

## MAKING EQUITY MATTER

GEOFF GALLOP

*Geoff Gallop challenges us to commit to the aspirational goals of ‘excellence’ and ‘equity’ in education in a world of meritocratic hubris...*

“Equity in education as the fundamental education policy is important not only for economic reasons, but it is a moral imperative especially in those countries that have made a promise to give all their people a fair go”. (Sahlberg and Cobbold ,2021)

Any commentary on what we ought to expect from the nation’s education system needs to start with the Education Ministers and their Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019). Its over-arching and aspirational goals for the system as a whole are “excellence” and “equity”. I interpret this to mean (1) a system that is continually improving in educational performance and (2) one that pushes hard to ensure all who access it can realise their talents and capacities. So too, our ministers say, it ought it be a system that helps create “confident and creative individuals” with “high expectations for their educational outcomes”. These objectives should never be far from our mind, they represent a promise to the people as to what we should expect from our schooling system.

Such goals are particularly relevant to the government sector within whose classrooms are “the vast bulk of students with disability and disadvantage”.<sup>1</sup> The NSW statistics relevant to the finding are as follows:

- The number of students with disability estimated to attract funding support has increased by almost 300 per cent since 2002.
- The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students in public schools has risen by 83 per cent from 2004 to 2019.
- The number of students from a language background other than English (LBOTE) has increased by 45 per cent from 2004 to 2019.

- Students classified from a low socio-educational advantage (SEA) status now make up 32 per cent of the student population.
- One-third of NSW’s low SEA students live in regional, rural and remote areas and 86 per cent of those are enrolled in public schools.<sup>2</sup>

With these facts related to a segregated system on the table, we are obliged to go further and ask whether or not our stated objectives of excellence, equity and creativity are being achieved, not just for some but for **all** segments of our society, including the disadvantaged? In Australian language it’s what we call a “fair go”!

### SAHLBERG AND COBBOLD

In taking up such a challenge, both philosophically and practically, we have been greatly assisted by the work of Pasi Sahlberg and Trevor Cobbold. They note the deficiency of the current **National Schooling Reform Agreement** (NSRA), namely that it doesn’t clearly enough define “equity-in-education”. They point to plenty of loose talk about “equality of opportunity” but insufficient clarity about it for policymaking, implementation and evaluation.

Their solution to this has two aspects:

“First, from an individual perspective, equity in education outcomes should mean that all children receive an education that enables them to fully participate in adult society in a way of their choosing. We can refer to this as an adequate education. Second, equity in education should also mean that students from different social groups achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of these outcomes. We call this social equity-in-education”. Sahlberg, and Cobbold, (2021 pp12 -13)

Their definition of “equity-in-education” is particularly significant because:

“...it is unreasonable to expect in education policies or in school leadership strategies that all children will achieve the same education outcomes because, as individuals, they have a range of abilities and talents which lead to different choices in schooling. However, it is reasonable to expect that these different abilities and talents are distributed similarly across different social, ethnic and gender groups in society”. Sahlberg, and Cobbold, (2021 pp12 -13)

Put the two objectives together – an adequate education for all and more equity in educational outcomes across the society - and we have a strong and meaningful basis for guiding design and evaluation.

Sahlberg and Cobbold also point out that there may very well be groups within groups, “sub-groups” as they call them. For example, they may exist between indigenous students in remote as opposed to urban settings. This necessarily complicates the objective of improving social equity and needs to be thought through as required. It doesn’t, however, change the argument for equity.

### FAIRNESS AND PUBLIC POLICY

There are conservative commentators who dispute the assumption that different abilities and talents are distributed similarly within the groups that make up society. They are left defending hierarchy as in some sense “natural” or, for all of its faults, a better and more stable way to run a society, especially if there is room for some upward mobility. More to the point, and counter to Cobbold and Sahlberg, such conservatives say that fairness can’t actually be the focus of public policy, even as a generalised aspiration. Pushing the system towards equity-in-education may be good in “theory” but in “practice” it leads to more harm than good, upsetting as it does merit based decision making. This is so, says leading conservative critic, F.A. Hayek, because social justice is a “mirage”, “meaningless” and incompatible with a liberal, market society. (Hayek, 1976)

In response to this we are all obliged to ask the question: Why shouldn’t we aspire to more equality in educational outcomes as part of a broader

agenda of fairness for all? It’s an objective derived from our human rights commitments (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26) and one that gives clarity to the anti-discrimination implications of those commitments. Whether it be gender, class, race, ethnicity or domicile around which we gather relevant information, we ought to ensure that educational outcomes allow equal access to further education, highly paid occupations and influential positions in society. We ought to be widening rather than limiting the pool of talent. (Sahlberg and Cobbold, 2021)

Let me now turn to some of the relevant statistics. On the **National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy** (NAPLAN) Cobbold writes:

“The paper shows that 28% of low SES Year 9 students were below the national reading standard in 2022, 35% were below the writing standard and 15% were below the numeracy standard. Nearly 30% of Indigenous students were below the reading standard, 38% were below the writing standard and 16% were below the numeracy standard. Nearly one-third of remote area students were below the reading standard, 46% were below the writing standard and 15% were below the numeracy standard. By contrast, only 3% of Year 9 high SES students did not achieve the reading standard, 5% did not achieve the writing standard and 1% did not achieve the numeracy standard.

These are shocking inequities. For example, it is totally unacceptable that the percentage of low SES Year 9 students not achieving the national reading standard is 9 times that of high SES students and the proportion of Indigenous and remote area students not achieving the standard is 10 times that of high SES students”.

In some areas there were improvements but not enough to say that there isn’t “an appalling inequity” in the system.(Cobbold, 2023)

### DO SCHOOLS MATTER?

It is the case, of course, that social and economic factors play a crucial – some say decisive role – in all of this. A radical interpretation of these SES factors is that of sociologist – and social mobility scholar, John

Goldthorpe (2020) . He writes: “It’s not schools and universities, but differences in home environments, and particularly the time parents can give their children, that are the obstacles to equality of opportunity”. Another perspective is that of the OECD who say that “some children from disadvantaged households do achieve strong outcomes, demonstrating that equitable outcomes are possible”.(OECD, 2022) Note the reference to “some” rather than “many”!

My conclusion from this is the same as that of Sahlberg and Cobbold:

Schools are in a constant battle against the reproduction of inequality and poverty in society. Since the out-of-school factors explain majority of variation in students’ achievement in school, their efforts must be supported by economic and social policies to reduce growing inequality and poverty. Sahlberg, and Cobbold, (2021 pp16 -17)

I would read this as saying that both external, SES factors, and internal, school factors, need to be working in tandem to ensure adequacy and improve equality outcomes, step by step, as part of a broader ambition to bring about a fairer and more productive society.

It’s Sahlberg’s view that it’s not just the continuous reproduction or disadvantage that holds back educational equity but also the policy agenda that has dominated in recent decades. He calls it the **Global Education Reform Movement** (or GERM) and it involves standardisation, a focus on core subjects, the search for low-risk ways of reaching learning goals, the use of corporate management models and test-based accountability policies”.(Sahlberg, 2012) Unless qualified with some real-world issues related to teachers position in the labour market, school leadership and management, classroom realities and, of course, school funding, such an agenda is bound to fail if improved educational outcomes are the objective.<sup>3</sup>

### A MERITOCRACY?

The twin pursuit of excellence and equity is not helped either by what Professor Michael Sandel has called “meritocratic hubris” or the tendency of those who land on top to believe that their success is their

own doing and, by implication, that those who were left behind, must deserve their fate as well”. Underpinning this hubris is “the tendency to forget our indebtedness to family, teachers, community, country, and the times in which we live as conditions for the success that we enjoy”.(Sandel, 2020)

Certainly more competition for jobs at the top and more diversity in the CEO class that emerges is in the public interest. Former OECD economist Adrian Blundell-Wignall puts it this way: “Inequality in the market for education is a barrier to long-term success” and is clearly in play in Australia. He points to the “remarkable outperformance of students from expensive private schools for entry to the best university courses, and their eventual dominance of corporate boardrooms”. (Blundell-Wignall, 2023) In other joint studies of the experience of the USA, France and Sweden, he finds evidence consistent with views “that more egalitarian societies that value innate ability more than social standing will generate better commercial leadership and economic performance than countries that do not”. (Atkinson and Blundell-Wignall, 2021)

In relation to GERM and the policies it produces, none have been as influential as “choice and competition” as opposed to “excellence **and** equity”. It leads to the conclusion that the government sector is best set up as a collection of semi-independent schools, minimally united and supported. This isn’t, as we argued in the first chapter of **Valuing the teaching profession**, “a sound basis upon which to build the commitment, capacities and leadership needed to turn the corner of disadvantage.” (Gallop, Kavanagh, and Lee , 2021) Let alone is it the basis to pursue equality of outcomes (as defined by Sahlberg and Cobbold). Our policy makers need a strategic, co-ordinated and prioritised approach to the way it builds its public school system.

It’s the case that many of the challenges facing principals and classroom teachers today are being experienced by **all** schools, government and non-government. Mental health issues and behavioural issues are at play in society – and, therefore, in classrooms today. In relation to this there’s plenty of evidence to lead us to conclude that the pursuit of equality – in all of its manifestations – starting with income and

material equality puts schools in a better position to tackle those challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Thus far I've addressed some of the realities that make difficult the achievement of improved performance in both excellence and equity – the sociology of disadvantage, the politics of GERM and the ideology of meritocracy. On the other side of the equation we now have a clear definition of equity and what can demonstrate whether progress is – or isn't – being made in that direction. This is the breakthrough that gives definition and structure to the argument.<sup>5</sup>

### STRENGTHS OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

We know too, that the all-important government sector has strengths lacking in the non-government sector – and which can be mobilised for progress in equity.

We know, for example, that within the limits laid down by the social and economic environment within which schools operate, government schools perform as well as their non-government counterparts, and that is the case even with all the resources and infrastructure the private sector has to provide for its students. (Larson, 2022)

We know too, that state (public) school graduates do better at university than private school graduates within the same end-of-school tertiary entrance score, this being “a clear finding” in England as well as Australia. (Preston, 2014).

We know too, that values, more inclusive and science-based than propagated in parts of the non-government sector, prevail in government schools. Learning to live with differences, a basic requirement for policy-makers in a multicultural society, is at the core of the mission of a government school today.<sup>6</sup>

In noting these positive drivers related to a government school system, I'm reminded of the early years of the Australian Nation when public sector institutions or enterprises were set up with the clear aim of not only competing with private sector equivalents but also seeking best practice in what they do. It soon became obvious that strong political support was needed – in funding and organisational innovation – if we were to create a genuine mixed economy.

The same applies today, and in the context of education needs to be strategic and **more than strong**, and coming from **both the national and state arms of government**.

The politics of all of this can't be avoided. Myths are myths. Prejudice is prejudice but it doesn't mean they won't be influential. A significant portion of the community have come to see the education debate in terms of choice (parents) and competition (government). They want government priorities to support their own families and their own children. It's that old battle that can't be avoided, self-interest versus the public interest. It's one thing to have a mix that seeks to reconcile the two principles, quite another to allow **one** of the two elements to undermine the other.

### DEFINITION, MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

More practically our focus needs to be on developing further the work on the statistics and information generally needed in relation to “equity-in-education”. As Cobbold has put it:

“A clear definition of equity in education is fundamental to making real progress towards it. Not only would it clarify expectations about equity but it is necessary to set clear achievement targets for students from different social groups and monitor progress in achieving equity. It is equally necessary to ensure government accountability for making progress on equity”.( Cobbold, 2022)

Currently, says Cobbold, reporting on progress is deficient. The same points are made by Jim Tognolini and Tom Alegounarias(2021) “ The relative lack of confidence in key concepts or generally understood definitions in the assessment domain is, therefore, an acute problem in teaching”

In relation to this “The inculcation of higher order thinking skills, non-cognitive skills, and competencies into the Australian Curriculum, in accord with the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe)Education Declaration, has raised the stakes for beginning teachers to be able to teach, assess, interpret and measure progress on skills that have been traditionally found difficult, if not impossible, to measure” (Tognolini and Alegounarias, 2021)Making equity matter in all

our thinking about education isn't easy and, as we have seen, has its detractors and, indeed, its enemies. It requires a commitment that all may not share and it requires serious work in the province of measurement and assessment. It's a – work – in – progress that needs leadership from our public schools as well as partnerships between them and the wider community, including our researchers.

Certainly, I trust that nothing I have written is meant to imply that “confident curriculum expertise” and “basic and varied pedagogical principles” aren't crucial in the education endeavour (Tognolini and Alegounarias, 2021). Indeed they are, but unless they are backed up with “assessment expertise” and framed in the way outlined by Sahlberg and Cobbold (2021) there is every chance that only little – if any – dents into the prevailing inequalities will be possible.

## ENDNOTES

1. Education Department quoted in Gallop, G, Kavanagh, T and Lee, P, *Valuing the teaching profession* (2021), p. 20.
2. Ibid.
3. See Gallop, G, Kavanagh, T and Lee, P, *Valuing the teaching profession* (2021) for an alternative approach to “reform”.
4. See Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K “Income Inequality and Social Dysfunction”, *Annu.Rev.Social*, 2009:35:493-511.
5. See also, Cobbold, T. “Equity in Education must be clearly defined, measured and reported”, *Pearls and Irritations*, 1 July 2022.
6. See Gallop, G. *Evolving Partnerships in Education* (Australian College of Education, 1990), pp. 43-44.

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