

THE CONVERSATION

1 October 2014, 5.41am AEST

Education is a public good, not a private commodity

AUTHOR



Stewart Riddle

Lecturer in Literacies
Education at University of
Southern Queensland



"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Educator
Derek Bok. Shutterstock

We are at an important juncture for education in Australia. With the government's higher education reform agenda well underway and its school funding stasis, teacher education and Australian curriculum reviews, now is the time to be asking: what is education actually for and who does it benefit?

Education tends to be argued about in terms of weighing up public and private benefit. At one end, you have the notion of education as a public good, where the benefits spread across society in terms of employment, economic prosperity, health and social cohesion. At the other end, you have education as a commodity, which fits into a user-pays system.

Who benefits from education?

The neoliberal position on education is that it is a private benefit, measured in terms of economic and social attainment. In other words: study hard, get a good job and you will reap the rewards of your individual efforts.

A more nuanced position would consider the social benefits of education, which are well documented. Increasing literacy rates, for example, leads to improved health outcomes, broader participation in democratic processes, reduced crime and poverty rates, environmental sustainability and social equality.

In a recent report, UNESCO outlined how education performs much more than an economic function, by enabling:

individuals, especially women, to live and aspire to healthy, meaningful, creative and resilient lives. It strengthens their voices in community, national and global affairs. It opens up new work opportunities and sources of social mobility.

Earlier this month, the OECD released its **Education at a Glance** report, which emphasised the need for equity in education, where all students have the same opportunities for educational success. This was also the underlying message of the Gonski funding review, which has been used as a political football ever since.

It has been a very busy year for education politics. Funding and equity continue to feature in media reports and need to be understood in terms of the current policy agenda.

Private vs public schooling and the mantra of choice

The argument goes something like this: give parents choice over schools and competition will do the rest. This positions parents and their children as consumers, while schools, universities and education itself become commodities.

Yet there are some significant problems with a user-pays approach to education, whether we are talking schools or universities.

The PISA in Focus report shows that the mantra of “choice” is exacerbating inequality in schooling. The obsession with market-based thinking in education can work against the very narrative of improving educational opportunities. This is, of course, something that our ministers of education would not wish to hear, because the whole push is to go down this path in the name of school improvement.

The question could be asked: after all the focus on **competition** and choice over the past couple of decades, why does Australia’s performance on international comparisons continue to slide, when we have one of the highest rates of children in **private schooling** in the OECD?

There is little **long-term** benefit from private schooling, and studies show once at university public school graduates **perform better**. So why do we continue to denigrate and devalue public schooling in this country?

This narrative has been stoked by the media and politicians claiming that schools and universities need to be “fixed” and that market-based notions of competition and choice are the solution. One example is in Christopher Pyne’s **hyperbolic claims** that without deregulation, Australian universities will slide into mediocrity.

Making the public private in the name of improvement

There are serious concerns about the encroachment of corporations into education, which has been playing out on the global stage. The privatisation movement globally has some worrying implications for education as a public good.

Swedish Free Schools have been around since the early 1990s, yet show limited educational gains for students.

Instead, the focus becomes one of profit over student learning. However, there is little evidence that “profit-making would meet demand for good school places; be commercially viable; create better choice; increase competition; or raise standards”.

In the UK, these are called Free Schools, whereas in the USA they are Charter Schools. In Chile, there is a push back against for-profit education, which has had disastrous effects for public education.

Western Australia has been the forerunner for the privatisation of public schools in Australia, with its Independent Public Schools reform. Reports about its efficacy have been mixed, yet despite there being very little evidence that the reforms will have any impact on student performance, this is the path that we seem to be intent on heading down.

The federal government have announced a \$70 million package to support the rollout of Independent Public Schools across Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory. This push has been labelled “privatisation by stealth”.

Equity and social justice in education

More than 20 years ago, when describing the importance of social justice and equity in education, Raewyn Connell commented:

An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage.

We have known the importance of these notions for a long time, yet inequality is a persistent feature of education in Australia, which has been covered extensively [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Cut to 2014, and Gonski co-panellist Ken Boston claims that we have the most socially segregated education system in the Western world.

It seems more important than ever to consider the importance of providing an education system that is built upon principles of equity and social justice, in order to give all kids the very best opportunities we can.

Funding is at the heart of a more equitable system. One way of working towards this is to build the very best public schooling system that we possibly can: first, by investing in a needs-based funding model such as the one proposed by the Gonski review.

A cornerstone of this model would work to address the Gonski review’s basic tenet, that “all students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances”.

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Sign up to our free daily newsletter

Email address

Your email address 

Australia

Subscribe

Job Board Find career opportunities from intelligent institutions.