

COVID-19 and Inequities in Australian Education – Insights on Federalism, Autonomy, and Access

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***Abstract:** The current COVID19 pandemic has forced major adjustments, often at short notice, on schools and schooling. Educators have been working in a constantly changing environment to continue to deliver for students, families and communities all the while maintaining the necessary supports for themselves and colleagues. In Australia this has led to debates concerning when and who can close schools, the authority of schools to enact context-sensitive activities, and amplified existing inequities. Informed by a larger Australian Research Council grant focused on school autonomy and social justice, we argue that the pandemic and responses to it have highlighted the idiosyncratic nature of Australian federalism, drawn greater attention to the role of school autonomy, and amplified inequities in the access to quality education irrespective of location.*

Keywords: Autonomy, federalism, access, equity, Australia, COVID-19

Introduction

The large-scale closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised many issues and concerns with the equity of school systems globally. It has challenged what we think of schooling, how it is currently and what it can be. At the same time, it has elevated questions such as who has authority over schools, where funding comes from, on what evidence decisions are based, and for whom schools serve. These questions have illuminated many of the nuances of inequities in our current school education systems.

With a specific focus on Australia, and informed by ongoing work as part of a large-scale Australian Research Council funded project investigating school autonomy and social justice (see: <https://www.schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org/>), our attention in this paper is centred on three issues: i) the idiosyncratic nature of Australian federalism and its impact on schooling; ii) the autonomy of schools and/or school systems; and iii) the access to high

quality schooling regardless of location. While schools remain the constitutional responsibility of states/territories in Australia, the Federal Government has the fiscal capacity to influence policy. The oversight of schools is complicated by funding mechanisms that see the bulk of funds for public schools filtered through state/territory governments and Departments of Education while Independent and Catholic schools/systems (which comprise 11.45 and 18.48 percent respectively of Australia's 9503 schools) receive public funds (different to many other countries) directly from the Federal Government. The impact of school closures and continued accessibility to teaching and learning is not equally distributed across Australia or different systems (public, Catholic, independent). Put simply, the pandemic has amplified many of the inequities of Australian education.

Our argument is that the public health crisis that is COVID-19 has highlighted the multiple pathways and influence of schools and school systems courtesy of federalism and allowed different systems (e.g. public, Catholic and independent) to engage with government and the public differently – entrenching existing inequities. The autonomy to engage, or not, with government directives has varied greatly by sector and we focus in particular on equity issues of decisions regarding when to close and open schools. Caught up in all of this is the access to education for all students. This includes not only the availability of the technologies necessary for ongoing engagement with schooling, but also what types of engagement are considered acceptable for different groups of students and communities. In sum, our argument is that COVID-19 has brought to the fore the inequities that have existed in Australian school systems for some time. Prompted by the pandemic, this represents a significant opportunity to not only raise these issues but to advocate for those students and communities most disadvantaged.

The Idiosyncratic Nature of Australian Federalism

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories and school education is arguably the 'oldest and deepest federalist artefact' (Keating & Klatt 2013: 414). Constitutionally, education is the responsibility of the states/territories however the primary source of funding is through the Federal Government as the collector of income taxes. In short, the Federal Government provides funds for schools through three main approaches: i) for public schools, constituting close to two-thirds of all enrolments, funds are granted to state/territory governments who then allocate through their budgets; ii) for the Catholic sector, the Federal Government directly funds the system (comprising 19.5% of students) which then allocates to individual schools; and iii) individual 'independent', largely faith-based, schools receive federal funds directly. The intricacies of this complexity remain somewhat hidden in public discourses but play out in a very specific way during a major (inter)national crisis as it enables different levers to be pulled. A prime example has been school closures.

School closures were, and remain, a common intervention since the initial spread of COVID-19. While the exact scale is still unfolding, UNESCO reports that over 140 countries and two-

thirds of all students globally have been impacted (see: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>) and the OECD (2020) notes that some 1.6 billion children have been directly affected. In Australia, the Catholic and independent schools sectors were able to close in response to the initial outbreaks (with the most common action starting school holidays a week early) whereas public schools were forced to remain open. The intimate relations between schooling and the economy were emphasised with calls for schools to remain open to allow parents to continue working. The federal intervention here was to threaten withdrawal of funding for Catholic systemic and independent schools if they did not re-open. This re-opening was for the most part through the provision of remote learning, with students learning from home with content delivered via online platforms (e.g. Microsoft Teams) and/or printed packages and phone calls.

Throughout the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the handling and messaging resulted in public perception of state/territory governments growing in esteem compared with the Federal Government (Wilson, Pallant, Bednall & Gray 2020). However, school closures demonstrate how the financial power and policy reach of the Federal Government has expanded in apparently irreversible fashion despite its constitutional responsibility (Feena 2018). The Prime Minister and particularly the Federal Education Minister were publicly critical of state governments closing public schools. The latter even had to publicly apologise for critical remarks made about one state government's decision to close public schools as he had over-stepped on constitutional responsibility (No author, Federal education minister Dan Tehan apologises for 'overstepping the mark' in schools closure criticism of Victoria, *The Guardian*, May 5, 2020). Due to the idiosyncratic funding nature of Australian school education, the Federal Government encouraged independent and religious schools to re-open earlier than they had planned in exchange for an advance on \$3 billion of already committed funding. National statements such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Australian Government [Department of Education] 2019) and reform agendas such as the Gonski Report (Gonski et al. 2018) are potentially compromised by the urgency of decision making required by the pandemic and the fiscal powers of the Federal Government to pull policy levers on different sectors to different degrees. What the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore is the complex tensions arising from the demarcation of responsibilities for education across three systems and the six states/two territories, complicated by different political persuasions.

The Autonomy of Schools and/or School Systems

The capability of independent schools and the Catholic system to close schools at a time when the Federal Government was stating that schools are safe introduces questions about the autonomy to enact such a decision. Australia has been a leading advocate of self-managing schools through the work of Caldwell and colleagues (e.g. Caldwell & Spinks 1992), but also home to some of its most vocal critics (e.g. Smyth 2008). This long and contested history (MacDonald et al. 2020) has raised concerns for social justice (e.g. Keddie, MacDonald,

Blackmore, Wilkinson et al. 2020) given the increasingly marketised context within which school 'autonomy' operates (e.g. Keddie, Macdonald, Blackmore, Eacott et al. 2020). Despite this, autonomy-based reforms have remained persuasive in policy and education discourse in their association with improving school outcomes.

Across all major international (e.g. PISA, TIMSS) and national (e.g. NAPLAN) testing regimes, Australia's performance is at best stagnant and in all likelihood, declining (e.g. Thomson, De Bortoli, Underwood & Schmid 2019). Increases in school level autonomy over the past few decades have coincided with increasing administrative workload for school leaders (Heffernan & Pierpoint 2020), less time for teaching and learning related matters (Thomson & Hillman 2019), and heightened stress and well-being concerns (Riley, See, Marsh & Dicke 2020). The pandemic has forced further administrative burdens and responsibility on school level educators as they reacted to fast changing situations to best protect staff, students and the community from the virus. The decisions (e.g. to close or remain open – even shifting to remote learning) have highlighted what schools have autonomy over (or not) and provide evidence for whom schools serve. During the pandemic's first wave in Australia, only public schools have been seen as serving the public interest (Wilson et al. 2020).

Australia has a very divisive school sector with battle lines often based on sectors – public, independent, Catholic (Eacott 2019). Major reviews such as Gonski (Gonski et al. 2018) have sought to introduce sector blind funding arrangements that are based on measures of (dis)advantage. These have however proven politically difficult to implement and currently growth in funding for the independent and Catholic sectors is out-pacing those to public schools (Chrysanthos & Carey, Growth in money for private school students outstrips public schools, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 30, 2020). This funding distribution is part of a much larger social policy move playing out in schools through what Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid and Keating (2010) describe as a shift from the public to private purposes of schooling (see also Smyth 2008). What the pandemic has done is to amplify these issues. Therefore, resulting from the class-based stratification of school systems (where access to different sectors is limited by the fiscal capacity of families to pay) means that education cannot escape issues of equity.

The Equitable Distribution of Quality Education

Policy decisions during the pandemic have required a careful balancing of choices and implications across health, economic, social and education measures. No decision has been made without consequences for a significant portion of the population (e.g. the double burden of woman having to assume learning support roles for children at home while sustaining usual roles, therefore exacerbating existing gendered inequalities). What the pandemic has done is expose the many inequities in our education systems. These inequities have been widely recognised (e.g. Gonski et al. 2018; Halsey 2018; OECD 2016), with UNICEF (2018) noting Australia is one of the most unequal countries at the primary and secondary

levels reflected in a long performance tail and a strong correlation between social (dis)advantage and outcomes. School closures have brought these inequities to the fore. Some groups have sought to quantify the impact of school closures on students' learning, with the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged (e.g. Joseph & Fahey 2020), and the Prime Minister publicly argued that schools need to open to prevent children from falling behind while also freeing parents up to restart workforce participation. Two matters brought to the fore through COVID-19, and particularly school closures, are the inequitable distribution of resources to support learning and the acceptance of variable quality experiences for different groups.

In shifting from face-to-face instruction to remote learning, significant pressures were moved to families to provide the necessary resources for learning. Apart from the time and capacity to assist children with their learning, the pandemic amplified the digital divide in Australia. Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 86 percent of Australian households have access to the internet. The distribution is however not even across all social groups, with 33 percent among the lowest income households not having access to the internet at home. While some schools/systems sought to loan laptop computers or iPads to families, the additional costs associated with devices, electricity, internet access and data charges combined with availability to assist students at home, means that the pandemic has exposed many of the enduring inequities in our school systems.

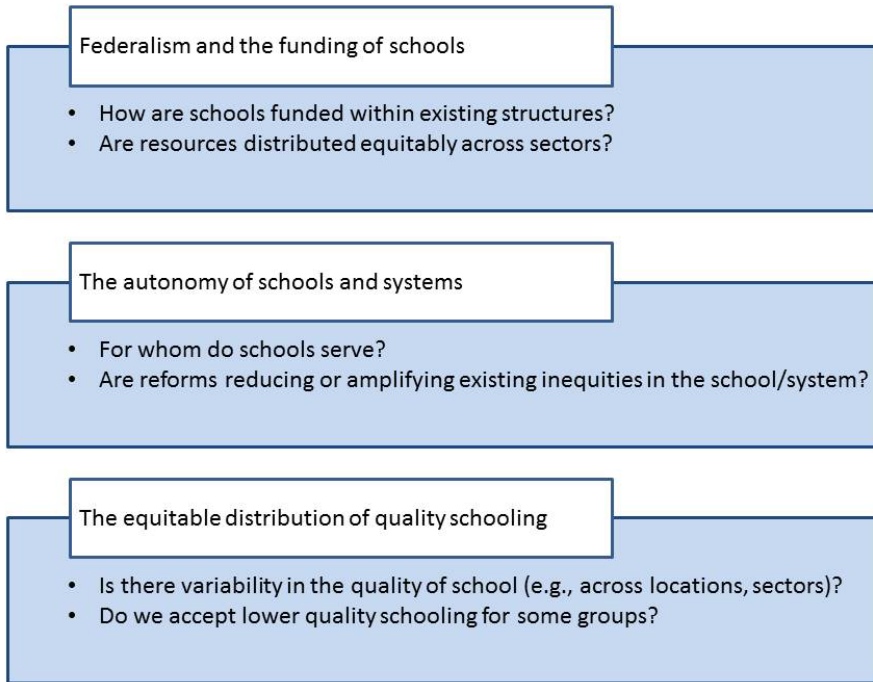
Not surprisingly, many of the calls to re-open schools (mindful that public schools never shut) centred on equity. The key claim was that by not physically attending school, students were having their education compromised. For a number of the reasons previously cited, this compromise was felt greatest by already disadvantaged groups. At the same time, these calls highlighted existing complicity with inequities. The Halsey Report (Halsey 2018), among many others, draws attention to the inequities of Australian schooling based on location – notably regional, rural and remote education. For those in many rural and remote communities, distance and online learning is the only way to access education and this has been achieved for some 100 years (e.g. Downes & Roberts 2015). If the claim is made that it is a deficit way of educating, what does this show about our acceptance of it for rural and remote students (Downes & Roberts 2020)? Therefore, while the pandemic has created challenges for educators, it has illuminated a number of the significant issues of education that have remained somewhat obscured for many.

Conclusion

Since the initial outbreak and subsequent international spread of COVID-19, many researchers, edu-preneurs and consultants have sought to capitalise on the opportunity by appropriating their work and linking it to the pandemic. Various models, adjectival approaches, or products have been advocated as the solution to the problems created by the pandemic and/or the best path forward. In this paper we have adopted a different approach. Finding stimulus in Anderson's (2009) call for problem posers not problem solvers, rather

than try and provide simple solutions (often mirroring those advocated prior to the pandemic), we have explicitly articulated some of the issues that the pandemic has amplified – at least in Australia, but arguably elsewhere (see Figure 1). In particular, we have raised issues of the politics of schooling (including relations to levels of government), the autonomy of schools and systems to respond, and the inequities of access and resources. If any ‘new’ form of schooling is possible post-pandemic, then confronting the challenges of education is arguably the only path. The insights provided in this paper, and the questions we raise, are one step in engaging in a conversation about the problems and possibilities of education. This is however not a one off, or individual endeavour. To that end, this is an ongoing project which we hope you will join.

Figure 1: Reflective Questions Raised by COVID-19 Pandemic for School/System Leaders



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