

Accountability and the public purposes of education

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In this paper, I want to frame MySchool as an accountability strategy in the context of the purposes of education. I do this because the debate about MySchool has largely been conducted in the absence of an articulated set of reference points – that is claims and counter claims about the importance or the consequences of MySchool are often made in a vacuum. They are self evidently good or bad. I will argue that the reference point against which such judgments should be made is the public purposes of education¹.

Part A: An argument for the public purposes of education

Educational practice is informed by its purposes; and such purposes are the outcome of political processes, resulting in broad ‘settlements’ which shape educational discourses at particular historical moments. The literature review in our project revealed that there are three broad purposes of education - democratic, individual and economic. These purposes interact and become assertive under different conditions. Given the high status of purpose within education there will always be a dominant purpose.

- The *democratic* purpose is located in a society that expects its schools to prepare all young people to be active and competent participants in democratic life. Since this benefits the society as a whole it is a public purpose.
- The *individual* purpose aims to advantage the individual in social and economic life. It treats education as a commodity, and supports school choice within an educational consumption approach. It posits education as a private good for private benefits and is therefore a private purpose.
- The *economic* purpose aims to prepare young people as competent economic contributors. Since this combines public economic benefits with private economic benefits, it is a constrained public purpose.

Of course educational purposes are not simply represented in official statements of missions and goals. They are shaped and delivered – both intentionally and unintentionally – through policy and practice in many different ways in schools and education systems which can be grouped into three *modalities of schooling*. These include:

- the *structure of schooling*, such as the ways in which formal schooling is organised and funded which contain hidden messages about how the society is/should be structured, ordered and maintained;
- the *official curriculum*, such as organisation of knowledge, including which knowledge is selected and omitted; assessment and reporting practices; and pedagogy;

¹I will indirectly draw from a recently completed ARC research project report on the public purposes of education which was conducted in partnership with the Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA); and the Foundation for Young Australians: Reid, A., Cranston, N., Keating, J., and Mulford, B (2010) *Exploring the Public Purposes of Education in Australian Primary Schools* (AGPPA). The project involved detailed case studies of a number of primary schools; a nation-wide survey of primary principals; and interviews with policy makers.

- the *culture and processes* of education systems and schools, such as social relationships, the nature of decision-making processes, the school ethos and so on – all of which give out messages about what is valued.

A healthy education system is one where there is strong compatibility within and between the modalities of schooling and the stated purposes of education. One way of thinking about the relationship between the modalities and the purposes of schooling is to use the metaphor of the body – where the institution of the school (or the education system itself) is the body; the purposes of schooling are the heart; and the modalities are the arteries. If the arteries get ‘clogged’ as a result of being incompatible with the heart, then the body will suffer. In short, to achieve a healthy education system means ensuring that there is a strong compatibility within and between the modalities of schooling and the stated purposes of education.

Under the Howard government, the major educational purpose was an individual one, dominated by the ideology of choice and resulting in increased competition between schools. Education was treated as a commodity. The Rudd/Gillard government has mainly focused on the economic purposes of education, with the major priority being the preparation of human capital for the labour market. In my view, this dilution of the public purposes of education has had negative impacts on the idea and practise of education as a common good. In a globalised and more complex world where the nature and role of the nation state is changing, schooling based upon public purpose becomes more important. There is need to return to a renewed emphasis on democratic **public purposes** for Australian education.

How can the public (democratic) purposes of education be advanced? Since active democracy requires capabilities for its nourishment, the central work of schools in a democratic society is the development of the capacities for social practice. These include capacities for citizenship, work, intercultural understanding, community involvement, communication and so – capacities that build the common good.

The development of these capacities as a major purpose of schools has implications for the three modalities of schooling referred to earlier. Thus, from the perspective of public (democratic) purposes of education, the structure of schooling would seek to ensure equality of educational opportunity and resources that provide for the needs of all students (it would not tolerate unequal resourcing of school); the curriculum would ensure that all students are encouraged and enabled to develop the capacities necessary for a democratic society (rather than a narrow and/or stratified curriculum); and the culture and processes of schooling would be based upon and model democratic processes (rather than authoritarian, top-down approaches).

However, it is one thing to argue in the abstract for a renewed focus on the public (democratic) purposes of education – quite another to develop educational policy and practice in ways that are consistent with it. Our research demonstrated that there is a formal commitment in the education community to the public purposes of education – from policy makers, principals and teachers – and this commitment is represented in the *Melbourne Goals of Schooling*. However, the research also showed that there is a lack of alignment between the stated goals and intentions of education policy and the strategies that are designed to deliver these and this makes it difficult for schools to deliver on public purposes. That is, the arteries are clogged. I will use the strategy of MySchool to ask whether or not it is compatible with the public purposes of education espoused by the *Melbourne Goals of Schooling*.

Part B: What is MySchool and why has it been developed?

An education based on public purposes would model democratic practices at the level of systems (policy making) and individual institutions. It would also take seriously the process of review and accountability, seeking to enhance quality on an ongoing basis, but ensuring that such processes are not inconsistent with or counter productive to a public good philosophy. In my view, MySchool fails this test.

When then Minister Gillard launched the MySchool website with great fanfare at the end of January 2010, she argued that it would satisfy the need for ‘transparent accountability’. The dominant information that appears on the current version of MySchool about each school is its annual NAPLAN (national assessment program - literacy and numeracy) results. Now that MySchool has been introduced, NAPLAN has moved from being one piece of information which informed schools and education systems about one aspect of the outcomes of schooling, to being a high stakes test purporting to measure the quality of a whole school and to compare it with other schools. We are told that more information about schools may be added in the future. But since we don’t know what that might look like, we can only assess the version of MySchool that currently exists.

So, why MySchool? Different reasons have been given for MySchool – but common to these reasons is the idea of placing information about schools in the public arena. This information is invariably justified in terms of ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ in relation to three aspects: information for parental choice; information for quality improvement; and information to inform policy action.

Part C: Is MySchool consistent with the public purposes of education?

Let’s take each of these and assess them against their consistency with the public purposes of education enunciated in the Melbourne Goals, of Schooling.

Information and choice: the education market

If some (parents) vote with their feet that’s exactly what the system is designed to do (Rudd, 2009))

MySchool assumes that people should shop around for schools as though they are consumer items like plasma TVs thus creating the impression that education is a commodity, rather than a public good. This diminishes the sense of school community - that feeling of all working together to make this a great school (OurSchool rather than MySchool) – because it assumes that if you are unhappy you simply choose somewhere else to send your child.

Further, it promotes the belief that everyone is in a position to choose. In fact, choice is limited to those who can afford the school fees or the relocation or transport costs if the chosen school is a long way away. It ignores the fact that in many states, government schools are zoned. You can’t just decide to move to another school if it is not in your zone. It also assumes that the ‘top’ schools will be able to take all comers. They won’t be able to of course and so people who don’t get their choice, or who can’t choose, will feel they are being short changed. In short, choice does not exist for a large percentage of the population.

That is, I believe that the MySchool approach to accountability actually works against the public purposes of education, by promoting schools as consumer items that exist to meet an

individual's private needs rather than as community assets that build the well being of the community in which they exist and the society as a whole.

Information for quality improvement through competition.

Of course, we expect this information to provoke frank and robust discussions between parents, their child's teacher and school principals (Gillard, 2010)

The idea here is that the publication of school results will bring pressure on schools (principals and teachers) to improve their results and thus the quality of education. This will be achieved by comparing schools and getting the competitive juices going. There has been an attempt to overcome the objection that it is fatuous to compare schools with very different student and resource bases by creating lists of 'like schools'. It is hoped that there will be a sort of kick the dog effect as schools seek to do better than other 'like' schools: parents will pressure teachers; teachers will pressure students; principals will pressure teachers; and education departments will pressure principals and so on.

Now on the surface this may appear to be about providing the very best schools for all and is thus consistent with the public purposes of education. In fact, the sort of competition that is created must, through its own logic, create winners and losers. There will always be schools at the top of the table and schools at the bottom. If this competition meant that overall there was an increase in 'quality', such an approach might even be justified – but unfortunately the evidence suggests that the opposite occurs: that is, it is a form of accountability which has a deleterious effect on the quality of education for a number of reasons.

First, there are major problems with the key technologies that are used to create the MySchool website – the Index of Community and Socio-Educational Advantage (ISEA) which purports to be a measure that enables meaningful comparisons to be made across schools; and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which is the testing program which provides almost the sole piece of information about the quality of a school. These concerns are explored in more depth in other papers (see Margaret Wu and Barbara Preston), so I won't deal with the detail here – but suffice to say that if these technologies are flawed, it is hard to say that this approach to accountability is likely to improve quality.

Second, the approach ignores findings from studies conducted in the UK and US, which demonstrates that the use of standardised tests in this way has deleterious effects on teaching, including that it narrows the curriculum and causes teachers to teach for the test; damages the morale and self-image of schools at the foot of the league tables that are inevitably created; and does not over time improve quality. In addition, high-stake approaches like this (league tables, monetary rewards for schools and teachers) cause schools and individual teachers to throw up smokescreens in order to hide rather than reveal issues and problems that confront them in their teaching; and try to ensure 'success' by manipulating the process, such as excluding certain children from tests, and focusing on students at the cut-off points, not those at the top or bottom ends.

In short this approach to improving the quality of education actually has the opposite effect. Far from promoting transparency by encouraging openness, collaboration and rigour across an education system, the high stakes test approach closes this down, by fostering a competitive jockeying for position between individual schools. Such an approach is the

antithesis of the kind of public purposes that are enunciated in the *Melbourne Goals of Schooling*.

Information to inform policy action

So through these new transparency measures we are going to have more information and we will be able to use that to bring these new resources and new reforms so they can make the most difference (Gillard, 2010)

The other way in which information on the MySchool website is claimed to be used is to inform education policy (eg., where to focus resources) at a systems level and inform practice at the level of classrooms and schools. Usually, this aspiration is linked to the concept of equity with the claim that once we have identified ‘failing’ schools or teachers, we will be able to do something about them.

This is a worthy goal. However, apart from the fact that most of this information was already available for these purposes before MySchool – we know well enough already which groups of students need additional support and resources – the strategy lacks the sophistication that is required to really address the causes of low student achievement.

For a start, the information provided is far too limited a base upon which to make policy or diagnose problems. It doesn’t tell us anything about the quality of a school in relation to important aspects of schooling such as social and cultural outcomes – the key public purposes of education. If you think that schools should provide a broad and general education, including the arts, health and physical education, citizenship education and so on, then this narrow focus is a barrier to the enactment of the Melbourne Goals of Schooling. Why is it not just as important to assess and report on the ways in which schools are promoting, say, intercultural understandings or creativity, as it is to report on literacy and numeracy outcomes?

NAPLAN was not designed for the purpose to which it is being put in MySchool. Understanding NAPLAN results as a representation of the quality of a school is a corruption of its original purpose. Sure, it is possible to argue that parents can gather other data to complete the picture, but this isn’t easy. Many people don’t have the time or the knowledge to piece together the full range of information about a school, so they will tend to rely on a single source such as MySchool. After all, it is officially sanctioned information.

More than this, the approach suggests that quality improvement in schools is just a matter of identifying some low NAPLAN scores and throwing money at the problem. Unfortunately it doesn’t happen like that. Learning outcomes are influenced by a range of social and cultural as well as educational factors, many of which are deep seated. These have to be identified and worked on over time. There is no quick fix. The fact is that questions about equity and education are incredibly complex. Over the years, many educators have worked long and hard to understand the causes of educational disadvantage. Policies and strategies have been developed and implemented in an effort to make some headway through funding and resourcing, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, school culture, structures and organisation. Despite failures, new insights have been gained as collectively the profession inches forward in its understandings about the relationship between equity and education, seeking to improve policy and practice. And yet, somehow MySchool is the magic elixir for what has been evading us for so long!

Sadly, MySchool might in fact **work against** equity in education. The research in many parts of the world warns about the adverse effects on equity of high stakes approaches to accountability. For example, Linda McNeil and colleagues summarise their findings in Texas from an extensive study which show that the state's high-stakes accountability system has a direct impact on the severity of the dropout problem, putting

our most vulnerable youth, the poor, the English language learners, and African American and Latino children, at risk of being pushed out of their schools so the school ratings can show "measurable improvement." High-stakes, test-based accountability leads not to equitable educational possibilities for youth, but to avoidable losses of these students from our schools (McNeil et al, 2008 – see article at: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/28>)

Once again, these are not approaches which are consistent with the public purposes of education.

Part D: What would accountability look like when based on the public purposes of education?

It is important to carefully analyse the claims that are made for MySchool as an accountability mechanism in Australian education since, as far as I can tell, no sustained case for the MySchool website has been made, using research evidence. Rather it is based on a set of apparently common-sense assertions about what information parents want and how to improve quality in education. I have argued that these claims do not withstand serious analysis and that indeed, as it is currently constituted, the MySchool website may be actually doing damage.

But it is important to go beyond critique and to suggest alternatives. In my view if it is genuine about the *Melbourne Goals of Schooling*, the government would seek to promote an accountability approach which is consistent with **public purposes** of education. Such an approach would be based on the following sorts of principles: It would

- *be developed in consultation with the profession and the wider community;*
- *have a sturdy conceptual basis, grounded in evidence from research about the forms and effects of approaches to accountability in education;*
- *assume that a picture about the quality of a school would encompass a range of data relevant to the capabilities for citizenship demanded by a democratic society;*
- *promote rigorous and open investigation and inquiry into the cause of problems, issues, dilemmas and concerns in schools*
- *recognise the complexity related to learning outcomes and such factors as socio-economic status and cultural background, and promote approaches which seek to explore causes and trial approaches over time*
- *recognise that quality learning outcomes are a result of collaborative endeavours within schools and across schools;*
- *promote schools as community centres (public goods) where people have an investment in working together to tackle problems and improve quality.*

A system of accountability based on these principles would certainly support the idea that information about schools should be in the public domain. The question is what sort of information and why – and these are questions that will be explored today. My purpose in this session has been to argue that in its current form, the MySchool website lacks a sturdy conceptual basis and is at odds with the supposedly flagship document, the *Melbourne Goals of Schooling*. It is the antithesis of each of the accountability principles I have described. In my view it should be closed down now while further development work is done. I don't think it can be patched up as we go, with the fitful addition of disparate pieces of information as lobby groups argue their case. After all, if a large number of doctors were aware that a drug or some aspect of medical practice might harm patients, would we object to them banning the drug or practice until we are sure there are no toxic effects? If not, why is this different?

The challenge is to shape a commitment to transparency and accountability which truly serves the democratic public purposes of education.