

## **LINK 5a: Politics and school education in Australia: A case of shifting purposes<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent decades, various Australian federal governments have sought to intervene directly in the schooling responsibilities of State and Territory governments. They have attempted to impose managerialism and a market ideology on schools. To date, an unexplored aspect of these agendas has been a resultant shift in the purposes of education. In this paper, Labaree's (1997) understanding of the purposes of schooling - democratic equality, social efficiency, social mobility - are used to trace this shift and examine the key drivers behind the changes. It is argued that there has been a privileging of the private (social mobility) and economic (social efficiency) purposes of schooling at the expense of the public (democratic equality) purposes of schooling. The findings have wider relevance beyond Australia, as similar policy agendas are evident in many other countries raising the question as to how the shift in purposes of education in those countries might mirror those in Australia.*

### **Introduction**

For some decades in Australia, national (federal) governments have sought to intervene directly in the schooling responsibilities of State and Territory governments through, for example, the use of tied grants and grants for new non-state schools. More recently, allied with this intervention, has been an attempt to impose the ideology of the market on government schools as well as on non-government schools. A central theme running through these agendas - intended or unintended - has been a shift in the purposes of education, with a privileging of what might be seen as the private purposes of schooling like social mobility at the expense of the public purposes of schooling seen here as embracing notions of democratic equality, citizenship, equity and social justice. Of note is that such agendas are not unique to Australia, but are evident in various guises in many other countries where policy making at the political level has impacted on the purposes of schooling.

This paper explores federal government schooling policies in Australia in the period since 1972 and on funding and policy priorities and their effect on this shift in purposes of education. We address some of the dynamics and results of these policies and interventions,

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highlighting how school education in Australia has been, and continues to be, shaped by them. Since the late 1980s, we argue there has been a consistent narrowing of the schooling agenda to one that gives primacy to the purposes of schooling that highlight economic orientations and more recently, an emergence of private purposes. While schools have always served both public and private purposes, when the shift away from public purposes is so significant to diminish them relative to private purposes, questions about the very nature of school education as offered in Australia need to be raised. Importantly, the issues raised here are consistent in broad terms with developments in many other countries, such as the United Kingdom. With the current federal Rudd Labor Government approaching the half-way point in its first term and a national curriculum being rolled out, it is opportune to reflect on the extent to which the shift to a focus on the private purposes of schooling that occurred particularly under the previous Howard Government has either been maintained or whether the pendulum has begun to swing back to a balance between public and private purposes.

## **Background and framework for discussion**

### *The purposes of schooling*

Formal education institutions like schools have always served multiple purposes. Put simply, 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 necessarily a stark distinction between public and private purposes: 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. The work of David Labaree (1997) provides a useful framework for the following discussion of the shaping and shifting of purposes of education in Australia. In broad terms, Labarre conceptualised three purposes of schooling (Labaree, 1997, pp.43-58; Reid, Mulford, Cranston and Keating, 2008):

- *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 and also involves notions of equity and social justice.
- *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.
- *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 mainly private purposes.

The purposes of schooling are often expressed through the funding, structure and organisation, and curriculum of an education system. It is argued here there has been a diminishing focus on the public (democratic equality) purposes of schooling in terms of policy and funding initiatives. In Australia, this shift has been both aided and constrained by the federal structure of the political system. A good part of our discussion is on the Howard Coalition Government in particular, as it was the managerial and market policies enacted during the 1996-2007 period that gave primacy to the private purposes of schooling. In doing so, we acknowledge that it can be argued that the groundwork for such developments were laid by the earlier Labor governments of Hawke and Keating.

### *Federalism<sup>2</sup> and schooling in Australia*

Federalism has had a major role in the shaping of schools in Australia. Government policies, emanating from both State and Federal bodies, provide multiple challenges for schools. While school education has traditionally been the responsibility of State and Territory governments, the last decade or so has seen increasing federal government influence – some would argue interference - in educational matters at both the systemic and the local school levels. Indeed, it could be argued that attempts to gain greater federal control of school education can be dated back to at least the tenure of John Dawkins as federal Education Minister in the Hawke Labor Government. Tensions emanating from this more dominant role of the federal government have been particularly evident when the governments at these two levels (State and Federal) are of ideologically different orientations as was the case during the final years of the Howard Coalition Government.

### **State and Federal government dynamics**

To some extent, federalism and the different ideological perspectives of Federal, State and Territory governments has had a moderating effect on educational restructuring in Australia (Blackmore, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Under the Australian Constitution, State and Territory governments are responsible for schooling. Yet, as in other areas of Federal-State relations, schooling has been fraught with tensions, particularly as the Commonwealth has encroached more and more upon the responsibilities of the States and Territories. Such infringement was a particular feature of the recent Howard Government but its antecedents go back at least to the Whitlam Labor Government (1972-1975). Ultimately, the more managerialist practices and Federal government policies have encroached upon State and Territory school systems, the greater the impact on public purposes. As Singh and Taylor (2004, p.6) have put it, “local contexts and actors are likely to shape the specific form of local educational discourses and practices”. In this regard, Lingard suggests that “the apparent educational policy convergence across

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<sup>2</sup> The form of government that unites separate political entities (in Australia, the States) within a single national system, but which allows each state to retain a degree of independence. Labor Party governments are typically seen as left-leaning or progressive, Coalition (Liberal and National Party) governments are seen as conservative or right-leaning.

<sup>3</sup> This situation contrasts with that in New Zealand, with its unitary system of government, where the impact of managerial-based policies in the 1980s was extreme and rapid.

nations ... [is] mediated, translated and recontextualised within national and local structures” (Lingard, 2000, p.80).

*A brief political historical perspective – pre-Howard Government*

In the 1970s, the Whitlam Labor Government was instrumental in ending the centralised education system in Australia. Its policies were aimed at democratising the schooling system through implementing participatory decision-making, and increasing access and equity for students across Australia (McInerney, 2003, pp.59-60). The rhetoric was one of decentralisation and local empowerment. The Australian Schools Commission, the Karmel Report (1973) and the Disadvantaged Schools Program became key drivers of the government’s school reform moves (McInerney, 2003, pp.59-60; Meadmore, 2001, p.17). A social democratic understanding of school-based management and school improvement was pursued. It was argued that leadership in schools should be distributive and parents were to be actively involved in decision-making (McInerney, 2003, p.60). Labaree’s (1997) democratic equality purposes were clearly evident.

During the 1980s and 1990s this social democratic approach to school-based management was supplanted by one derived from managerial and marketisation agendas which engulfed the entire public sector. As a result, the way schools were expected to plan, function and report on their performance and that of their students changed. It could be argued that these agendas diminished the public purposes of school education and facilitated the emergence of purposes more consistent with social efficiency priorities as described by Labaree (1997).

In contrast to the more centralist Whitlam Government, the subsequent Fraser Coalition Government was more decentralist (Fletcher and Walsh, 1992, p.602). It wanted to reduce the federal deficit, decrease federal expenditure especially in relation to welfare, devolve responsibilities to the States, promote private schools above public schools, and eliminate or weaken federal education agencies or politicise their personnel (Smart, 1985, p.2). In 1981, as part of the “Razor Gang”, the Commonwealth’s key educational research and curriculum development bodies were abolished while the Schools Commission was weakened. It has been asserted by some writers that Fraser’s “New Federalism” might have laid the groundwork for Hawke’s later corporatism (Lingard, 1993).

The policies of the following Hawke and Keating Labor governments were different from those of both the Whitlam Government and the Fraser Government. Hawke’s corporate federalism had managerial undertones as it was designed to expedite the government’s microeconomic reforms and to bypass the heated atmosphere of Premiers’ Conferences (Kimber, MacGregor and Moore, 1997; Fletcher and Walsh, 1992). Tension across, and a narrowing of, the purposes of schooling can be detected in the policies of the Hawke and Keating governments. Many of the policies initiated by the Hawke Government’s first Education Minister, Susan Ryan, were to increase equity and social justice: democratic equality purpose of education. Yet schooling was placed as central to “national economic reconstruction” (Knight and Warry, 1996). By defining education as an economic tool for Australia’s future prosperity, the platform was set for much of the educational policy

developments that followed that gave greater prominence to the social efficiency and social mobility purposes of schooling.

During John Dawkins' time as education minister considerable changes to the organisation, structure, funding and processes of Australian schools were made (Knight and Warry, 1996; Stewart and Kimber, 1996, p.46). The establishment of the supra-department of Employment, Education and Training in 1987 highlighted the emphasis placed on education as a means to generate greater national productivity and international economic competitiveness. Social efficiency purposes were now strongly evident. The policy shift from equity (democratic equality) to international competition (social efficiency) was highlighted by the replacement of the Schools Commission by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (Knight and Warry, 1996) and the resulting concentration of power in the hands of the minister and senior Commonwealth public servants. This shift is further highlighted by the focus on vocational education and on associated core competencies in the recommendations of the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael reports on post-compulsory schooling (Taylor, et al, 1997), thus re-creating the divide between academic and vocational education. While equity and access were promoted, they were framed in terms of social efficiency, resulting in the individual and the economy being placed centre stage.

Throughout the Hawke-Keating period, schooling in Australia was subject to the Federal government's quest for greater control. The schooling agenda had been "captured" by the corporate managerialist agenda, with strategic planning and accountability now very much in evidence in the educational lexicon. Thus by the time of the election of the Howard Government in 1996 there had been a significant narrowing of the agenda for schooling. The efficiency or economic purposes of schooling had gained primacy over the public purposes of schooling.

#### *The Howard Coalition Government*

Under the Howard Government (1996-2007) there was a further narrowing of the education agenda to one more concerned with education's role in contributing to economic outcomes. This entailed greater Commonwealth (Federal) intervention in schooling, based strongly on notions of the market and competition. These managerialist and market orientations further shifted the focus away from the public purposes of education towards economic and private purposes of schooling. This movement was achieved, in part, by substantially altering the balance of power between the Commonwealth and the States in the Commonwealth's favour.

The Howard Government sought to re-engineer program oversight arrangements to facilitate the better fulfilment of Commonwealth goals. In this regard, Parkin and Anderson (2007) argued:

*that Commonwealth grant contributions are a vehicle for pursuing Commonwealth policy and program priorities. The education portfolio has been replete with examples .... such as the requirements for public schools; that is, schools created by and owned by State*

*governments—to specify performance targets and performance measures, to ensure that student reports are plain-English in composition and reveal where a student ranks in his/her class, and to publish school performance information (p.295).*

This quotation captures the funding and organisation (use of Commonwealth grants), structure and processes (e.g. performance measures, plain-English reports), and curriculum (nation-wide curriculum standards) dimensions of school systems. It highlights how these became focused on social efficiency and social mobility purposes of schooling through emphases on individualism, competition, the market and private sector practices (e.g. performance measures).

Another way in which the Howard Government sought to alter the structure, funding and organisation of schooling was by downsizing DEET into the Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. A number of education bodies were abolished and forty specific purpose programs were “broadbanded” into five areas: literacy, languages, school-to-work, special learning needs, and quality outcomes. Here, the Disadvantaged Schools Program was subsumed under literacy, watering down “equity and social justice concerns” (Knight and Warry, 1996) as the notion of disadvantaged was recast from socio-economic to the literacy proficiency of an individual. This policy shift, it could be argued, privileged private purposes of social efficiency over public purposes.

The drive to raise standards and accountability, and no doubt impose a national curriculum, was evident in an earlier education minister David Kemp’s argument that the primary school curriculum contained too many subjects that detracted from the time needed to address core issues of literacy and numeracy (Knight and Warry, 1996), themes which have resonated in educational policy debates since. Consequently, a “National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy” was developed through MCEETYA. National benchmarks and testing were also implemented. Knight and Warry (1996) believed that this regime was likely to be used to attack (then) current teaching methods and teachers.

This focus on literacy and numeracy could be construed as part of the rhetoric of a “crisis in education” that warranted intervention at the highest (i.e. Federal government) level and which, it was argued, could only be solved through managerial and market means. The arguments put then have resonance with similar concerns currently expressed. Such means were consistent with the shift to, and enhancement of, the private purposes of schooling such as individualism and market competition.

Prior to the 1970s, education policy in Australia was viewed in progressive liberal terms, with education seen as needing to be freely available to all. By contrast, the Howard Government focused on “aspirational” Australia. Here, education was construed as the means of social advancement rather than as a contributor to equality of opportunity. The Coalition’s funding policies stressed choice for those who wanted to opt out of the public schooling system (Stewart, 2005, p.476). Unlike the Hawke Government’s tiered funding system that directed most funding to the neediest schools, the Howard Government’s socio-economic status (SES)

model of funding was assessed on the presumed income of the parents – this income was determined by proxy using postcodes. The result was that considerable funding flowed to the schools widely regarded as the wealthiest. It also downgraded funding to Catholic schools. Under the SES formula, school assets were excluded (Stewart, 2005, pp.481-2; English, 2005). As a result, funding was effectively withdrawn from the government sector (Knight and Warry, 1996). Such policy strategies clearly facilitated a shift towards an enhanced emphasis on social mobility purposes of education.

In large part, the Howard Government's removal of the cap on new schools in 1997 (Meadmore, 2001, pp.121-124) was the impetus for the growth of the non-state sector. Indeed, the government provided new non-state schools with establishment grants (English, 2005). As many of these new schools were religious-based, the essential secularism on which the Australian system of schooling was founded began eroding. As a result, some writers (e.g. Meadmore, 2001) argued that these policies created the potential for the values of social harmony, religious tolerance and multiculturalism to be diminished. Such a situation clearly privileges the social mobility purposes of school education and diminishes the democratic equality purposes.

The growth of non-government schools was also facilitated by the push towards marketisation and the recasting of parents as consumers able to choose (and pay for) the school to which they sent their children. As a result, and in order to attract parents, schools were expected to perform in relation to their competitors. Consequently, notions of 'performativity' became allied with marketisation. Hence, many non-government schools appointed business and/or marketing managers to 'manipulate the marketing mix' making themselves more competitive not only against other non-government schools but also against public schools (English, 2005). It could be argued that expanding the non-government sector eroded the notion of 'free' public schooling for all. The stress of competition between individual schools in the marketplace clearly privileges the social mobility purpose of schooling at the expense of the democratic equality purpose of schooling.

A key element of the Howard Government's funding of schools was the General Recurrent Grants Programme, which assisted "schools with the recurrent costs of school education so that they could offer students educational programs directed towards the achievement of the Australian Government's priorities for schooling. ...." (Australia, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, n.d.a., [http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/farmer/schools\\_funding\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/farmer/schools_funding_brochure.pdf)). In relation to government schools, the Federal government provided 'supplementary' funding to that provided by the States to assist in the achievement of specific objectives agreed by the Australian Government and the States. These tied grants were calculated on a per student basis.

The Federal government's capital grants programme further highlights the Howard Government's use of funding for schools to pursue particular policy outcomes. While these grants were for the most educationally disadvantaged students, some of the

wealthiest non-government schools also received funding. In 2007, the *Investing in Our Schools* Programme provided some \$140 million in grants directly to schools. The majority of this funding flowed to government schools, meaning that the Federal government directly intervened in the constitutional jurisdiction of State and Territory governments. The funding was designated for shade cloth, the installation of air-conditioning and computer equipment, classroom refurbishment, the purchase of library books and the purchase of musical instruments. While Federal governments have used tied grants for many years, the use of these grants by the Howard Government represented an attempt at much greater Commonwealth intervention in what have traditionally been the constitutional responsibilities of State and Territory governments.<sup>4</sup>

The *Flagpoles for Schools* Programme (Australia, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, Flagpoles, 2007a), while symbolic in nature, highlighted the Federal government's attempts to impose a particular set of values on Australian schools without recourse to State and Territory governments. It is arguable as to whether such values were actually aligned with the traditional public purposes of education.

To some extent, the *National Framework for Values in Australian Schools* (Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005) and the school chaplains program (Australia, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2007b) could be allied with the flagpoles program in terms of the values the government wanted to promulgate in schools. This Values Framework arose out of the 1999 Adelaide Declaration and a project commissioned by MCEETYA in 2003. These nine values were expected to be evident in a school's mission and in the curriculum. They included *care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility and understanding, tolerance and inclusion*.

While these values appear to express many of the values that might be considered typically Australian (yet none are exclusively Australian) and be consistent with democratic equality notions, it is when a government attempts to overlay or impose its own ideological understanding of these values onto schools that they become problematic. Indeed, Dyrenfurth (2007) took a highly critical view of this strategy and identified the way in which he believes Prime Minister Howard appropriated terms from the political left like 'battler' and the 'fair go' and infused them with the individualist ideology of his conservative Coalition government. Further, Dyrenfurth (2007, p.211) argued that "Howard's rhetorical hegemony upon 'Australian values' contributed [not only] to his decade-long electoral success, but such discourses also have had important effects upon the collective desire to address inequality". Thus, it could be argued, Howard's values initiatives in schools were not really about enhancing purposes of democratic equality as their rhetoric might suggest.

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<sup>4</sup> Section 96 of *The Australian Constitution* reads: 'During a period of ten years after the establishment of the Commonwealth and thereafter until the Parliament otherwise provides, the Parliament may grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as the Parliament thinks fit.'



Akin to the above debate about values were what became known as the history and literacy ‘wars’. These two ‘wars’ illustrate how the federal government sought to manufacture a ‘crisis’ in schooling. Focusing on history, this ‘crisis’, the Howard Government asserted, could only be resolved by going ‘back to basics’ and imposing what many considered to be a very limited and conservative understanding of history onto the nation’s school students. While the Howard Government made legitimate points about the need for Australians to leave school with an understanding of the important events in Australian history, the type of history that was being proposed caused considerable controversy. The then Education Minister, Julie Bishop, attacked the States as being left-wing ideologues in their curricula, and argued for the linking of teaching a prescribed history curriculum and state funding. In terms of literacy teaching in Australian schools, it was argued that only the government’s managerial and market solution would work as it stressed the need to go ‘back-to-basics’ because teaching students such things as critical literacy should not be part of the English curriculum. Democratic purposes were to give way to social efficiency purposes.

When the proposed curriculum guide for years nine and ten history was released in 2007, many critics argued that it overlooked key stories in Australian history (Christensen, 2007). Such omissions, it could be argued, indicated that Howard sought to ignore aspects of Australian history that might be uncomfortable for conservatives. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister considered the guide to be an accurate version of history (Christensen, 2007). The State Premiers and the Federal Labor leader, Kevin Rudd, viewed the guide as either a conservative view of history or a political stunt. They rejected the tying of education funding to teaching the “Prime Minister’s history curriculum”. On its election in November 2007 the Australian Labor Party scrapped Howard’s history curriculum.

### *A national curriculum*

Calls for a national curriculum in Australia have been evident for some decades now. The Rudd Labor government has continued the call and enacted specific strategies to achieve such ends. In the lead up to the 2007 election both major parties were pushing various proposals for a national curriculum. As noted earlier, the Coalition Government was focusing on the teaching of history and accusing the Labor states of pushing a particular ideology within their curriculums. The then Opposition Labor Party proposed “programs for literacy and numeracy in schools, a boost for maths and science teaching, and a national curriculum board to develop a uniform national curriculum for the core subjects of English, history, maths and science” (Marginson, 2007, pp.5-6). While located in a traditional, some would say conservative, framework of understanding the curriculum, the initiative is occurring in a unique period of government tenure across the country, with Labor governments in all but one state and both territories – the potential for consensus, so often constrained in the past by ideologically different governments, has never before been so great.

Another dimension in the drive to a national curriculum has been the implementation of national standardised testing under the Howard Coalition. Under this arrangement, annual assessments of all students in literacy and numeracy are conducted by the States and

Territories with these tests equated to the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks. From May 2008 national tests were held in literacy and numeracy for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, replacing current State and Territory based assessments (Australia, Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, National Assessment Program, n.d.b).

At a more general level, the call for a collaborative approach to schooling across the country is highlighted in the *The Future of Schooling in Australia* (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007), released by the Council for the Australian Federation, which was formed in 2006 by the Premiers and Chief Ministers in response to the less cooperative nature of COAG under Howard. Here it was asserted that a number of agreements had been put in place over the last decade that provided a framework for a national curriculum including the Adelaide Declaration's eight common areas of learning for a socially just approach to schooling and the National Statements of Learning in English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship and ICT's (schooling was highlighted in the publication, *The Future of Schooling in Australia* (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007, p.3). It was argued that with high-quality course material, excellent teaching and flexible organisation all students should be able to progress along a personal pathway that reflects their specific goals, strengths and motivations, and harness other opportunities for learning. The key learning areas (Arts, English, Mathematics, Health and Physical Education, Science, Studies of Society and the Environment and technology, citizenship and civics, and business and financial literacy) suggest that a curriculum based around this type of framework would support both public purpose and private purposes (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007, pp.19-21).

The economic importance of a national curriculum was evident in the COAG communiqué resulting from the meeting of the 20 December 2007 – the first for the Rudd Government – where education was listed as part of the productivity agenda (Council of Australian Governments, 2007). While the achievement of a national curriculum may be possible by 2011, balancing economic purposes in the new national curriculum initiatives with those more oriented to public purposes may be challenging. It would appear that, despite the election of a more left-leaning government, one which might be expected to be more favourably disposed to re-engaging with the democratic equality purpose of schooling, the Rudd Government seems to be wedded to managerialist and market agendas which ultimately may leave it little different from the Howard conservative directions of earlier times.

The current developments in regard to a national curriculum will be of interest to monitor to determine if greater progress can be made now, decades after the original attempts, and especially in a political context where State and Territory Labor governments dominate across the country. Many remain hopeful that, in such a situation, a (re)commitment to the public purposes of education such as equity and social justice might re-emerge as, at least, of equal priority as the economic and private purposes that have dominated for well over a decade.

*Reflections across recent decades*

Quite clearly, under the managerial drive of the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments the nature, focus and shape of the schooling agenda, and the assumptions regarding the functions of education and its purposes (Knight and Warry, 1996) changed. The curriculum was narrowed to ‘a focus on basic education ... accompanied by a stress on school-based post-compulsory VET’ (Knight and Warry, 1996) with greater attention to national testing and reporting, agendas that continue to have prominence under the current Rudd education policies. Whether the actual outcomes of such policies will be different under the current government, which is pursuing what seem to be similar policy agendas in these areas compared with that under Howard, are yet to be seen.

Allied with this managerial orientation to the structure and processes of schooling is the rhetoric of parental “choice”. This (apparent) democratic equality notion has been highly evident in the discourse of the expansion of non-government schools. Not to be ignored is that enrolments in this sector have increased in line with a more favourable funding regime (Knight and Warry, 1996; Singh and Taylor, 2004). For some commentators, one of the potential negative outcomes of such trends is that state schools could “be residualised as a ‘safety net’ for those who do not choose or cannot afford non-state schooling. The long-term consequence, we believe, will be the de facto privatisation of schooling. ...” (Knight and Warry, 1996; also see Stewart, 2005).

The Howard Government’s managerial and market agendas drew Marginson to note that, using Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) figures, “Australia is a below average public spender on education, 4.3 per cent of GDP compared to an OECD country average of 5.2 per cent, and an above average private spender on education, via the universities, private training and private schools” (Marginson, 2007, p. 3). Marginson drew attention to the cumulative effects of Federalism, in particular the move from a neo-corporatist to an impositional method of intergovernmental relations, and of managerialism. This illustrates the way in which federal government policies have altered the school system in Australia to one that privileges private purposes in funding, structure, organisation, process and curriculum, resulting in a decline in ‘publicness’, which Stewart describes as “the belief that the state is properly the sponsor of a single, government-owned educational system that is open to all” (Stewart, 2005, p.476.).

Despite the more collaborative approach to federalism being adopted by the current Rudd Labor Government, it remains to be seen whether the understanding and enactment of the purposes of schooling will see the pendulum swing back to a position where public purposes are once again in greater evidence than they have been. The Rudd Government’s moves towards a national curriculum might be a key indicator on this question. Certainly, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008, [http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/melbourne\\_declaration,25979.html](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/melbourne_declaration,25979.html)) suggests that the purposes of schooling may well be revisited and re-orientated, with considerable attention in this *Declaration* to what are clearly public purposes of education. Time will tell if the rhetoric of the *Declaration* becomes a reality.

## Conclusions and wider implications

This article has highlighted how school education policy emphases have affected how the purposes of schooling have been understood and enacted, and suggested that public purposes of schooling such as social justice, equity and the development of active citizens have become less prominent with respect to private purposes. In Labarre's (1997) terms, in Australia, democratic equality purposes have been downplayed from a pre-eminent position under the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s, and social efficiency and social mobility purposes privileged. In particular, social mobility purposes gained primacy during the years of the Howard government, while social efficiency purposes have been significant under both Labor and Coalition governments.

It could be argued that schooling policies have come full circle. The highly bureaucratised education systems of the pre-1970s were replaced by the devolved systems of the Whitlam Government. But with the managerialist school-based management agendas of the 1990s and 2000s, and the federal government's desire for a national curriculum, there has been a steady departure from the social democratic priorities of the 1970s. Allied with such a shift, it has been argued here that there has been a retreat from the democratic equality (public) purposes of education to a much greater prominence on social efficiency (economic) and social mobility (private) purposes. The rhetoric of the current Rudd government suggests a potential realignment in this situation. For example, the discourse of documents such as the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* suggest there might be a re-visiting and re-emphasis on public purposes not in evidence across the years of the Howard government. However, recent national education policy priorities such as national testing and enhanced accountabilities for school leaders and others suggest otherwise.

While there is clearly a place for both public and private purposes in schools, one ought not be privileged at the expense of the other. It remains to be seen whether the policy developments across the next few years will widen debate surrounding schooling in Australia, and result in a revisiting and a refocusing on public purposes of schooling education, a position not in evidence under the influence of government, especially Federal government policies of the last few decades.

While this discussion has been located in the Australian political and educational contexts, there are clear messages and implications for those in other countries where similar managerialist and market policy agendas are evident. Indeed, this includes most developed countries across the globe. The questions to be posed in these countries are similar to those addressed in this discussion. These questions revolve around critical reflections on the impacts of key policy decisions on the purposes of education: What is it we expect of our schools and schooling systems? In particular, policy makers are encouraged to consider the broader social, individual and economic effects of their policy decisions on the very nature of the future society they are creating through the educational, experiences and opportunities available to young people in schools. What messages do our young take away from their

school experiences as to their understandings of the purposes of schooling? How do these messages shape their understandings of, and the priority they might give, to being an engaged and contributing citizen in their community? Or do they see school as mainly about providing a competitive advantage for them as individuals and getting a job at the expense of a more collective and inclusive future?

Almost all developed countries have an increasing interest, some would say obsession, in determining future education policy based on performance on key national and international tests. It is timely to consider whether, as discussed here, major policy agendas such as those focused on testing programs can shift the balance in the purposes of education to a privileging away from those concerned with the critical contribution education makes to the broader well-being of its citizenry. It is likely that the contestation around the purposes of education will be on-going. Labaree (1997) provides us with some clear lenses through which we can critically reflect on what purposes might be privileged by policy decisions. Certainly from an historical perspective in Australia, it is clear that the pendulum from public to private has shifted in recent decades. A key question is where do we want that pendulum to settle as current education debates and policies determine schools and their purposes in this country for the immediate future? There are clearly implications for school leaders in all this as they are at the juncture of managing the tensions often emanating from the demands and implications of a new (political) policy and the more immediate local demands of their school community. It has been argued here that in recent decades these external demands have impacted on the very purposes of education and have played out in practice in a variety of ways. Contestation over where the pendulum settles is likely to continue. In Australia, the rhetoric of the *Melbourne Declaration*, suggests a more even-handed outcome in terms of purposes of schooling – the reality is yet to be realised.

## References

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