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Education Beyond and Greater than Gonsky

Abstract

The submission points out the broad nature and role of education in contemporary society, with schools education being foundational to the broader role and function of education in society, though often addressed as if an end in itself. The submission also points out the limitations of stereotypical conceptions of education, focusing on curriculum, teaching quality, schools autonomy and funding, which form the basis for the present reforms. The submission identifies several areas of functional schools education reform outside these stereotypes, in the interests of a more functional conception of schools education initiatives in the future.

The current premise for education reform is the ill-founded assumption that quality in education is a performance criterion which is measurable and comparable with international jurisdictions, and that to achieve that presumed quality, funding and marginal reorganisation without fundamental structural reform, is necessary and sufficient.

In fact, education is not like that. You can sort of, meaningfully talk of quality in education, but what constitutes good quality performance, is contingent, because the student cohort is a developing cohort whose needs and potential, change over time and stage of life. And in fact, it is in contemporary terms, now very anachronistic to refer to children's education, absent any consideration of adult education needs, which are now lifelong needs, where the efficiency of adult education delivery, depends upon sound and diverse schooling. And adult education needs can't be meaningfully understood as drivers of children's educational goals (including socialisation), without considering the job market which will be consuming and more importantly, rejecting the qualities and attributes inculcated in any phase of education. One can't any longer just say to people, "get a qualification and you'll get a job". And nor are people considered 'good as they are', for work, which is a pity, and a sad loss of the free capacity to make a life in society, that we must all absorb and never imagine aspiring to again.

The Bill presented, is dominated by curriculum standardisation, teacher quality, school management autonomy and funding, representing a very narrow view of education, both functionally and its place in society today. One can discern from these dominant focal points, the influence of the various lobby groups, rather than a grand and visionary design for education, serving our contemporary and emerging society.

At each level of schooling, different things are happening to students developmentally. So as a functional imperative, one needs to watch for developmental deficits, pick them up, and correct them. That is a more important driver of 'performance' and equity of schooling outcomes, than curricula, teaching quality, principal autonomy or funding. In early and primary school, the deficit risks are in cognitive development. But in high school, the potential deficit risks some students may be subject to, are more commonly social, often deriving from dysfunctional social interactions between students, where social interaction and development are so important in these years. In systemically dysfunctional high schools, bullying-inhibiting initiatives (that we haven't worked out how to develop yet, because we haven't posed ourselves that problem), would conceivably be a powerful driver of inter-regional educational equity, just by virtue of the relief from attentional aberrations that dysfunctional socialisation in dysfunctional schools engenders, leave alone other factors.

The conception of schooling remains dogmatically bound to old stereotypes. The objective of primary school is to send a few students to selective high schools. The objective of high schools is to send as many students as possible to competitive courses in 'good' universities. The current proposed Bill does not break those stereotypes, and in fact reinforces them, to the detriment of our educative capacity to contribute to the Common Weal as society emerges into a new era, with new challenges and opportunities, not least being a permanently 'tight' job market, which in the absence of a regulatory counterweight, imposes stringent educative pressures both in and entering the workforce, without government support for individuals facing those pressures.

We could be achieving high international rankings in schools testing, and still not be serving the community, pupils or employers, nor inculcating enlightened citizens. Yet the proposed Bill, places national test performance as a key objective. Equity of educational outcomes is also an objective of the Bill, but it is subsumed under the presumption that curriculum standardisation, teacher quality, school management autonomy and funding, will magically resolve educational inequity if only tweaked in some unspecified way. That is monstrously self-deluding and indulging of vested interests.

In conclusion, I urge Parliament to conceive of education as a whole of life enterprise. People are no longer, 'good as they are' in contemporary and emerging society. Parliamentarians inadvertently prove this every day. Education is no longer just for kids. Education is emerging as a part of the whole of life staged transition, at friction with the opposing force of a permanently tight labour market, which Parliament has not begun to address in all its ramifications. Education doesn't end with high school or university. Early education is foundational, but it's not the end. Regional differences and in particular, systematic regional dysfunction in education, do reinforce relative regional disadvantage. Thus at any level of abstraction, education is an important policy implement for the Common Weal, which is poorly employed in this Bill, apparently drafted for political purposes other than the Common Weal.

A number of initiatives are available to Parliament, which are difficult to conceive as amendments to the present Bill, due to the very narrow conception of that instrument. But the sun may yet rise on education, unencumbered by lobbying monophthalmic interests.

1. Coordinated facilities for teaching and management exchanges between schools of varying performance and quality, and periodic opportunities for communications, including the opportunity for staff and students to observe the learning experiences and outcomes of schools with different performance and quality characteristics. This is particularly important in high school.

2. The creation of a permanent 'Dysfunctional Schools Task Force', reporting to Federal Parliament, to arrange with State authorities, the design, funding and implementation of a systematic package of adjustments for identified groups of schools, with facility for the tailoring of elements of the package to the needs of individual schools. That's how you obtain educational equity. Not simply by making teachers more expensive.

3. The assignment of regional psychological and 'teaching adjuvancy' resources to aid primary and secondary schools in developing, reviewing and revising teaching and learning strategies and facilities, and in exceptions handling, and providing psychological and specialist teaching support for individual students at learning and developmental risk (cognitive or social), in conjunction with formalised processes for identifying and handling behaviours by students with the propensity to disrupt the social, cognitive and educational development of peers, particularly in high schools. The work able to be done by specialised psychological and teaching adjuvant resources, is tacitly subsumed into arguments for improving teacher quality, though teacher quality alone can never accomplish what these supporting services may do for students.

4. The coordination of the creation and delivery of specialised schools management resources to enable schools to develop specialisations in their learning activities, to cater for the particular needs, vocational, demographic and otherwise, of their student cohorts, and encouraging diversity in the schooling experience. Instead of setting up technical schools versus academically oriented schools, management plans and resources may be developed as modules enabling schools to develop their educational delivery capacity, tailored to the specific needs of their local community and student cohort.

The corporatisation of these capacities will enable the export of these competencies to international jurisdictions, and provide a source of partial self-funding. Experience with these core capacity-building and equity-distributing capabilities, will provide insights into the problems and needs of education, independent of any interested lobby group.

Conclusion

National test performance is a poor foundation for education policy. Education is now a lifelong, stage of life service, with very complex demographic and market forces driving its needs. Schools education is foundational to the broader educative enterprise in society, and requires a functional approach to policy, as opposed to the dogmatic and interested focus on curriculum, teacher quality, principal autonomy and funding.

The submission identifies functional schools initiatives to coordinate exchanges between schools with polar performance disparities. To create a 'Dysfunctional Schools Task Force' to coordinate the structured and efficient normalisation of function and operation of identified dysfunctional schools. To provide psychological and 'teaching adjuvancy' resources to deal with special needs at the school and individual level. And to coordinate the design and delivery to schools, of specialised schools management modules, enabling schools to tailor educational services to their local community and student cohort needs, for a diverse educational offering.

The submission promotes a disinterested, expansive, 'whole of life' view of educational needs, and a functional approach to schooling for the foundational realisation of the early stages of those needs.