

**LINK 2b: Public Purposes of Schooling: an ARC project involving a partnership between the Universities of South Australia, Tasmania, Melbourne and Queensland, the Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) and the Education Foundation (2007 – 2009).**

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***The logic of the ARC project***

Behind every new educational strategy or policy is an assumption about the contribution that it will make to the broader purposes of schooling. And yet these purposes are rarely the subject of extended public or professional debate. They are assumed rather than examined. Given that purposes shape the nature of policy and practice, their comparative neglect is a matter of concern. It is our view that at this point in Australia's history there is a need to bring them to centre stage in the education debate. The starting point for any such consideration is a clarification of what is meant by educational purposes.

Formal education institutions like schools have always served a number of purposes. Some purposes can be described as primarily public in that they advance the interests of society as a whole; others are primarily private in that they promote the interests of individuals. We say 'primarily' because there is not as stark a distinction between public and private purposes as is sometimes claimed: it is a matter of emphasis. Thus private purposes can contribute to the public good in a circumscribed way, just as public purposes can accrue benefits to individuals. Following Labaree (1997), we think that there are three broad purposes of schooling:

- *democratic equality*, which is about a society preparing ALL of its young people to be active and competent citizens. Since we depend on the collective judgment of the whole citizenry then an education based on the goal of democratic equality is clearly a public good;
- *social efficiency*, which is about preparing young people to be competent and productive workers. To the extent that we all benefit from an economy that is working well, then an education based on the goal of social efficiency is a public good. But it is a public good that also has a strong private purpose since it results in economic rewards for individuals and serves the needs of the private sector;
- *social mobility*, which is about providing individuals with a credential which will advantage them in the competition for desirable social positions. This goal constructs education as a commodity which can be traded in, say, the labour market. As such an education based on a goal of social mobility is a private good which serves private purposes.

Labaree (1997, p. 42) suggests that these three purposes of schooling can be differentiated on the basis of position or perspective. Thus the democratic equality goal is seen from the perspective of the citizen; the social efficiency goal from that of the tax payer and employer; and the social mobility goal from that of the individual educational consumer. A close

analysis of any education policy text will usually show that it is written from one of more of these perspectives. Of course educational purposes are not simply represented in official statements of missions and goals. They are shaped and delivered – both intentionally and unintentionally - through at least *three modalities of schooling*: the funding and organisation of education systems; the formal and informal curriculum; and the structure and processes of schools.

In any democratic society, state funded educational institutions (in Australia this covers state and ‘private’ schools) will always serve both public and private purposes: it is a matter of balance. In different historical times there will be shifts in the emphasis and meaning placed on each in education policy and practice. The question of whether the right balance has been achieved at any point in time is an important, although neglected, one in debates about public policy.

In the 1970s in Australia, for example, there was a strong emphasis on the public purposes of schooling as enacted and practised through policies based on philosophies of equity, access and participation. These policies aimed, with varying degrees of success, to spread the benefits of education to a broader section of the population beyond the elites who had previously been the major beneficiaries of public expenditure on education. While these policies served private purposes in the sense that they enhanced the life trajectories of individuals, they had a dominantly democratic equality (public) purpose which aimed at enriching the economic, cultural and political life of Australian society through a more educated citizenry and workforce. A new approach to funding schools (state and ‘private’), democratic decision making in schools, and the push for a comprehensive curriculum to replace the binary of academic and vocational pathways are examples of education policies from that time which were aimed at realising the democratic equality purpose.

In the contemporary period, by contrast, education policy and practice foregrounds the social efficiency and social mobility (private) purposes of schools and marginalises and dilutes the democratic equality (public) purpose. This is the result of the dominance of at least two intersecting ideologies – neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism – which have shaped the *three modalities of schooling* in ways that construct education as a largely private commodity. For example:

- *Organisation and funding*: The dominance of neo-liberal policy regimes has tended to place a greater emphasis on the individual in a competitive market economy and so privilege the social mobility purpose of schooling. This has affected not only what schools are expected to teach, but also how they are expected to operate. In particular, schools are expected to win market share by appealing to and satisfying the needs and wants of individual ‘consumers’ (parents and students). This has created a focus on the individual benefits of education at the expense of its public purposes. At best, the public good is seen increasingly as simply an aggregation of individual preferences;
- *Curriculum*: The central aspect of neo-liberalism is its service to the economy. From this perspective, education is seen as pivotal to the development of ‘human capital’ and thus as fulfilling a social efficiency purpose. In this way, the vocational purposes of schooling are fore-grounded at the expense of a broader general education. More than this, the overlay of neo-conservative ideology stressing the importance of the canon of western thought, suitable for some students, has resulted in a return to the

vocational-academic binary with separate (and inevitably stratified) curricula and even separate schools. Where the democratic equality purpose exists, it is in diluted form. Thus, equity and access is promoted on social efficiency grounds (more students at school for longer is good for the economy), and the curriculum tends to privilege the life of the individual and consumer more than the active and engaged citizen;

- *Structure and processes of schools and school systems:* Neo-liberal ideology has infected the structure and processes of schooling through what Youdell (2008) calls 'endogenous privatisation' by which she means the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make education more business-like. Thus the ways in which concepts such as 'choice', 'accountability', 'school effectiveness', and 'devolution' are used tend to rework education as an object of profit. Associated with this are the regimes of performativity which force schools to compete for 'market share' through such mechanisms as league tables. The effects of this are to weaken, if not distort, the democratic equality purposes of education.

We are not saying that these effects have been felt uniformly or that schools have simply unquestioningly fallen in line with these policy directions. Indeed, as our research is showing, many schools are working hard against the policy grain. However, there is much research evidence that demonstrates how neo-liberal education policy is making this work increasingly difficult because of the limits it places on democratic possibilities. We believe that this emphasis 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.

For those committed to the importance of the role of schools in developing the public purposes of education, the contemporary developments demand a response. 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. In relation to the three modalities of schooling it means engaging in public debate, exploring such fundamental questions as:

- How can Australian schools be funded and organised so that there is more of an emphasis on collaboration than there is on competition, underpinned by a collective endeavour to work to remove the unequal distribution of educational resources;
- What sort of curriculum is needed to develop young people with the political, environmental, intercultural, and interpersonal capabilities needed to participate productively in a globalising world? What would a national curriculum look like that placed the democratic equality purpose of schooling at its centre?
- How can we organise educational institutions so that they are microcosms of the sort of democratic society that we might aspire to as a nation?

A community conversation about questions such as these would be a step towards identifying the kinds of changes to education policy and practice needed if Australia is to readjust the current distorted balance of its educational purposes. The problem is that when such

questions are asked the conversation starts as though there is a blank slate upon which to draw. And yet despite the current policy directions, many schools are working against the odds to enact education as a public good. So, before it is possible to establish what changes might be needed, **there is an important task of assessing how the democratic equality purpose of schools is currently understood, represented and practiced in schools and schooling systems, and the extent to which the social mobility and social efficiency purposes are working against its realisation.** That is the task of this ARC research project.