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PISA PERFORMANCE AND AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION: MYTHS AND REALITIES

Educación en Australia y Rendimiento en PISA: Mitos y Realidades

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ABSTRACT

Australia's record as one of the higher performing nations on the recent PISA tests occasioned more interest internationally than domestically. Notwithstanding this success however, it is argued that its overall national success on the PISA tests is something of a myth, masking wide differences between the overall majority, and certain disadvantaged minorities. Disaggregating the performance data reveals the actual situation with respect to indigenous Australians, certain ethnic minorities and the effects of social class, which in each case is complemented with analysis of test performance differentials from PISA and NAPLAN. This examination reveals the reality that Australia is less successful than several other countries in extending high levels of school performance to key minorities. Given this failure, the myth of Australian high performance needs to be re-examined: much more needs to be done to boost the educational success of disadvantaged minorities.

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KEY WORDS: PISA, Australia, Myths, Realities, Performance, Reforms, Disadvantage.

RESUMEN

Los resultados de Australia, como uno de los países como uno de los países con los mejores resultados en el reciente estudio PISA han interesado más fuera de sus fronteras que dentro de ellas. A pesar de este éxito, sin embargo, se argumenta que los buenos resultados nacionales en los test de PISA encierran algo de mito y enmascara amplias diferencias entre la inmensa mayoría y ciertas minorías desaventajadas. Realizando un examen desagregado de los datos de Australia se pone de manifiesto la situación actual respecto a los indígenas de ese continente, ciertas minorías étnicas y el efecto de la clase social que se complementa en cada caso con el análisis de los diferenciales de rendimiento entre PISA y NAPLAN. El examen revela que Australia en realidad es menos exitosa que algunos de otros países a la hora de extender elevados niveles de rendimiento escolar a determinadas minorías clave. Ante este fracaso, el mito del alto rendimiento australiano necesita ser revisado: es necesario hacer mucho más para mejorar el éxito educativo de las minorías desaventajadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: PISA, Australia, Mitos, Realidad, Rendimiento, Resultados, Reformas, Desventaja.

As a modern democracy, a nation of many cultures and languages, and OECD member, it might be expected that Australia's education system would, in general, stand comparison with most similar nations. Hence when PISA results in recent years appeared to place Australian students well in relation to many other nations (see Figure 1, below), the results were a cause for quiet congratulation, rather than a surprise. The news was no great news; unlike Germany for example, which experienced what became known there as 'Pisa Schock' when its results revealed that German students performed in the lowest third of developed nations (ranked 21st of the 32 leading industrial nations, well behind Australia, Britain, Japan, South Korea and much of Continental Europe):

Treasured stereotypes are dying in Germany. That the country's finances are solid, its workers productive and its economy a powerhouse are all broken myths. Even Mercedes-Benz sedans have fallen in quality ratings.

And now the nation has awakened in disbelief to findings that its prized education system has fallen to the bottom third of the industrial nations,

panicking a generation of parents and posing an unexpected competitive threat as societies push further into the brave new world of the information age, education experts concur (NY Times 2003).

Stung by such apparently poor results, the German Chancellor called an Education Summit, with representatives from each of the 16 German Länder, to plan how Germany could move from a mediocre performance in education towards an 'Erziehungsrepublik' or Education Republic (Economist 2008). Germany's poor performance became breakfast conversation in households throughout the country, with the Allensbach Polling Institut data revealing that 60 per cent of Germans were alarmed at the unexpectedly poor results.

Among Australians, its national results occasioned no great interest: certainly much less than would have been the case if the national football team had done as well, or Australia had won a cricket test series, for example. Perhaps national character still has something to offer, after all.

In fact, however, closer scrutiny of the results revealed that there were no grounds for complacency. It is true that the Australian system (like Germany, a federal system, where the individual states are largely responsible for education) generally performed well on these and other tests. It is also true that, as a country of migration, Australia has considerable experience, and some success, in embracing children from many different cultures and languages, many of whose school performance matches or even surpasses overall averages, within a relatively short space of time. This also proved to be the case for the PISA 2006 results. Nonetheless, as will be indicated below, there are significant exceptions to this general rule, and much more needs to be done, to reduce the unacceptably large gap between educational attainment of certain groups, and the majority. The article initially sets out some of the major characteristics of the Australian system; then, drawing on educational performance data, it outlines some systematic disadvantages of key minority groups, some of whose ongoing underperformance highlights how much more needs to be done, in education and society.

1. AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Australian education system is both very young and very old, as is indicated below. A federal system, with the individual states responsible

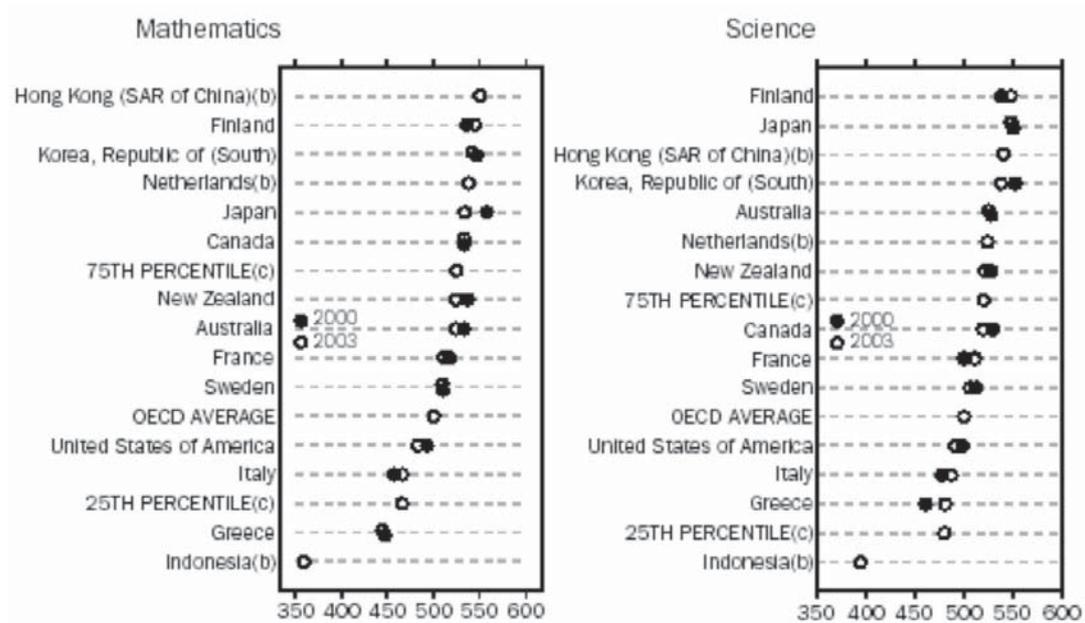
for both schooling and vocational education, the national government (known as the Commonwealth government) is more active in funding and regulating the higher education realm. Schooling generally begins at five years, and is composed of both elementary and secondary stages, totalling twelve years. Most states adopt a 6+6 pattern, although in at least one case it is 7+5. A significant proportion of students who complete year 12 now proceed to some form of further education, often in Australia's thirty-nine universities. Of a total Australian population of some twenty-two million, enrolments in higher education now total over one million, (with around one quarter, or some 250,000, being international students). While educational performance generally bears comparison with other OECD member countries, there are some important exceptions, which undermine any claims about overall standards of excellence. Three are treated below, *seriatim*.

1.1. Indigenous Education

Tens of thousands of years before Confucius and Plato, an elaborate and sophisticated form of education was already common across Australia. Stemming from the beginnings of settlement in Australia by Aboriginal groups, between forty and sixty thousand years ago, these forms of education began (as in ancient Greece and China) in the individual's younger years, were progressively refined as the individual became an adult, and continued lifelong.

Over 500 tribes existed, each with their own distinct territory, history, dialect and culture (BROOME 1982: 11). Each group had its own distinctive economic structure, not always static, and usually based on both sexual and social division of labour (ROSE 1987, BUTLIN 1993). On the coast, shellfish, the sea and richness of the land could often sustain larger groups, and formed the basis of the economy. Inland, the resources of the land supported fewer people and the tools used for hunting and gathering, as well as the economic and social structures, reflected this difference. Economic exploitation of the land to meet material needs, and the spiritual maintenance of the land, were not separate aspects of people's relations to the country, but rather "each validated and underwrote the other. The land was a

Figure 1. Mathematics and Science Literacy Average Scores, PISA, Selected Countries



Source: ABS, Yearbook Australia 2006 Notes: (a) Of 15 year-old school students as assessed by PISA. Ranked by 2003 average scores. (b) Did not participate in PISA 2000. (c) Percentiles are based on average scores for all countries.

living resource from which people drew sustenance — both physical and spiritual" (BELL 1982: 48).

Education served as an initiation into culture — both the norms and the practices that were necessary to function successfully as an adult in that society. This entailed the extended and repeated performance of those practical skills acknowledged as necessary for the proper performance of adult roles, and the particular forms of spiritual learning appropriate in that culture. Educative practices were also distinct from white practices in other ways, with, for example, little distinction between theory and practice: "Because there is an immediate goal in the practical aim of spear making; the more theoretical education is accepted as part of the whole experience" (HART 1974: 15). Aboriginal patterns of education were oral, (based on songs, myths and stories), more communal than individualised, experiential, integrated, spiritually based, and organised along kinship lines. "Kinship welded Koori life together" (MILLER, 1985: 2). 'Education' was nonetheless

lifelong, and skills (carving, weapon making, story telling) were practised to improve skills. Elders of the tribe were particularly respected, as repositories of knowledge and custom.

1.1.1. Racist ideologies: the Six Pillars of colonialism

British colonization of Australia in the late 18th century changed all this: Australian Aborigines came to be seen as the most wretched, primitive and miserable race on earth, with few if any redeeming qualities. This licensed the doctrine known as '*Terra Nullus*', the view that when Australia was colonised by the British, the land was for all intents and purposes, uninhabited and empty.

The colonists' acceptance of the legitimacy of exploitative practices towards Aborigines was sustained by a constellation of six widely held, and related, ideologies. The first was that, since Aborigines had no real society, in particular formal institutions of law and government, therefore they had no real title to the land. This was reinforced by the commonly accepted view, most directly associated with the British philosopher John Locke, that only those who actively worked and improved the land could exercise title to it. The Christian God had commanded men to work (Genesis 1: 28), and Locke's version of the Genesis myth (LOCKE 1965, MILLER 1985, WELCH 1988) supported the view that only that by tilling, sowing and so on, could an inalienable title to the land be established.

The second source of legitimation stemmed from the nineteenth century view of evolutionary theory; particularly the incorporation of ideas of naked struggle and conflict into the realm of human affairs, in the form of what came to be called Social Darwinism:

"Although Darwinism was not the primary source of the belligerent ideology and dogmatic racism of the late 19th century it did become a new instrument in the hands of theorists of race and struggle" (DALEY, 1938-9: 172).

The popularisation of evolutionary theory in terms of the survival of the fittest in society, meant that black-white relations could thus be legitimately seen

as a struggle for survival, however unequal, of two warring groups. To the victor went the spoils, and the predictable result of this conflict only served to further confirm beliefs in the evolutionary superiority of white culture-race.

Laissez-faire economic liberalism (SMITH 1979) was the third major view to inform race relations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its congruence with evolutionary theory (above) is clear, and provided an even more secure platform for racist practices. *Laissez faire* economics held that government ought not intervene in the operation of the business cycle, or related areas of social activity. In the struggle to succeed in society, some would succeed, while others would fail. Interventions by government would be inefficient, since they would mitigate the unfettered operation of economic laws of supply and demand, which alone should govern the organisation of society, and its institutions.

Influenced by such prevailing views, as also the common association in the Christian tradition of the colour black with evil, missionaries were not immune to racism either; indeed, Christianity formed the fourth ideological pillar to legitimate nineteenth century racism. Worse, it helped create the idea of the savage as ignoble, in defiance of pre-existing Rousseauian notions: any suggestions of the nobility of a savage race awaiting the imminent redemption of Christian missionaries was dismissed as 'unchristian'.

The fifth form of ideology was another favourite of nineteenth century science: the nascent study of Anthropology which was used on this occasion to 'prove' that Aboriginal Australians were inferior beings. Both early Australian journals of Anthropology, and prevailing practices such as craniometry, were used to support the view that Aboriginal peoples were not within the fold of the 'civilised' races' (ANON, 1898: 47). At most the brachycephalic races such as Aborigines could "supply the steady workers" (ANON, 1899: 77) under the benevolent rule of their white masters.

Perhaps the final element of ideology underlying Australian racism was the most malignant. Concepts of equality were in the air when Australia was colonised by the British in 1788, just one year before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and 12 years after the American Revolution. Yet,

"The egalitarian and libertarian ideas of the Enlightenment spread by the American and French Revolutions conflicted, of course, with racism, but ...

also paradoxically contributed to its development. Faced with the blatant contradiction between the treatment of slaves and colonial peoples and the official rhetoric of freedom and equality, Europeans and North Americans began to dichotomize humanity between men and submen (or the 'civilized' and the 'savages'). The scope of the applicability of the egalitarian ideals was restricted to the people, that is, the whites..." (VAN DEN BERGHE, P., 1967, pp. 17-18; see also CARNOY 1974).

The above constellation of beliefs formed a potent blend of science, christianity and capitalism, which effectively conquered competing, indigenous worldviews, and relegated Aboriginal peoples to the bottom of the social and economic pyramid. These beliefs legitimated profoundly oppressive nineteenth century colonialist policies and practices with respect to Australian Aborigines. One of the distinguishing features of colonialism is the profoundly held belief in the racial-cultural superiority of the colonising civilisation and people. This belief acts as legitimation for exploitative policies and practices, such as that of exclusionism, dispossession and extermination. As Hartwig argued:

"For the colonist participating in the process of dis-possession, it was psychologically desirable, at the very least, to persuade himself that Aborigines were inferior beings, pests and nuisances who deserved their fate" (HARTWIG, 1972: 12).

1.1.2. Internal Colonialism

The Australian case was arguably one of internal colonialism, involving the subordination and continuing domination of a "previously independent nation within the borders of another nation-state" (ALTBACH and KELLY 1984: 3; see also CARNOY 1974). Thus, as Wolpe has argued, the principal feature that distinguishes internal colonialism from 'normal' colonialism is that, with the former, both colonisers and colonised occupy the same territory. In other major respects, the situation of subordinate racial and ethnic groups, "is produced and maintained by the same mechanisms of cultural domination, political oppression, and economic exploitation" (WOLPE, 1975: 229) which foster the dependency of Third World states.

Education often serves as an instrument of internal colonialism by socialising the colonised into an acceptance of inferior status, power and wealth. In colonial Australia, a definition of schooling was legitimated which stressed rudimentary skills only, in keeping with the lowly social class which the colonised were to occupy; and induction into Christianity, "the white man's morality" (ROBERTS 1981: 272 see also JENSEN 1984). Colonised Aboriginal peoples were not consulted as to the content of this curriculum, or whether they wanted (white) schooling at all. English was the dominant medium of instruction, and the disintegration of tribal structure and culture was promoted by the removal of children to schools far from their homeland, a longstanding practice which caused much needless grief among indigenous communities (EDWARDS and READ 1989). By immersing pupils in white culture it was hoped that Aborigines could simply be transformed into honorary whites, albeit at the bottom of the economic pyramid. It is hardly surprising that alienation was high, and attendance and retention rates low, among Aboriginal youth.

1.1.3. The Contemporary Picture

The above sketch of the apparatus sustaining internal colonialism helps explain much about the current situation. Much has changed of course, yet indigenous Australians remain the most marginalised ethnic group in the country, on every index of social disadvantage — employment, poverty, health, and education. Thirty percent of indigenous households live below the poverty line, life expectancy is still many years below the national average, and crime statistics are also disturbing — while the indigenous population comprises only 2% of the total, they form one in five of people in prison, a ten fold disproportion (ATSIC Submission 2003).

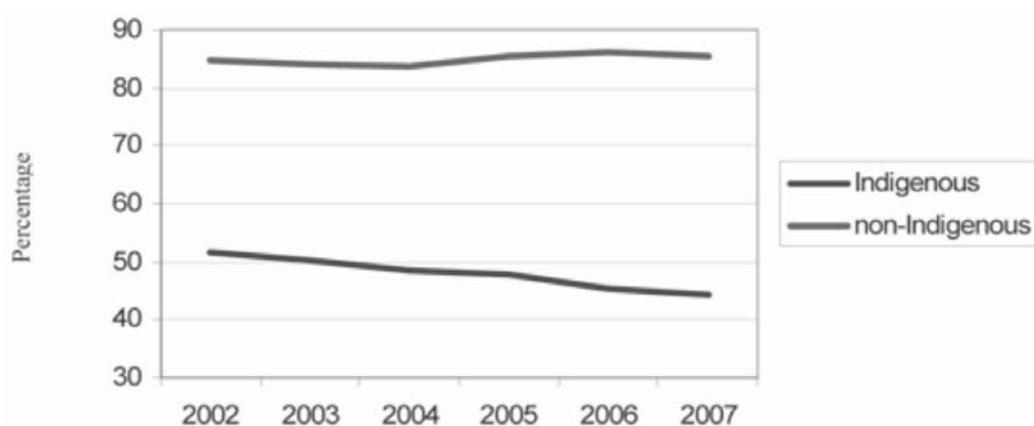
Many teachers of Aboriginal students are still poorly prepared for the task. And because such schools are often in depressed inner city areas or remote outback areas, they are often staffed with inexperienced, youthful teachers, who view their appointment as 'serving time', pending a more favourable appointment. Staff turnover has traditionally been high, and schools tend to lack resources. Lack of resources available for both bilingual education programmes, and for the teaching of Aboriginal languages is a further, pressing problem.. (If we all Die... 1986).

It is widely acknowledged that "Aboriginal languages are in an endangered state" (LO BIANCO 1987: 54). This loss of Aboriginal languages is all the more significant since, in oral traditions, the language is the repository of the culture: myths, law, values and social organisation. Once the language disappears, the culture which it supported also dies, and there is considerable evidence that many Aboriginal languages are either already extinct, or on the verge of extinction. From the onset of white colonialism (1788), when more than two hundred Aboriginal languages were in use, only perhaps 10 to 20 are now viable in the longer term, particularly without a massive effort directed at their maintenance (LO BIANCO 1987, OZOLINS 1993).

While a few successful bi-lingual 'Two Way' schools exist, (where Aboriginal elders work in parallel with regular classroom teachers, to teach children about local language and culture), they are often seen as too expensive by governments. And when innovative programmes that involve Aboriginal partnership in curriculum and pedagogy are developed, they can arouse the hostility of the local non-Aboriginal community, concerned that their children may be disadvantaged (STEWART 1984). In sum, while much is being done, (often in concert with local Aboriginal education workers, communities and consultants (Education Department of South Australia 1991), much remains to be done.

Overall, the school success of indigenous Australians remains a tragic testament to educational failure. The following table summarises the current,

Figure 2. Year 12 Attainment from Year 11 student base, indigenous and non-indigenous

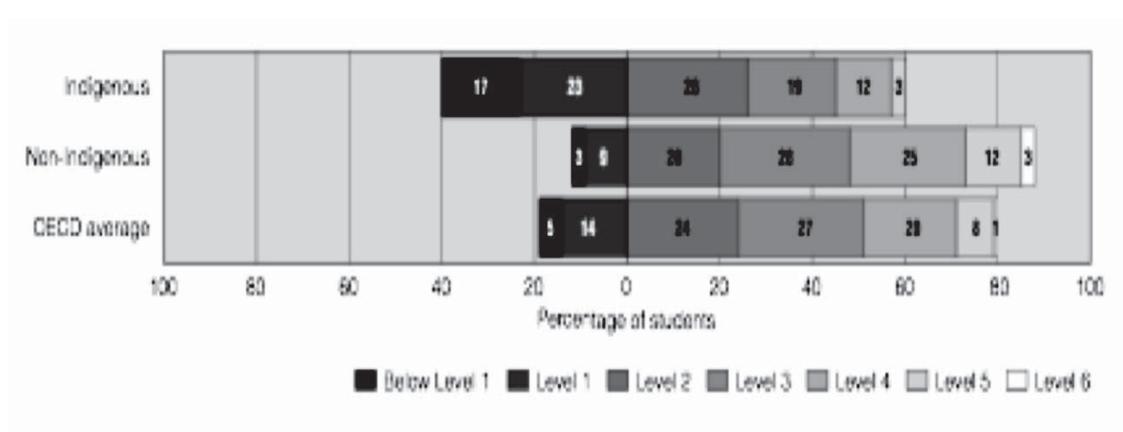


Source: FAHCSIA 2009: The Challenge... , p. 16.

Table 1. Attendance Rates and Performance, Indigenous and non-indigenous pupils

ITEM MEASURED	INDIGENOUS	NON-INDIGENOUS	GAP
Pre-School Attendance	46.2%	57%	12.8%
% 17 year olds attending school	42.9%	65%	22.1%
Year 12 completion	45.3%	86.3%	41%
Days absent from School	26	8	18
% at or above NAPLAN minimum standard* Year 3 Literacy	68.3%	93.5%	25.2%
% at or above NAPLAN minimum standard* Year 3 Numeracy	78.6%	96%	17.4%
% at or above NAPLAN minimum standard* Year 9 Literacy	70.7%	94.2%	23.5%
% at or above NAPLAN minimum standard* Year 9 Numeracy	72.5%	94.8%	22.3%

Source: FAHCSIA 2009: The Challenge. NAPLAN is the National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy.

Figure 3. Pupil Performance, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and OECD average, PISA 2006

Source: ACER, PISA in Brief, p. 12.

but sadly longstanding gap in educational attendance and performance, of indigenous and non-indigenous pupils in the Australian education system.

The following data reveals the much higher attrition rates of indigenous children at school, relative to non-indigenous children; a major concern, since Year 12 completion is the normal pre-requisite for entry to higher education, and a middle class occupation and existence.

The performance gap is also starkly illustrated in the following Figure, which shows the data for indigenous Australians, and non-indigenous Australians, each relative to the OECD average.

The gap is particularly large for indigenous students living in either Remote or Very Remote locations (two categories that are both used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, to gather information). Among the latter, who are without question the most disadvantaged group in the country, only 30 per cent of indigenous pupils reach the national minimum standards specified, compared with around 80 per cent for indigenous children in urban areas (FAHCSIA 2009). Such tragic performance gaps undermine any case for satisfaction with PISA results.

2. AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION AND ETHNIC ACHIEVEMENT

Like other new world countries such as the USA and Canada, Australia is a country of migration: with the exception of indigenous Australians, all are migrants. This does not however mean that this substantial cultural diversity has always been adequately acknowledged, including in education. Although Australia is now legitimately seen as one of the more successful multicultural societies internationally, much of its history was much less accommodating of ethnic differences.

2.1. Contradictions of History and Geography

The fact that the Australian continent was colonized by the British led to a longstanding contradiction: between place and heritage. Australian institutions and ideologies were shaped by its British origins, which led to a common Australian sense of isolation from England and Europe, and helps

explain why, after federation, one of the first national laws was the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901: 'After 1901, non Whites could only enter Australia on a temporary basis under a permit' (SHERINGTON 1990, p. 93) This notorious Act, soon known world-wide as the 'White Australia Policy', became the public face of racism, both to its Asian neighbours and to all prospective migrants. At that time, Australia could be legitimately seen as an isolated outpost of Empire, firmly anchored to British culture yet geographically adrift in a hostile sea of Asian (non-white) cultures.

As in other countries, xenophobic sentiments rose in the periods before WWI and WWII. In 1939, Lutherans in South Australia, for example, were once again on the defensive against attempts to close all German schools. During the war, many loyal (German speaking) Australians, (many either of Jewish extraction or recent refugees from central European fascism and anti-semitism), were incarcerated in 'internment camps'. Moreover, certain politicians exploited the latent racism and anti-semitism of the times to rail against the potential influx of Jewish refugees and migrants to Australia, despite knowledge of the atrocities being committed in Nazi death camps being available at that time (BARTROP 1994). That other countries such as the USA and the UK also denied entry to (Jewish) individuals fleeing from European fascism hardly mitigated Australia's blatant racism.

After the war, attempts to preserve Australia as a bastion of white British culture persisted, notwithstanding a major broadening of Australia's immigration program. In education, no allowance was deemed necessary or desirable for the distinctive needs of non-British migrants who, it was often assumed, should submerge their cultural traditions and values as part of the price paid for settling in a new and prosperous land.

2.2. Multiculturalism from the 1970s: A New Beginning?

The decade of the 1970s at last saw increasing recognition of Australia as a multicultural society, both normatively and empirically. The 'White Australia Policy' had finally been abandoned; increasing immigration from non-traditional areas was supplemented by refugees from South East Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. In a federal system, where education was largely controlled by the individual states, such governments developed

policies affirming the principle of multiculturalism and the means towards its realisation. English as a Second Language (ESL) was widely defended on a needs basis, as also the teaching of Languages other than English (LOTE), although distinctions were not always drawn carefully between community languages and traditional 'foreign' languages (mainly French and German) (COPE and ALCORSO 1986).

In the context of widespread funding cuts and redundancies of the last two decades, however, hard-pressed mainstream staff and resources have been stretched more thinly in order to achieve new program goals and outcomes, without training, while reductions occurred in funding and skill levels for former specialist multicultural units and programs.

2.2.1. Current Context

While multiculturalism has long been widely accepted, some sensationalist media accounts (Not a Single Problem, 1986: 3), and forms of racist social practice still persist (Sydney Morning Herald 1993, KABIR 2004). As in some other countries, some Muslim Australians lament that Australia's involvement in both the recent Iraq wars, and Afghanistan, has marginalised them, to a degree.

As in America, the Vietnam war proved a watershed in Australian politics, and helped provoke a re-evaluation of its role and geographic situation in Asia. Geographic proximity, the urging of several recent Prime Ministers, closer and more extensive relations on many fronts, and the rise of China, has stimulated Australia to look much more closely at its relations with Asia. Whether this connotes an overall change in traditional Australian attitudes to Asia (and the South Pacific) is still a matter of some debate among Australia's neighbours, however.

The Australian reorientation towards Asia during the 1980s and early 1990s was paralleled by changes in Australian migration. Particularly in the major cities, the poly-ethnic character of Australian society is very apparent. Currently there are well over 100 ethnic communities in Australia, speaking some 80 languages. After Israel, Australia's migration program was the world's next largest per size of population in the several decades after

Table 2. The Changing Face of Australian Migration

BIRTHPLACE	1993-4	2003-4	% CHANGE
UK & Ireland	9,563	19,214	100.9
New Zealand	7,772	14,418	85.51
China	2,740	8784	220.6
India	2,643	8,135	207.8
South Africa	1,654	5,849	253.6
Sudan	340	4,591	1,250.3
Philippines	4,179	4,111	-1.6
Malaysia	1,252	3,718	196.9
Indonesia	622	2,584	390.8
Singapore	502	2,224	343.0
Viet Nam	5,434	2,212	-59.3
Zimbabwe	143	1,620	1032.9

Source: SMH 29th October 2005, citing DIMIA data. Note — It is likely that some of the migrants from Viet Nam, Indonesia, and Malaysia are of Chinese ethnicity. See Jupp et al 2001: 81.

WWII (KALANTZIS et al 1990: 1). Over 25% of Australians are of non-English speaking background (NESB), while almost 12 per cent claim to speak a language other than English at home. At the beginning of the new millennium, some 10% of the population of Australia's two largest cities (Sydney and Melbourne) were from Asia (WELCH 2010b). Table Three shows the changing origins of Australia's migrants.

Nonetheless, for post-1945 Australian immigrants, multicultural rhetoric was often belied by differential treatment. In 1980, for example, the unemployment rate for workers born in Greece was 9.0 per cent, when overall rates of unemployment were considerably lower (Lever Tracey 1981). The simple fact of being an immigrant from a non English-speaking background (NESB) significantly increased one's chances of being poor, at least in the early years of immigration.

High aspirations among migrants remain common, although significant differences existed between different ethnic groups, and between males and females within the same group. Newly arrived, or lower class, adolescents can be especially disadvantaged, which often resulted in high rates of truancy. Self-fulfilling prophecies have been pointed out, whereby students with inadequate linguistic skills were labelled as unintelligent, and performed accordingly. Recommendations that bilingual teachers and interpreters be recruited from Australia and overseas, and that major ethnic languages be widely taught, have been only partly implemented. While improvements have occurred, figures still revealed that NESB migrants formed a disproportionate element of the long term unemployed. Rates of unemployment varied significantly by birthplace. Unemployment rates for Turkish-born individuals, for example, were four times those for Australian-born, while rates for Lebanese, Vietnamese, and immigrants from Western Asia and South East Asia were also disproportionately high. By the early 1990s, Australia's two largest export markets were Japan and Korea, (and now includes China) while by the new millennium, the swiftest-growing group of migrants were Chinese. In education, this changed patterns of migration and the reorientation towards Asia had had significant impact. For example, although French remained the major language learned in year 12, community languages are now more widely taught. A strong trend exists of replacing French and German (and community languages such as Italian and Greek) with Asian languages such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese or Indonesian/Malaysian. (Australia's Language 1991: 69, OZOLINS 1993: 245-57, CLYNE 2005, WELCH 2010b). Italian and Greek are now less often spoken in the home, while Vietnamese, Chinese, and to a much lesser extent Khmer and Laotian, are now more common (BULLIVANT 1987, CLYNE 2005).

Again however, as was argued above regarding Aboriginal education, a rising tide of economism has resulted in cutbacks, including the abolition of the national Asian Languages Strategy, which had, with some success, promoted the study of Asian languages in schools, and its replacement by a poorly-funded substitute, the National Asian Languages and Studies Programme, introduced by the new federal government in 2008 (WELCH 2010b: 134). Increasing cost pressures on Australian universities have also

Table 3. Selected Community Languages spoken in Australia 2001, with % change from 1991

<i>LANGUAGE</i>	<i>NO. OF SPEAKERS IN 2001</i>	<i>PERCENT CHANGE SINCE 1991</i>
Italian	353,606	-15.6
Greek	263,718	-7.7
Cantonese	225,307	38.9
Arabic	209,371	28.6
Vietnamese	174,236	58.1
Mandarin	139,288	155.9
Spanish	93,595	3.4
Tagalog (Filipino)*	78,879	33.4
German	76,444	-32.6
Macedonian	71,994	11.7
Serbian	49,202	102.2
Hindi	47,817	110.4
Korean	39,528	100.1
Indonesian	38,724	42.4

Source: CLYNE 2005. Tagalog, the main language of the Philippines, cannot be distinguished in the Census from Filipino, the planned national language.

seen cuts to language programmes. Nonetheless, educational participation among migrants is often higher than for Australian born.

How does the above shape the educational experiences of specific minorities? Clearly some minorities are more successful than others: in Australia, as in other countries of migration, Chinese, Greek and Jewish migrants (each of which traditionally prize educational attainments highly, and each of which have also suffered ethnic discrimination) are examples. "Being Greek, Chinese or Jewish meant having a 'serious' attitude towards education" (TSOLIDIS 2001: 117)

Pupils from such communities often exhibit high aspirations, high retentivity, and high attainments, relative to their Anglo peers. Certainly, PISA 2006 data confirm that immigrant status is not associated with poorer performance: indeed, in some cases, both foreign born and first generation pupils outperformed Australian-born:

In scientific literacy there were no significant differences between the scores of Australian-born students (students and both parents born in Australia); first-generation students (students born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas); and foreign-born students (students and both parents born overseas).

Students with a language background other than English scored significantly lower than those who spoke English. Slightly more foreign-born students than Australian-born students and substantially more students with a language background other than English (20% compared to 11% of English-speaking students) were not achieving proficiency level 2.

In reading literacy, first-generation students achieved significantly higher scores than Australian-born students. There was a similar distribution in the proficiency levels, across all immigrant status categories.

English-speaking students scored at a significantly higher level than those students with a language background other than English, and 20 per cent of students with a language background other than English failed to achieve Level 2, compared with 12 per cent of English-speaking students.

In mathematical literacy, both first-generation and foreign-born students significantly outperformed Australian-born students. There was no significant difference in the average scores of English-speaking students and those with a language background other than English. Similar proportions of students in each of the immigrant and language categories achieved at the lower proficiency levels.

However, a higher proportion of foreign-born (23%) than first-generation (18%) and Australian-born (15%) students and a higher proportion of students with a language other than English (22%) than English-speaking (16%) students were achieving at Level 5 or higher (ACER, PISA in Brief, 13).

Demographic changes also mean that racism is now more likely to be directed at more recent arrivals, often Indo Chinese or Middle Eastern. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Greek pupils are also not exempt from racism towards newer migrants, for example Vietnamese (KALANTZIS et al 1990: 191).

The politics of being bicultural still mean that negotiating both cultures is a daily accomplishment for many pupils, who may well feel allegiance to (aspects of) each culture, but may also quite pragmatically give expression to one more than the other in certain contexts. Some identity confusion can result from this dual allegiance, at times. Greek language and dancing may be appropriate among fellow Greeks, but at school it may well be more 'cool' to play rugby or cricket. Where ethnic rivalry exists between Greek and Anglo pupils (WALKER 1988: 60-4), it is often more politic to participate in majority culture activities.

As with other countries of migration, such as the USA and Canada, the educational experience of migrant groups is diverse. Even those who may have been assessed as falling below national norms upon arrival, often manage to surpass these same performance levels within a generation or two.

Such educational success has been achieved by many; however for some, especially among certain Asian and European minorities, including many Muslim Australians, for example, their educational experiences are, at least so far, less positive. While Muslim settlers have inhabited Australia for well over a century, (Afghans being an early example), and while many have achieved notable successes in education and society, many have not: By the 1996 census, Muslim Australians were as educated as the Australian-born population, and in the categories of Bachelor and higher degrees, more so (KABIR 2004: 273). Overall, at least 10,498 Muslim students were reported as studying at Australian universities in the 1996 census, yielding a rate of attendance higher than that for the general population. (Some of these would be international students, however). Nonetheless, the rate of higher education participation is quite polarized: among Lebanese-born Australians, some gain the higher educational qualifications needed to access professional and managerial jobs, "while others experience inter-generational unemployment and poverty" (BATROUNEY 2001, p. 568, WELCH 2010: 151). The same

census showed that the unemployment rate for Muslims was 25 percent, relative to 9 percent for Australia-born, and the total population (KABIR 2004: 272), a disparity that persists in parts of both Melbourne and Sydney. A 2005 survey revealed that literacy levels among especially young Islamic males are still well below average, a fact that of itself denies them access to many job opportunities: "Literacy ... is a huge issue. And with that comes low or no qualifications and high levels of unemployment" (SMH 2005b). Analysis of the 2001 Census data for males aged between 15 and 24, living in specific Sydney suburbs and who identified themselves as Islamic, pointed to "... a pattern of underachievement among young Islamic men" (SMH 2005b).

Among 15-24 year olds, only 39 percent of Islamic males in Bankstown said they had reached year 12 (some were still at school). But 46.5 percent of Islamic females and 45.4 percent of males across Sydney said year 12 (WELCH 2010b, pp. 154-5).

These figures need to be seen in the context of average rates of Year 12 completion, in NSW, and nationally: currently 70 percent or higher, and again give the lie to unproblematised claims of high PISA performance.

3. SOCIAL CLASS IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

Australians like to distinguish themselves from the social stratification that characterised the old world, whence many of their parents or grandparents came. Like other new world nations (Canada, New Zealand, and the USA) Australia sees itself as less disfigured by class consciousness and class structures, than Britain, and many parts of Europe.

By contrast, Australians cherish an image of themselves, and the principles and social practices of their society, as egalitarian, where the principle of 'a fair go' (an equal chance for all) forms a prime social norm, and where all individuals are relatively equal. In Australia, it is often asserted, anyone can rise to the top, if they work hard. But is this true? Does hard work really guarantee success and status, especially in a system where close to 30% of children attend 'private' (non-state) schools, at secondary level? And how far does social class affect patterns of educational achievement among Australian pupils?

3.1. Class and Schooling — the Historical Background

Despite the image that Australians like to hold of themselves, Australian education has always been disfigured by class. As in England in the 19th century, the poorest children, sometimes called 'ragged children', were often absent from the state elementary schools altogether — either because working, or denied entry because of their poor appearance, and supposedly harmful moral influence on the other pupils. Child labour was still common, and in rural areas where schools were less available, accorded to seasonal demands for agricultural work. Many working class parents, for whom child labour (especially by girls) was an important part of the domestic economy, often favoured the irregular attendance licensed by non-state schools, at least in the early part of the century. Prosecutions for non attendance were rare, especially if the children were employed, or parents were ill.

In effect, schooling paralleled the class structure of 19th century colonial society. Even when, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, state (public) elementary schools were more widely established, they were often seen as specific to the working class, while private schools (sometimes called 'grammar schools') were seen as the preserve of the middle classes. The 'taint of pauperism' (Larson 1986: 3) attached itself to those from the middle classes who sent their children to school provided free by the State. So much, it seems, for the myth of mateship, and Australian egalitarianism.

3.1.1. Class and Contemporary Schooling in Australia

While class should be grasped in its historical concreteness, its meaning is limited to the past. Indeed, profound class disparities are evident in contemporary Australia, including in the PISA test results. These disparities give the lie to any simplistic account of Australia's PISA success.

One of the key indices that underline class differences in the Australian PISA results was that of differences between schools. Here, Australia performed much more poorly in bringing all students to an acceptable performance level. Differences between schools were quite marked, especially in comparison with Scandinavian countries, as the following table reveals.

Table 4. Variance between Schools, PISA 2006, Selected Countries

COUNTRY	VARIANCE BETWEEN SCHOOLS
Finland	4.7
Norway	9.9
Sweden	11.5
Australia	19.8
UK	23.5
USA	29.1
Spain	12.7

Source: Statistical Tables, PISA 2006 National Report.

While Australia performed significantly better than the OECD average of 33.0, the above results show that its results are more like those of other Anglo democracies such as the UK and USA, than that of Scandinavian countries, (and Spain) where differences between schools fell within a much narrower band. What is the likely explanation? Could the fact that, rather like the USA, Australia is a country of migration, which complicates the task of bringing all pupils, including those whose first language was not English, to high levels of performance? There are two grounds for doubting the validity of this proposition. Firstly, Scandinavian countries too, now have migrants from a range of countries in their schools, and none of these students stem from a background where Scandinavian languages are spoken. Many, if by no means all, of Australia's migrants have some background in English, and a significant number stem from English speaking backgrounds. Moreover, as was seen above, many migrants to Australia, (again like the USA), often match, or even surpass Australian born pupils' performance, within a period of years (although some clearly do not). The evidence, then, suggests that migration is not the source of the greater performance gap evident in Australian schools, relative to Scandinavian systems. A much more likely source of explanation rests in the greater socio-economic inequalities in Australia, compared to Scandinavian countries. As Australia's

PISA 2006 results reveal, there are marked performance differentials among schools, according to socio-economic ranks:

In scientific literacy, students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile scored a significant 87 points or more than one proficiency level lower than students in the highest socioeconomic quartile.

Twenty-three per cent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile were not achieving at Level 2, compared with five per cent of the cohort in the highest socioeconomic quartile. Only six per cent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile achieved Level 5 or higher, compared with 26 per cent of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile.

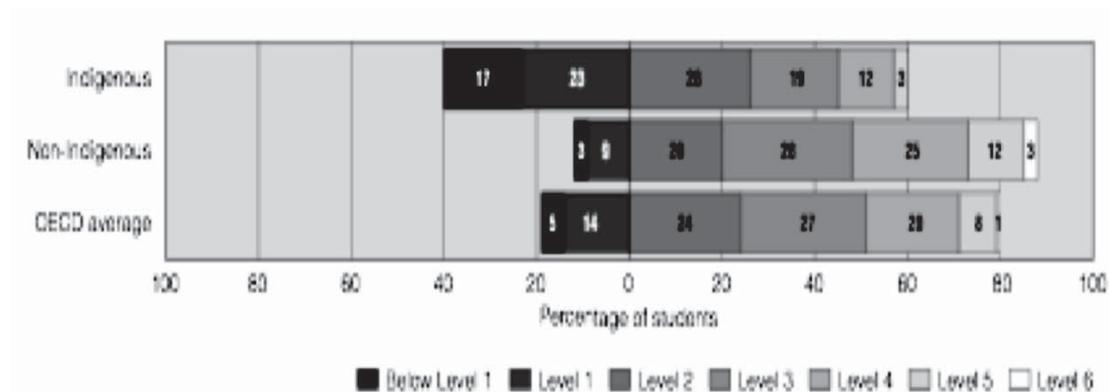
In reading literacy, the difference in average scores between students in the highest and lowest socioeconomic quartiles was 84 score points.

Five per cent of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile were not achieving at Level 2, compared with 23 per cent of the cohort in the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Only four per cent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile achieved Level 5, compared with 21 per cent of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile.

In mathematical literacy, students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile scored on average 78 score points lower than those of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile. Twenty-two per cent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile were not achieving at Level 2, compared with five per cent of the cohort in the highest socioeconomic quartile. Only six per cent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile achieved Level 5 or higher, compared with 29 per cent of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile (ACER, *PISA in Brief* p. 12).

Another way of expressing these differences is according to a composite index (known as ESCS) that PISA developed to measure socio-economic status. The index comprises the occupation levels of parents, highest education levels of parents, an index of educational resources at home and an index of family wealth. Mapped graphically, the ESCS allowed comparisons between countries such as those indicated above, to be displayed, as in the following figure.

Figure 3. ESCS, Selected Countries, PISA 2006



Source: ACER, PISA in Brief: 14.

Comparatively, Finland stands out, as both performing in a higher band in general, but also within a narrower band. This means that Finnish students of lower socio-economic background perform closer to the performance of higher socio-economic pupils, than in Australia. Canada too appears more successful on this measure: the achievement levels of its lower socio-economic pupils are higher than those in Australia, and closer to their higher socio-economic pupils, although Australia's higher socio-economic pupils score somewhat better than Canadians.

While there have long been differences in educational outcomes between rich and poor in Australia, these schooling differentials become all the more important at times of growing social fissures, such as have opened up in Australia over the past twenty years or more. During the 1980s, income inequality increased markedly (GITTINS 1993, Saunders et al 1989, CONNELL et al 1991, WELCH 2010a), as the Australian economy was globalised. Over a somewhat longer time (1976-1992) the proportion of the population with middle incomes plunged from 65% to 40%, while the proportion of households with an income of less than \$22,000 and over \$72,000 (in constant 1991-2 dollars) both rose significantly (Mc Kay 1993, pp 137-8). Income distribution in Australia is still 'not particularly equal when compared with other countries' (SAUNDERS 1993: 3), although when the 'social wage' — which includes the differential effects of home ownership, and public spending on the national public health system

('Medicare'), housing and education — is taken into account, it was argued that Australia, was not as starkly socially differentiated as some other developed economies, and was in fact more like Germany and the Netherlands than the UK or the USA (WHITEFORD and KENNEDY 1994, WHITEFORD 1993).

But it is just this infrastructure that has become imperilled, as state and federal governments competed to be seen as the most fiscally prudent. The results of this 'prudence' was that spending on infrastructure declined sharply, with total government funds (an aggregate of local, state and federal levels of government) falling from more than 7.5% of GDP in 1964 to around 3.5% in 2004. This left some infrastructure in areas such as transport, health and education, seriously eroded. Parallel attempts to move responsibility for health, housing, and education from the state to the private sector, accorded with the 'user pays' philosophy of conservative regimes, but has had disastrous effects on the poor. It is estimated that by about 2004, around 850,000 children lived in poverty, a phenomenon closely associated with parental unemployment. Australia's child poverty rate was 15.9% by 1990, exceeding all other countries except the United States, and more than three times that in Germany, Norway and Sweden (Saunders and Matheson 1991: 3). In the context of widespread restructuring of the Australian economy from the early 1980s, (WELCH 2003), around 25% of full-time male jobs were eliminated between 1970 and 1990 (MC KAY 1993: 144). Estimates showed that almost half of all single-parent families, one quarter of all renters and similar proportions of those aged under twenty-four were living in poverty. The prospect of a genuine, sizeable, and reasonably permanent underclass developing in Australia, (in addition to Aboriginals, as indicated above) was very real, and very worrisome, by the 1990s.

3.1.2. Worlds Apart: The Effects of the Dual System of Public and 'Private' Schools

From the 1960s, federal governments of various persuasions, followed by the various state governments, which under Australia's federal constitution, have responsibility for education, began to subsidise the elite, so-called 'independent' schools, increasing their already privileged position. Through

science grants, and interest rate subsidies, the scale and scope of these subsidies began to increase. From that point, growth in the nominally 'private' (or, as Anderson 1990 describes it, the 'state subsidised' sector) was increasingly underpinned by government funding. Moves to fund all schools on a needs basis in 1972 failed to end the divisiveness of State Aid to 'independent' schools. Even worse from an equity perspective, political compromises meant that even the wealthiest schools came to be subsidised under new government funding formulae.

Currently, after decades of federal and state funding of private schools, and the corresponding residualisation of the local public high school (CAMPBELL, PROCTOR and SHERINGTON 2009), three pupils in ten now attend a private high school. Faced with this trend, that both state and federal governments have themselves fostered, no major political party now dares oppose the powerful private school lobby. What difference has this growth made to the process of social and educational division in Australia? The answer is complex, since elite, Protestant private schools are far more class-based than neighbourhood Catholic schools — by far the largest of the private systems — who cater for significant numbers of disadvantaged, and immigrant children, and far fewer from the upper classes. (But there is also an elite sub-sector of Catholic schools, which have always produced leaders [of the Catholic community] in Australia). In any event: private enrolments continue to grow. Hence, despite the fact that some 70% Australian pupils attended public schools, more than 70% of doctors and more than 60% of lawyers intended sending their children to non-Catholic 'independent' schools that catered, in 1990, for some 8% of the Australian school population. Their choice was not on religious or spiritual grounds, and despite the fact that far fewer of these same lawyers and doctors had attended such schools themselves (ANDERSON 1990: 98-99).

The perpetuation of a separate, class-based, and heavily state-subsidised system of purportedly 'independent' schools competing for finite resources against the hard-pressed public schools, exacerbates social divisiveness in Australia. The latter must accept all entrants, irrespective of religion, achievement level or social class, and are required to deliver high quality education to all. Public schools are increasingly being made into the poor relation. The unequal contest between public and 'private' schools in Australian education of the late 20th century is increasingly impoverishing

the public schooling system, and is being accompanied by increasingly strident and uninformed critiques of the lack of quality in public schools, for which state and federal government policies and practices of the last twenty years or more are clearly largely responsible. The reforms systematically diverted funding from public schools to private, underpinning the shift of enrolments from one sector to the other (WELCH 2010a, pp. 264-7). In the most populous state (New South Wales), some 76 new private schools were opened, from 1996-2000 (SMH 2000), many of them low-cost Anglican schools, in areas where few non-government schools had previously existed. The effect of the reforms was to shift the burden of provision, to those least able to pay. Regrettably, the current Labor (Social Democratic) federal government has continued the same policy, albeit promising a funding review in 2012.

The results are plain to see: private high schools increased their share of total enrolments from 26 percent to 33 per cent over the years 1986-2006 (WELCH 2010a: 266). At the other end of the socio-economic scale, public schools in areas of high poverty, unemployment and significant non-English speaking background (NESB), struggle. Students at such schools also struggle to match the performance of less disadvantaged schools: fewer complete year 12, and are much less well represented at high performance levels of NAPLAN tests. PISA results can not be broken down by school, but would surely show the same trend.

4. CONCLUSION-THE POLITICS OF REFORM OR THE REFORM OF POLITICS?

For perhaps three decades or so after WW2, equality of educational opportunity was an important guiding principle of educational growth and reform in Australia. At least until the 1970s, education was seen as an important means to achieve social equality. Since the 1970s, however, 'reality has been turned upside down' (PUSEY 1991: 10). The notion of the 'social good' became increasingly marginalised: a 'buried discourse' (PUSEY 1991: 166), replaced by a new economic rhetoric of individual rights, ideologies of 'efficiency', and 'choice'. Its associated social practices, have profoundly altered Australian society:

'What wins is a kind of "dephenomenalising" abstraction that tries to neutralise the social contexts of program goals in every area, whether it be education, industry support, public health or water resource management' (PUSEY 1991: 11).

This is what the Australian sociologist Michael Pusey termed 'economic rationalism' (often called elsewhere neo-liberalism): the domination of social policy by the language and logic of economics. But this is not just any economics but rather it is modern 'positivist economics', which perceives itself as a science, and eschews value judgements about social goals. This positivistic process led to what was earlier dubbed an ideology of efficiency (CALLAHAN 1962, WELCH 1998, 2010a, BATES 1990).

Perhaps for this reason, the increasing privatization of the Australian education system seen above, has been paralleled in some states by the growth of academically selective public high schools. The combined effects are clear when examining pupil achievement more closely: of the top 100 schools across Australia, measured according to their performance on the 2010 NAPLAN tests, only 5 measured 'below average on the index of social and economic advantage' (Australian 2010b) A high proportion of top-performing schools across the country were either private or academically selective public schools. (Australian 2010a) The lamentable conclusion is that "Money, not brains, is the most important factor when it comes to getting a good education" (Australian 2010a) While PISA data do not allow performance data to be disaggregated in this way, closer analysis of its data would surely reveal the same trend.

Australia has witnessed a major shift of resources in education from the state to the private sector. At the same time, state schools are being given an ever-widening charter, and ever-fewer resources with which to carry it out. Doing more with less in state education has become a central motif in all six state systems, over the last decade or two, justified via calls for enhanced productivity or efficiency, in the name of precisely the same positivist economics that Pusey cites. Given this increasingly unequal, but increasingly intense competition between schools — both between public and private schools and among public schools — it is no surprise to find evidence of manipulation of test results emerging in 2010. (Australian 2010c and d).

The Australian education system is unable to deliver the benefits that its rhetoric implies: providing high quality education, and substantial equality of educational opportunity, to all. In seeking to shield themselves from increasingly unsatisfiable expectations, virtually all Australian states resorted to substantial programmes of privatisation and devolution, to avoid responsibility for traditional areas of public concern:

The more the state withdraws from the economic process, as by privatising public services, the better it can escape the legitimation demands that arise from its general responsibility for the burdens resulting from a crisis-ridden capitalism (HABERMAS 1989, p. 26).

The above analysis shows a systematic withdrawal from the earlier state-building ideology that underpinned the development of state systems of education in Australia. After more than two decades of significant restructuring of Australian society and economy, using strategies such as privatisation, decentralisation, and managerialism, the question must be asked: what damage is being done to older values of social justice, and participatory democracy that have underpinned the development of the Australian state? In education, if high overall performance on the PISA (and other) tests is being purchased at the expense of Aboriginal Australians, some ethnic minorities, and the poor, can this really be considered a success?

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