

Public Education as an Education Commons

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Introduction: recasting the public/private debate

Proposition 7 of *New Learning: A Charter for Australian Education* (ACDE, 2001) boldly asserts that in the new century ‘the place of the “public” and the “private” in (school) education will be redefined’ (p. 121). The *Charter* builds the case for this assertion on the basis of the growing disparity of resources within and between public and private schools, and the conviction that such inequalities do not well serve the need for all Australians to develop the range of ‘capacities created by new learning’ (p. 123). The current drift to private schools, the decline in investment in public education, and the tendency to reform public education by forcing on it private enterprise models of organisation and management, are all identified as contributing factors. The section concludes by proposing two areas for urgent action: (1) building a vibrant public education system and (2) redefining the role of non-government schools. In relation to the redefinition of non-government schools, the *Charter* seeks to hold in balance the tension between broad public interest and the rights of individuals and sectional groups to choose educational options that match their needs and aspirations. It argues however that non-government schools:

...need to be held accountable... for government funding and expected to deliver on values of diversity and inclusivity that mark public schooling. In a democracy, communities do have the right to design options which fit their needs and aspirations.... (but) the operative concepts (should be) not around market choice, but around community autonomy, responsibility, self-governance and diversity....(W)ith an approach to learning which stresses collaboration over competition, it may be possible to mix and match resources and even programs between public and community-based schools (ACDE, 2001, p. 124).

This is an interesting challenge but the *Charter* does not suggest how such an agenda might be advanced, particularly at a time when the current federal government is seeking to move in the opposite direction by privileging education markets and individual choice at the expense of the public purposes of education. In such an environment it appears more likely that it will be public education that is redefined, with private education being used as the reference point. If the aspiration for a vibrant public education system is framed by the market place rather than by and through collective democratic processes, it will result in a watery version of public education where community purposes are swamped by individual interests. This is not to

contest the aspirations of the ACDE *Charter*, but to suggest that their realization demands the development of strategies that recognize and directly respond to the factors that are shaping contemporary education policy.

This paper is based on a commitment to the public and democratic purposes of education, but it argues that in the current environment the pursuit of these purposes calls for a reassessment of established arguments. The dominant defence of public education has tended to focus on the question of funding. This has been an understandable and important response in a policy climate where the share of public funds going to private schools is increasing. But it should not be the sole response. Always making funding the starting point limits the parameters of the public/private debate and stifles new ways of thinking about it. In the face of a neo-liberal policy regime, the odds against public schools are overwhelming. As increasing sums of public money are channelled into the private sector, and as the drift from public to private schools continues (ABS a & b, 2002), it is clear that those committed to public education need to rethink established strategies.

In this paper I will argue that one way to move beyond the confines of the established parameters of the debate is to shift from a focus on education **systems** to a focus on the concept of the **publicness** of education. It is primarily a speculative piece, the aim of which is to suggest some possibilities rather than pin down specific policy approaches. In particular, it explores ways to break down the binary between the public good and individual choice.¹ I will commence this task by describing the trajectory of contemporary education policy and the ways in which this is shaping public education.

¹ Many of the arguments in this paper have emerged from long and lively conversations with my colleague Pat Thomson. We are currently expanding these ideas in two forthcoming edited volumes: *Rethinking Public Education: Towards a public curriculum* (Reid & Thomson, 2003); and *Rethinking Public Education: Beyond the market* (Thomson and Reid, forthcoming).

The failure of contemporary education policy

There have been a number of analyses of the form and effects of education policy in relation to government schools since the election of the conservative Liberal/National Party coalition in 1996 (eg., Reid, 1998). In this section I want to focus on how this policy trajectory is beginning to change the traditional understanding of public education as a collective common good to one that focuses on the individual, now constructed not as a citizen but as a consumer. In this new policy environment, education is understood as a commodity that confers benefits (mostly economic) upon individuals.

Having moved from a largely social to a largely individual rationale for education, the logic of operating in an education market where individual consumers can make individual choices is compelling. And associated with this of course comes all the machinery of the market, including the necessity to develop brand images and to sell these through public relations exercises. At the centre of the new discourse lies the concept of choice, with its emphasis on the right of parents to choose the educational environment that best suits the needs of their child, whether the school of their choice is in the government or non-government sector. According to the official government line, choice leads to diversity that in turn ‘...allows freedom of expression, accommodates diverse beliefs and values, stimulates innovation and promotes greater accountability for schooling outcomes to parents and to the wider Australian community’ (DEETYA, 1997, p. 2, quoted in Ethell & Dempster, 2000, p. 39).

It is important to note that the rationale for choice is couched in the democratic rhetoric of rights, freedoms and diversity. On the surface it is difficult to contest: after all, who can oppose people having choices in a democracy? And yet it is a distorted view of democracy that is being proposed. First, choice is constrained by personal circumstances. There are many private schools that are not in reality available to a large percentage of the population because they are far too expensive; and there are a number of schools that are available only to those of a particular ethnicity or religion. In effect, choice is available to some, not all. Second, choice is seen as serving individual rather than collective community goals. Once individual choice becomes the dominant motif for education, the public purposes of education become a second order consideration.

Does this abandonment of the collective or public in favour of individual choice matter? In my view it is one of the most fundamental issues facing this country because of its potential impact on Australian democracy. To privilege choice of schools on the basis of personal interest is to diminish the important social purposes of education in creating citizens for a democracy. Democracy needs nurturing, and schools are one of the few focal points in our society for the sustenance of democratic discourses. This role cannot be limited to encouraging young people to learn *about* the institutions of democracy through the school curriculum. It also involves learning to practise democracy. Schools are places where young people from different backgrounds and experiences can learn democratic habits and capacities of liberal citizenship, including the habit of civility and the capacity for public reasonableness.

The tragic events of the past two years surely underline the critical importance of an education that develops democratic capacities. In the end, the threat of terrorism and the growth of fundamentalism, introverted localism and racism can only be met by societies that comprise a citizenry with capacities to think beyond the confines of their own experiences, backgrounds and cultures. From a democratic perspective then, the question becomes one of how to organize the education of our children in order to promote democratic capacities. This is a question of public purpose, not individual choice, but the one need not preclude the other.

The traditional democratic argument for public schooling is a powerful one. It goes like this: what is learned in schools is not only a function of the formal curriculum, it is also learned through the ways in which schools structure learning environments and experiences. It is less likely that democratic sensibilities will be developed in places like private schools that have been deliberately structured to foster particular world views. Kymlicka (2001) makes this point in relation to schools that are formed around religious views:

*...common schools teach public reasonableness not only by telling students that there are a plurality of religious views in the world, and that reasonable people disagree on the merits of these views. They also create social circumstances whereby students can see the reasonableness of these disagreements. It is not enough to simply tell students that the majority of the people in the world do not share their religion. So long as one is surrounded by people who share one's faith, one may still succumb to the temptation to think that everyone who rejects one's religion is somehow illogical or depraved. To learn public reasonableness, **students must come to know and understand people who are reasonable and decent and humane, but who do not share their religion.** Only in this way can students learn how personal faith differs from public reasonableness, and where to draw that line. This sort of learning requires the presence within a classroom of people with varying ethnocultural and religious backgrounds (p. 304, my emphasis).*

From this perspective, it is argued, a democratic society needs to do all in its power to ensure that its schools comprise diverse student populations. Schools that are formed through an inclusive enrolment policy (all public schools) are more likely to contain a diverse student community than those that base their enrolment policy on some form of exclusion (most private schools), whether through wealth (extent of fees), religion or ethnicity (e.g., Reid, 2000). For these reasons, public school proponents have been concerned about the 'residualising' effects on public education of a policy of choice (e.g., Reid, 1998).

Now, it is important to distinguish between the philosophical premise of this argument - that an important public purpose of schools is to develop democratic capabilities – and the strategic question of how this is best achieved, through for example diversity of student populations. The latter is an empirical question. It is this distinction that may offer a way to disturb the binary of public purpose versus individual choice. I will argue that it is a mistake to assume that pursuing collective public purposes of education means rejecting the concept of choice.

The question is how choice is understood and how a balance can be struck to ease the tension between the individual freedom to choose and the pursuit of what is considered to be in the broad public interest. This demands a different reference point for choice. Rather than being based solely on the individual's right to choose for individual purposes, individual choice should be promoted within a discourse of the public and democratic purposes of education. If this argument is to advance there is a need to rethink the discourses of public education.

Rethinking public education

As the ACDE *Charter* (2001) observes, the challenge for the new century is to develop public policies that advance public as well as individual interests, and that promote and celebrate diversity while developing cohesion and social solidarity. The education policies that are developed will go a long way to determining how successful our society will be in achieving that goal. It should be clear by now that I do not believe that contemporary education policy is able to meet that challenge. Indeed, I think that the use of the education market and individual choice to drive social policy is counterproductive to creating the sort of society that can meet the demands of globalisation and diversity in socially just ways.

However, I also think that the current defences of public education – many of them shaped in the 20th century to meet the demands of other contexts and times – are inadequate as a response to neoliberalism and are unlikely to shape public schooling in the directions needed in a globalising world. In the first place, the dominant focus of the public education lobby (including myself) has been on the issue of funding. While there are a number of rhetorical positions on the funding issue (Thomson & Reid, 2003), they have in common a set of assumptions about public education as a public good and as a nation-building institution, including its role as a foundation of Australian democracy, an arena for social cohesion and an avenue for social mobility.

Pat Thomson and I argue that these familiar defences are no longer adequate. In particular they:

- are usually based on a romantic vision of a free public education system that never was;
- promote an idealised version of democracy that fails to come to terms with questions of pluralised and multiple identities;
- fail to recognise that variations in wealth and resources of schools are as apparent within the public system as between public and private schools;
- do not appreciate that it is not only the white middle class who are choosers in the education market: there are increasing numbers of diverse families placing their children in private schools; and
- focus primarily on funding formulae and sectors of schooling while neglecting fundamental curriculum questions about the nature of knowledge in a multicultural society, and how the dominant competitive academic curriculum continues to reproduce patterns of inequality and privilege (Thomson and Reid, 2003)

In my view, one way to move the debate beyond the prevailing orthodoxies and the dominant focus they place on the issue of funding is to open up for examination the taken-for-granted assumptions upon which the debate has been based. The key one of these is the publicness of public education, and concepts associated with it such as the common or public good. These old conceptual friends have been at the core of the defence of public education for the past century, frequently expressed but rarely explored. Do they still have purchase in the

21st century? What do they mean in a globalising world? My intention for the rest of this paper is to begin to interrogate some of the concepts central to the case for public education to see whether this might suggest some different ways forward.

Public education as a public good

The concepts of the common good and the public good are invariably invoked in the defence of public services or resources. As terms they are used interchangeably and I will treat them in the same way. Public goods must meet at least two criteria. The first is that the intent and outcome of a publicly provided service or resource contributes to the well being or common good of all in a society. The second is that the benefits of public goods have strong qualities of publicness. In particular, a public good is nonrivalrous in consumption (its use by one citizen does not detract from its benefits for other citizens), and nonexclusionary (it is available to all under the same terms and conditions).

Since the development of public education systems in the various Australian colonies in the 1870s, public schooling has come to be accepted as a public good, available to all (ie nonexclusionary and nonrivalrous). The public benefits of providing public education include the development of capabilities that enable people to participate in democratic life as citizens and economic life as workers, and that provide a number of the cohesive aspects of any society, such as facility with a common language.² Of course, within a broadly agreed understanding that an educated populace is of benefit to a society, debates continue about the purpose, emphasis and form of public education. In general terms these debates are arbitrated through the institutionalised democratic forums of state and federal Parliaments. For example, it is the concept of the public good that provides the major justification for making schooling compulsory (the state is not willing to leave the formal education of the young to parents) and for the implementation of that principle through setting the age of compulsion. As a public good, public schooling confers private as well as public benefits. For example, while public education provides skilled workers for the economy and thus for the common good, the same job skills also confer private benefits – higher incomes, job status, a capacity to enjoy leisure activities and so on.

In the 20th century the concepts of common good and public good provided an important philosophical foundation for the proponents of public education, and I believe that the spirit of these concepts should continue to pervade education policy in the new century. However, I think that they are in need of some renovation. The threat to public education in the contemporary environment is such that there needs to be a reassessment of the discourses and assumptions marshalled in its defence and used to develop education policy. In short I believe that there is an urgent need to reconceptualise the concepts associated with the publicness of public education.

² I recognise of course that public schools have contributed to the reproduction of educational and social inequalities (see for example, Teese, 2000). But my argument in this paper is that since it is public schools that have public purposes, they remain the best hope for the achievement of a more socially just schooling system.

The problem with a concept like the public good is that it may no longer be appropriate for a society that is characterised by diversity, where people have multiple identities. In such a society, to what extent is it possible to talk of THE public good? As Carlson (1996) argues, there is a danger that the concept will function as a totalising and normalising construct where the community is understood as a unified whole that speaks with one consensual voice and represents one set of interests, and where all conduct is judged against some pre-determined standard.

It should be clear from what I have written so far that this observation does not mean that I am making a case for the individuated and unfettered choice regime that is the hallmark of current government policy. Far from it – I am looking for ways to be able to resist these policy directions. But I think that the concept of the public good needs to be amended to encompass the diversity that is so central to a pluralist democracy. When supporters of public education object to choice on the grounds that basing policy on individual interest militates against the public good, they appear to be opposing choice and diversity. This plays into the hands of those who want to emphasise individual choice. And yet the concept of choice does not have to be an individualistic one: there are different, more powerful and more democratic meanings available.

In a democracy individuals also make choices as part of a wider community and these relate to the collective good of their society. Education has a key role to play in developing the sorts of democratic capacities that enable people to become involved in the process of making collective choices about the future directions of their society. But in late modernity this means more than seeking a singular consensus. It requires some new ways of thinking about democracy and education will be central to this process. As Saltman (2000) argues:

*'Education needs to be understood as part of a larger commitment to rethinking democracy in light of what historical change has revealed about it, namely that modern democracy is characterized by radical indeterminacy, a history and politics without guarantees. A radical democratic theory of choice must include recognition of the inevitability of social antagonism. **Such a theory does not strive toward a singular common good defined in the liberal tradition. Rather choice would involve the possibility of individuals and groups drawing on different traditions. Yet these traditions would be linked to a common political identity defined by radically democratic principles.**'* (p. 49, my emphasis)

Privileging a collective notion of choice will result in a very different educational policy trajectory than privileging a notion of choice based on individual decision making in an education market place. However the concept of the public good will need to be expanded if it is to accommodate the tension between individual and group choice, the shared political principles that order the process within which choices are made, and the 'sense of shared identity (that) helps sustain the relationships of trust and solidarity needed for citizens to accept

the results of democratic decisions, and the obligations of liberal justice' (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 311).

A second problem with the ways in which the concept of the public good has been employed is that its potential meanings have been narrowed by its historical use. In Australia, public schooling has been equated with public education systems. That is, the emphasis has been and is on an administrative unit (the system) rather than on the meaning of public. This creates two potential problems. First, for the past forty years private schools in Australia have received public funds but have been free of the expectations that accompany the concept of the public good. This has meant that the funding criteria for private schools have tended to focus on administrative questions rather than on substantive questions about the public good. For example, would it be possible for private schools to reject any student if the criterion of public good was being used as the basis for funding? Second, in the absence of debate about the 'publicness' of public education it has been all too easy to simply assert that public schooling advances the public good without grounding this concept in any more than generalities. This has exposed public schools to the ravages of neo-liberal policy regimes. For example, it does not take much imagination to forecast that some of the wilder schemes for self managing schools in some states could result in state schools competing against one another for custom, imposing fees and being exclusionary in their enrolment procedures. Would these schools still be operating in and for the public good?

That is, in the absence of some agreed understandings about what constitutes the public good, the concept has been emptied of meaning. It does not assist in the making of judgments about possible future directions. We have no reference points beyond membership of a system to define the 'publicness' of public education. This is another reason that the discourse of public education is in need of some renovation.

Finally, I wonder whether the concept of the public good has become a totalising discourse that obscures some of the important ways in which the educational landscape has changed in the past 40 years. Thus, all 'private' schools are now in receipt of government funds, many of them getting up to 80% of their total incomes from this source. Private schools are in fact publicly subsidised schools, that maintain the rhetoric of being private institutions. The illusion of being private enables them to continue to argue, at the same time, for minimal government regulation even while they ask for more government funds!

The absence of debate about the meaning and purposes of the 'publicness' of public education has given legitimacy to a new discourse, one that Pat Thomson and I have labelled the 'no-difference' story (Reid & Thomson, 2001). According to this line of argument, since the current extent of state aid effectively dissolves the differences between public and private schools, all schools should be funded as though they are the same. This stance is reinforced by the centrality of the concept of choice to contemporary educational policy. It is argued that healthy competition between the sectors will lead ultimately to a more diverse and better quality education system. The 'no difference' advocates maintain that the agitation for more money for public schools is simply maintaining an outmoded division (e.g., Angus, 1996).

Radical forms of the ‘no difference’ story are represented in proposals for deregulation and voucher systems (Caldwell & Roskam, 2002). By ignoring what constitutes publicness, such a proposal glosses over the fact that education is a major public policy lever which is only effective because there is a substantive public education system through which not only educational changes but also broader social outcomes can be effected. The idea of the public is absent from the no-difference story: individualism triumphs again.

I reiterate that I want to maintain the spirit of the discourses that historically have been marshalled by advocates of public education. My point is that some of these discourses are in need of renovation if they are to advance the case for public education. In particular I believe that there needs to be a return to the idea of the public, and a focus on asking what it means in the 21st century.

A new discourse for public education?: an education commons

If, as I have argued, the old defences of public education are no longer adequate in the face of neoliberal education policy, what are the strategic options for proponents of public education? Can new strategies be developed that do not reify individuation and choice, and yet that go beyond normalising discourses? In my view there is a need to develop new ways of thinking about the public and its relationship to public schooling. I propose that the concept of the education commons³ might be one way to conceptualise the issue in a different way.

The commons is a spatial metaphor for community resources that are held in common and are able to be used or enjoyed equally by anyone in the community without the need to obtain the permission of anyone else. Most resources held within the commons are free, but where fees apply to their use, these are neutrally and consistently applied (Lessig, 2001). Buck (1998) describes commons as ‘resource domains in which common pool resources are found’ (p. 5). Usually the term is applied to natural phenomena. Thus fish are a natural resource that are found in an ocean resource domain. The key is that no single individual exercises the core of a property right – that is, the exclusive right to determine whether the resource is made available to others – with respect to these domains and the resources within them. It is a community resource and all users are subject to the same rules of use. What determines the commons is the character of the resource and how it relates to the community: ‘In theory any resource might be held in common. But in practice the question a society must ask is which resources should be, and for these resources, how?’ (Lessig, p. 21).

I think that the concept of the commons can be applied to social resources like education, and in particular that it might be of use in the contemporary public/private debate. In practical terms it would be possible to see education as a public resource domain (the commons) that contains a range of public education resources - schools, Universities, community learning facilities and so on – that are commons resources. As with the concepts of the public and common good, resources in the education commons would be non exclusionary and ‘rights’ to these resources would apply equally to all. Preserving and enhancing the health of the education commons would be the same as caring for the environmental commons and a number of the ideas for environmental sustainability could be applied to it.

How is this different from traditional understandings of public education? The commons metaphor is largely a spatial idea that moves away from metaphors that construct education as a commodity (public good). It suggests a space where there is room to move and yet which is bounded. From the perspective of the commons, the public good might be conceived in terms of limits of tolerance, where a set of limits are established that allow for variation within a range but exclude outside that range. It is the common good that maintains these limits (Haynes, 2002). These limits, or public principles, would determine whether or not particular education resources are deemed to be a part of the education commons and thus in receipt of

³ I would like to thank Bruce Haynes for alerting me to the literature on the commons, and for his comments on aspects of this paper.

public funds. Given that the education commons is a public benefit, such principles would have to be arrived at democratically and always open to public debate. That is, *the concept suggests that the question of which education resources are available in the education commons and the conditions under which they would be available would be determined by a set of public principles.*

What are the advantages of conceptualising education as a commons?

There are many different ways in which the concept of the commons might be used to construct policy. Although this paper is speculative, I will limit my remarks to the possibilities inherent in the current arrangements in Australia. If readers are attracted to the metaphor of the commons, they might consider other more radical possibilities. Membership of the education commons would require agreement to a set of democratically determined public principles. Of course the old ‘public’ systems would by definition belong automatically to the commons. Publicly subsidised ‘private’ schools or systems would join the education commons but unlike the current approach would operate under the same set of public expectations as public systems. Those that did not want to sign up to these public principles would not receive government funding.

The metaphor of the commons offers one way to address some of the intractable problems in the public/private debate alluded to in this paper. First, tying the process to the concept of the commons would mean that all schools receiving government funds would be required to operate within a set of limiting conditions, perhaps enshrined in a charter of commons rights and expressed as principles. Within these boundaries, diversity would thrive. The principles and expectations would be determined through public debate and legislated through State and Commonwealth parliaments. The debate would focus on identifying the characteristics of schooling in the commons, using the publicness of education in a democracy as the reference point. Thus the principles would be based on the ‘publicness’ of key aspects of schooling such as curriculum, governance, pedagogy, systems, accountability and funding. There would have to be processes for an ongoing community debate about these principles, but the point is that such debate would be generative, based on consideration about substantive educational and community issues.

In this way the idea goes some way towards resolving the tension between the collective good and individual choice that I described earlier. At the same time it spurns individualistic market-based approaches to educational provision. It allows schools to be established by groups (e.g., religious or ethnic groups) outside the state systems, but it ensures that these schools would see themselves as a part of an education commons, contributing to the educational health of the whole community, not just a certain section of it.

The touchstone for choice would be a rejuvenated notion of the public good, not individual advancement. Thus the problem of homogenous school communities referred to above might be resolved by requiring all schools to demonstrate the ways in which they are exposing their students to a range of cultures and backgrounds. The question of real rather than limited choice might be resolved by implementing a principle of non-excludability where no student could be prevented from participating in the life of any school for such reasons as difference or perceived ability.

The approach stands in stark contrast to that of the Menzies Centre (Caldwell & Roskam, 2002) which proposes that all schools (public and private) are treated in the same way in order to promote individual choice. By ignoring the *publicness* of education, the approach of the Menzies Centre constructs education as a personal positional good, and so opens the door for a voucher system. By contrast the education commons promotes individual choice within the context of a set of public principles that bear the burden of responsibility for the whole community, not just one small part of it.

Second, the proposal provides the basis for a more equitably resourced Australian schooling system. This is because the concept of the commons places the current disparity in resources between schools in stark relief: it makes such disparities look indefensible. Rather than focusing on winning the best deal for competing systems, the logic of the commons suggests a policy trajectory that is needs based, striving to provide the very best educational opportunities and facilities for all Australian students, while maintaining a diversity of choice. That is, the commons offers a policy lever for making equity a central consideration. For example, it suggests a return to a sort of pre-1996 needs based funding model, where former ‘private’ schools could continue to charge fees but would be subject to the same set of public principles and expectations as fully funded public schools.

Conclusion

In my view current Commonwealth policy in relation to state aid to private schools fails to come to grips with the public purposes of education, emphasising individual purposes and shoring up privileges for elites. I believe such a policy trajectory cannot be justified: it is unjust and must be challenged. However, the defence of public education needs to refocus on the publicness of education by rejuvenating the concept of the public good to take account of the increasing diversity of Australian society. Unless this happens, public education presents an easy target for slick neo-liberal rhetoric relating to the strength of the market and the power of individual choice.

I have played with the idea of an education commons defined by a number of foundational public principles as one way of resolving the tension between individual choice and public benefit. It will be obvious that there are many other ways in which the debate might be constructed. The point is that starting with a consideration of 'publicness', rather than funding, has the potential to move the public/private debate beyond its current impasse. It would mean debating the 'publicness' of key aspects of schooling such as curriculum, governance, pedagogy, systems, accountability and funding.

In my view, one of the fundamental challenges facing Australia is to preserve the spirit of public education as a public good, even while the concept of 'public good' is reshaped to account for the changing circumstances and diversity of a nation-state functioning in a globalising world. This will require an ongoing national conversation that goes to the heart of our future as a country. As Saltman observes:

... public education is inherently political in that schools are places where citizens are made and particular visions of democracy are propagated. The questions that educators and other cultural workers need to ask are: 'What kinds of citizens do we want to make? And 'What kind of democracy do we want to have?' (Saltman, 2002, p. 117).

These are public questions that can only be adequately answered in an education system that reflects democratically determined, and therefore transparent public principles.

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