

‘Closing the Achievement Gap’: Will the national education agenda be a help or hindrance?

Alan Reid
University of South Australia, Adelaide

*Professor Alan Reid is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of South Australia.
This discussion was presented as the Keynote Address at the annual conference of the History Teachers’
Association of Australia (HTAA), held in Adelaide in October 2011.*

Introduction

It is a great honour to have been asked to deliver the opening keynote address at this conference. The invitation to speak was accompanied by a difficult to resist assurance that I could choose my own topic. After giving a possible topic a lot of thought, I decided that since the majority of your conference will focus specifically on history, and that presumably issues and challenges around the national curriculum will get a good airing over the next few days – and that anyway there are far more credentialed speakers in that area at this conference – I would talk about the wider context in which the learning area of History, and history teachers, are currently operating. In my view all educators need to be aware of this context, and be actively involved in debates around the issues in the contemporary policy arena, because the decisions that flow from these debates will most assuredly affect their work – in your case your work as history educators. It is not possible to cocoon within a subject area – no matter how important and fascinating it is – and be free of the impact of this agenda on your work.

So, I have chosen the national education agenda as my focus, and I want to explore this agenda through the lens of what is claimed to be one of its dominant themes – equity. After many years on the outer, equity appears to be experiencing a revival in Australian education. It is frequently mentioned as one of the goals of federal government policy – usually described as ‘closing the achievement gap’ - and used to make evaluative judgments about educational practice. I applaud the government for this policy emphasis, and in what follows, in no way do I mean to question its sincerity. But in this paper I will argue that far from advancing equity, many of the policy directions and associated strategies that have been developed are likely to be more counterproductive to equity goals than they will be to their realisation. I will suggest that one of the main reasons for this is the processes that are used to develop and implement policy

– processes which have resulted in undertheorised and superficial strategies lacking a foundation in research and educational practice. In my view unless and until this serious matter is addressed, the policy rhetoric about equity is unlikely ever to be realised. If this is to change, the first task is to understand what is happening and so the purpose of this paper is to shine a light on these policy processes. Before I do so however, I want to construct a potted history of equity and education in Australia, in order to derive some broad principles, based on what we have learned, about the process of policy development. Given my audience, I undertake this historical sketch with some trepidation – but it is needed because it will function as a reference point against which to assess contemporary policy.

Equity and education in Australia: a potted history

1870s – 1960s

For almost 100 years after the formation of state public education systems in the 1870s, the concept of equity was weakly represented in education. State schools were established to cater for working class children whose families could not afford private education and so in the first instance compulsory public education was confined to basic or elementary schooling, the main aim of which was to ‘gentle the masses’ for purposes of social control. Secondary education, for which one paid fees at private college, was primarily for the children of the upper and middle classes who were seen as the future leaders. Gradually through the first half of the 20th century, access to education was broadened by increasing the age of compulsion and expanding secondary education and making it free to all children. This was justified through a liberal meritocratic ideology which began to take hold, maintaining that advancement up the educational ladder, and thus social advancement, should occur on the basis of ability, interest and effort, rather than be determined by birth.

However, this emerging ideology did not question the relationship between a child's background and educational outcomes and so the structures which were established to offer different pathways for students invariably replicated and reproduced prevailing social structures and circumstances. By the 1950s, it remained the case that the vast majority of University students came from private schools which offered an academic curriculum, while students from working class backgrounds either left school as soon as they reached the compulsory leaving age of 14 years, or were overwhelmingly represented in technical schools. The few working class students who made it to university were cited as examples of the efficacy of the ideology of meritocracy.

1960s – early 1990s

The post-World War 2 baby boom led to increased demands on schools as people, recognising the potential of education in the welfare state, began to insist on the provision of greater opportunities for their children. By the 1960s, as the age of compulsion rose to 15 years and the economy required more skilled workers, Australia was moving slowly to an age of mass secondary education. More young people staying at school for longer periods highlighted the correlation between school success and such background factors as class, gender, ethnicity and 'race'. Researchers and practitioners began to grapple with the causes of, and reasons for, unequal educational outcomes, and through the 1970s and 1980s state and federal governments funded a number of programs – such as the famous Disadvantaged Schools Program – to explore strategies designed to address the issue. Concerns about equity and social justice had become an established part of the education landscape.

During this time a number of important understandings emerged. First, there was the realisation that equity was not only an individual matter (eg providing equal access and opportunities), but was also a collective social concern. Educating all young people to acquire the capabilities to function as active citizens was not something that could be left to chance or unevenly distributed, it was a common good that was a prerequisite for a vibrant and healthy democracy. Second, there was a growing appreciation of the complexity of achieving equity in and through education. For example, some of the early approaches which treated 'equity groups' (e.g. socio-economic, gender, ethnicity or 'race') as stand-alone categories, were amended to take account of the intersections of these groups and the different contexts in which they operated.

These new understandings led to the development of a range of strategies and approaches. For example, there were new funding policies based on a commitment to a fairer (re)distribution of resources; curriculum policies and teaching strategies which sought to address the ways in which the official curriculum had tended to embody the cultural capital of dominant groups; and political processes which tried to give more voice and power to members of marginalised groups. There were successes and also many failures.

Whilst some inroads were made into the manifest inequalities, it was clear that this was difficult and complex work, and that sustainable long term change was going to take many years to achieve: equity in education is a marathon not a sprint. It was recognised that approaches and strategies seeking to address equity needed to be grounded in research and inquiry, and be systematic and appreciative of the contexts in which education is practised.

1990s – 2007

By the early 1990s, and in the wake of the Labor government's intention to construct education as a key tool of micro-economic reform, the focus on trying to understand the complexity of equity in education began to wane. After the election of the Howard government in 1996, the emphasis on the economic purposes of education was strengthened, but with an ideological twist: the new government had embraced neo-liberalism. The discourse of the market - with its stress on individual rights and consumer choice - became dominant even in social policy areas such as education. In this new environment, education was increasingly constructed as a positional good for the use of individuals, rather than as a social good. In such an environment, the discourse on equity was pushed to the background and replaced by the dominant concepts of choice and competition.

2007 – present

The election of the Rudd Labor government in November 2007 resulted in equity returning to centre stage in education policy. The new federal Minister of Education, Julia Gillard, committed the government to such priorities as lifting retention rates to Year 12 or equivalent to 90% by 2020; sharply increasing rates of participation in higher education for students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds; and raising literacy and numeracy outcomes, especially for indigenous students where it declared a target of halving the attainment gap in year 12 by 2020.

I applaud this commitment to equity which has continued into the second term of the Labor government. However, it is intriguing that despite its visible presence in policy rhetoric, there is no articulated government view about the meaning of equity. In its absence, equity in education has been shaped, by default, by the dominant educational ideology which, under the Rudd/Gillard governments, has rested upon three major premises. The first is that the major purpose of education is to prepare young people for the workforce. That is, education has a largely, though not solely, economic purpose. The second is that schools and school systems operate best when they compete against each other in an education market where the winners are those who best meet the need of the 'consumers' (parents and students). The third is that the best way to achieve quality in education is through 'transparent accountability' which ensures that information about schools is provided to enable consumer choice, and that schools are motivated by systems of rewards and punishment (e.g. Lingard, 2011; Savage, 2011).

This triumvirate of policy positions has given equity a very individualistic policy framing in education. It involves an identification of which students are at risk and the formulation of policies which ensure that these students in particular are the beneficiaries of choice and accountability in order to 'close the achievement gap'. The central tools in this process are standardised tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which are used as benchmarks to assess both the achievement gap itself and educational progress made. This has meant that the government has remained in thrall to the endless display of graphs showing Australia's place in PISA test results; accompanied by the mantra that the Australian education system is 'high in quality but low in equity', or that Australia has a 'long equity tail' (McGaw, 2008).

However, the identification by PISA or NAPLAN of the disparity between the educational outcomes of, say, indigenous children or children from low socio-economic backgrounds and children from more affluent backgrounds (something about which the education community had been aware for decades), has not led to more detailed research about the causes of such inequalities, but simply to assertions about what strategies are needed to 'close the achievement gap' which invariably involve greater accountability, rewards and punishment. If these strategies resulted in improved equity outcomes, they might be defensible. But, I will

argue that ignoring the complexities involved in the concept of 'equity', has resulted in policy 'solutions' which are simplistic and therefore counterproductive to equity outcomes. Just as such approaches have manifestly failed in other parts of the world, so too will they fail in Australia.

In this paper I will argue that if this is to change – that is, if we are to retain equity at the heart of education policy but return to the more sophisticated policy processes used during the period of the 1970s and 1980s – we need to understand in some depth what is happening, how and with what consequences. It is only when we are armed with such information that it will be possible to argue for the kinds of changes necessary. I intend to conduct this analysis by exploring three different aspects of the **processes** used in the so-called Education Revolution: Policy simplification; Policy borrowing; and Policy catch-up.

Policy simplification

Lindsay Tanner's recent book *'Sideshow'* shows how and with what consequences public policy debate generally is being dumbed down in Australia. One might have imagined that education would be one area in our society that might model how to conduct nuanced and sophisticated policy development – and yet I will argue that in fact the dominant policy discourse in education is based upon a simplification of complex issues. Let me offer some examples:

- *The causes of identified problems are rarely explored* and there is often a leap from problem to solution (indeed, sometimes it is a solution looking for a problem), with little use of research, or at best selective use and at worst abuse of research findings. I could give dozens of examples here, but one that is troubling me at the moment is the way in which research about the effects of quality teaching and teachers have slipped into the mantra that teachers are the sole and determining influence on learning as though such factors as context, socio-economic status, and resources don't matter. The so called education reformers in the United States (about whom more later) are fond of telling the world that breaking poverty can be totally achieved by dedicated and quality teachers.
- *There is a language of certainty.* How often does a politician tell us that 'it is the right thing to do'; and how is that standardised test data have achieved the status of being the sole arbiter of educational quality or measure of educational improvement, as though the data is able to provide some objective

or scientific proof. Why is qualitative data gathered in specific contexts at particular times dismissed as being 'soft'?

- Any new policy is invariably accompanied by *strident overclaiming about its benefits* – the claims about the first draft of the national curriculum being of 'world class status' (whatever that means); or the chest thumping that occurs when standardised test results show a small improvement.
- *Professional educators, far from being trusted are often blamed, and rarely consulted*, except about the detail of policies that have already been determined.
- (Conversely) *There is an increasing trust in and use of (by policy makers) of the views of people who have no expertise in education, such as business people, economists, journalists and lawyers*. In the United States, for example, the heavy hitters in the corporate world – e.g., Gates, Walton, Murdoch, Broad (collectively forming what Diane Ravitch calls the 'billionaire boys club') – have entered the field, not just as donors of private funds, but as **designers** of education policy. Using the 'achievement gap' as their justification, they have poured buckets of money into schemes based on education markets and 'transparent accountability'. Their 'solutions' have been picked up by successive governments and turned into failed policies, a prime example being *No Child Left Behind*. Let me provide an example of how this plays out in the public sphere. It involves one of Australia's most famous exports – Rupert Murdoch.

A case study of policy simplification

In November 2008, Rupert Murdoch, presented the 2008 Boyer lectures which he entitled *Golden Age of Freedom*. One of his seven lectures was dedicated to education. Now, before I tell the story, remember that we are talking about (a) an American businessman who has been living in America for the past 25 years; and (b) a context where he is talking shortly after the first onslaught of the Global Financial Crisis – just as we were learning about the sheer naked greed, the financial and corporate sectors. In the USA alone it left a debt of three trillion dollars, with thousands losing work and/or their life savings.

Murdoch started his lecture by bringing to bear his deep expertise in education, and his detailed understanding of the Australian education system over the past quarter of a century, to say:

The unvarnished truth is that in countries such as Australia, Britain and particularly the United States, our public education systems are a disgrace. Despite

spending more and more money, our children seem to be learning less and less – especially for those who are most vulnerable in our society.

His evidence for saying this is not revealed, but having said it – that is, having dismissed the entire public education systems in three countries – he goes on to apportion blame and then propose strategies for turning things around. The blame part is easy. It is of course the public school educators who are responsible for the parlous state of education:

... there is a whole industry of pedagogues devoted to explaining why some schools and some students are failing. Some say classrooms are too large. Others complain that not enough public funding is devoted to this or that program. Still others will tell you that students who come from certain backgrounds just can't learn (Murdoch, 2008).

This deeply researched accusation opens the way for his solutions for educational reform which are based upon an equity rationale - yes, 'closing the achievement gap'. His reasons for wanting to close the gap have nothing to do with making a fairer society or better democracy, they are purely economic: the global economy needs skilled human capital; and 'as a general rule, the more education you have, the more you are going to earn in your career'.

What is needed, says Murdoch, are at least three strategies. **First**, higher standards need to be set. The implication here is, presumably, that educators are setting low or inadequate standards - again an unresearched accusation. But given that the question of standards is a vexed one in the education literature, it is interesting to note Murdoch's contribution to the debate. For him, standards in education mean that:

...we ought to demand as much quality and performance from those who run our schools as we do from those who provide us with our morning cup of coffee.

I will leave it to you to ponder what that actually means – but it is an important benchmark because his **second** strategy involves holding schools to account and closing them when they fail to reach these standards. This closure strategy leads into his **third** strategy which proposes that corporations (remember that he is talking at the time of the GFC) should get heavily involved in schools, especially at the lower levels, because:

... corporate leaders know better than government officials the skills that people need to get ahead in the

21st century. And businessmen and businesswomen need to take this knowledge and help build school systems that will ensure that all children get at least a basic education (i.e., privatise schools).

You can see in all of this some of the techniques described above – certainty; constructing educators as the enemy; describing a problem without any evidence and then proposing solutions; transferring business models to education and so on. One wonders what Murdoch would say if we told him how to run his media empire. Indeed, given the recent controversies engulfing News Corporation, his time may have been better spent watching what was happening in his own business enterprise, rather than denigrating educators and public education.

I will argue in the next section that this narrow and simplistic recipe for educational success is not only fatally flawed but can only work against the interests of students from equity groups. The purpose here is to show how the public policy discourse about education has been so debased, that people with no expertise or knowledge about education (other than the fact that they once attended a school) feel that they can denigrate the efforts of those working every day in the field, and make pronouncements about education policy. Perhaps it wouldn't matter if they had no influence but unfortunately their words and ideas are picked up as pearls of educational wisdom by politicians and soon become the lingua franca of educational policy discourse.

Since he made that speech, Murdoch has outlined plans to make News Corporation a leading provider of educational materials within 5 years, with about 10% of its total revenue deriving from that source. He has recently established an Education Division to spearhead this push; and has spent \$360 million acquiring a 90% interest in Wireless Generation (a company which produces software for assessment, curriculum instruction and compiling student test scores and other student information for school districts and state governments). Given the recent scandals, no doubt the irony of this does not escape you – but it certainly hasn't stopped Murdoch from his push into education. This month he is the keynote speaker at Jeb Bush's (yes, Jeb Bush!) *National Summit on Education Reform*. We can expect more speeches from Murdoch outlining the problem with education and promoting the ways to overcome them in order to 'close the achievement gap', because many of his 'solutions' are the basis of profit generation.

My argument in this section is that it is difficult to develop sophisticated policy approaches to address complex equity issues when the education debate is being simplified in these ways, and when those designing the solutions are also trying to turn a profit!

Policy borrowing

It is now well established that the transfer of policies in one country to another is highly problematic. Differences in context and culture demand that, at the very least, ideas from one setting are treated with some caution and trialled before they are imposed in another setting. Unfortunately this has not happened in the 'education revolution' where one of the major policy pieces – what has been called 'transparent accountability' – has been unashamedly borrowed from New York with little attempt to check it out before full scale implementation. As a consequence, I will argue that the outcomes are more likely to impede than to enhance equity in education. Let me explain by starting with the New York story.

In 2002, the Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg announced the appointment of Joel Klein, a successful and charismatic New York Lawyer and businessman, as Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, the largest public school system in the United States. Klein immediately vowed to lift the standard of education in New York, particularly for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Once again, the discourse of the 'achievement gap' was employed to identify equity groups using graphs of standardised test results. Before long, Klein brought to bear his legal and business acumen to design an **education** program to deliver his promise. It comprised the following elements:

- Using annual standardised test results as the indicator of educational quality. This allowed his Department to publicly compare 'like' schools;
- Awarding to every school a grade with associated consequences, and making these public. Schools receiving an A or B grade would receive financial rewards; schools with D or F grades would be given targets to meet the following year or be treated as failing schools and risk closure or the removal of the principal and some or all staff; and schools receiving three Cs in a row would be treated as failing schools;
- Giving bonuses to principals and teachers on the basis of improvements in standardised test results;
- Establishing charter schools – self-managing schools, funded from the public purse, but which run as private entities and compete for custom in an education market;

- Pushing the cause of the private company *Teach for America* which organises programs involving the recruitment of the ‘top’ graduates from a range of areas (eg law, finance, science etc), giving them six weeks teacher training, and then placing them in the most disadvantaged schools to work with the most disadvantaged students. This ‘infantry’ of ‘quality’ teachers would be used in the fight to reduce the equity gap.

Within two years of introducing this program, Joel Klein was publicly and widely spruiking the unparalleled success of his accountability approach. Using the standardised test results he showed not only that standards were improving rapidly, but that the gap was closing fast. ‘Failing’ schools were closed, and new Charter schools were established in their place, in the face of vociferous teacher, parent and student protests about the unfairness of the strategy and the destruction of established school communities. Klein was unphased by the protests and emboldened by his success, which he trumpeted far and wide at home and abroad. During this triumphalist period Julia Gillard, then the federal Minister of Education and herself a lawyer, was drawn into the Klein orbit. It was not long before Gillard was a convert, and she issued an invitation to Klein to visit Australia and talk about the educational transformation of New York. As Gillard eulogised:

No one who has witnessed Joel’s marshalling of evidence about the systemic improvements he’s made in New York schools could be in any doubt about the effectiveness of his approach. His message is morally compelling and intellectually convincing (Gillard, 26/11/2008)

Not surprisingly, the ‘transparent accountability’ agenda announced under the banner of Australia’s ‘Education Revolution’ bore a striking resemblance to the Klein agenda. As it was rolled out, it was justified on the basis of – you guessed it – ‘closing the achievement gap! The agenda comprised:

- MySchool 1 and 2 – the website which allows people to compare the performance of like schools, with the sole information about educational outcomes being NAPLAN results;
- Performance bonuses to schools which lift their NAPLAN results;
- Performance bonuses for teachers and principals;
- Autonomous (self-managed) schools, described as ‘empowering local schools’;
- Financial and moral support for Teach for Australia (the Australian version of its American counterpart).

It is instructive to compare each of these policy ‘initiatives’ with the intent and substance of Klein’s New York agenda. The extent of the similarity is so striking that it inevitably raises the question about whether or not these borrowed policies worked in the settings in which they were developed. That is, did they achieve the purpose for which they were designed - to ‘close the achievement gap’ – before they were so slavishly copied? It is to that question I will now turn.

What’s the problem with the ‘transparent accountability’ agenda in terms of equity?

Well, apart from the fact that these policies were developed for and in totally different settings, if you were going to borrow policies:

- A. *Why not borrow from successful countries?* At first blush it would seem obvious that if a government was to borrow policies from other countries, it would select those from successful countries. Assuming for the moment that standardised test results at the international level are able to tell us a lot about the quality of education in various countries, why would the government not borrow policies from those countries which are above us in PISA outcomes (eg., Finland, Korea, Canada), rather than a country which is many places below us? In 2009, Australia was 15th and the US 29th in maths; in science, Australia was 10th and the US 23rd; and in reading Australia was 9th and the United States 17th (OECD, 2010). If the Australian government had looked up the PISA League Table ladder rather than down, it would have adopted a very different policy approach to advancing equity in Australian education. However, not only did the government ignore the evidence of the very benchmarks that it used to identify Australia’s equity ‘problem’ and justify its ‘transparent accountability agenda’, but it also ignored research findings from the USA and the UK demonstrating the failure of New York-like ‘accountability’ regimes.
- B. *Why not take account of the research from the USA and the UK which demonstrates the failure of such ‘accountability’ regimes?* The considerable research evidence from the countries such as the US which have implemented similar accountability strategies shows that they: (a) narrow the curriculum ; (b) cause schools to throw up smoke screens, even cheat (eg., exclude students, tamper with tests) and teach for the test, in order to improve results; (c) have not resulted in improved educational outcomes (as measured by standardised tests) overall or closed the equity gap; (d) residualise public education; and (e)

frustrate those parents for whom choice is a mirage, and damage the sense of school community as parents begin to eye off 'better performing schools' (eg., Houtt and Elliott, 2011; Ravitch 2010; Hursh & Martina, 2005). Where it has been implemented, the performance bonus culture has not resulted in improved educational outcomes (other than teaching for the test) and has instead diminished teacher collegiality and collaboration. That is, the sort of agenda being borrowed by the Gillard government does not have a good track record, other than working against equity!

- C. *Why not investigate, in depth, the claims made by people like Joel Klein before transplanting their policies?* Even if the government paid no attention to the research evidence, it would be expected that it would undertake some due diligence in respect to the claims made by people like Joel Klein, before transplanting their policies. It failed to do this. Earlier I left the Joel Klein story at the stage where he was spruiking the outcomes of his policies as lifting performance and closing the achievement gap. The tests scores continued going up every year. In 2007, these results caused the Broad Foundation to award New York City its annual prize as the nation's most improved urban school district; and in 2009, 84% of elementary and middle schools received an 'A' grade report compared to 23% in 2007. Klein was riding high and Mayor Bloomberg used the results to bolster his re-election.

It was at about that time that Julia Gillard became an overnight fan of the Klein agenda for educational transformation, apparently oblivious to the fact that many people were raising publicly their concerns about the standard of the tests which lay at the heart of his suite of policies. They began suggesting that the annual New York tests were getting easier. It was claimed that they were too narrow, too short and too predictable, and since questions varied little from year to year, teachers were able to prepare students for the test. More than this, it was claimed that the cut off scores for achieving a proficiency level were being lowered each year. Eventually the evidence of grade inflation was too compelling to ignore and forced the City to adjust the 2010 tests to better equate with national standards. **Under the revised tests, the grades plummeted.** In many schools the percentage of students passing dropped by more than 50 percentage points. In some places it was much worse. The percentage of third grade students proficient in Maths at Public School 179 in the Bronx, for example, had been 91%

in 2009 and fell to 21% in 2010. The New York Times reported that '...overall more than half of public school students in New York City failed their English exams and only 54% passed in Maths.... (T)he drop-offs were most drastic for black and Latino students, as well as those with disabilities and those still learning English, primarily because many of the students had been just above the minimum proficiency rates under the old standards' (Medina, 2010, p. A1).

Once the central piece of the Klein agenda was revealed as a sham, the rest began to fall like a house of cards. The teacher performance bonus was scrapped; charges were levelled that the claims about the educational outcomes of charter schools were overblown; and evidence showed that non-charter schools were becoming residualised. New York parents began protesting at public meetings, particularly angered by the fact that student performance had been exaggerated, thus denying some students remedial or diagnostic assistance; and providing a false picture of student progress. It was according to famous US educator, Diane Ravitch, 'institutionalised fraud'.

Just as the anger was boiling over, Joel Klein revealed that after 8 years in education his time as Chancellor was up, and he had accepted a position as Executive Vice President in charge of News Corporation's newly formed Education Division, leaving New York schools to pick up the pieces. Of course old habits die hard, and Mayor Bloomberg, in the face of fierce criticism appointed another non-educator, business woman Cathie Black, to the position of Chancellor. This time however, the lack of Emperor's clothing became apparent more quickly, and within three months Black resigned, acknowledging that she did not have the expertise for the position.

And so it came to pass that the agenda that Julia Gillard was so quick to borrow and foist onto the Australian education system, had unravelled, with school progress since 2002 remaining flat when tests results were corrected against national standards, and the equity gap just as wide as it had been in 2002. It is important to note that New York's experience was replicated in some other States of the USA which had also adopted the reward/punishment approach to closing the achievement gap with similarly inflated successes.

This is the system that Julia Gillard wants to impose on Australian schools. The fact is that apart from damaging schools, these sorts of approaches and policies feed into and reinforce the idea that equity in education is an

uncomplicated issue which can be achieved simply by putting in place strategies of ‘motivation’ which reward and punish. It is clear such policies only exacerbate inequality. By failing to recognise the complexities of the causes of inequality, by jumping from simple indicators like NAPLAN results to simple solutions, by borrowing failed policies from other countries and failing to recognise the importance of context, governments are avoiding the complex task of building approaches to equity in education which are based on ongoing research and inquiry and which are sustainable in the long term.

Policy catch-up

The third aspect of the current policy approach is what I will call policy catch-up, by which I mean that as the inevitable problems with the policy platform are encountered – problems that have emerged as a result of the tendency to simplify complex issues – so too are there hastily constructed responses which seek to paper over the cracks. Usually these policy responses are accompanied by a post hoc justification for actions that have been already taken. The problem is that the original policy announcements have determined the policy direction and so any subsequent action is invariably educational spack filler. This haphazard approach to policy development and implementation makes it difficult to deal with the complexity of educational issues. The national curriculum is a good case study example of this process at work.

In January 2008, then Education Minister Gillard announced the government’s intention to pursue the development of a new national curriculum, comprising four subjects: Maths, Science, English and History, to be developed by the end of 2010 by ACARA and implemented in 2011 by the States and Territories. It is hard to believe that at that stage the government seriously believed that a national curriculum could comprise four subjects, but there it was – no sense of whether other learning areas were to follow, no argument about why these four subjects were chosen, no overall curriculum plan. Naturally the professional communities of the less favoured subjects began to complain and lobby and so began an unseemly jostling for position to claim the remaining space in the new national curriculum. Geography, Languages and the Arts made it into the hastily constructed second phase of the national curriculum (and ready for implementation from 2012); and, after another round of lobbying, protesting and schmoozing, a third phase with ‘the rest’, including such learning areas as Design and Technology and Health

and Physical Education, was announced (and ready for implementation from 2013).

By this time, of course, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was telling us that this had always been intended since it was spelt out in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals of for Young Australians* (2008), conveniently ignoring the fact that the Goals had been agreed to almost 12 months after the first decisions were made about the curriculum. In any case this post hoc rationalisation skates over the fact that the ‘big 4’ subjects had set the template for the learning areas which follow. The rest have to pick up the scraps from the national curriculum table, after such matters as time allocation are determined. The lack of curriculum design here is breathtaking.

The date for implementation of Phase 1 in 2011 was always impossible and it was not far into the process before the deadline had been quietly shifted to ‘**from 2011 and by 2013**’. Each of the subsequent phases had a similar two year time frame, resulting in the final year of implementation for the compulsory years of schooling being 2015, eight years after the initial announcement. Surely it would have been possible to work with the profession to conceptualise and design the whole curriculum, before breaking up the development phase into stages, and thus to complete this work well before 2015. That is, the rush to speed up the process has resulted in slowing down the process. It also means that ACARA is constantly having to play policy catch up.

The process of policy catch-up has resulted in a number of problems. Most obviously, it has meant that the new national curriculum has no view of ‘curriculum’ other than as being a collection of subjects or learning areas. As a consequence of starting the process by focusing on four subjects, the opportunity to conceptualise a number of important non-subject areas was lost and so in each case, **despite the fact that the Phase 1 subjects have been completed, published and are now in the implementation stage**, catch-up work is proceeding to fill in the obvious gaps. This is an impoverished approach to a so-called 21st century curriculum. I will give four examples of the problems which still need to be addressed in the catch-up process.

Assessment and reporting

When the first draft of the first four Learning Areas was released, it was apparent that very little thought had gone into understanding and defining the nature of

'achievement standards'. Not surprisingly, the various writers in each Learning Area interpreted these differently, and so when the drafts were released, there was no common approach within subjects, let alone between them. Despite the fact that the first four subjects are now being implemented, there are still many problems with the achievement standards. In some cases, for example, although the documentation tells us that the standards are designed to capture the quality of work expected at each year level, they appear to be little more than summaries of the content. As a result, catch-up work to validate the completed and published achievement standards is now underway.

The general capabilities

In the very first drafts of the Learning Areas of Maths, Science, English and History, the claim was made that this was a world class curriculum. One of the major reasons for this was the presence of the general capabilities:

However, 21st century learning does not fit neatly into a curriculum solely organised by learning areas. Increasingly, in a world where knowledge itself is constantly growing and evolving, students need to develop a set of skills, behaviours and dispositions, or general capabilities that apply across subject-based content and equip them to be lifelong learners able to operate with confidence in a complex, information-rich, globalised world. The Australian Curriculum focuses on the development of general capabilities in addition to discipline-based learning areas (ACARA, 2009).

It might be imagined that such an innovative feature of the new curriculum might receive the same focus and emphasis during the development phase as the Learning Areas themselves. Questions such as how the content of each of the seven capabilities might be sequenced at different stages of schooling; the curriculum role of the capabilities; and whether or not the capabilities are to be assessed and reported on separately, are the kind of issues that needed to be addressed right from the start. They weren't. The writers of the four Learning Areas began work before there was any agreed understanding about such basic issues. Not surprisingly the general capabilities became an afterthought, even a distraction, tacked on disparately to Learning Area content. At the time of writing, I understand that catch-up work is now happening and that more detailed outline of the general capabilities are to be released soon. But this of course is after the first four subjects have been completed and so once again there will be need for some speedy catch-up work.

The approach to equity and the curriculum

During the development period of the first four Learning Areas, equity in the curriculum meant little more than setting high standards and expecting all students to achieve them. There was no attempt to theorise an approach to equity which would inform the writing process, using the rich research literature in this area. Issues such as the relationship between official content knowledge, pedagogy and assessment; the ways in which the official curriculum has tended to privilege the cultural capital of certain groups and marginalised that of less powerful groups; and how particular curriculum structures have tended to create hierarchies of knowledge, are all equity questions that were ignored. Of course these are complex issues and the national curriculum was never going to be able to resolve them. But our first national curriculum should have begun with a consideration of what has been learned so far and developed some principles to guide the Learning Area writers. I understand that, at the time of writing, ACARA has commissioned some papers on equity. But the insights from these can only partially inform the already completed Learning Areas. Once again we will be in catch-up mode.

Interdisciplinary work

The various drafts of the national curriculum invariably use the term 21st century learning to describe what follows. If this term has any meaning, it would surely include interdisciplinary work. And yet there has been no sophisticated attempt to build this into the new national curriculum. It is weakly represented in some Learning Areas where the knowledge from one discipline is used to illuminate the knowledge from another discipline. But there are no obvious ways by which students can start with, say, a social or environmental issue or problem and draw on insights from the various disciplines to explore it. Of course, this might still be possible at the level of individual schools. But the point is that the official curriculum does not facilitate this work, through, for example, the use of a mechanism to trigger interdisciplinary pedagogy. Rather, the new national curriculum sends the signals that such work is not valued, especially when it seems to represent little more than a collection of stand-alone Learning Areas. No doubt these issues will be picked up in the implementation phase, but by then the frameworks will have been set and any attempts to promote interdisciplinary learning will once again be done in catch-up mode!

I have no doubt that the development process for the national curriculum will muddle through with this catch-

up work. Each of the four examples I have given (and there could have been many more) will be dealt with in the usual ad hoc way with the usual post hoc justifications. However, the irony of policy catch-up is that so often, in seeking to remedy the problems caused by policy haste, it ends up taking longer than a thoughtful, well researched and consultative approach would have taken! It impedes the sort of rigorous and systematic work that is needed to address the complexity of equity issues.

Instead of the rush to claim world class curriculum status for draft documents, it would surely have been preferable to have established a definition of curriculum and conceptualised the whole of the official curriculum, and the relationships within it, before rushing to work on its component parts. In the absence of such work, it has been necessary to engage in policy catch-up. This has diminished the possibility for an innovative and creative approach. Australia's first national curriculum could have been so much more.

Conclusion

What I have argued in this paper is that while equity has (thankfully) been brought back to centre stage in the national education agenda, it is a narrow, emaciated and individualistic version of equity. Such a version is characterised by simplistic understandings of the nature and causes of educational disadvantage; and policy processes which are counterproductive to the achievement of equity.

The Gillard/Klein agenda assumes that bridging the equity gap is simply a matter of making standardised test results public, encouraging competition between schools, and motivating teachers and principals through systems of reward and punishment. 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.

What is galling is that the Johnny-come-latelies – the businessmen, lawyers and politicians; the instant experts in areas in which they have no expertise or knowledge – are destroying the hard won gains of educators over the years. A genuine approach to equity in education would reject a policy discourse which simplifies complex issues; which blames teachers and schools; which ignores processes of research and inquiry; which

jumps from problem to solution without using evidence; which transplants failed policies from another country; which marginalises educators from the policy process; and which is constructed in such haste that the system is always in policy catch-up mode.

In short, if the government is serious about equity, its policy processes must:

- Be based on a developed and articulated view of equity and social justice
- Be thorough and systematic and recognise the complexities involved in achieving better educational outcomes for 'equity groups';
- Be based on research and inquiry, and be deeply appreciative of the contexts in which educational practice operates;
- Allow for trial and evaluation before being spread widely
- Avoid the trap of reinforcing the very inequities that policies and strategies are designed to address
- Trust the profession and make it a central partner in the decision making process.
- Be wary of hyper inflated claims about 'closing the achievement gap'.

That is, greater equity in education demands hard work over a long period, not quick fixes. The voices of all educators and members of the community are needed to reassert a more social and democratic view of education and equity.

2012
HTA Extension Essay Prize
1st – \$500 2nd – \$300 3rd – \$200
& Sydney Jewish Museum's
'Generation to Generation' Prize
1st – \$300 2nd – \$150

Entries due in September 2012

Full details:
www.htansw.asn.au