

# **Resisting educational inequity and the ‘bracketing out’ of disadvantage in contemporary schooling**

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*Resisting Educational Inequality: Reframing Policy and Practice in Schools Serving*

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter, data from Australia’s National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the *My School* website, and the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) are considered together in order to draw out a nuanced view of how broader factors of social disadvantage are implicated in educational outcomes measured via standardised testing regimes. Of particular concern is the *bracketing out* (Sellar & Lingard, 2014) of social, economic, and educational disadvantage, which allows policy makers, education commentators, and school leaders to make claims about students, teachers, and schools (Thompson & Mockler, 2016) that are de-contextualised and overly simplified. Instead, this chapter argues that educators and policy-makers need to unmask complex educational disadvantage as an important part of re-framing public discourse.

The Australian government initially claimed that NAPLAN and *My School* would be important public policy devices for producing greater transparency and accountability, as well as lifting the overall quality of Australian schooling (Gorur, 2013) through a commitment to

improving outcomes for students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, perhaps the main effect has been a perversion of equity discourses (Sellar & Lingard, 2014) in order to reframe educational equity as a matter of quality (Mockler, 2014) by removing any consideration of the complex interplay of social, economic, and educational factors of disadvantage.

This chapter performs three moves: the first, a consideration of how schooling in Australia has been reframed by shifting the emphasis from equity to quality, which in turn established the conditions for standardised testing. The second move examines how the construction of ICSEA and the *My School* website masks socio-educational disadvantage, which then provides a false 'level playing field' for school comparison; and in the third move, this chapter makes a case for resisting the bracketing out of social disadvantage and the reframing of equity as quality.

### **Reframing Australian schooling discourses: from equity to quality**

There has been a recent shift in the Australian schooling landscape from equity to quality (Mockler, 2014), which has had a significant impact on education policy discourses (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014). This reframing of equity has occurred as part of a broader collapsing of the public good into rationalised discourses of economic productivity (Savage, 2013) and as a basis for increasing economic growth and human capital (Gerrard, Savage & O'Connor, 2017). Instead of equity being understood as a focus on providing all young people with access to high quality, meaningful education within their particular community contexts, equity becomes the production of outputs, efficiencies, and accountabilities (Ball, 2006) within a quasi-market of schooling.

Within this equity-as-quality context, Loughland and Thompson (2016) describe the absolute belief of policy makers and others that "competition between individuals, schools,

and systems improves efficiency, and that educational equity is essentially a problem of teaching quality” (p. 112). Additionally, there has been a reframing through media and political discourses of dis/advantage as an effect of difference and diversity, which in turn removes structural and systemic inequalities from consideration (Clarke, 2012). As such, the problem of difference is one that education policy makers can address through an ever-increasing commitment to standardisation, including in curriculum and assessment practices.

An important policy solution for schooling has been the call for better measuring and tracking devices, such as standardised testing, so that inequality can be tracked and monitored by governments and education systems through targeted statistical means (Gorur, 2013). The mantra is that equity is achieved through achieving better quality, transparency and accountability (Kenway, 2013). Enter both localised and globalised systems of data production and consumption via standardised testing regimes, reporting and *policy borrowing* (Lingard, 2010), particularly for standardised testing and accountability structures from the United Kingdom and United States.

The Australian government introduced national assessments such as NAPLAN and reporting frameworks such as the My School website as levers for enacting policy change to address disadvantage (Gorur, 2013) through market-based emphases of competition and the assurance of choice and quality. However, as Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) warn, turning schooling into a quasi-market relies on ensuring that there is unequal access to educational opportunities. This raises questions about the nature of educational disadvantage and the possible configurations that might be able to respond to the complex challenges of a highly-segregated schooling system, such as that in Australia.

Furthermore, educational equity becomes rearticulated as a matter of individual choice and diversity through economised education policy discourses that seek to remove questions of social, economic, and educational context (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014) in order to

focus policy efforts on the performance of teachers and students (Sellar & Lingard, 2014). As Connell (2012) argues, this works to create a *zone of manufactured insecurity*, which must then be addressed through increased performance and competition between students, teachers, and schools. Test, report, repeat ad infinitum.

Yet this is a zero-sum gain.

Importantly, the more that social, cultural, and economic factors of individuals and groups are masked in discussions about equity and schooling, the more difficult it becomes to integrate these factors into policy debates about the nature of educational disadvantage and consider potential alternative solutions. Instead, what is required is a further reframing of equity, one that moves beyond economic rationalism, efficiency, productivity, and competition as the measures of schooling, to a more productive conceptualisation of equity.

### **National testing regimes and the bracketing out of disadvantage**

An increasing emphasis on standardised testing regimes informs educational policy imperatives, both locally and globally, with equity rearticulated through testing and reporting infrastructures (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014). Simultaneously, through mechanisms such as the *My School* website and ICSEA, policy makers, media and concerned parents are able to bracket out factors of social, economic and educational disadvantage (Sellar & Lingard, 2014) by unproblematically comparing 'similar' schools and their NAPLAN results through a user-friendly web interface. As such, complex contextual features including cultural and language diversity, poverty, disability, indigeneity and geolocation are easily removed from any consideration of how students, teachers and schools might be faring. At the same time, the data presented are further confounded by category issues on the NAPLAN tests. As Creagh (2016) argues, the formation of categories in NAPLAN, including gender, indigeneity,

language background, and geolocation, actually works to mask differing levels of advantage within categories.

Furthermore, the diversity of communities' particular educational challenges and needs is rendered invisible and policy-makers are no longer concerned with how uneven access and opportunities affect educational outcomes. Lingard, Sellar and Savage (2014) argue that contemporary educational equity discourses assume that society is both hierarchical and meritocratic. As such, shifting the weight of social responsibility back onto individuals produces an environment where underperforming students are to blame for their own lack of educational outcomes, and likewise so are their teachers and schools.

Since the United States government released the 1966 report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, there has been general agreement that student background accounts for a majority of the variation on academic attainment, where “differences between schools account for only a small fraction of differences in pupil achievement” (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 22), when socioeconomic factors have been accounted for. The precise measure of how much social, economic and cultural factors influence young people's success in school, versus how much variation can be attributed to in-school factors is much more difficult. For example, up to 14% of variability in test scores can be attributed to teaching (ASA, 2014), with the remaining variability due to system-level conditions; that is, factors beyond the control of the school. However, that has not discouraged various Australian governments from making policy on the assumption that addressing in-school factors will make *the* difference for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or even assuming that bracketing out socioeconomic context works to improve learning outcomes for students.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) developed ICSEA as measure of a school's average level of socio-educational advantage relative to other schools. The median ICSEA score is 1000, with a standard deviation of 100.

Most schools fall within the range of 500 and 1300 (see Figure 1). While a large band of schools fall roughly within a standard deviation either side of the median (900 – 1100), both ends of the spectrum actually represent extreme levels of relative dis/advantage.

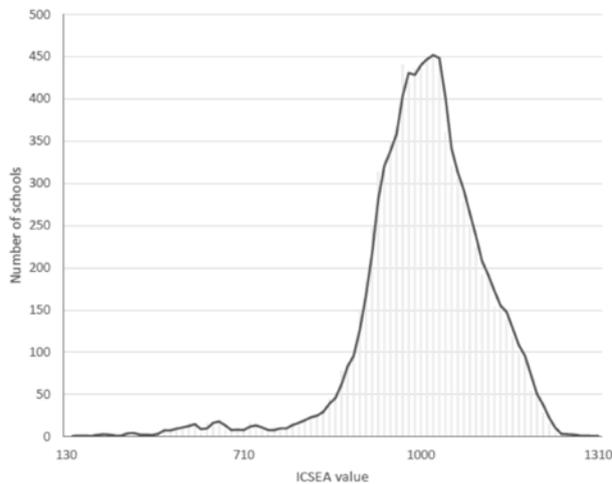


Figure 1: Distribution of 2015 ICSEA values

Source: [https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/Guide\\_to\\_understanding\\_ICSEA\\_values.pdf](https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/Guide_to_understanding_ICSEA_values.pdf)

One of the most concerning effects of ICSEA is the bracketing out of socioeconomic factors, in order to make them no longer relevant to policy-makers when making broad-level judgements about academic attainment, school and teacher quality. Rather than shining a light on systemic educational disadvantage, the comparison of statistically similar schools works to remove socioeconomic considerations from the debate as “once the equivalence of demographic profiles of schools was established using ICSEA, differences in socio-economic advantage would be controlled in the calculations” (Gorur, 2016, p. 32). Thus, it becomes acceptable to make judgements about disadvantaged School A against disadvantaged School B because the levels of disadvantage are held as being equal. This then creates a context for responsabilising schools and teachers through the focus on within-school differences, such as teacher effectiveness, quality of learning programs, and school leadership. Further, there is a perversity in bracketing out socioeconomic context when those very factors are considered to

be important indicators of educational outcomes (Sellar & Lingard, 2014). Why else would they be used in the calculation of ICSEA to begin with?

At best, ICSEA provides a brute measure of the relative levels of educational advantage of schools' student populations. Importantly, ICSEA is not a measure of individual students' levels of educational advantage, nor does it rate schools, staff or teaching programmes (ACARA, 2015b). It is claimed that ICSEA allows for "fair and meaningful comparisons between schools" (ACARA, 2015a, p. 1) that are similar, in terms of their statistical representations via the ICSEA model (ACARA, 2013). Interestingly, the construction of ICSEA enables the simultaneous acknowledgement of students' backgrounds and difference in advantage, and its removal from considerations of quality and equity.

At worst, using ICSEA to compare schools' NAPLAN results simply encourages governments to ignore entrenched poverty and multigenerational disadvantage in particularly vulnerable communities, instead constructing them as statistical factors to be taken out of the equation when making supposedly objective judgements about teachers, students and schools. Furthermore, it enables policy makers, educational leaders, and the media to ignore the social stratification of schooling when reporting on school and teaching quality. There is a very simple, and rather compelling, reason for this: it is far easier to address and commercialise interventions on teachers, students, school leadership, and resourcing, as well as making policy mandates around curriculum, assessment and reporting, than to attempt to address endemic social inequality, which exists beyond the school gates.

### **Making the relationship between disadvantage and school performance visible**

There is a persistent correlation between socio-educational advantage and aggregated school average performance on NAPLAN, with regression analyses provided in previous ICSEA technical reports demonstrating variance in school performance that can be accounted for by

ICSEA values. The mainstream media never report on this information and it is buried in the back pages of the *My School* technical reports. In 2015, the correlation between ICSEA and NAPLAN performance was 78% (Figure 2), while it was 80% in 2014 (Figure 3) and 81% in 2013 (Figure 4). While this trend suggests a slight decrease in correlation between ICSEA and NAPLAN, clearly the socioeconomic status of parents continues to be the main indicator of success on standardised testing, and *not* school systems, class sizes, teaching quality, school resources, or other school-based factors.

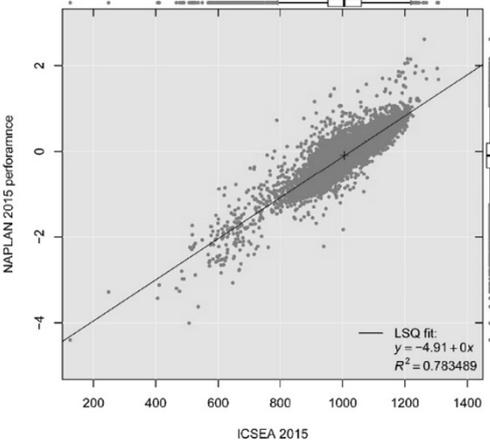


Figure 2: Correlation between 2015 NAPLAN school average and 2015 ICSEA value  
 Source: [https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA\\_2015\\_technical\\_report.pdf](https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA_2015_technical_report.pdf)

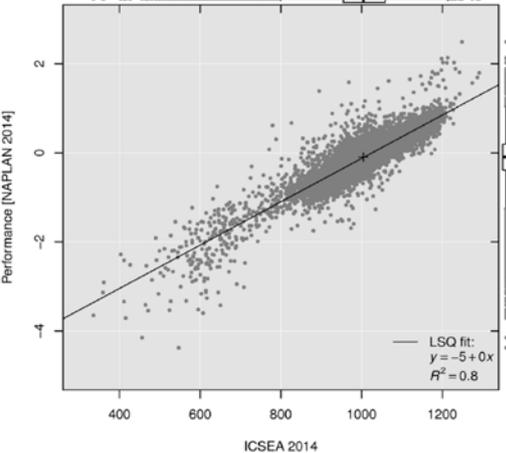


Figure 3: Correlation between 2014 NAPLAN school average and 2014 ICSEA value  
 Source: [https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA\\_2014\\_technical\\_report.pdf](https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA_2014_technical_report.pdf)

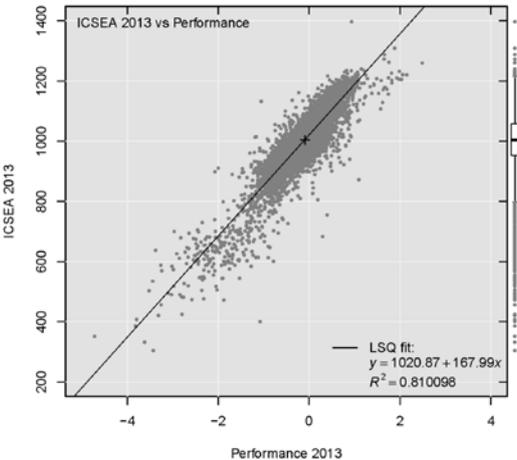


Figure 4: Correlation between 2013 NAPLAN school average and 2013 ICSEA value  
 Source: [https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA\\_2013\\_Generation\\_Report.pdf](https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ICSEA_2013_Generation_Report.pdf)

Importantly, the strong relationship between NAPLAN and ICSEA is driven by differences in social, economic, and educational factors of advantage, and not by the construction of ICSEA (Goss & Chisholm, 2016). These factors include students' geolocation, indigeneity, parental education and parental occupation. Additionally, there are multiple intersections of disadvantage for some students, which has a compounding effect, particularly for students who are Indigenous, have a disability, or who are living in care.

To demonstrate the clear link between factors taken into account in the construction of ICSEA and NAPLAN performance, the following graphs use data from the 2016 NAPLAN national report (ACARA, 2016). For illustrative purposes, the percentage of students at or above national minimum standard on the Year 9 2006 NAPLAN Writing Test data have been provided in this chapter as they are indicative of the spread of results across test domains and year levels. Figure 5 shows the results by geolocation and Indigeneity, Figure 6 by state and Indigeneity, Figure 7 by parental occupation, and Figure 8 by parental education. These particular factors were selected because they are the factors directly considered in the calculation of ICSEA and because they help to further demonstrate the persistent correlation between ICSEA and NAPLAN results.

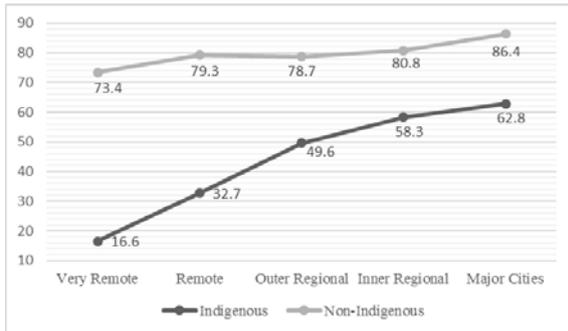


Figure 5: 2016 NAPLAN Year 9 Writing: percentage of students at or above national minimum standard by geolocation and Indigeneity

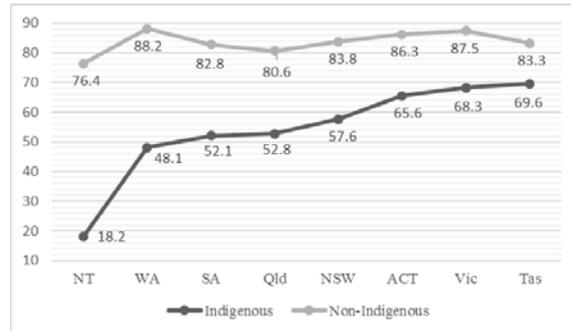


Figure 6: NAPLAN Year 9 Writing: percentage of students at or above national minimum standard by state and Indigeneity

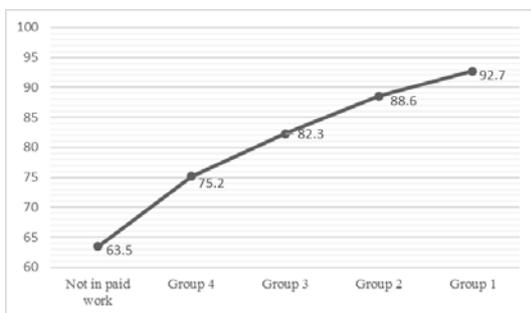


Figure 7: NAPLAN Year 9 Writing: percentage of students at or above national minimum standard by parental occupation

Group 1: Senior management and qualified professionals  
 Group 2: Other business managers and associate professionals  
 Group 3: Tradespeople, clerks, skilled office, sales and service staff  
 Group 4: Machine operators, hospitality staff, assistants, labourers  
 Not in paid work: Not in paid work in the previous 12 months

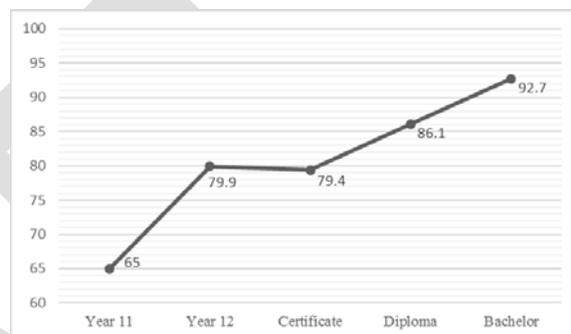


Figure 8: NAPLAN Year 9 Writing: percentage of students at or above national minimum standard by parental education

Immediately apparent in the data from the 2016 Year 9 NAPLAN Writing test is that there is a recognisable correlation between factors taken into account for ICSEA development and performance on NAPLAN. Clearly, geolocation, Indigeneity, parental occupation, and parental employment bear some relation to the relative average success on NAPLAN. For example, while students in very remote schools perform much lower than students in major cities, this is even more pronounced for Indigenous students (Figure 5). There are 71.3% of non-Indigenous people who live in major cities; with 34.8% of Indigenous people living in major cities and 13.7% in very remote locations (ABS, 2013).

Jurisdictions with the highest Indigenous populations as a proportion of the overall student population (NT, Qld, WA, SA) have a more pronounced gap between students at or above the national minimum standard (Figure 6). The differences in parental occupation (Figure 7) and parental education (Figure 8) also demonstrate relational gains: the higher the education level and occupation category, the higher the achievement on NAPLAN. Of course, these are overly-simplified categories, and taken alone do not offer a particularly nuanced picture of how disadvantage correlates with performance on standardised tests. What is important to note, is that these are the factors combined to construct ICSEA scores for schools.

Less immediate, but perhaps more important, is the cumulative effect of these factors on individual and groups of students. While the data provided by ACARA on *My School* do not allow cumulative comparisons, it is worth noting that each of these factors shared in this chapter are common in NAPLAN data reporting and ICSEA calculation. However, what is missing is the nuanced public discussion of what it means to address educational disadvantage in Australia, when the policy and media discourse focus so intently on improving teaching quality and school accountability. Educational disadvantage is a complex phenomenon and any proposed simple solution will not be able to address the wide range of different contexts.

Importantly, this is not a question of schooling sectors (government, Catholic, independent) and equity. There is substantial evidence demonstrating that government schools with above-average ICSEA scores (i.e. those with relatively high socio-educational advantage) perform as well, and in some cases better, than their non-government counterparts (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). Furthermore, with the rise of selective government schools across many metropolitan regions, there is an increasing emphasis on schools catering to the most advantaged, mirroring the practices of some of the more elite non-government schools. Instead of reducing the effect of family backgrounds on student education outcomes, it

appears that the trend is going in the opposite direction (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). The gap in educational outcomes is widening between disadvantaged schools and advantaged students, and the masking of disadvantage through mechanisms such as ICSEA simply works to exacerbate this problem.

### **Resisting the reframing of educational inequity**

At present, equity is “being transformed through the national and global reworking of education into a field of measurement and comparison” (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014, p. 711), which emphasises the notion of equity as meritocracy and quality within a homogenised education system. NAPLAN, *My School* and the misuse of ICSEA as a comparative tool is just one localised version, with other more global effects felt through things such as the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a high-stakes comparative testing regime that produces similar effects on a transnational level (Lingard, Sellar & Savage, 2014). The rhetoric of reducing the vast distance between non-Indigenous and Indigenous educational outcomes is a further example of the rearticulation of equity and education policy in Australia (Lingard, Creagh & Vass, 2012), where Indigenous students’ performance on NAPLAN becomes the sole proxy for educational success.

Reframing equity for social justice instead requires educators and policy makers to refocus their efforts on the relationship between the purposes of schooling and the lives of young people. A key aspect is to resist the bracketing out of impacts on students from “marginalised backgrounds whether characterised by social class, economic circumstances, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and/or physical ability” (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017, p. 13). A further effect of reframing equity as quality has been to increase the problem of the residualisation of some public schools. This is due in some part to schooling segregation, which drives educational outcomes (Lamb et al., 2015), where patterns of inequality become

entrenched in particular communities, while others enjoy enormous aggregated social, economic, and educational advantage. Similarly, Bonnor and Shepherd (2016) argue that equity requires addressing the effects of aggregating disadvantage in particular schools and communities.

Of course, schools alone are not able to determine educational outcomes (Karmel et al., 1973), given that they are one part of the complex social and economic fabric of communities. However, that has not prevented media and politicians from constantly decrying falling standards, failing schools and underperforming teachers as the most urgent problems to be solved by education policy. Added to this, there remains a persistent element in policy debates for schools to solve the larger issues of social and economic inequality and disadvantage (Gerrard, Savage & O'Connor, 2017), despite the impossibility of such a task.

Sellar and Lingard (2014) argue that the narrowing “definition of equity and debates about how to increase equity in schooling must be countered by reinvigorating attention to the impact of school and social contexts on educational opportunities and outcomes” (p. 4). Rather than collapsing social justice into questions of efficiency (Ball, 2006), where the focus is on quality, evaluation, leadership, and accountability, there is a clear need to reframe equity as something separate from efficiencies and competitive measurements (Gerrard, Savage & O'Connor, 2017). Arguments for school reform that equate improving equity measures through economic success, enterprise and the notion of a meritocracy (Ball, 2008) cannot deliver meaningful change for disadvantaged communities.

The use of ICSEA to bracket out social, economic and educational disadvantage from discussions of schooling outcomes is highly problematic. It provides the opportunity to let politicians, policy makers and commentators off the hook by masking the persistent inequalities present in contemporary schooling. It is too neat, too simple, and reduces the complexities of social structures to meaningless metrics of standardised outputs and

efficiencies. Instead, there needs to be a move to reframe the problem of equity in education to one that extends the analysis of schooling outcomes not just beyond the performance of students on standardised tests but also beyond the factors that lie within the influence of schools. A heterogeneous treatment would make these factors more visible in education policy and public discourses. Continuing to mask educational disadvantage in order to make clean comparisons of school performance is an inappropriate strategy for addressing deep social division. Instead, we need to understand the complex issues of inequality that present themselves in multiple forms, in order to begin to address the compounding effects of disadvantage. Removing these from any discussion of schooling is at worst, deceptive malpractice, and at best, dishonest.

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