

Education, Equity, Economy

Series Editors: George W. Noblit · William T. Pink

William T. Pink *Editor-in-Chief*

Kim Beasy

Meg Maguire

Kitty te Riele

Emma Towers *Editors*

# Innovative School Reforms

International Perspectives  
on Reimagining Theory, Policy, and  
Practice for the Future



Springer

# **Education, Equity, Economy**

Volume 11

## **Series Editors**

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The volumes in this series provide insights into how education, equity and economy are related. The most prominent issue in education is equity. Equity has had dramatic effects not only on education processes and outcomes but also the economy. As the global economy has developed we have moved from post-industrial, to knowledge, to most recently the creative economy. Each of these economic shifts has driven inequities, which in turn has led to more urgent calls to reduce inequities in education. While this outcome is widely known, the focus of much recent work has been on the economy per se. This is the first series to take education rather than economy as its centerpiece. Education is widely regarded as the key resource for global competitiveness, at both the individual and national level. Education, and the differential return from education for different groups in a society and across the globe are best captured by exploring the linkages to the economy. While this connection is important there is mounting evidence which suggests that education alone is insufficient to redress the inequities persisting in most countries. The volumes in this series offer the reader analyses and critiques that cut across these intersecting forces. Specifically, they critique the notion of individual capital while interrogating the systemic intersection of education, equity and economy. For information on how to submit a book proposal for this series, please contact the publishing editor, Ann Ruth: [ann.ruth@springernature.com](mailto:ann.ruth@springernature.com)

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Editor-in-Chief

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Editors

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ISSN 2364-835X

ISSN 2364-8368 (electronic)

Education, Equity, Economy

ISBN 978-3-031-64899-1

ISBN 978-3-031-64900-4 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64900-4>

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# Introduction: Reimagining the Future of Schools



William T. Pink, Kim Beasy, Meg Maguire, Kitty te Riele, and Emma Towers

**Abstract** In this introductory chapter we do four things. First, we identify a range of problems currently limiting the efficacy of schools in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United State, and lay out the reasoning for urgently initiating future-oriented reforms in the present moment. Second, we detail the framing of the text by situating it as the logical culmination of prior research and theorizing focused on a variety of schools reform initiatives within an international context. Third, we offer brief summaries of the chapters in each of the three sections of the text. Finally, we note a number of inter-connecting themes which emerge across the chapters, and issue a call for immediate action around future-oriented reforms designed to support a more just, sustainable, and prosperous society. A society that empowers all young people to become both enlightened and engaged citizens, and good stewards of the future.

## 1 Introduction: Reimagining the Future of Schools

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that schools have failed to educate all students equitably, and are therefore in need of an urgent and radical reform. With this nod to Jane Austen, this text takes up the task of exploring what schools should look

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Switzerland AG 2024

K. Beasy et al. (eds.), *Innovative School Reforms*, Education,  
Equity, Economy 11, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64900-4\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64900-4_1)

like if they were reimagined and subsequently redesigned to be effective for all rather than some of the students attending them. The time is right for this reassessment because currently schools are perceived by many to be in a state of crisis. Dropping reading and mathematics achievement scores in the US, for example, are seen as indicators of poor teaching leading many, especially those on the political right, to call for the dismantling of the public schools in favor of privatization and charter schools: completely ignoring, of course, the lingering effects on learning of the closing of schools during the Covid 19 pandemic, and much research which suggests that both privatization and charter schools are no more effective than the public schools (Pink, 2022a). The political right is also placing teachers under siege by suggesting that they are indoctrinating students by (a) teaching about the history of the US, especially the troublesome history of race and class, and (b) by embracing social justice for students who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community. This increased attention on the perceived shortcomings of schools in the US is emerging within a highly contentious political climate significantly heightened by the run up to the Presidential election in November 2024. Specifically, the Right has taken up this attack on the efficacy of teachers and schools in large part as they attempt to move the country to the right, while also relentlessly pushing for the privatization of schools via an endorsement of both vouchers and charter schools: ironically, their embrace of an increasing authoritative stance toward leadership has singled out the schools as an instrument of indoctrination for their own ends. As a consequence of this contested terrain engulfing schools, it becomes vital that we step back and engage in an honest assessment of what isn't working in US schools and what it will take to fix these shortcomings.

The call for change to schooling seems ever-present across societies, including calls from young people themselves. In 2019, young Indigenous people of Australia prepared *The Imagination Declaration*, presented to the Prime Minister and Education Ministers of the country (Shay et al., 2019). The declaration challenged stereotypical deficit views, stating:

When you think of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander kid, or in fact, any kid, imagine what's possible. Don't define us through the lens of disadvantage or label us as limited...Expect the best of us. Expect the unexpected. Excerpt from Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience [AIME], (2019).

This call for reimagining schooling and viewing students through a lens of high expectations rather than disadvantage is particularly relevant given the inequality in how schooling is experienced and the need for a curriculum to prepare young people for a future marked by a changing climate, geopolitical uncertainty, economic disruption, artificial intelligence, and other significant global phenomena. Yet, in the Australian context, similar deficit discourses persist to those noted in the US. Across much of the world—including Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom—a side-effect of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has been to shine a light on educational inequities. In Australia, policy decisions to view schools and classrooms as virus incubators left many students, particularly those facing disadvantages who

relied heavily on school providing emotional, material, and learning support (Rudling et al., 2023), without access to school sites. The shock to the education system caused by the pandemic gave rise to innovations and new partnerships, and to intentions for ‘building back better’ (Reimers et al., 2022; World Bank, 2020). Yet, worthwhile and thoughtful recommendations for change (Australian Government, 2023; Sahlberg et al., 2023) continue to come up against conservative pressures driven by concerns about declining student academic achievements and a significant teacher shortage. In Australia, reimagining schools for the future is perhaps more possible now than it has been for decades, but it won’t be easy.

Another educational truism was expressed by a quote attributed to Mark Twain: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.” Schools may not be the panacea that they are often held up to be. Indeed, schools may also be much more to do with schooling than education! The English setting has been a crucible for major reforms in curriculum, in pedagogy as well as in governance and a destructive attempt at forensic assessment and accountability through high stakes testing and school inspections (Ball, 2021). Not surprisingly, many of the concerns in Australia and the US, as previously detailed, are evident in the English setting. In England we have turned towards a more traditional curriculum that has side-lined creative subjects and anything considered to be ‘sensitive’ such as concerns about political morality and ethics, in favour of disciplines that have been judged to be more to do with wealth creation as detailed in a school-based study on the effects of curriculum and assessment reforms on students and teachers (Neumann et al., 2016, 2020; Gewirtz et al., 2021). Like the US charter schools, English academy schools have reduced local democratic forms of accountability and have frequently been seen as a step towards educational privatisation (Male, 2022). Currently in schools there is an obsession with quantifying attainment, a stress on labelling students through the mechanisms of tracking and a neglect of students with learning challenges or special educational needs as well as students of minoritized heritages and identities (Neumann et al., 2016).

In one recent large-scale study it was found that nearly one in two 15–16 year-old young people in England reported that school was not an enjoyable or meaningful experience, but something to get through because of their futures (McPherson et al., 2023). Reflecting findings in an earlier study on curriculum and assessment reforms in English secondary schools, many schools have adopted teaching methods that many young people experience as alienating and stressful, particularly those with creative and practical interests and those who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Neumann et al., 2016). School can be a stressful time for many young people. Recent studies report a marked increase in worsening mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, which can be precipitated by (negative) school cultures (Barker et al., 2023). In turn, teachers have been hard to recruit and hard to retain, class sizes have increased, teacher aides have lost their jobs due to budget problems (Worth, 2023). In many ways then, what we see is a state of crisis in English education that reflects the US and Australian situation. So, what can be done? *Can* anything be done?



## 2 Framing this Text

It is with these several issues in mind that each of the authors in this text was tasked with responding to the question, “What would the schools of the future look like if the current limitations and failings were remediated?” This text is the natural extension of three prior large-scale projects. The first project culminated in the text entitled “International Handbook of Urban Education (Pink & Noblit, 2007). Here scholars from around the world were invited to enter into a dialogue about the way the world was organized and divided, how rapidly urbanization was moving world-wide, and how urban education was emerging as a central feature of this activity. This text clearly illustrated that a one-size-fits-all approach to improving urban schools was misguided, and that attention to the local, or situated, context would prove significant to the development and implementation of school improvement strategies: in particular, both the availability of adequate resources and the political will to enact policy actions emerged as essential characteristics of successful urban school improvement.

The second, and equally broad-based prior project, resulted in the text entitled “Second International Handbook of Urban Education” (Pink & Noblit, 2017). Here, comprising all new content, again from scholars from around the world, explored the primary theme of how the urban is defined, and in particular under what conditions the marginalized are served by the schools that they attend. In emphasizing that in a variety of geographic locations the school continues to hold a special place to advance social mobility, as well as a key mechanism for supporting the economy of a nation, the text explores the importance of themes such as social stratification, segmentation, racialization, urbanization, class formation and maintenance, and patriarchy. An analysis framework was offered that served to make the current practices of urban education and the various attempts to improve them more transparent: yet again, context emerged as a key to both the conceptualization and realization of reform.

The third prior project that pre-staged the current text is the text entitled “The Oxford Encyclopedia of School Reform” (Pink, 2022b). The emphasis here was on detailing a range of reform strategies across the globe that are nested within the local policy, economic, and socio-cultural context: what emerged from this international perspective, of course, illustrated that the search for the “silver bullet” for actualizing an effective reform is a fool’s errand. Rather, it emphatically demonstrated that attention to a range of in-school factors (e.g., curriculum development, administrative and teacher leadership, practices which sustain inequities across race, class, and gender, school restructuring, and instruction that is insensitive to the cultural heritage of students), together with key out-of-school factors (e.g. national politics and educational funding, and the existing inequities in housing, transportation, and salaries and taxation), are both critically essential to include in the calculus when framing and delivering school reform initiatives.

Perhaps the most disturbing and persistent take-away from these three large projects is that both the process and outcomes of schooling have remained essentially

unaltered in the face of a variety of interventions designed to reshape them. Thus, the next obvious question to pose is “Given a clean slate, current practices aside, how should we reimagine schools in the future so that they work for all rather than some students?” The first step in curating this current text was to decide which geographic locations to include: most importantly, which locations had the most in common, politically, economically and socio-culturally, in terms of their ability to inform each other. Three locations emerged at the top of the list namely, Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States. The second step was to recruit associate editors from each location who could solicit cutting-edge chapters from authors ready and able to engage with the question about a reimagined future of schools. This became a rather easy task: Kim Beasy and Kitty te Riele were eager recruits to curate the Australian section, while Emma Towers and Meg Maguire were equally eager to curate the United Kingdom section. The US section was to be curated by William Pink. The third step, of course, is the often difficult task, namely the solicitation of an interesting and provocative set of chapters: chapters that reflect a variety of perspectives about (a) how to interrogate the shortcomings of the existing theory, policies and practices of school, and (b) how best to conceptualize an alternative vision of schools that remediates these shortcomings. We believe that we have successfully achieved this third task: each of the 17 chapters in this text illustrate both hope and possibility in their reimagining of schools for the future.

In acknowledging that the chapters in the text come at the task of reimagining the future of schools from a range of perspectives and with different foci, we want to emphasize in what ways both an intra-national, and cross-national perspectives become important lenses for analysis. In short, we must include in our calculus for reforms both the local, and the country as we interrogate school reforms, while at the same time looking across countries when asking “What is the relevance of reforms conducted elsewhere for me?”: whilst context matters, looking outside your own context potentially offers insights not previously imagined. Utilizing such an analytic framework, for example, spotlights the fact that no matter how much we may wish it to be the case, there cannot be a universal approach to crafting the school of the future. By organizing the text around three specific countries, Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States, the multi-faceted power of context is foregrounded.

### **3 The Organization of the Text**

We have noted above how the present provides the best possible time for (a) a systematic interrogation of the failings of the current theory, policy, and practice of schools, as well as (b) providing space for the development of alternative visions for the school of the future. To this end, we offer this text as a vehicle to stimulate a broad-based dialogue that can lead to radical change in the way we conceptualize and do schools. As noted, the text is divided into three Sections: sections on Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States.

## Section 1: Australia

In Australia school education is primarily the responsibility of the six states and two territories. Nevertheless, over the past 20 years the federal government has become much more deeply involved—for example in relation to a national curriculum and standardised assessment of literacy and numeracy achievement—and has used federal funding to direct attention in specific directions. Some chapters in this section explicitly take a national perspective. The others, while informed in specific contexts, also have resonance across jurisdictions in Australia and (we expect) internationally.

The first chapter in this section, Chapter “[A New Funding Policy Settlement for Australian Schooling](#)”, by Sinclair and Savage, provides a comprehensive insight into the tumultuous and complex history of school funding in Australia. Sinclair and Savage highlight how school funding, political interests and a lack of commitment to true structural reform have undermined the equity aspirations of past funding reforms. Their critique highlights the need for a new funding settlement that insulates itself from shifting political winds in order to realise the vision of providing every student, regardless of background or location, with access to a quality education.

This unfinished work towards educational equity across Australia’s diverse contexts is taken up in the subsequent chapter, chapter “[Envisioning Community Partnerships in Future Schooling](#)”, by Beasy and Emery, on school-community partnerships. They highlight how integrating communities as core partners can yield significant benefits like lower absenteeism, higher achievement, and expanded learning opportunities—outcomes closely aligned with the equity aims that past funding reforms have failed to achieve. However, Beasy and Emery argue that realising the potential of school-community partnerships requires challenging the dominant accountability-driven logics that have kept such efforts at the periphery. Drawing on examples from Tasmania, they demonstrate how adopting alternative “enabling logics” like co-construction and relationality can disrupt antiquated modes of practice to authentically embrace communities as partners. Their call to fundamentally reorient the core logics driving school policies and practices echoes Sinclair and Savage’s argument for a new funding paradigm insulated from political vagaries. Whether addressing funding or partnerships, both chapters highlight that incremental reforms are insufficient for achieving equity. Systemic change is needed to escape the short-sighted decision-making that has derailed past initiatives and undermined the shared vision of high-quality education as a right for all students, not a privilege for some.

In a similar vein to the chapter by Beasy and Emery, the next chapter, the chapter entitled “[In Their Shoes](#)”: [School-Based Citizenship Education, Technology Enhanced Learning and Equity](#)”, also highlights ways in which working in partnership would support a more equitable education future. In fact, Keith Heggart (an academic) co-authored this chapter with a professional collaborator Stephanie Smith. Heggart and Smith argue that citizenship education in schools is a vital contributor to a civil and democratic society, but that high quality experiential

citizenship education is not equitably available. The authors demonstrate how technology (especially virtual reality) can be put to good use to co-design engaging pedagogical innovations. This is especially vital for overcoming the tyranny of distance for students in regional and remote areas, who too often do not have educational opportunities on par with their city-based peers.

The chapter by Duhn, McPherson and Kirkwood, entitled “[Creating a Climate for Change: Early Years Education, Climate Action, and Place-Based Learning with Young Children](#)”, provides a powerful example of the kinds of paradigm shifts needed to truly transform schooling. It challenges traditional notions of childhood innocence that have limited substantive engagement with complex issues like climate change. Instead, the authors position young learners as active agents capable of shaping their learning and societal responses. The innovative Tasmanian case studies showcase pedagogical approaches that embed children as co-researchers, fostering deep connections to place, Indigenous knowledges, and environmental stewardship. Their chapter reveals what enabling logics centred on children’s rights and societal needs can manifest.

The final chapter of the Australian section, entitled “[Being at School: A Prerequisite for Educational Equity](#)”, takes as a starting point that schooling, however imperfect, brings essential benefits in terms of social connections, emotional wellbeing, and physical development. Te Riele, Sullivan, Rudling, Bessell, Higgins and Guerzoni argue that accessing these benefits of school is especially crucial for students experiencing disadvantage. They note that these students, especially children and young people in out of home care, are absent from school far more than their more privileged peers. The chapter therefore focused on three sets of reforms to support school attendance as a necessary (although of course not sufficient) first step towards educational equity. First, to change education systems and policies to tackle the exclusion of (usually already marginalised) students through punitive discipline and part time enrolments. Second, to transform schools into places where students want to be. Third, to enhance interagency collaboration so that the responsibility for supporting attendance is shared across the many organisations that children in care (as well as other equity groups) are connected to.

## Section 2: United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, education is a devolved matter with each of the four nations, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, responsible for their own educational provision. Although we have labelled this section ‘United Kingdom’ and the UK is discussed in these chapters, the focus of the chapters’ contents are mainly on schools in the English setting.

The section starts with the chapter entitled “[Reversal and Paradox: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment in England 1970–2024](#)” by Ken Jones. The chapter provides a much needed historical context to education and schooling in England over the last 50 years and reflects on changes to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment during what Jones refers to as the ‘neoliberal period’. The chapter argues that this period saw a profound intensification of neoliberal educational policy, particularly from 2010, where policy reform increased the powers of some such as management

systems and central government, but diminished the powers of others such as teachers and students. The chapter draws on the work of Basil Bernstein, specifically his essay ‘On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge’ (1971/1975) to set Bernstein’s conceptual framework against current school structures. By applying this conceptual framework, developed in the 1970s, to the current schooling landscape, the chapter highlights central points of change, and provokes questions about the continuing suitability of the conceptual system with which he worked.

The second chapter in this section, the chapter entitled “[A Decolonial Future for Education and Schools](#)”, is authored by Haira Gandolfi. Gandolfi argues for a reimagining of a decolonial future for education and schools as, currently, countries like the UK have embedded the histories and legacies of the Global North within their school curricula and educational experiences, in particular those students of racialized communities. This decolonial future requires a rediscovery of knowledges, practices and histories ‘hidden by colonial structures’. In addition, the relationships between these hidden histories and those mainstream histories already found in the existing curriculum need further critical examination and overall school curricula need to be challenged to remedy legacies of epistemic injustice. By taking a *coalition possibilities*, or *intergroup dialogue*, approach to this endeavour, Gandolfi rethinks the future of education by paying close attention to what educational systems, pedagogies and school curricula can look like.

The chapter entitled “[Not ‘Another Version of the Same Thing’: Problematising and Reworking English Initial Teacher Education in Ethnically Diverse Times](#)”, written by Saffron Powell, Meg Maguire and Emma Towers, centres on the current state of teacher training (Initial Teacher Education) in England. It argues that in its current form, it is no longer fit for purpose in a country that is witnessing an increase in the ethnic diversity of its school-age population—a demographic that is not reflected in the overwhelmingly white British teaching workforce. Given that successive policies introduced to diversify the teaching workforce over past decades have yielded very little progress, the chapter argues that what is needed is a complete rethinking of the Initial Teacher Education system to one that supports minoritised ethnic teachers, that takes racially literate approaches to teaching and learning and an Initial Teacher Education curriculum that makes a systematic and rigorous response to sensitising *all* teachers to diversity.

Lynda Dunlop and Elizabeth A.C. Rushton’s chapter entitled “[Changing the Climate of School-Based Climate Change Education in England](#)”, argues that climate change education in England is not keeping pace with calls from young people and teachers who desire a school system that empowers young people’s active participation in their climate change education and create schools for the future. The authors highlight two key reforms needed for a future-focused climate change education in schools: first, to encourage difficult questions and give space for honest discussions and concerns around climate change; second, the need for teachers and those charged with educating teachers to be given autonomy to move beyond the (limited) prescribed curriculum and teach about climate change that focuses on action and justice.

The final chapter in the section, the chapter entitled “[The School Is Irredeemable: Proposing Discomfort for a Different Future for Education](#)”, by Jordi Collet-Sabe and Stephen Ball completes this section with a crescendo and argues that in its current state, the modern school is ‘intolerable’ and ‘unredeemable’. They make it clear that their focus is not on teachers or students, but on the practices of modern schools. They apply Foucault’s strategy of reversal and the commons approach as critical tools to think about education and schools differently, to ‘reverse’ and ‘unthink’ schools—not to reform or redeem schools but to do away with schools altogether and in its absence to encourage a complete reimagining of education.

### Section 3: United States

The United States section starts with Pink’s chapter entitled “[Reimagining Education for the Common Good: Interrogating the Braiding of Key Factors in the Pursuit of a Twenty-First Century Praxis](#)”. He argues that the primary reason previous attempts to reform schools have had little significant impact has been their almost single-minded attention to in-school factors such as curriculum, instructional packages, teacher and administrator accountability, and standardized testing. Using the metaphor of braiding hair, he lays out an alternative reform strategy that requires an equal and systematic attention to five factors, or strands of hair: merit and meritocracy, credentialism, in-school reforms, workplace reforms, and socio-economic factors are all interrogated. Highlighting the importance of the ideals of the Common Good, combined with the transformational power of Communicative Competence, Pink calls for the development of an inclusive community dialogue that can serve as the much needed prologue to the successful reform of the school in the future.

The Koon, Jordon, and Philoxene chapter entitled “[Mapping a \(R\)evolutionary Education for a Just Future: Building on the Educational Lessons of the Late Anthropocene](#)”, begins with the observation that the focus of contemporary capitalism is grounded in the need to exploit both human and natural resources that are problematic with respect to the future of humanity and an inhabitable earth. Seeing the school as complicit in this world view, they explore a number of questions that ask how teachers can better prepare students for the world they will inherit, and what should be the role of schools in preparing both the individual and the collective. To address these critical questions, they review a number of insights learned from previous critical educational movements in the US. They end by offering six factors essential for a (r)evolutionary practice required to transition schools for a just future.

Carrillo’s chapter entitled “[Schools and Teacher Activism: Implications from the Arizona #RedforEd Movement](#)”, uses activity from a teacher’s movement in Arizona, together with research on the power of informal play settings, to interrogate how both minority students and educators experience a range of in-between spaces. In particular, Carrillo is interested in questioning how these actors both imagine and create spaces that can challenge forces that can typically function as alienating and subtractive. He argues for the development of negotiating borders, liminality, and a series of in-between spaces as a strategy for reforming the school in the future.

The Ellwood chapter entitled “[Mobilizing and Organizing for Racial Justice: A Letter to Future School Leaders](#)”, opens by noting how the current organization and practice of schools contributes in fundamental ways to the persistence of racial inequality in the society, and asks what leadership should look like to reverse this ongoing pattern. Drawing from a study she is conducting in a high school that is engaged in an explicit and systemic effort to dismantle institutional racism, she argues that such an effort requires initiative and both formal and informal leadership, in a variety of forms, that is multi-faceted. Emphasizing that leadership flows in multiple direction, Ellwood concludes by detailing three essential transformational leadership actions required of leaders in the schools of the future.

The chapter entitled “[Anti-Racist Policy Decision-Making in Schools: A Framework to Root Out Racism in Education](#)”, by Walters, Diem, Welton, and Iverson, continues the focus on the beliefs and practices in schools that sustain unjust and unequal environments for those students historically marginalized, excluded, and oppressed by schools. They detail a research-practice partnership (RPP) they established in a high school, and explore how an anti-racist policy decision-making protocol that they designed worked: six steps of the protocol are detailed and evaluated. They illuminate the messiness of their work in supporting the school work on anti-racist change, while underscoring the significance of school leaders incorporating critical reflection: their conclusion is that the continuous use of the RPP protocol will result, over time, in the incorporation of anti-racist thinking in all future leadership decision-making.

In Bailey’s Chapter entitled “[Special Education and Implications for the Future in Public Schools](#)”, she raises a number of questions that need to be addressed if students with disabilities are to receive the best possible educational experience. Beginning with an examination of recent reauthorizations of funding bills for students with disabilities, Bailey notes that in many cases the subsequent changes to special education has not always proved positive for students, and in many cases has resulted in the loss of critical funds. She notes how students with disabilities get fewer services in self-contained and resource class, but asks “Are they effectively served with inclusion in the general education classrooms?” She systematically addresses a range of controversial issues (eg., charter schools, vouchers, technology) in outlining an ideal practice around disabilities in the school of the future.

In the final chapter entitled “[Critical Community Building Pedagogy for Wholeness](#)”, Bettez, Spears, and Pegram engage in a form of freedom dreaming as they build a case for centering wholeness into the daily activities of teachers: wholeness being the alignment of body, mind, and spirit in the creation of a more peaceful, interconnected, joyful, and just society. Arguing that this focus on wholeness must be achieved within the context of a culturally sustaining pedagogy, they provide both definitions and explanations of concepts supporting five practice categories which teachers can incorporate into their various learning spaces. They end with an ethic of love, which they emphasize is the critical component for building a pedagogy for wholeness.

Finally, it is worth noting how the diverse perspectives presented in these chapters collectively highlight the pressing need for a fundamental reimagining of schools, and the various ways they suggest what might be needed to do so. Whether addressing funding models, community partnerships, citizenship education, climate change pedagogy, student attendance, curriculum reform, school leadership, or teacher preparation, for example, the common thread is that piecemeal reforms are insufficient. Realising an equitable, future-focused education system will require systemic paradigm shifts—rethinking the core purposes, principles, and practices that have historically marginalised learners’ voices, societal needs, and vital partnerships (Piketty, 2022). The message is clear, that only by boldly embracing such transformative change can schools in Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States, like other places, lay the foundation for a more just, sustainable, and prosperous society that empowers all young people to reach their full potential as engaged citizens and stewards of the future. It is in this spirit that we offer the future-oriented visions in this text as a stimulant for the engagement of all citizens with a vested interest in their future in realizing this goal.

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**Part I**  
**Australia**

# A New Funding Policy Settlement for Australian Schooling



Matthew P. Sinclair and Glenn C. Savage

**Abstract** School funding is widely advocated in policy and research as a means for improving education outcomes, addressing inequalities, and improving the economic prospects of nation states. In this chapter, we focus on developments associated with the landmark 2011 ‘Gonski’ review, which sought to overhaul Australia’s patchwork approach to funding, reverse declining student performance trends, and address growing inequalities. Despite these grand aims, we show that its overarching equity aspirations have not been realised and inequalities persist. We suggest these problems will continue, unless major structural and procedural reform is undertaken. We also argue that political interests continue to bedevil funding processes, with funding levels and deals subject to the winds of political cycles, party changes, and lobby groups. In response, we argue that a new funding settlement is needed that attends to these long-standing issues and seeks to distance short-term politics from funding decisions. While we recognise that funding *politics* can never be abstracted from funding *policies*, we nevertheless offer three reform trajectories that we suggest could underpin a new settlement. In doing so, we argue that achieving a more equitable and effective education system in Australia requires a new vision and a stronger commitment to equity principles. By pursuing these trajectories, Australia can pave the way for a future where every student, regardless of background or location, has access to better quality education, laying the foundation for a more prosperous and cohesive society.

**Keywords** School funding · Equity · Gonski · Federalism · Policy settlement

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Switzerland AG 2024

K. Beasy et al. (eds.), *Innovative School Reforms*, Education,  
Equity, Economy 11, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64900-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64900-4_2)

## 1 Introduction

The connection between school funding and equity has emerged as a major point of discussion and concern amongst member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It is widely acknowledged in these debates that equitable and fair funding of schools is intrinsically linked to generating positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and countries (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2018). For this reason, governments globally have invested significant energy in designing funding policies that target equity and quality, with the view that doing so will render societies fairer and more economically productive and competitive (Spring, 2014; Di Gregorio & Savage, 2020). Following these trends, since 2010, Australia has undergone major national school funding reform in ways strongly shaped by global research and policy advice, especially data produced by the OECD's Education Directorate (Di Gregorio & Savage, 2020).

Australia is a federation in which state and territory governments have constitutional responsibility for schools, yet recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in federal government involvement in schooling policy and funding, with the aim of generating more policy alignment at the national scale (Savage, 2020). In 2008, for example, the country's education ministers (state, territory and federal) declared 'equity and excellence' as the number one goal of Australian schooling as part of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008). A wide range of national reform initiatives emerged in concert with the declaration, including a national curriculum, a standardised national literacy and numeracy assessment (NAPLAN),<sup>1</sup> the My School website,<sup>2</sup> and national teaching standards. The 'equity and excellence' goal continues to this day, via the 2019 Alice Springs/Mparntwe Declaration. These declarations have provided the foundations for Australian policymakers to focus renewed attention on education outcomes and how funding can be harnessed to improve overall performance. In particular, the equity focus of this goal has generated intense political and policy interest concerning the link between funding, student background, and their scores in standardised tests (e.g. NAPLAN), and generated further scrutiny of long known differences in funding and resourcing between public and private schools.

The flurry of national reforms produced in the late 2000s and early 2010s reflected the logic and features associated with what Sahlberg (2016) calls "the global education reform movement" (p. 1)—privileging standardisation, accountability and the core skills seen to be crucial to economic development. Successive Australian federal governments have driven and financially incentivised this national agenda and have attached high aspirations to the claimed capacity for these reforms to drive improvement in real and relative terms (Savage, 2020). In 2012, for

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<sup>1</sup>NAPLAN is an annual national assessment for all students in years three, five, seven, and nine, and is the only nationwide assessment that all Australian children undertake.

<sup>2</sup>The MySchool website publishes nationally consistent school-level data about every school in Australia.

example, then federal education minister Julia Gillard claimed that national reforms in schooling would be central to lifting Australian students' education outcomes into the "top five by 2025" (Gillard, 2012, p. 1) in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

A landmark development came in 2011 when the *Review of Funding for Schooling* was released (commonly known as the 'Gonski Report' after the Chair of the Review, David Gonski). Commissioned in 2010 by the federal education minister, the review played a major role in reshaping the federal funding of Australian schools and creating a new understanding amongst governments across the nation about funding and its relationship to equity. The primary contribution of the review was a new needs-based national school funding model called the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). The review also recommended a National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) to provide independent oversight over Commonwealth school funding arrangements, which has been in operation since 2017.

More than a decade on from the Gonski Report, however, Australia's student outcomes have continued to decline on PISA and on nearly all other measures used by governments to measure school and system success and equity (Savage, 2023). Moreover, while the SRS has led to a significant overall increase in funding to Australian schools and generated greater national consistency in how to measure relative levels of funding across systems and sectors, 98% of Australian public schools remain underfunded when measured against the SRS. This is a major issue, given public schools educate a disproportionate percentage of disadvantaged students relative to private schools (Catholic and Independent), as well as the majority (66%) of all students in the nation. In contrast, Catholic (20%) and Independent schools (14%) cater for fewer disadvantaged students yet they both receive the full SRS entitlement in every state and territory outside of a very small number of schools (O'Brien et al., 2023). We expand on these important statistics and inequities later in the chapter given they are central to our critique of the status quo and argument for a new funding policy settlement.

Despite the grand aspirations of the Gonski report, Australia today finds itself in a situation where schools and students who need funding the most are not receiving their fair share, significant inequalities in funding continue to exist between government and non-government schools, and student background continues to be a strong predictor of education outcomes. This challenge of reducing the severity of the connection between student background and their outcomes through funding is not unique to Australia, but one that is mirrored across many other nations such as Mexico, Germany, and Italy (OECD, 2023).

While recognising that Australian funding arrangements are distinct, we see recent decades as exemplary of what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) term "globalizing" education policy trends, in which equity has been rearticulated through an economic lens (Lingard et al., 2014). In light of this, the Australian case provides a powerful window into examining the dynamics of contemporary global debates about funding and equity. These debates range from broader questions about what constitutes fairness and what the relationship is between equity and outcomes, to specific debates about how to best design and deliver funding models.

In this chapter, we use Australian developments as a case study to examine these dynamics and consider what broader lessons can be learned about the relationship between funding and equity. In doing so, we seek to make two contributions to this edited collection of chapters and broader school funding debates. The first is to provide a succinct historical overview of funding policy in Australia that has led to the current school funding policy settlement in which public schools continue to be underfunded when measured against the SRS. The second is to imagine and argue that a new policy settlement for Australian school funding is needed, and to outline three reform trajectories that could underpin this. The primary aim of this new settlement is to ensure the education opportunities, experiences and outcomes of all young Australians are better served.

Our argument is structured in four parts. We begin with a historical overview of key policy developments that have shaped the past two decades of school funding reform in Australia. The next section lays out the years leading up to the largest review of funding in Australia since 1973 and the specifics of the review. This is followed by our presentation of three possible reform trajectories for Australia that could underpin a new school funding settlement: 1. arms-length decision making and longer funding cycles; 2. political boldness to address structural and historical inequalities; and 3. greater transparency and strengthened accountability. The last section concludes the paper.

## ***1.1 The History of School Funding in Australia***

Australian school funding policies have a complex history, with contested claims over multiple decades about how funding should relate to equity (Keating & Klatt, 2013). Thompson et al. (2019) trace funding policy back to pre-federation, citing Potts (1997), who points out that from 1872 to 1895 the six colonies “passed the “free, compulsory and secular“ Education Acts which stopped most financial assistance to church schools and made primary education a state responsibility” (Potts, 1997, p. 1). Following the Australian Constitution Act of 1901, the states retained control over funding and set the agenda for schooling without any recurrent financial input from the federal government. Consequently, due to the Australian federal system, debates about funding have historically been concentrated at the state and territory (subnational) scale (Lingard, 2000).

The public policy conversation concerning school funding started to change in the early 1970s in two significant ways (Connors & McMorrow, 2015). First, various stakeholders began advocating for large funding increases for disadvantaged schools to address various challenges (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022). These included funding for a shortage of classroom resources, run down infrastructure, and staff shortages due to enrolment growth, all of which were acute in many Catholic and public schools (Windle, 2014). Second, there was significant pressure on the federal government to respond to economic and social pressures to keep Australia