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**October.26.2014**

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# URGENT: we need to act on equity in Australian schools now

**By Stewart Riddle**

There is an equity problem in Australia and we urgently need to talk about it.

Christopher Pyne couldn't be more wrong when he told us recently "schools have all the money they need to get the outcomes for our students." Worse, he claimed schools are "awash" with extra funds from the Commonwealth and any attempt to discuss funding was not only "an old argument", but "asinine".

I believe to **not** talk about it would be asinine.

If nothing else, Pyne has been consistent. On ABC's Lateline on 16 July, 2012, he declared, "There isn't actually an issue in Australian schools that revolves around equity", and then more than a year later on the same show on 26 November 2013, said, "I don't believe there is an equity problem in Australia."

In his opening remarks to the 2014 ACER Conference on 4 August, Mr Pyne said that, "research on equity in education highlights the need for policies addressing underachievement to focus on quality rather than socio-economic status or disadvantage itself."

No doubt, Pyne has worked very hard to ensure that the focus is taken off equity, and its most visible lever: school funding. This has been achieved through the policy movement of reframing equity as an issue of quality. The branding of the

coalition government's schools policy as "Students First" and the following four priority areas is no accident: teacher quality; school autonomy; engaging parents in education; and strengthening the curriculum.

To these ends, in 2014 we have seen a visible review of the national curriculum, the establishment of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), support for Independent Public Schools, and a much-quieter invite-only review of low SES-loadings.

Yet one of the biggest factors is equity of access to resources and opportunities. The Productivity Commission in 2012 found the following:

"Educational disadvantage is more likely to be experienced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students in rural and remote locations, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities, learning difficulties or other special needs. Many, especially Indigenous students, face multiple sources of disadvantage."

There is a well-documented link between disadvantage and educational performance, such as the work produced by the OECD around PISA testing. In Australia, this is demonstrated in a difference of approximately two-and-a-half years between students who are living in the lowest socio-economic quartile and those in the top. Similar gaps exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, as well as those living in remote parts of the country.

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) released the *Poverty in Australia Report 2014* on 12 October. With over 600,000 children (17.7% of all children in Australia) living below the poverty line, the effect on education simply cannot be brushed aside.

**Children living in poverty, with unemployed parents, have the lowest mean scores on NAPLAN. Those whose parents have the highest income levels, score highest on the national literacy and numeracy tests.**

This is supported by a recent report by the ABS that drew on Census and NAPLAN results. The report showed that Tasmanian students from high-SES households performed much better than students whose parents were poorer.

Such disparities are certainly not unique to Australia. In the UK, research shows social class to be the strongest indicator of educational advantage, while research from the USA suggests a gap of nearly four years' schooling exists between rich and poor students.

A recent USA study found that poverty is the strongest factor in whether high school students go onto tertiary study. Given the government's plans to head down a USA-style path of deregulation, this should be of some concern.

The disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged students is deepening.

Gonski co-panellist, Ken Boston, is unequivocal when he claimed at a conference in May 2014, that "we have the most socially segregated education system in the western world".

In her recent book, *Class Act*, Maxine McKew taps into the equity issue as part of a narrative of school improvement, through various case studies and interviews with education experts. She makes an unequivocal argument that we need to have a funding model that addresses the clear divide between advantaged and disadvantaged schools. Speaking recently to *The Age*, McKew made the claim that ignoring the Gonski review will be "an act of monumental stupidity."

Susanne Gannon and Wayne Sawyer, editors of recent book, *Contemporary Issues of Equity in Education*, make the claim that schooling is one of the "great social justice projects". In their chapter, Bob Lingard and Sam Sellar describe the reframing of the issue social justice and equity as one of quality. They expertly deconstruct the policy moves and levers that facilitate this reframing.

We need to reframe the discussion from one that conflates teacher quality with quality teaching back to one that focuses on social justice.

The notion of curricular justice in schooling is not new, and as Raewyn Connell explained in her 1993 book, *Schools and Social Justice*, is inherently invested in reconstructing mainstream education "to embody the interests of the least advantaged".

At its most basic, curricular justice is concerned with equity of access and engagement in formal schooling, where the least advantaged are provided with opportunities to succeed. This is part of a bigger redistributive justice movement in education that examines who benefits from schooling and who is excluded from these opportunities.

Henry Giroux claims that curricular justice involves "forms of teaching that are inclusive, caring, respectful, economically equitable, and whose aim, in part, is to undermine those repressive modes of education that produce social hierarchies and legitimate inequality."

We need different forms of curricular justice that are contextually-appropriate and relevant to the lives of young people. What we do not need are more blame-games and obfuscation.

We need a sensible, redistributive model of equity in school funding. This was the promise of the Gonski model. What we do not need are further distractions.



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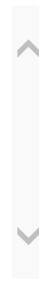
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