.

Reid, A (2003) 'Public education as an education commons', *Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) Discussion Paper*, pp 1-20

Reid, A (2004) 'Towards a culture of inquiry in DECS' Occasional Paper Series, No. 1, pp. 1-19. South Australian Department of Education and Childrens' Services

Reid, A (2009) 'Is this really a revolution? A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda' in *Curriculum Perspectives*, Vol. 9. No. 3. pp 1-13

Reid, A., Gill, J and Sears, A (2010) 'The forming of citizens in a globalising world', in Reid, A, Gill, J and Sears, A (eds) (2010) *Globalisation, the nation-state and the citizen: Dilemmas and directions for civics and citizenship education*, Routledge: New York, pp. 3-18.

Reimers, F. (2006) 'Citizenship, identity and education: Examining the public purposes of schools in an age of globalization' in *Prospects*, Vol, xxxvi. No. 3, pp 275-294.

Sandel, M. (2005) *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Sehr, D. (1997) *Education for Public Democracy*, Albany, USA: State University of New York Press.

Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, London: Penguin Books.

Soder, R., Goodlad, J, and McMannon, T (eds) (2001) *Developing Democratic Character in the Young*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Teese, R (2006) 'Condemned to innovate' in *Griffith Review*, Edition 11. Pp. 13-21

Tyack, D (2007) *Seeking Common Ground*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Whitty, G., Power, S, and Halpin, D. (1998) *Devolution and Choice in Education: The School the State and the Market*, Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Young, I. M. (1990) 'Polity and group difference: A critique of the idea of universal citizenship', pp. 175-209 in Beiner, R. (ed) *Theorizing Citizenship*. Albany: State University of New York Press.