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Let's stop talking about school choice and reconfigure what we are doing in Australia

By Stewart Riddle and David Cleaver

In a perfect world, public schooling would be able to honour its mission to provide access to high quality education for all young people, regardless of their backgrounds, interests, and capacities.

However, the world we live in is far from perfect.

Idea of collective good is being lost

Market-based policy decisions by governments of various persuasions over the past thirty years in Australia have, with breathtaking success, undermined the emphasis on the collective good of the community. Education, and schooling in

particular, are at the centre of the move to privatise the public, whether through the growth of private schooling or the encroachment of corporate interests in public schools.

These days we worry more about [individual responsibility](#) and private gain than we do about working together towards what is best for our community as a whole.

Furthermore, the question of [social justice](#) and [equity in education](#) becomes reframed as an individual matter, where choice, competition and decentralisation are the mechanisms for delivering equal opportunity and high quality educational outcomes for students.

In his book, *Hatred of Democracy* French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, describes how contemporary society promotes mass individualism in the self-interested pursuit of limitless growth. In other words, Capitalism sets up citizens to be consumers, whether that's of media, electronic goods, or education.

Schooling has morphed into a product to be consumed

We argue that mass individualism should not be the measure of collective social good, whether we are talking education or otherwise. The social, and in fact the very nature of most global challenges and condition mean that we need a commitment to the public good more than ever before. Schooling needs to be reclaimed as a space for reimagining democracy and civic virtue.

Of course, there is also an uncomfortable tension with the notion of democracy in the classroom, given that schools by their very design are undemocratic social institutions. By this, we mean that schools are places where young people learn to regulate and control their behaviours, to follow rules and engage in a multitude of compliances to authority. These effects, we argue, are enhanced in a climate where performance on standardised tests becomes the measure of the quality of learning and teaching that takes place in schools.

Much of the media cycle is given to a narrative of educational achievement and standards in decline. The policy response, especially from conservative think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies, is to call for greater levels of privatisation, competition and choice in the education market.

Capacity to pay is not 'choice'

The well-worn argument is that parents should be free to make choices about the best school to send their children to. Schools would then improve their educational outcomes to meet the demands of the market and their 'consumers'.

This fits with Rancière's notion of massified individualism – by each student improving their own individual educational outcomes, overall 'quality' is increased.

Yet for families living in poverty or in communities of high levels of disadvantage, with unemployment, health and other welfare concerns, there is simply no capacity to choose.

Often when parents are making choices about schooling, they are actually choosing to buy into advantage, rather than specifically seeking a school that best suits the needs of their child. This is well-exemplified in the prestige of highly selective public schools in inner-city locations throughout the country, who are increasingly relying on NAPLAN scores and entrance exams to select the best and brightest students.

One clear effect of buying into advantage is the increasing segregation of Australian schooling. The work of Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd demonstrates the growing divide, not between public and private schools, but between schools in areas of high socioeconomic advantage, and those in low SES communities.

Let's look at reconstructing schooling instead

Perhaps we should focus less on the notion of choice of schools and more about reconstructing schooling itself, so that the local public school is the best option for young people to have a meaningful, connected and authentic educational experience. In much the same way that a commitment to a high quality public health system and universal medical coverage promotes excellent health outcomes across the entire community, so does a commitment to a high quality public education system.

We are concerned with the delegitimising effects of schooling-as-usual, without regard for the particular lives and knowledge of young people themselves. Simply enacting mandated curriculum, even ones claimed to contain powerful knowledge, finding ways to better test learning, or ensuring that there is greater school choice available, does not address the systemic and social disadvantage that many young people face.

We argue that there is a clear need to reconfigure schooling. We suggest that this might take the form of schooling that better connects with the lives of young people in substantial and sustained ways. This will mean moving beyond standardised, 'one size fits all' approaches and where classrooms model democratic principles of social justice and more meaningful knowledge transfer, acquisition, and production.

Given the enormous complexities and challenges of our time, we owe it to young people of all persuasions, to have the very best chance of a meaningful education that can be provided.

Business as usual simply won't work.



Stewart Riddle is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood at the University of Southern Queensland. His research interests include social justice and equity in education, music-based research practices and research methodologies. He also plays bass in a band called Drawn from Bees.



David Cleaver is a lecturer in the School of Linguistics, Adult and Specialist Education at the University of Southern Queensland

*This post has been adapted from the [forthcoming book](#), *Alternative schooling, social justice and marginalised students: teaching and learning in an alternative music school*.*

This is the first piece in a series on schooling and democracy in the lead up to the [Re-imagining Education for Democracy Summit](#), being held at USQ Springfield 13-15 November. For more details about the summit

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One thought on "Let's stop talking about school choice and reconfigure what we are doing in Australia"



Dr Jennie Duke

August 23, 2017 at 6:55 am

Let's do it! Maybe a Friere approach! Pedagogy of hope! CST Common Good. Great commentary. Thank you.

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