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# Public Education Matters: Reclaiming Public Education for the Common Good in a Global Era

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## Abstract

*This article argues that public education needs to be reclaimed to fulfill its role as a “democratising force” to address social and economic inequality and to respect and recognise diversity and difference. By analysing historical developments in federal policy, funding and economic contexts a case is developed to demonstrate that the role of the state has been dismantled and the public nature of education has been reduced. The factors responsible are articulated and discussed with particular reference to the impact of neo-liberal policy, the “marketisation” of education and new public management. Measures such as those taken by Education Queensland that support the development of school leaders and teachers to engage in research, development and critical debate are supported. International examples of how systems have revitalised and supported the public nature of education are discussed. These include more intelligent accountability systems that respect the professionalism of teachers and collaborative curriculum development strategies that engage with all, including those who are least powerful such as the students.*

## Introduction

Why does public education matter? What are the purposes, nature and role of public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These are key questions that frame this paper. How “public education” has changed over the years will be described and analysed drawing on some historical detail and contextual information. Emergent global challenges and their impact on current public education policy and practice will be analysed.

Most state systems in Australia include a vision and goal for public education such as this one by Education Queensland: “to provide a quality public education system that delivers opportunities for all students to achieve learning outcomes and reach their

potential” (Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA), n.d.). To achieve this vision public education needs to be reclaimed for the common good in a global era as a “**humanizing, liberalizing, democratizing force**” to realise “the full development of human personality and a strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, as cited in Tomlinson, 2001, p. 171).

Public education matters and the professional research and development approach of the Public Education programs developed by Education Queensland is a significant step in the right direction. Further steps forward will be suggested such as the extension of current initiatives to include scholarly policy research and analysis. Other fields for research and development will be discussed such as intelligent accountability systems and collaborative curriculum development that includes recognition of the Rights of the Child. That is, “the right of the child to freely express views and have those views taken seriously” (United Nations (UN), 1989).

## Purpose

Public education is provided by governments (national, regional or local or a combination of these) and is funded from public monies. The state regulates economic matters to ensure that the social order is enhanced for all. In Australia the established view is that education is the right of every citizen and should be freely available. A central aim is to address social and economic inequality and to respect and recognise diversity and difference. The government sector has been traditionally responsible for promoting social equality and inclusion through education. These values should be evident in both the policy and practices of public education. However, the political context, the funding arrangements, the organization and operation of public schools help to determine the extent to which these schools can enact these values for the common good.

“Publicness”, as Stewart (2005) puts it, involves the belief that “the state is properly the sponsor of a single, government-owned educational system that is open to all” (p. 476). There is now a need to recommit to values such as reciprocity, altruism, social and economic equality and inclusivity to govern the education system. In suggesting that we need to reclaim public education I would agree with others (Stewart, 2005; Vickers, 2005; Lawton, 2005; Ball, 2003; Reid, 2002; Whitty, 2002) who argue that the role of the state is being dismantled and the public nature of education is diminishing. What then are the factors that have been responsible for this decline? And why is it important to reclaim public education? First some background to our current context.

## Background

Under Australia's federal system of government the states maintain constitutional responsibility for schooling. Historically, public schools have been expected to provide a "public good" by giving children equal chances. In the public system there has been a set of shared values and educational opportunities are expected to be the same for all children regardless of their socio-economic status, the location of their residence or their parents' occupation. Traditionally, public schools have also been places where young people from different backgrounds and experiences learn together and in so doing come to appreciate and respect difference. In this way these schools have been constructed "as a fundamental building block of democracy" (Reid, 2002, p. 575).

During the Whitlam government (1972-1975), the Commonwealth assumed a more active role in policy-making with a consequent shift in Commonwealth- state government arrangements (Meadmore, 2001). In 1973, for equity reasons to support those schools in need, the Commonwealth began to fund private as well as public schools. It was this that "challenged the concept of education as a public good" (Reid, 2002, p. 575). So that by the mid-1990s responsibility for education was shared between state-owned, and state-regulated schools, and publicly subsidised private schools. When the conservative Liberal/National party coalition was elected in 1996 public choice theory dominated policy and the shift of students away from public schools to the private sector continued (Vickers, 2005; Reid, 2002) so that in 2007 private schools had increased their share of enrolments to 33.5% of the total. This increase it is argued is illustrative of parents' support for the individual purposes of education.

To illustrate this shift away from public school, of the 3.4 million students attending primary and secondary schools in 2007 there were 2.26 million (66.5%) in government schools and 1.14 million (33.5%) in non-government schools. While student enrolments at all schools increased by 2% (68 384) between 2005 and 2007, this growth was not comparable across government and non-government schools. Non-government schools experienced a 4% growth (46 094) in enrolments over the period. By contrast enrolments in government schools increased slightly, by 0.9% (22 290) over the same period (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007).

In Australia public education has underpinned the country's economic success, however, with a third of Australia's primary and secondary students in private schools it has been asserted that "Australia [i]s at risk of developing a system that treats public education as a charity" and "the elite are buying social class as opposed to a better education" (Australian Associated Press (AAP), 2006, p. 1). Once a critical mass is established in the private system the public system struggles to function with an absence of the diversity that includes the elite.

## Funding and Economic Context

The manner in which public education has been funded perhaps provides the greatest insights into the government's policies and priorities. Figures available from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reveal that Australia has been spending much less on all levels of public education (4.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP)) than nations that are comparable (5 per cent of GDP). These similar nations increased spending in the tertiary sector by an average of 49 percent from 1994 – 2004 while Australia was spending four per cent less. In the same analysis Australia was third last in public spending on schools and vocational education (AAP, 2007). Yet funding of private schools has been described as “the Commonwealth's largest budgetary outlay within its education portfolio” (Connors, 2007, p. 6).

During the period of the Howard government the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows how income inequality increased. Despite the increase of real disposable incomes, between 1996-97 and 1999-2000 there was increased inequality. For example, in the top quintile the mean income increased by \$111 a week, which is eight times the increase of \$13 per week for those in the lowest quintile and almost half (47.3%) of the total increase in disposable income was received by those in the top quintile (Dyrenfurth, 2007, p. 224).

Poverty is growing faster in Australia than in most other developed nations so that:

... 11.2% of the population earns less than half the average wage. ... [T]he OECD countries, Ireland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Japan and the US have higher rates of poverty. [However], the poorest fifth of the Australian population currently earn 1.6% of the total wages and salaries. In contrast, the richest fifth earn 44%. This [contrasts] with other OECD countries in which the poorest fifth earn 8.2%, whereas the richest fifth earn 37.2%. (Dyrenfurth, 2007, p. 224)

It also seems that Australia has one of the highest levels of inequality in the distribution of income among developed countries yet this is not recognised by Australians who are least likely to agree to statements such as “income differences are too large” or that “it is the responsibility of governments to reduce inequalities” (Dyrenfurth, 2007, pp. 224-25).

These figures when considered together reveal some telling trends. Australia has spent relatively less on public education, and even less on vocational and tertiary education. When these figures are considered in relation to the increase in numbers of student enrolments in non-government schools the need to reclaim public education becomes

apparent. For as the figures related to poverty reveal our population is rapidly segregating by wealth and the gap is widening, at the same time the role of public education to address such inequalities by providing opportunities for all, for social cohesion and collective purposes is declining. The international measures of educational attainment are further evidence of the need to reclaim public education to address issues of equity.

## **International Comparative Measures**

Policy makers and others have shown increased interest in international measures of educational attainment such as the results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). These comparisons have influenced policy development, yet important questions of whether we are comparing like with like have not always been considered. Such comparisons require a common set of criteria for measuring performance, comparability between samples and the reporting of the results, a match in terms of the content of the curriculum and the approach used, and regard given to context.

Nevertheless, governments have used the results from international comparisons to justify the introduction of ongoing curriculum change. For example, in the UK the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commenced a National Numeracy Project to address perceived weaknesses, particularly in the teaching of Mathematics at primary school level, after the publication of the results of TIMSS in 1996. This project was followed by the adoption of the National Numeracy Strategy, the National Literacy Strategy and the Key Stage 3 Strategy by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Australia, as with other countries, has also made use of international comparative data such as that of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). This international comparison of achievement showed significant State and Territory differences in Australia. So it is no surprise that the new Labor Government in 2008 has introduced plans for a National Curriculum in Mathematics, Science, History and English in primary and secondary schools by 2011.

What has been most revealing for Australia in equity terms is that the analysis of the results of the international performance data has revealed that Indigenous children have scored significantly lower than non-Indigenous children (Lokan, Ford, & Greenwood, 1997). Australian schools are not adequately addressing inequalities and when compared with other developed countries, Australia is underperforming in terms of

equity: “high in quality but low in equity” (McGaw, 2004). An analysis of the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data suggests that Australia in general is “over-represented in the lowest categories of maths proficiency and under-represented in the highest” (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2004, p. xiii). So, while the achievement of students overall is high, there are wide differences between the high and low achieving students. What are the reasons for the inequalities that have been identified?

## **Marketisation of Education and New Public Management**

Marketisation of education, with the establishment of quasi-markets that rely on diversity and choice (Ball, 2003), describes the change in policy direction and helps to explain the enrolment trends, the funding patterns and equity issues that have been raised. A market approach asserts that competition will provide benefits such as responsiveness, increased productivity, efficiency and accountability. Financial responsibility and accountability are devolved to individual schools and the competition that does arise from the establishment of quasi-markets encourages schools to differentiate themselves from one another. An outcome of such policies of choice does result in diversity but such differentiation is organised around socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion and race (Reid, 2002). As Dempster, Freakley, & Parry (2001) emphasise market theory is not concerned with the degree to which “satisfaction of collective values” is met. They cite Robertson (1997) who states “Markets are not moral they are necessarily preoccupied with self-interest and advantage and . . . are unfit arbiters of what constitutes our collective well-being” (Dempster et al, 2001, p. 3).

Education as a public good has been dominated by the discourse of individual rights and choice. Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has come to be seen as a “positional good” (Reid, 2002). Funding for education has favoured choice to allow those who have a preference for private education to make this selection. Social equality in education has not been a major priority during the time of the Liberal/National Coalition government rather education has been viewed as a way to advance socially and has been accompanied by increased choice and competition, both between and within sectors (Reid, 2002; Vickers, 2005).

To help explain the current education policy context it is also useful to consider the ways that democracy is understood and practiced (Reid, 2002; Carr & Hartnett, 1996). Neo-liberal policy draws on a “‘realist’ conception of democracy that assumes democracy flourishes best in an individualistic society with a competitive market economy, minimal state intervention, a politically passive citizenry and active elite political leadership.” (Reid, 2002, p. 572). This view of democracy sees education as a positional good rather than a public good. Individual freedom of choice is valued

over equity in this view. A classical perspective of democracy values active citizens who are actively engaged in “political debate and public decision-making on equal terms with a minimum of bureaucratic control” (Reid, 2002, p. 572). Education from this view has a collective purpose that values freedom and equality, and cannot be left to market forces.

<b>Realist View of Democracy</b>	<b>Classical View of Democracy</b>
Individualistic society	Public decision-making on equal terms
Competitive market economy	State has a role in provision
Minimal state intervention	Public purpose requires state intervention
Politically passive citizens	Informed and politically active citizens
Active elite political leadership	Distributive leadership
Education as a positional good	Education as a public good

**Table 1: Views of Democracy (adapted from Reid, 2002)**

### **Impact on Public Education**

The establishment of competition between the public services and private enterprise is an outcome of “New Public Management” (NPM). NPM has resulted in greater service provision by private enterprise as is evident from the privatization of public utilities such as water, electricity or airlines. Dempster et al. (2001, p. 2) have analysed this phenomenon and its impact across OECD countries and they conclude the government’s role in public service provision has been reduced and a framework of competition and accountability on public sector activity has been introduced. Stated standards and performance measures with clearly defined targets or indicators of success that are often quantitative are now more prevalent. There is also a greater emphasis on output controls with a stress on results or products rather than processes. Of most concern is the reduction in the self-regulating powers of the profession.

New Public Management when applied to public schooling “has colonized government decision-making” (Dempster et al, 2001, p. 3) and caused the restructuring of public schools. These impacts include decentralization of decision-making to self-managing schools and the promotion of competition between schools. There have been greater demands for financial accountability and much more control over what goes on in schools. There is increased bureaucratization and recentralization of curriculum and assessment, with pressure for outcomes-based assessment of students, principals and teachers. The performance of schools is expected to be more open to public scrutiny and teachers’ competence is appraised. At the same time there is tighter regulation of pre-service teacher education (Dempster et al, 2001).

Further research (Reid, 2002, p. 576) suggests that education based on choice can be detrimental to public schools in the following ways. First, public education comes to be seen as a “residualised” system and is seen as “the choice” for those who cannot afford private schooling, with a consequent loss of diversity of student population. Second, public education as a system becomes more stratified as schools compete for a greater share of the education market and the curriculum becomes more differentiated and hierarchical as schools seek to identify “market niches”. There is also a “significant disparity of resources between schools” (Reid, 2002, p. 576).

The impact of market forces and centralised control of education can be seen in the British and American systems where to a great extent public education has been dismantled (Whitty, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001). For example, in England evidence of the recentralization of curriculum and increased bureaucratization occurred in 1988 when a national curriculum was introduced. Schools became preoccupied with achievement in terms of student results. Evaluation and assessment took on primarily an accountability function. The national curriculum identified the content of programs, and the objectives and processes, in terms of targets or standards. The publication of league tables became a device for judgments about school performance and the positional status of the school became the criterion for selection. Parents make their choices in the UK based on the reputation of the school and their perception of the quality of the school. Schools that have a low position because of the lower levels of student achievement, low socio-economic status, high ethnic composition, remoteness, high truancy, other factors or a combination of these, are in fact the schools that experience the impact of market forces and competition.

## **Accountability**

Accountability frameworks in education have introduced stated standards and performance measures. Inspection and standardised testing have been the dominant accountability measures in the UK. They are also the main criteria for judging school performance and measuring success in terms of student achievement. Schools are accountable for what they do for students however using assessment results in this way can lead to schools being rewarded for the “quality” of the students they can attract and enrol rather than what they actually do for students to help them achieve. The dangers of “raw” exam or test results for accountability purposes have been experienced. The costs both in human and financial terms have been huge (Broadfoot, 2007).

In a context of accountability the need to demonstrate performance is heightened and explicating what works is pursued. Some organizations and government agencies are reporting evidence from curriculum evaluation using a “what works” approach. The



consequence of such developments for curriculum and assessment is that evaluation is little concerned with debating fundamental value issues in the curriculum program, or the assessment strategy itself, but is now incorporated into implementation. So that far from representing a relatively independent and/or predominantly professional activity – evaluation has been incorporated into the processes of policy development and system management.

The value of dialogue and deliberation with practitioners in evaluation to facilitate understanding of the challenges of diverse values in the context of practice has been recognised. However, the combination of a what works approach and evidence-based decision making has reinvigorated concerns relating to measurement, validity and reliability of quantitative measurement. Some government agencies are demanding Evidence Based Policy and Practice (EBPP), derived from randomised experimental designs, as a basis for intervention and pursuit of policy agendas. In this drive for efficient use of resources with the development of guidelines and frameworks to regulate and assess evaluation practice caution must be taken to ensure that we are comparing like with like. It is important that in the synthesis of evaluations for EBPP that outcomes have not been simplified and contexts have not been ignored.

In spite of the generation of democratic, responsive and deliberative forms and purposes of evaluation it would appear that evaluation for accountability and control continues to impact on current practice as is evident in the re-emergence of bureaucratic forms of curriculum and assessment with the return of quantitative, reductionist approaches as evident in “No Child Left Behind” policy in the United States. In the name of efficiency what becomes apparent is a return to technological and behavioristic refinements of curriculum evaluation and a possible trivialization that threatens the richness of the intellectual activity for those involved in the discipline of curriculum evaluation.

The impact of such trends in evaluation on assessment practice is that data analysed for a particular purpose may be used for another unintended purpose. For example, performance assessment data has been used for the development of league tables that are then used to judge the quality of schools. As Broadfoot suggests:

... in transitions between criterion- and norm- referenced approaches and formative and summative purposes, there is considerable scope for the issue of “fitness for purpose” to be obscured. The result ... is a number of, at best unhelpful, and at worst, downright damaging assessment practices. (2007, p. 59)

Given the current quest in Australia for consistency in education using standards-referenced assessment systems, involving student assessment and reporting against

national and international benchmarks, it is important to make explicit the intended and unintended consequences of such strategies. It is useful to acknowledge the inexorable existence of the pressures to pervert. In a context that is standards-driven and values standardization, there is a great danger that technical and rationalist approaches which generalise and make superficial assessment tasks and practices, will emerge. Differentials of assessments around the world and in particular cultures can be lost.

## **Standards and Assessment**

The introduction of standards-referenced assessment for the purposes of accountability and for opening up assessment practices and reporting to the scrutiny of the public also need to be problematised and considered carefully. These too are important areas for research and development (Klenowski & Adie, in press; Wyatt-Smith, Gunn, & Klenowski, in press).

The term “standards” is ubiquitous but there are no simple measuring instruments that can be used to determine an appropriate value for a student’s achievement or for that matter of a school. There is no natural unit of measurement as there is for some physical quantities, such as weight or height. Therefore assessment standards cannot be objective in the same sense. Assessment in education is inherently inexact and should be treated as such (Harlen, 1994). In the context of standards-referenced assessment standards describe the expected features or qualities at various levels of performance. Standards as descriptors of student achievement are used to monitor growth in student learning and provide information about the quality of student achievement. The functions of standards as defined in this way are to:

- Provide a common frame of reference and a shared language for communicating student achievement;
- Promote teachers’ professional learning, focused on good assessment practices and judgment of the quality of student achievement against system level benchmarks; and to
- Present more meaningful reports and engagement with assessment as a learning process.

High-stakes assessments are enacted by policy makers to improve education and, setting high standards of achievement, can inspire greater effort on the part of students, teachers and principals. However, the inadequacy of high-stakes assessments, or the lack of sufficient reliability or validity for their intended purposes, has the potential for unintended and harmful consequences. To illustrate in England SATs tests, are taken by children aged seven, 11 and 14. The results are used to evaluate what national

curriculum level pupils have attained and if schools have met attainment targets. For example, Level 4 is the level of achievement expected of most 11 year-olds on the 1 to 8 (highest) national curriculum scale. The government has set the target of 85 per cent of pupils reaching this standard in English and mathematics by Year 6 (a goal which has not yet been met) (Stobart, 2008, p. 187). Primary schools are evaluated on the percentage of their pupils that achieve this level. There is therefore great pressure on the teachers and their schools as they are judged publicly on the results.

Reay and Wiliam (cited in Stobart, 2008) conducted research involving a class that was preparing for the national tests (SATs) which is taken in the last year of junior school in England. As Stobart indicates the children become very aware of their expected level. Here is some of the interview data from that study:

**Hannah**

(name given to the girl being interviewed): I'm really scared about the SATs. Mrs O'Brien [a teacher at the school] came in and talked to us about our spelling and I'm no good at spelling and David [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning and I'm hopeless at times tables so I'm frightened I'll do the SATs and be a nothing.

**Diane** I don't understand, Hannah. You can't be a nothing.

**Hannah**

Yes, you can 'cos you have to get a level like 4 or level 5 and if you're no good at spellings and times tables you won't get those levels and so you're a nothing.

**Diane** I'm sure that's not right.

**Hannah**

Yes it is 'cos that's what Mrs O'Brien was saying. (Reay & Wiliam, 1999, cited in Stobart, 2008, p. 2)

Policy makers can be misled by "spurious" increases in assessment results that do not relate to improved learning; students may be placed at increased risk of failure or disengagement from schooling; teachers may be blamed or punished for inequitable resources which remains beyond their control; and curriculum and teaching can become distorted if high grades or results per se, rather than learning, become the overriding goal. In May 2008 the news headlines in England read: "Tests damaging to school system" and "Teachers criticise over-testing". As reported in the former article "The original purposes of examinations, to assess students' progress has become confused with school accountability [in England] and the performance management of teachers" (British Broadcasting Commission (BBC), 2008, p. 2).

## Implications for Public Education

To attend to these challenges Education Queensland has focused on the professional development of teachers and principals. Standards and frameworks have been developed using a professional learning approach that has included practitioners across the sectors and key stakeholders such as the Queensland Teachers' Union, the then Board of Teacher Registration, Principals' Associations and the Deans of Education. The key documents include: *Professional Standards for Teachers*, a statement of the *Leadership Capabilities for Education Queensland Principals* and the *Developing Performance Framework*. These documents provide the basis for continued learning and a focus for growth as professionals. Teacher professionalism is not only encouraged but also respected, particularly with the initiative of offering scholarships that support teachers and school leaders to engage in critical inquiry and research at both Masters and Doctoral levels.

The importance of rigorous research and reflection cannot be underestimated for if we want students to “emerge from schooling with optimistic visions of the future, capabilities to adapt to rapid social change and economic change, a commitment to lifelong learning, and skills and knowledge that enable them to participate in social and community decision making” (Education Queensland, 2005, p. 1) then our school leaders and teachers need to continue to learn, to develop their capabilities and reflect critically on policy and practice.

## Implications for School Leaders and Teachers

Professional development that includes engaging in research in the field of policy studies is recommended. Policy includes the principles, plans or procedures established by an agency, institution, or government, generally with the intent of reaching a long-term goal. In developing policy there is often a need for policy officers to “grasp the complex remit quickly and take action” (Saunders, 2005).

First, school leaders need to understand the key political and economic policies affecting education. Second, apart from being able to describe and account for policy, they need also to be able to critically analyse and evaluate policy from an informed view. In so doing school leaders and teachers develop the capacity to explain. Key questions for consideration include:

- Why public policies and public education are undergoing change;
- What effects the changes are having and will have in the future;
- Whose interests are being served by the change;

- What practices and positions, that are challenged by change, are worth sustaining; and
- What alternatives are worth supporting. (Dempster et al., 2001, p. 10)

Too often the effects of social class, race, gender, ethnicity and locality on students' participation rates in schooling, their school performance, and their subsequent life opportunities are not taken into account in the development of policy. Inequalities are reproduced by institutional practices that are difficult to oppose with "...hegemonic or competitive academic curriculum at the core of schooling, and the ways in which it is taught and assessed" (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006, p. 8).

Policy-related research offers the benefits of influencing the policy environment, particular initiatives and practice. For as Ball (1994) emphasises there is a difference between policy as text and policy as discourse. He suggests texts do not change circumstances:

Policies don't normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or options are set (Ball, 1994, p. 19).

It is important for school leaders and teachers to be aware of the policy effects for as Ball (1994, 2003) has suggested often considerable attention is given to specific effects but the general effects, formed by the "ensembles of policy", are rarely considered. So often curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and organization are treated in isolation when it is the intersection of these message systems at the school level that is often not analysed and are left under-researched (Looney, 2001).

School leaders, teachers and academics need to work together with policy officers to contribute to debate. Too often the debates focus on the technical rather than the theoretical in key areas such as curriculum and assessment reform. So the focus remains on efficiency and effectiveness not on the values that underpin such reforms. Education for democracy is key yet rarely debated, issues of power and control tend to be the area of concern. Similarly, the management of change tends to be analysed rather than the meaning and the values that underpin the change. Often the relationship between education and productivity or economic growth is at the heart of the debate rather than education and the common good (Looney, 2001). As has been argued the principles, of neo-liberal consumer democracy, tend to override the principles of social democracy and there is more priority given to efficient and effective curriculum or policies rather than to those that are considered valuable curriculum or policies.

If public education is "central to the construction of a pluralist moral democracy then the processes of educational policy making must be consistent with the values upon

which this model of democracy is based” (Reid, 2002, p. 582). Reid quotes Carr and Harnett (1996) to make the point that education needs “to enable future citizens to participate in the process of contestation through which their society – including its system of education – is reproduced and transformed” (p. 582). Reid’s argument is that “a democratic society is needed to promote democratic education, and democratic education is needed to produce a democratic society” (p. 582).

To achieve such a vision requires developments in the approach to policy-making. Democratic principles need to underpin the policy-making processes so that education can fulfill a democratic role. Policy developed by experts and implemented in an autocratic manner will not be supportive of the intended aim. Ongoing debate about education, including those who are the least powerful, is needed. Deliberation among citizens from diverse groups, who have a diverse range of views and values, is essential for a democratic society that helps enrich the democratic process (Guttmann, 1987; Parker, 2002, as cited in Banks, 2008).

Academics have a role as “public intellectuals” or “critical beings” to raise the important questions and to bring these to public attention for consideration and debate. With school leaders and teachers as researchers and scholars this role extends to include them. Publications and other visible outputs or outcomes provide bodies of evidence that have the capacity to influence. These are important outcomes of research in the policy environment where there are pressures such as a relentless focus on “deliverables” and rapid, responsive, just-in-time, “good enough” knowledge. Increased pressures arise from global networks that have replaced traditional knowledge creation and dissemination with “info-nuggets” and “evidence-lite” information (Saunders, 2005).

When policy-makers work alone they look for “evidence”, they tend to rely on known and trusted researchers and are swayed by well-known or visible research. They are reliant on in-house or their own-commissioned research. Consequently policy officers can be unaware of existing research and its implications. Rather they are seeking research that provides confirmation and there can be a tendency to use research selectively. Sometimes policy officers lack requisite skills for research appraisal and interpretation and delegate research to specialist officers. There is also the tendency for key staff to move on leaving very little “organisational memory” (Saunders, 2005).

This implies that there is a responsibility for academics to engage with decision-makers, practitioners and the public. Together academics have the competitive edge in concepts, hypotheses, argument and explanatory power. Academics in working collaboratively with policy officers, school leaders and teachers can explain the “added value” and “fitness for purpose” of a chosen methodology. Academics bring particular levels and areas of expertise to policy development and therefore are often well grounded in the

existing research methodologically and substantively in that particular field. Concerns of practitioners and school leaders can be best addressed from a consortium of universities and academics that can engage other social science areas as needed. Academics can also help strengthen ethical and quality criteria (Saunders, 2005).

## School Leaders and Teachers as Researchers

For Masters candidates it is the critical, reflective capacity that is being enhanced through the program of study and by engaging in research. At the Professional Doctoral level candidates are also concerned with developing a critical, reflective capacity but are also expected to make a contribution to knowledge by researching a problem or issue from their chosen professional context. The professional doctorate is specifically designed for professionals investigating real-world problems and relevant issues for the profession, industry and/or the community. The focus is scholarly research into professional practices. The research program bridges academia and the profession, and offers doctoral candidates the opportunity to investigate issues relevant to their own practices and to apply these understandings to their professional contexts.

Apart from policy studies other important areas for Masters or Doctoral level research include the impact of government policy. In particular the impact of government policies on the moral dimensions of education is an important consideration to assist in understanding and explaining one's own professional values (Dempster et al., 2001, p.10). These authors' suggest the following "contestable values dualities" that are experienced in education as possible areas for study and the development of one's professional values.

Contestable Values Dualities	
The rights of the individual child	The rights of majorities
The interests of the student	The interests of the school
Mainstream views	Minority Views
Excellence	Effort
Quality	Equity
Self-determination	Social responsibility
Local need	System priority
Intellectual achievement	Other kinds of success
Individual preference	Community obligation
Compliance	Professional autonomy
Loyalty to parents	Loyalty to teachers

**Table 2: Contestable Values Dualities (adapted from Dempster et al., 2001)**

## Intelligent Accountability

Intelligent accountability involves putting more trust in professionals who are clear about their values and goals. Education Queensland is taking the collaborative action with a consortium of universities (University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and James Cook University) to reinvigorate school leadership and teachers through providing opportunities for scholarship and research<sup>1</sup>. This is one important step in the development of teacher professionalism.

Intelligent accountability policies, such as those of Finland, (Sahlberg, 2007) involve trust-based professionalism that grows over time from an ethos of respect within the education system that values teachers' and principals' professionalism in judging what is best for students and in reporting their achievements. In the Finnish education context intelligent accountability enhances trust among teachers, students and education authorities in the accountability processes. What is more, they are involved in the process so they develop a strong sense of professional responsibility and initiative (Fullan, 2005; Sahlberg, 2007). The impact on teaching and student learning has been positive.

The Finnish education system is recognised internationally as a successful system that has built on the values of quality, equity and social cohesion through public funding. Finland has been a slow implementer of market-oriented approaches to reform. In fact the Teachers' Trade Union as a main negotiator in education has resisted market-oriented management models in the education sector. In contrast, sustainable leadership grounded in values of equity has developed with equitable distribution of resources without reliance on competition. There is early intervention for prevention and the development of trust particularly among teachers. In Finland all "basic school teachers must hold a Masters degree to become permanently employed" (Sahlberg, 2007, p. 153) and teaching is considered a research-based profession that has been central to teacher education developments. During the past decade there has been an increase in the number of school principals and teachers who have completed doctoral studies.

Assessment of student learning is based on teacher-led assessment rather than standardised external tests, numerical grades are not used after grade five so that students are not compared with another. Only descriptive assessments and feedback are used which current research informs us will impact positively on student performance and engagement in their learning (Assessment Reform Group, 1999). Teacher-made classroom assessment is a dominant practice and is used by teachers as an opportunity for learning as much as for assessing student achievement.

There are shortcomings of such a system in that there is a reliance on teachers' and schools' abilities to judge and report on students' achievement and there are differences



among criteria that teachers use to evaluate their students, even within the same school. Issues arise when students move to a new school and experience assessment that may involve expectations that vary to those of their previous school. Despite these shortcomings the concept of intelligent accountability is preferred as it enables schools to keep the focus on learning and allows more freedom in curriculum planning compared with external standardised testing contexts. This approach allows teachers to address the needs of students from particular sociocultural contexts and enables assessment practice to be responsive.

Finland was at the top of the OECD countries in the 2003 PISA tests results in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. Strong performance was uniformly distributed across Finnish schools and there was very little between-school variance in performance. The relationship of parents' socio-economic status with students' measured school achievement was also one of the smallest among all countries. However, accountability in Finland is based on relative success as opposed to competitive achievement. A competitive conception of achievement relies on knowledge and skill domains that are easily measured whereas in Finland achievement is more broadly conceived. Students demonstrate their achievement of knowledge and skills in academic and aesthetic subjects but also by certain developed features and moral behaviour.

## **Preparing for the Knowledge Society**

In addition to developing teacher professionalism and suggesting research and development into intelligent accountability systems there are also calls for preparation for the knowledge society. Rapid and unprecedented change characterises the knowledge society and voices from a range of sources claim that what is now paramount for young people is the need to become better learners and generators of knowledge (Klenowski & Looney, 2006; Reid, 2005; Deakin-Crick, Broadfoot, & Claxton, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003). Schleicher has indicated that the challenge is clear:

. . . the most effective modern economies will be those that produce the most information and knowledge – and make that information and knowledge easily accessible to the greatest number of individuals and enterprises. (2006, p. 4)

The emergence of the knowledge worker as the powerhouse of successful economies has generated new demands on education systems and on schooling, especially as education becomes “the key quality of labour” in the knowledge society (Castells, 1998, p. 345). Successful knowledge workers are not characterised by being knowledgeable as traditionally understood, but by their ability to learn and re-learn and by their engagement with the new “creative ethos” (Florida, 2002, p. 21).

Hargreaves (2002) has analysed the implications of the knowledge society for schools, for teachers and for learners. His dystopian vision of the standardised marketised school system fuelling the engines of economic growth and productivity is not unfamiliar to those currently working in educational reform. His vision of a school system for the knowledge society focuses on learning – teacher learning – as well as student learning which aligns with the professional development approach adopted by Education Queensland.

Teachers who are catalysts of the knowledge society must therefore try to make their schools into learning organisations where capacities to learn, and structures to support learning and respond constructively to change are widespread among adults as well as among children. (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 20)

Increasingly governments and employers are seeking graduates, citizens and employees with thinking skills, the ability to problem solve and to be creative in the transformation of information and ideas. At the same time educationalists are aware of the need for teachers and their students to understand the nature of learning and the need to teach learning skills (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Hargreaves, 2002).

## **Curriculum Research and Development**

Stenhouse (1975) saw schools as research and development institutions, conducting research in curriculum and teaching in close collaboration with researchers for the growth of the research tradition in schools. Others (Reid, 2006; Lawton & Walsh, 2004; Green, 2003) agree that curriculum incorporates content and process that engages schools and teachers in professional creativity and knowledge generation. Stenhouse defined curriculum as “...an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice” (1975, pp. 4-5). He added that curriculum should be grounded in practice and is “...the means by which the experience of attempting to put an educational proposal into practice is made publicly available. It involves both content and method, and in its widest application takes account of the problem of implementation in the institutions of the educational system.” As a minimum Stenhouse declared that “a curriculum should provide a basis for planning a course, studying it empirically and considering the grounds for its justification” (1975, pp. 4-5).

With regards curriculum development in Australia, until recently, there has been a dominance of a technical approach and as Smyth (2006, p. 317) concludes what we have witnessed is a lack of national debate about crucial issues and significant

complexities confronting schools, teachers and teacher educators, instead we have been subjected to trivialisation and an “undignified slugging of public schools”. The rationale for a national curriculum in Australia has aroused debates around the argument for consistency (Masters, 2006; Graham & Martin, 2006; Reid, 2006) when in reality what some see occurring is a struggle for power and control by the Federal Government over the states’ agenda (Graham & Martin, 2006; Smyth, 2006). “Curriculum is not only an education matter but also a democratic matter,” Reid continues:

At a time when the Australian nation-state is grappling with the many challenges of globalisation, it is important to engage broad community discussion. ...The curriculum stands as one arena where people can discuss issues which go to the heart of community life, such as: what are the valued knowledges in societies and communities characterised by diversity?; what are the capabilities that people need to live enriched lives?; how can our education institutions represent and expand democratic life? (2006, p. 69)

Reid (2002, p. 582) advocates new discourses to support public education in these new times. He stresses the importance of “the nation-building role” of public education but indicates that this role has to be contextualised in a global world. Education is fundamental in the development of people’s democratic capacities to collectively engage in choices about the future direction of their society. Reid (2002, 2006, 2007) argues for a “collective notion of choice” that will impact on educational policy differently to that which privileges “individuated notions of choice”.

## **Democratic Principles and Strategies**

If we are to engage people in active citizenship in the nation state and the global community then as argued we need to reach publicly agreed capabilities (Reid, 2002, 2007) that include in the curriculum a range of political and social capacities. These involve: an understanding of inter-cultural competence, skills of critical thinking, commitment to the collective good and to social justice and well developed political skills.

As citizens of the global community, students also must develop a deep understanding of the need to take action and make decisions to help solve the world’s difficult problems. They need to participate in ways that will enhance democracy and promote equality and social justice in their cultural communities, nations, regions and in the world. (Banks, 2008, pp.134-5)

Banks argues for transformative citizenship education which:

...recognizes and validates the cultural identities of students. It is rooted in transformative academic knowledge and enables students to acquire information, skills and values needed to challenge inequality within their communities, their nations and the world; to develop cosmopolitan values and perspectives; and to take actions to create just and democratic multicultural communities and societies. (2008, pp.134-5)

To support these goals democratic principles need to support the pedagogies, structures and processes of the school. Democratic inquiry and democratic curriculum strengthen the school's processes of becoming a community. Diversity is respected in community building and the school operates accordingly incorporating inclusive strategies. All students participate in school activities with cooperation among the students regardless of their race, ethnic origin or cultural groups. Students are not excluded (Reid, 2002, 2006, 2007).

## **Collaborative Curriculum Policy Development**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in the Republic of Ireland has effectively used democratic principles, and honoured the rights of the child, in collaborative curriculum development. The reform proposal for upper secondary education curriculum recognised the need to involve broad community discussion in the identification of agreed capabilities. The rationale for the framework drew heavily on the knowledge society discourse, specifically the need for schools to produce successful learners with a range of flexible skills applicable in a range of settings. The NCCA deliberately chose the term “key” to indicate the importance of these capabilities of “unlocking” success in learning, communication, social interaction and collaborative working (Klenowski & Looney, 2006).

The consultation process for “Developing Senior Cycle Education” had a number of strands including an on-line component that involved the updating of the results of the survey on a daily basis. This attracted ongoing media and public attention and this format allowed for far more student engagement.

Respondents to the online survey were asked to suggest how the learning environment at upper secondary might be changed to meet some of the challenges to be faced by students in the future.

Three perspectives emerged. First, a high proportion of respondents agreed that “learning for understanding” should take precedence over “learning for examinations” (94%).

Second, the future learning environment should be more varied and more appropriate to the needs of learners. Respondents agreed that “more project-based learning should be encouraged” (82%) and that “learning should have a more practical focus” (85%). There was overwhelming support for the students’ involvement in “more creative activities and problem-solving” (97%) and for the increased use of technology as a tool for learning (90%). Third, there was support for the range of learning settings to be diversified to include the community and the workplace. The majority of respondents agreed that there ought to be closer links between learning and work (85%), more community-based learning (77%), and greater opportunities to take out-of-school courses (77%).

In the final report from the full consultation process the five key skills that were most frequently identified were: information processing; communicating; being personally effective; critical and creative thinking and working with others (NCCA, 2003, p. 20). These five skills are identified as central to teaching and learning across the curriculum at senior cycle. They are important for all students to achieve their full potential, both during their time in school and into the future. “Key skills enable students to participate fully in society, including family life, the world of work and lifelong learning. As students develop in each of the key skills they will grow in their knowledge about and skills in learning in general and their own learning in particular. And they will develop as effective learners.” (NCCA, 2008)

## Conclusion

Research, conducted in the policy, and teaching and learning contexts with which teachers are most familiar, is useful. One such research project that provided Queensland teachers with insights, to which they could relate, was the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (QRLS) (2001), funded by Education Queensland. Michael Apple (2006) states that this study as described in *Teachers and Schooling Making a Difference* (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) portrays “a democratic and critical education in action” as it captures the developments occurring in this state. The focus is on public schools. In particular, there is discussion and explanation of the interface of policy development and practice, support for the development of schools as learning organizations with a focus on the relationship between teacher learning and student learning and “schools as reflective and inclusive communities of practice” (Apple, 2006 p. 7). It is distributive leadership that is valued in this context. The value of partnerships with academe, teachers, school leaders and policy makers is illustrated. This study conceptualised the notion of “productive pedagogies” that views teachers as at the core of making a difference to student outcomes and encourages classroom practices (which value intellectual quality, connectedness, socially supportive classroom environment and valuing difference). “Productive pedagogies” and

“productive assessment” are key to improving learning for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is through learning together with the academy that school leaders, teachers and policy officers will find the “commonplace of education” (Schwab, 1978, p. 371) in studying the cluster of learning, teaching, school and curriculum. We need to promote debate and professional dialogue with policy officers about classroom practice where learning is central and teachers and their classroom practices are at the heart of educational policy. We now have the opportunity for teachers and school leaders to be reinvigorated, while supported in their engagement in policy research, to study issues relevant to public education, to develop curriculum based on democratic principles that incorporates the views of those who are least powerful, including the child. It is through these partnerships that our students can benefit as we develop their curiosity, ability to critique and enhance their creativity to deal with the uncertainties of the future. For it is with teachers like Phillipa Garlick, who is recognised by her students and their parents for her dedication to her profession and tireless efforts for her students, (Westside News, 2008, p.15) and schools like Milpera State High School (<http://www.milperashs.eq.edu.au/>) that respect the importance of difference and social justice principles where the hope lies for public schools. For here is the potential to demonstrate that public education matters and public education is able to achieve its collective purposes for the common good in a global era.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Education Queensland has funded a scholarship scheme for teachers to undertake further study specialising in Public Education.

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