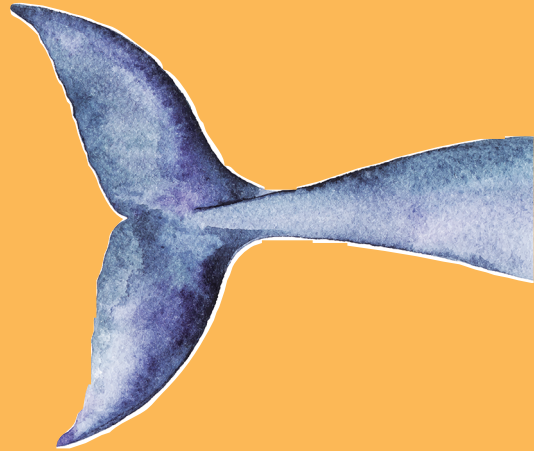


*“The most penetrating analysis of the failure of
Australian schooling so far” – Ken Boston*

UNBEACHING THE WHALE

Can Australia’s
schooling be
reformed?



Dean Ashenden

*“Takes us from powerful critique to compelling agenda”
– Anthony Mackay*

Praise for *Unbeaching the Whale*

“The most penetrating analysis of the causes of the failure of Australian schooling so far. If the stranded whale is ever to be unbeached, this book will hold the key. Undoubtedly it will reignite a much-needed debate.”

— Ken Boston AO, *Gonski panel member and former director-general of education in NSW and South Australia*

“Dean Ashenden compels us to reconsider the very basis of education policy in Australia and to contemplate how we might and should do better. With his unflinchingly sceptical analysis and his deep understanding of the history of education, he pinpoints the unexamined assumptions, the failed “revolutions” and the perverse persistence of many of our shared misconceptions about schooling. Unlike many contemporary critics of education policy, he doesn’t leave us stranded, but maps out a credible route to enable every student to have ‘a decent shot at twelve safe, happy, worthwhile and productive years to begin their working lives.’”

— Carmen Lawrence AO, *Gonski panel member and former premier of Western Australia*

“The huge value of Ashenden’s account comes from drawing on the sweep of time from the reforming decades of the sixties and seventies to the present day. He does so from a special vantage point — that of an actor, observer and analyst of education over the entire period. For those of us who committed considerable effort to the education agenda over those years, Ashenden’s account of the failed revolution is confronting. *Unbeaching the Whale* presents inconvenient truths to be confronted and reconciled, and judgements to be questioned and contested.”

— Anthony Mackay AM, *CEO of the Centre for Strategic Education, co-chair of Learning Creates Australia and former chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership*

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reformed?

Dean Ashenden

Inside Story

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PROLOGUE

The historian Manning Clark believed that Australian political leaders fell into one of two groups; they were either “straighteners” and prohibitors or they were enlargers of life. So too ways of thinking about schools; this short book is an argument for an enlarging spirit in schooling and against the demand for compliance before all else.

That is not what I had in mind; the initial idea was to pull together some threads of thinking developed over a decade or so. Certainly I began with a set against what governments of all persuasions had been saying and doing about schools since the Howard years, an approach driven with utter conviction by the Rudd/Gillard governments in their “education revolution” (with the sole but compelling exception of Gonski). But as I dug out and for the first time really focused on a mass of evidence about how things had been going, I got more than I’d bargained for.

I was not shocked, exactly, but taken aback by the consistency of the picture over a wide field and across many years: Australian schooling has been on the slide for two decades, is still on the slide and is showing no signs of turning around. That conclusion was

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reinforced and expanded in scope late in the piece as I at last realised that much-publicised behavioural and emotional difficulties (“classroom disruption,” “school refusal,” early leaving, bullying, lack of “engagement,” problems of “wellbeing”) are even more marked, fundamental and significant than the cognitive shortcomings on which much of the evidence dwells. They suggest that schooling isn’t working, and that it isn’t working because what children and young people experience there is badly out of kilter with what they experience elsewhere.

There was more to come as I turned to the obvious question: why? Why didn’t an agenda prosecuted with exceptional vigour by exceptionally capable political leaders deliver what it promised, let alone do what really needed doing? There is nothing inherently wrong in the big arguments used to make schools sit up straight and do as they were told — choice, equality, “effective” teaching, and the duty owed by publicly funded schools to the wider society, including its economy. All can be constructive, inspiring even. But not the versions that came to dominate official minds.

Then the third and final occasion for a sinking feeling: how and by whom could the slide be arrested and reversed? As the straightening agenda expanded and grew in confidence, the system of governance — already limited to doing what could be done in bits and pieces within three-year election cycles — became more complex and less capable. When the Productivity Commission looked at the problem it found that key elements of the national reform agenda had been “stalled” for thirteen years, and that the things talked about at national HQ could seem “remote” from the “lived experience” of teachers and school leaders. There is now no entity, national or other, no government, state/territory or federal, and no stakeholder or combination of stakeholders with a span of responsibility and authority and a relationship

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between brain and body close enough to conceive and drive change of the kind and scale required.

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There is another side to this ledger, however. I was not the only or first to be dismayed at how things were playing out. Prominent veterans Brian Caldwell and Alan Reid (both former deans of education) conclude that “Australian schools have hit the wall” (Caldwell) and need “a major overhaul” (Reid). A former NSW education minister, Verity Firth, argues that the time has come for structural reform rather than more of the same. Her Western Australian counterpart (and former premier and Gonski panel member) Carmen Lawrence rages against the long tail, rising segregation, pathetically narrow performance measures, the failure of new school planning, “deeply disturbing” inequities, and “huge” differences in resourcing and opportunity. Barry McGaw, former chief executive of ACER, the Australian Council for Educational Research, and former head of education at the OECD, famously careful in his pronouncements, says bluntly that quality is declining, inequity is high, and the system is “resistant to reform”; his successor at the ACER, Geoff Masters, says “deep reforms” are “urgently required.”¹

All this comes amid a flurry of books about the “tyranny of merit” or “threats to egalitarian schooling,” books assaulting policy “that is taking us backwards” or calling for “reimagining” or “revolution” or “transformation” or a “ground-up rethink” of what “learning systems” are needed to equip students for “societal challenges we can’t yet imagine.”

And it’s not just policy wonks and the kinds of people who write books. Others trying to find a way through the maze include some actually giving life to the idea often given lip service by the

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powers-that-be: that *all* young people will become “confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of community.” Now, for the first time, breakthroughs in the rigorous assessment of learning and growth are making it possible for schools to keep doing some of the important things they have long done and to do important new things as well, and, what’s more, to do it for everyone: to provide twelve safe, happy and worthwhile years across the board.

So the nub of the answer to the question posed in the book’s subtitle — can schooling be reformed? — is yes, but it’s a very big ask, and schools can’t do it by themselves. It requires a reorganisation or “restructuring” of the system of governance; of the sector system, government, independent and Catholic; and above all of the daily work of students and teachers. And that in turn requires a very different way of thinking about schools and reform: more incremental reform, yes, but within a big, long-term strategy for *structural* change; equality *in* schooling rather than *through* it; more fraternity as well as more equality and liberty; more choice, but made more equally available; sectors, yes, but not organised so that two feed off the third; realising that schools, like students and teachers, need space and support to find their own way within a negotiated framework; accepting that schools can contribute to prosperity, but not by aiming at it; and the really big one, focusing not on teaching, effective or otherwise, but on the organisation of the production of learning and growth by its core workforce, the students. Thinking needs to be more politically capable and inspiring as well as enlarging in spirit, able to stimulate and guide the kind of top-down-bottom-up popular movement briefly seen in the “I Give a Gonski” campaign (and on a very much larger scale in the distant but formative tumults of the 1960s and early 1970s).

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The case for such a big and risky effort rests on necessity (current and piecemeal reforms can't do what needs to be done) and the fact that it really matters, not in a life-and-death way but in a hard-to-pin-down, universal, lasting way.

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What follows retraces the course of my own enquiries. Chapter 1 describes the straightening agenda of the education revolution, and then surveys the evidence of its failure. Chapter 2 asks why the revolution failed, and finds the answer in a worldwide climate of opinion, its constituent ideas, and its powerful machinery of production and distribution; the chapter proceeds mostly by critique but also tries to pin down what was crucially different about Gonski. Chapter 3 draws out the morals of these stories for tackling the question that really matters: what now?

1. THE REVOLUTION

THE REVOLUTION: CONTENT

In January 2007 the leader of the federal opposition, Kevin Rudd, declared that if elected Labor would drive a “revolution” across the entire Australian education system, from childcare through schools and the Vocational Education and Training system all the way up to the universities. Rudd wasn’t invoking obsolete ideas about a better-educated population being of value in and of itself; the point of the revolution was to secure our economic future. On this the evidence was both “unequivocal” and “disturbing,” he said. On the one hand, the rewards of the knowledge economies of the future would go to the best educated. On the other, Australia, once an international pace-setter, was falling behind. Labor in office would bring a new “national vision” of Australia as the most educated country with the most skilled economy and the best-trained workforce in the world.²

Labor *was* in office by the end of the year, and deputy prime minister Julia Gillard was charged with making that revolution. For Gillard, schooling and inequality rather than the system and the economy were the watchwords, but in all else she took her

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cue from Rudd. There were soon so many plans, programs and ambitions that it can be difficult to work out what the revolution was and wasn't. A manifesto for the 2010 re-election campaign, for example, checks off everything from national professional standards for teachers and bonuses for "high-performing" schools to a do-it-at-home online assessment tool, an item bank and a new Australian Baccalaureate. All would be "first ever" and/or "world-class."³

Gillard moved at such speed on these and other fronts that three of the revolution's four constituent elements were in place within a year: an intense focus on "outcomes"; a comprehensive plan to lift "teacher quality"; and a much-strengthened "national approach." The fourth element, a search for a new solution to the old problem of funding, was announced just over two years in.⁴

Outcomes: As the bullseye of the revolution's expansive target, "outcomes" provided its objective, its focus, its *sine qua non*. Outcomes in the "fundamentals" of reading, maths and science were held to be crucial in themselves as well as keys to learning everything else. They were unarguable. Better still, they were measurable and improvable. "What works" (the argument went) was now known and could drive action. The three international tests centring on outcomes in one or more of literacy, numeracy and science⁵ and conducted every three or four years would be complemented by NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy), a new annual test of literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It would compare each student's progress with that of their entire cohort. Scores for students would go to parents; scores for schools to everyone via My School, a new national website. My School would use outcomes and other data to compare each school with every other; it would show anyone

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from parents to ministers of education where and by whom progress was and wasn't being made.

A new language and a reheated rhetoric made it all seem both commonsensical and visionary. Outcomes, performance, transparency and accountability paved a path at the end of which were schools doing what they were supposed to do, ensuring that every student reached their full potential, tackling inequality, and contributing to Australia's prosperity in an ever more competitive world.

Teacher quality: If outcomes were the end, better teachers and teaching were the means. Teachers and teaching, it was asserted, made or failed to make all the difference. Gillard joined the legions reciting the incontrovertible finding of thousands of studies that “nothing at school influences student outcomes more than excellent teaching.”⁶ A top teacher could generate eighteen months or more in “learning years” in the course of a single year where others might achieve just half that. The revolution set about boosting the “quality” of teaching (or less tactfully, the quality of teachers) in every aspect, “recruiting, training, retraining, and rewarding.”⁷ A new Teacher Quality National Partnership would develop a “nationally consistent, robust, equitable performance management system” that would combine with new national teacher standards at four levels (Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished, and Lead) to underpin “Australia's first national system of performance, assessment and pay.” Salary scales would be stretched to keep good teachers in the classroom. Progression would be based on performance (ie. boosting outcomes) not seniority. Hard-to-staff positions would pay more; the “very best” teachers would get bonuses. Support staff would free up teachers to concentrate on teaching.

THE REVOLUTION

National approach: The revolution would also be emphatically *national* — national curriculum; national standards; national testing; national initiatives for low socioeconomic status, or low-SES, communities, literacy and numeracy, Asian languages, digital education, early years learning, data collection, and even school pride. Most important of all, there would be new national machinery — national policies, organisations, targets, accountabilities, agreements, measurements, indicators, benchmarks and data infrastructures.⁸ One of the three national agencies (Education Services Australia, a kind of back office for the assembled ministers) already existed; the second, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, was established in 2008; the third, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, followed in 2010.

Funding: The fourth element of the revolution, foreshadowed at the outset and detailed in April 2010, would become by far its most prominent and popular: a national review of the chronically contentious and complicated world of school funding. It would be headed by a low-profile mover and shaker in the upper levels of business, David Gonski, assisted by a distinguished panel of five, four of them broadly representative of the sectors (two for the government sector) plus a veteran go-between of government, public service and business. It would recommend on the usual things — amounts and shares — but also suggest how notoriously complex and opaque arrangements could be simplified and rendered transparent. Above all, it would further the great principle of equality — not just more equitable funding but funding delivered in a way that would make schooling and its outcomes more equal.

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All this was claimed to be novel as well as big. The first two sub-heads of an early prospectus for the revolution were “Overcoming a legacy of neglect” and “A new beginning.”⁹ In those early days Labor, wanting all the credit, downplayed the history to which its revolution belonged. The idea of a national curriculum had been around for decades; it was in draft form when Labor came to office in 2007. The first of a series of “national declarations” of schooling’s goals had been agreed as early as 1989 and revised in 2004. A national testing program was the brainchild of the Howard government. An avowedly national approach to funding had been installed in Gough Whitlam’s day, as had a new national institution to drive reform; that institution, the Schools Commission, had not survived, but increasingly frequent and extensive national consultation had. What many have assumed to be a new principle of needs-based funding advocated by Gonski had been developed by Peter Karmel’s report to Whitlam.¹⁰ Much of the thinking behind “teacher quality” echoed a 1998 Senate report.¹¹ A national action plan for schooling had been published in 2006 and approved by state/territory and feder

Even what was new to Australian schooling wasn’t new elsewhere. Much of the revolution’s hardware and software had been manufactured in Paris by the OECD (with a good deal of assistance from Australians, it should be noted).¹³ They had been installed in Britain by the Blair Labour government before Australian Labor’s revolution was conceived, and more recently by high-profile US school systems.¹⁴ Similar approaches had been implemented in so many other countries that by 2011 a Finnish author could coin the pejorative acronym GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) to label it.¹⁵

If the claim to novelty was on shaky ground, the claim to urgency wasn’t. Results from the first large-scale standardised

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testing of “the basics” in the late 1980s and 1990s came as a shock to system authorities, pushing them towards an outcomes, testing and accountability agenda. The national push, which dates back to the 1960s, was assisted by the image of the Commonwealth as the white knight of schooling and strengthened by common experience of the “outcomes” problem. The smaller systems particularly calculated that national curriculum, policy and research would save them money. The Howard governments (1996–2007) picked up on this mood but were more concerned with getting extra money into the non-government sectors than with prosecuting the emerging agenda; they deserved to be accused by Rudd and Gillard of having dragged the chain. Then came the 2007 results in the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA; Australia was on the skids. And so to Rudd and Gillard, incarnations of a Labor and Commonwealth tradition, champions of schooling and equality, determined to do something about it, immediately.

As noted, they weren’t just onto the problem; they were confident they had the solution too. “The key to improving Australia’s education system is not doing a lot of new things,” says a report commissioned by the Gonski review, “but rather it is applying what we know works in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable manner.”¹⁶ It all seemed to *fit* in the way of the DC3 beloved of innovation pundits: new not in any one component but in its transformative combination of the already-existing.

Each of the revolution’s many parts would support and be supported by the others; parents would be guided in their search for the right school not by rumour or reputation but by authoritative information about the things that really mattered; schools that responded to parent demands would get the carrot, those that didn’t, the stick; school leaderships in pursuit of enrolments

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would encourage teachers to learn from and use hard evidence rather than staffroom war stories or tired orthodoxy; schools serving disadvantaged communities would get funding commensurate with their task — under their own control — and would soon match it with the best; an evidence-based profession working in steadily improving schools would earn greater public respect and attract more capable recruits. “Performance” would be pushed from the outside by information, transparency and accountability, and driven from the inside by the rewards of doing well and the fear of not.

The problems were system-wide; the system would be transformed. Hence a famously rash commitment: by 2025 Australian schools would be among the top five performers in the OECD world.¹⁷ After a decade of dithering and debate, a consensus had emerged; it would soon become an orthodoxy.

THE REVOLUTION: FAILURE

Machinery: The revolution began with a dream run. Six out of eight state/territory governments were in generally sympathetic Labor hands. Several of the revolution’s components already existed in provisional form or better. The Commonwealth, in those palmy days before the global financial crisis, was flush; it could afford to grease political wheels. In perfect political weather, the national organisations and tests and the My School website were launched within a year or two; national agreements and partnerships followed in quick succession.

Then to the task at hand, and to recalcitrant realities. National agencies and national meetings of ever-changing casts of ministers and senior bureaucrats worked at a great distance from the objects of their attentions, the schools and their classrooms, the teachers and their students. Few ministers brought

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to their deliberations experience in and/or direct knowledge of education. The new national institutions and arrangements were collectively clumsy as well as remote; the machinery did not work as designed. Indeed the imagery is misleading — machinery of this kind does not whirr away producing widgets to specification. New agencies jostle and stake out their territories, states compete for influence over and the rewards of the new arrangements, and the larger ones are quick to see that the feds are kept in their place.

While the Commonwealth is surrounded by importunate states/territories and harassed by ruthless non-government sector lobbies, it enjoys being the centre of the web. National increasingly comes to mean Commonwealth. Its department of education grows, dwarfing the new agencies. With the states and territories having outsourced their brains to the national approach, Commonwealth ministers soon assume the right to speak for the family in the way of firstborn sons, behaving like national rather than merely federal ministers. With no schools of their own to distract them, they feel free to advise states and territories on how to do their job all the way down to prescribing the scope and format of student reports. Goals, intentions and programs multiply. The fourth (2019) iteration of a statement of national goals lists the many qualities to be displayed by young Australians and the many characteristics of schools that will deliver them, along with no fewer than eleven “areas for action” ranging from supporting educators, strengthening early childhood education and promoting world-class curriculum to “specific actions” for the primary, middle and senior years.¹⁸

The pivots on which all these wheels turn are the successive National School Reform Agreements, or NSRAs, reviewed in late

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2022 by the Productivity Commission. The commission's report opened with a description of the apparatus of which the NSRAs are part, hinting (intentionally or otherwise) at where the problem might lie: nine ministers of education pursuing three agreed reform directions, through various combinations of national and state/territory-specific "initiatives."¹⁹

Most of the initiatives to which the commission referred had been "delivered" (the commission said) but with no detectable impact on learning outcomes; three had not been delivered at all, two of them touted to be capable of doing what the others hadn't, namely, lifting outcomes. They were "stalled." Indeed they had been stalled for thirteen years.

One problem, the commission said in nice understatement, was that discussions convened under the NSRA could seem "remote" from the "lived experience" of teachers and school leaders. Suggesting how things might be done in the future, the commission made not-very-oblique comment on the past: NSRAs should be confined to a small number of reforms and should avoid a "one size fits all" approach in favour of undertakings that might benefit from coordination. "Milestones" should be clarified, and certain "thorny issues" should be resolved.²⁰ In other words, agreements had been made with no clear or shared idea about where "reform" was up to, had avoided difficult issues, and had probably hindered more than helped.

Even this was less harsh than it could have been. What the commission didn't ask or even hint at — surprising in an agency that is really just a branch of the economics discipline — was how much it had all cost. Quite aside from substantial increases in expenditure on schools, the large numbers of public servants in three agencies and in the federal department of education, as well as the significant numbers in the states/territories charged with

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servicing national agencies, processes and projects, don't come cheap; still less do "national" projects, programs and grants. Perhaps it netted out at less than each state/territory doing its own thing, but perhaps not. The question was not posed. Nor did the commission ask or hint at that most basic of economists' questions: what is the opportunity cost? What else might have been done with all those resources, and might it have worked better?

Money: The Gonski review was in several ways very different from the rest of the revolution, but it was like the rest in promising much but delivering nothing, or worse. The first major review of funding in forty years was designed to reshape notoriously arcane and inequitable arrangements, but it had one hand tied behind its back from the start. It was required to work with the sector system as it stood, and then to make sure no school would be worse off (a constraint subsequently upgraded to every school being better off).²¹ It was to recommend on a funding floor in the continuing absence of a ceiling.

Gonski was carefully researched and, to a degree, candid. It described the existing funding arrangements as complex, divisive and outdated, as lacking in coherence, transparency, coordination and direct connection with outcomes, and as riddled with overlaps, duplications and inefficiencies. It documented huge differences "far greater in Australia than in many other countries" between school and sector populations, between outcomes for the advantaged and the disadvantaged as well as between other defined groups and the mainstream, and between the highest- and lowest-performing students.²² A "concerning" proportion of students was not meeting minimum standards. David Gonski himself later professed to have been shocked by the inequities of the system.²³ As a whole, it was on the slide; at the turn of the cen-

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tury only one country outperformed Australia in reading and science, and only two in maths; nine years later one had become six, and two had become twelve.²⁴

Working within the (tight) constraints of its terms of reference, the Gonski panel came up with an appealing proposal: basic funding for every school would be supplemented by loadings reflective of demographics and location and the associated difficulty of the educational task. The loadings would go directly to the schools; they would be regarded as having entered into a contract for the delivery of a service, namely, lifting the “performance” of students from the designated groups. The Commonwealth and the states/territories would share the funding load for all schools, government and non-government alike, but government schools would be fully funded and non-government subsidised according to “capacity to contribute.”

Gonski’s needs-based solution (often and misleadingly referred to as sector-blind) was released in February 2012 to a standing ovation. The naysaying Coalition shadow minister found himself heavily outgunned, and not just in public opinion. The Gonski panel had done its political homework, consulting with the states and territories, the non-government systems and lobbies, the teacher organisations and other “stakeholders.” All that was needed to seal the deal was prime minister Gillard’s endorsement.

Bafflingly, it was not forthcoming. Granted, the budget was under pressure from big spending to quell the GFC — including spending on school infrastructure that had little or nothing to do with the revolution’s agenda — but Gillard’s first public response to Gonski remains surprising. The review had been commissioned two years on from the GFC, and its report came nearly two years after that. The government must have known that

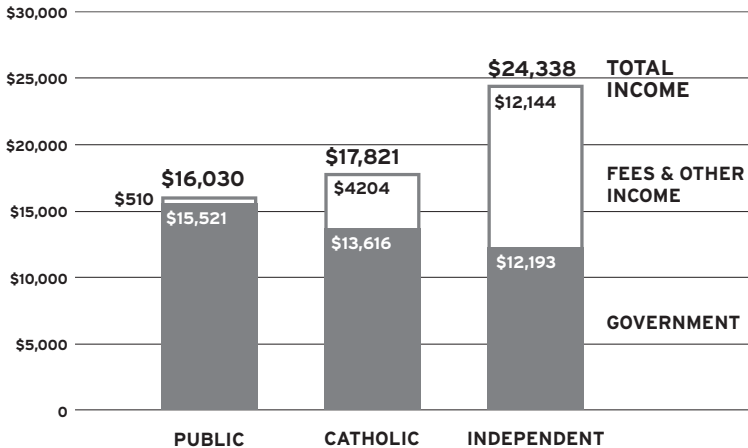
THE REVOLUTION

political wheels would need to be greased and that it would have to make appropriate provision.

Whatever the explanation, the upshot was disastrous. An inexperienced junior education minister was sent on a fool's errand, consulting with governments and the non-government sectors all over again, and doing deals with some but not all. With only months to go before an election it was obvious that the revolution was turning into a rout.²⁵ The clamour in support of Gonski — which had now entered the language thanks to the “I Give a Gonski” campaign driven by the teacher organisations — forced the recalcitrant Coalition to declare a “unity ticket on Gonski.” In office, it soon tore up the ticket. The new government could dine off the claim that Gonski was a shambles and find “need” to be greatest among fee-paying parents. Its version of Gonski had most public funding to non-government schools come from the relatively affluent Commonwealth, leaving the government schools (containing two-thirds of the nation's students and almost all of its “disadvantaged” families and schools) depending mainly on chronically indigent state and territory governments. Gonski ended up providing regressive funding with a new and plausible rationale.

Between 2009 and 2017 funding to government schools fell by \$17 per student per annum, while rising by \$1420 in Catholic systemic schools and \$1318 in independent schools.²⁶ Often defended as reducing fees and thereby increasing access, that funding has neither reduced fees nor increased access. Both capital and recurrent funding have favoured the proliferation of small low-fee independent schools, almost all affiliated with particular religious organisations and often with specific language and/or ethnic groups as well. At the other end of the non-government spectrum, resort-like establishments have appeared, gated communities able

AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS' INCOME BY SOURCE 2020 (\$ PER STUDENT)



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

to charge fees approximating the minimum legal wage. Between 2013 and 2017 the four wealthiest schools in the country spent more on new facilities than the total devoted to such facilities in the poorest 1800 schools.²⁷ Some Catholic systemic schools now routinely get more in public funding than their government opposite numbers, with fees and other income the icing on the cake.²⁸ By 2020 per student funding in independent schools averaged \$24,330, in Catholic systemic schools \$17,821, in public schools \$16,030.²⁹

Did it matter? A decade after Gonski was commissioned and seven years after its report was released, the OECD surveyed principals of “advantaged” schools and “disadvantaged” schools as to their school’s capacity to provide instruction, with findings for Australia set out in the table opposite.³⁰

Teachers: One recent (2021) survey suggests that teachers find their work rewarding but their jobs less so.³¹ The problem: despite

AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON HINDRANCES TO PROVIDING INSTRUCTION

Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by...

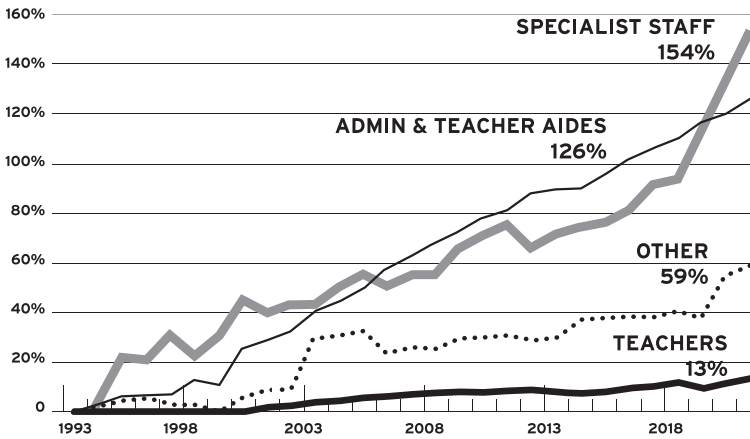
	Disadvantaged schools	Advantaged schools
	%	%
Lack of teaching staff	34	3
Inadequate/poorly qualified teaching staff	21	0.3
Teacher absenteeism	28	5
Teachers not well prepared	18	5
Lack of educational material	21	1
Inadequate or poor educational material	21	0.3
Lack of physical infrastructure	45	6
Lack of student respect for teachers	16	0.3

Source: Thomson (2021)

undertakings given by prime minister Gillard³² and despite ballooning numbers of support staff, teachers are spending less of their time on teaching and more on everything else.

What's getting most teachers down isn't their work with students but the "everything else."³³ One study, still in train, is reported to be finding that "teachers' work has greatly intensified and accelerated over the past thirty years."³⁴ A 2022 Monash University survey found that a "considerable majority" of teachers described workloads as unmanageable³⁵ and that a large majority were planning or would like to leave the profession.³⁶ Only one in three in an NEiTA-ACE survey agreed that "I am the best teacher I can be." That study also found that 84 per cent had contemplated leaving the profession in the previous twelve months,

CHANGES IN THE STUDENT-STAFF RATIO OF SCHOOL STAFF 1993-2018



Source: *Productivity Commission (2023)*

75 per cent of whom said that they felt stressed at work, while 82 per cent reported struggling with “work–life balance.”³⁷ Among those who did leave, two studies found that the most-cited factors were workload and work–life balance.³⁸ Top of the list for workload reduction: smaller classes, more admin staff, and fewer intrusive demands and instructions from head office.³⁹

Nor is there progress to report on the standing of the profession. Teachers enjoy a high level of respect for their ethical standards⁴⁰ but not the level of public esteem that they feel warranted. The Monash study reported most teachers as feeling that “the public does not respect teachers” and fewer than half as feeling “personally appreciated.” Among the recent leavers, according to two other studies, pay and “standing” come in just below workload as reasons for leaving.⁴¹ An analysis of media reports over twenty-plus years (1996 to

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2020) found that teachers' work is widely thought to be "simple and commonsense," and that stories about teachers are mostly negative.⁴²

Much the same is true of standards of entry to the profession. The revolution's many undertakings and programs notwithstanding, there is a clear downward trend in the academic attainments of students entering initial teacher education; the higher a student's Australian Tertiary Admission Rank the less likely it is that they will opt for teaching.⁴³ Between 2006 (just before the revolution was declared) and 2017, significantly increased proportions of high achievers went into courses in health, IT and science, and significantly decreased proportions into education.⁴⁴ The teaching intake had more low scorers (ATAR 51–60) in 2017 (10.7 per cent) than in 2010 (7.3 per cent) as well as fewer high scorers (24.4 versus 27 per cent).⁴⁵ Adding to the gloom: with increased numbers in teacher education programs came lower entry standards and lower completion rates.⁴⁶ A program aimed at recruiting mid-career "high performers" was a complete flop.⁴⁷

On pay, nothing has changed, at best. Teachers' salaries have been falling relative to other-graduate occupations for a long time. Between 1986 and 2018 the ratio of education to other-graduate salaries has declined from 100 per cent to 92 per cent for women, and from 98 to 84 per cent for men.⁴⁸ The revolution did nothing to interrupt these long-run trends. While top salaries for teachers increased by 16 per cent between 2006 and 2016, the figure for all other graduates was 22 per cent.⁴⁹ Compressed scales are still compressed; rewards and incentives for high performers and hard-to-staff positions are only exceptionally offered. Most teachers (87 per cent) say that getting promoted is important or very important, but 71 per cent also say that opportunities "rarely" come around.⁵⁰

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The loss of morale and confidence in the profession as a whole is also found in those who do get promoted. The “empowered” principals (working with “empowered” school communities) who would have “the opportunity to strengthen their leadership skills and improve professional standards” are in short supply.⁵¹ Schools struggle to fill some leadership positions; stories circulate of deputies acting in the principal’s job for months or even years as the search goes on. The most recent annual survey found “stressors” at an all-time high and “many principals on the verge of crisis.” More than a third of respondents reported being “bullied” or “harassed,” and more than half that they had been the subject of “gossip and slander,” with parents being the main culprits in both.⁵²

Quality of teaching: The revolution prompted a boom in talk about “quality” in schools and teaching. The study of media reporting on teachers and teaching mentioned a moment ago found a steep increase (2006–19) in the focus on the term. Behind the talk was extensive institutional support for the quality agenda at the state/territory level and nationally. The Australian Education Research Organisation was established in 2021 “to bring high-quality research evidence to education practitioners and policy-makers and to foster its effective use, so that children and young people can achieve the best possible outcomes.”⁵³ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is just one of a number of organisations to have developed teacher-quality ratings systems.

The only think tank to put significant effort into schools policy, the Grattan Institute, is a convert to the cause, publishing reports on matters such as “making time for great teaching” and better lesson planning. Education ministers and policymakers

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routinely proclaim that lifting “teacher quality” to improve classroom “effectiveness” is the key to lifting “performance.” (One federal minister, recently but only briefly in office, narrowed the task down to getting rid of “dud” teachers.⁵⁴) It is at least possible that the Melbourne-based academic John Hattie (of whom more will be heard in chapter 2) has done more to promote the quality idea than all these institutions combined.⁵⁵

So much effort; but has the “quality” of teaching improved? In its review of the NSRA, the Productivity Commission posed the question but found no evidence to the point: a promised indicator had still not materialised, and (the commission said) no evidence exists on the distribution of “teacher quality.” How many teachers are of “top quality”? How many at the bottom of the scale? How many in between? Has that changed? The commission resorted to speculation.⁵⁶ The lack of answers to such basic questions would be notable in any circumstances, but from advocates of evidence-based policy and teaching it is remarkable.

In the absence of direct evidence we must infer. If effectiveness theory is correct in arguing that quality rises with entry standards, then evidence noted a moment ago suggests that quality has fallen. Widespread dissatisfaction among teachers about workload and time on task would point in the same direction. So would evidence from an international study in 2014 that both student and teacher absenteeism are “considerably higher” in Australia than in other countries.⁵⁷ Surveys of class time lost in disruption are similarly discouraging.⁵⁸ The OECD found that nearly half of Australia’s lower secondary teachers work in schools whose principal reported that quality instruction is hindered by a shortage of qualified and/or well performing teachers.⁵⁹

Another straw in the wind: only 1 per cent of all Australian teachers have achieved the highest of four levels of accomplish-

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ment according to standards introduced in 2010 (although being admitted to that select company depends on applying in the first place).⁶⁰ And yet another: a 2018 study found that nearly one in three fifteen-year-olds didn't feel they belonged at school, and more than one in four reported feeling like an outsider. When data of this kind are fed into a Sense of Belonging Index, Australia scores below the 2018 OECD average, and its score has been sliding since 2003.⁶¹ Perhaps this is despite an increase in the "quality" of teachers and teaching experienced by these students, but probably not.

Even if quality has risen, will it, can it, rise quickly enough to make a real difference? A notably hard-headed US analysis (by supporters of the quality idea, it should be noted) found that no, it won't. Beginning from a series of assumptions described as "generous" — that one in four US teachers were already highly effective, that a combination of better salaries, higher standards of entry and improved teacher education programs succeeded in attracting 50,000 highly effective teachers (in a workforce of 3.2 million) every year, that highly ineffective teachers were eased out of the system at triple the then-prevailing rate, and that the rate of retention of highly effective teachers doubled — even if, as the authors of the study put it, the agenda "succeeds fantastically," the proportion of highly effective teachers would take five years to rise from 25 to 40 per cent. Most students "would still have less-than-excellent teachers."⁶² An appealing catchphrase does not make a viable strategy.

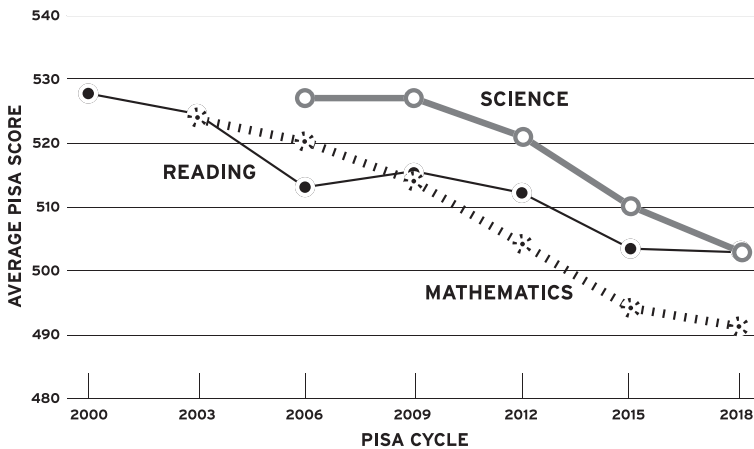
Far from lifting the quality of either teaching or teachers, the revolution's loose conflating of one with the other has probably served to divert attention from the quality of the work teachers are required to do. The study of media reporting on teachers and teaching mentioned above found that its focus was

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“far more on teachers than, say, teaching approaches, schools, schooling, education systems or anything else.”⁶³

Outcomes: In the fifteen years since the revolution got under way there has been no significant or sustained improvement in outcomes or in their social distribution. Movement, if any, has mostly been in the other direction. The gap between high and low achievers in the three PISA tests (reading, maths, science) has expanded. So has the gap between those students classified as having a low SES and those with a high SES. In reading, for example, the most recent tests (2018) show a gap approximating 2.7 years of schooling, with high-SES students up there with students from speedster systems such as Singapore and low-SES students down with the Slovak Republic and Greece. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has increased

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN PISA 2000-2018



Source: Thomson (2021)

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too.⁶⁴ The overall picture, as painted by PISA, is grim, as the much-reproduced ACER graph below plainly shows.

Results from two other international testing programs, PIRLS and TIMSS, suggest flatlining rather than decline. NAPLAN's annual tests show literacy and numeracy outcomes improving a little in one time or place while declining in others.⁶⁵ There is no evidence to suggest that the revolution's many interventions in the cause of lifting outcomes have done so.

Perhaps the most devastating of many analyses of outcomes (and of the gap between rhetoric and reality) was conducted by a team from the Mitchell Institute. The researchers assembled a range of data bearing on officially defined goals for schooling. How many students succeeded in becoming "lifelong learners," "creative and confident individuals" and "active and informed citizens" at each of three points (entry to school, the middle years of school, and the senior years)? Proportions "missing out" ranged from one in eight to more than one in three; those proportions were invariably worse for the usual "equity groups." Perhaps even more troubling (although not definitive): school seems as likely to make things worse as better.⁶⁶

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Unless we assume that things would have gone even more badly in its absence, the revolution failed by any measure, including its own. Governance, already incapable of doing what was needed, was pushed towards dysfunction. Chaotic and counterproductive funding was simplified somewhat, but only within limits imposed by the sector system — we still have three sectors, each with its own funding sources, levels and methods of distribution, in each of six states and two territories, all of them in receipt of funds from both state/territory and federal governments, with the net

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effect of making funding as unfair now as it was before the revolution. Transparency but not necessarily accountability has increased, at significant cost. Teachers were promised the earth but in the upshot lost ground in every area — pay, conditions, content of work, workload, morale. The “quality” of teachers and teaching, including its distribution across levels, sectors and regions, is still unknown but has in all probability declined. “Outcomes,” the revolution’s touchstone, were narrowed in definition and, despite one annual national and three triennial international standardised testing regimes, have at best failed to lift and in at least some areas have declined. As Australia continues to slide rather than rise in international league tables, the “top five by ’25” objective, confidently enshrined in legislation in 2012, has been quietly amended. The aim now is “for students to improve academic achievement and excel by international standards.”⁶⁷ How did such bold plans and high hopes come to this?

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Where did the experts, and two exceptionally capable political leaders, go wrong — in the whole and in just about every part? This question is pursued here at what may seem excessive length, not to suggest that those responsible should have known better, nor to learn from history, but to understand what we are now up against and what if anything can be done about it. The revolution is not in the past; its institutions, policies and mindset still dominate schooling. They are the main causes of a continuing deterioration, and are in no way capable of arresting and reversing it; understanding why that's so is a pre-requisite to tackling an even harder question: now what?

THE REVOLUTION FAILED BECAUSE IT WAS BADLY CONDUCTED

Canberra's great advantage was that it was the only government with a finger in every schooling pie. It was the most powerful single player in the field. But it was only one, and limited in ways peculiar to it. It supplied only one dollar in three and was the only government of the nine that knew next to nothing about schools; the eight governments that *did* run schools had been doing so for

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up to 120 years. What's more, on their side was a Constitution that gave the feds no role in schooling whatsoever.

The sheer scale of the industry — a workforce of more than four million in more than 9500 worksites⁶⁸ — should have given pause, but the industry's organisation and governance should have been more daunting still: those three sectors in each of eight states and territories, the eight governments controlling most schools directly and the rest only indirectly or not at all.

There was a time, roughly from 1900 to 1960, when the grand departments of education, commissioned by the so-called “free, compulsory and secular” movement to take basic education to every suburb, town and hamlet across vast distances, ran just about everything. They built schools, selected, trained and employed teachers, set syllabuses, prepared, published and distributed teaching materials, and sent inspectors to every school on a regular cycle to make sure that all was going according to plan.⁶⁹ The Catholic parish schools and the very few fee-based others tagged along, required to meet minimum standards set and inspected by the departments.

By 2007, those times were long gone. Each state and territory had its own cluster of autonomous agencies and institutions to provide teacher education, set curriculum, control certification, and determine terms and conditions of employment. They were beset by interest groups with little capacity to initiate change but a lot to block it, as well as carping media, fickle public opinion and ideological warriors for whom schooling was less a priority than an arena.

The revolution thought it could get around these many limitations in two ways: first, the national approach would provide a lever in place of direct control; second, a combination of carrots and sticks would get schools to make teachers change their ways

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sufficiently for students to deliver better “performance.” It was wrong on both counts. The national approach was less like a lever than a cumbersome contraption of ropes and pulleys. Worse, it duplicated the cumbersome contraptions in each of the states and territories, making the whole even more cumbersome than each of its parts.

The revolution wanted teachers to teach more “effectively” but without changing the job or the workplace. The way teachers teach is a hardy adaptation to the circumstances of their work.⁷⁰ So also, it must be added, is students’ work. The circumstances in question are deeply entrenched by convention, habit, industrial regulation, infrastructure and popular ideas about what schooling should look like. To all this the revolution was oblivious.

Teachers are not altruists, but past a certain point their struggles for better pay and conditions are essentially a struggle to do good work and be respected for it. They got neither. The revolution’s sticks appeared in no time; the carrots appeared not at all.⁷¹ As far as teachers and principals were concerned, the revolution and its tests and demands for “performance” constituted an invasion of their work and workplaces. Telling teachers that “there is nothing more important than the job that you do,” as Gillard did,⁷² then in the same breath talking about the declining “quality” of teachers, is to invite cynicism and resentment. The revolution’s “performance” and “accountability” obsession was an affront to teachers. Most would accept that standardised tests can be useful to them as well as to schools, to policy and to parents. But in the way that the far-off federal government demanded? In practice, transparency and accountability meant more work, more interference, more demands by a compliance-mad head office and, for some, more humiliation.⁷³

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Within not much more than a year of the declaration of revolution Julia Gillard had to tell a national conference on public schooling that “not every decision I have taken is popular or easy to accept for long-time advocates of public education,” that she understood that “league tables” based on “raw scores” can create a misleading picture and make the jobs of principals and teachers “that much harder,” and that she was “working with state and territory education ministers” to ensure that the “side effects” of a “new transparency framework are not negative ones.”⁷⁴ Another decade on, “transparency,” “accountability” and standardised testing are targets of industrial agendas.⁷⁵

There was something else that antagonised, or at the very least didn’t motivate. The revolution’s leaders, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, both realised that the system as a whole was in trouble, but a concomitant was a style of leadership that might have been taken from portraits of Napoleon and Jeanne d’Arc, heroic figures astride noble steeds calling the people to action in a great cause. Both were those archetypal figures, working-class kids good at the books; they had a clearer sense of the conditions of escape than of the misery of those who weren’t headed that way. Their rhetoric was not just overheated; it was presumptuous and minatory, and persistently so. “Readers of media releases,” said one old hand, “were shocked at the power-coercive language and the command-and-control strategy emanating from the federal government.”⁷⁶

Gillard claimed on behalf of the revolution not just national leadership but the right to determine its goals, methods and content. Someone with no experience in schools, from a government with no experience (or responsibility) either, didn’t hesitate to tell teachers how they should be doing their job. Schools’ successes, in sometimes difficult circumstances, in making themselves more

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open, less intimidating, more welcoming, more humane and more interesting were acknowledged much less often than their failures. Advised by a cocky effectiveness movement, Gillard told a national conference on public education that “we must confront some hard truths.” “Massive” improvements were possible in every school, and she would not be deterred from “relentless implementation” of “broad and deep reform” or from the “tough action” needed to achieve “real change.”⁷⁷ That was not a good way to go about it.

THE REVOLUTION’S BIG IDEAS FAILED TO MOTIVATE, EXPLAIN OR JUSTIFY

The choice argument: Choice wasn’t trumpeted in the way of the economic argument or equality, and it wasn’t omnipresent like teacher effectiveness, but it was among the key ideas that shaped the revolution. It spoke from deep inside the revolution’s machinery. Choice was more the Coalition’s kind of argument than Labor’s. It was the conservatives’ “liberty” to the social democrats’ “equality.” For the revolution, choice delivered “performance”; schools that lifted would be chosen over those that didn’t.⁷⁸ This was represented as a win for parents: for the first time they would be able to make properly informed choices, choices based on authoritative information about the educational performance of every school in the nation.

Although choice has a history in Australia dating back to the “free, compulsory and secular” movement of the 1870s and beyond, it took on its present meaning only in the 1960s and 1970s. Until then it came as a default setting: you went to a state school unless you were unfortunate enough to be Catholic or lucky enough to be rich, in which cases you did what most other Catholic or wealthy parents did. In the course of a spectacularly

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bitter political struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, first within the Catholic church and then between the church and its many opponents, choice was reconstituted as an active decision, made as of right.⁷⁹ Just how completely it has been made over is suggested by a “Better Education” website claiming thirty-six million visitors since 2008 that offers maps of the “best schools,” charts comparing “school results, ratings, stats and trends” and lists of “top suburbs with best schools.”⁸⁰

Behind the struggles of the 1960s to redefine choice was a very material problem: money. The “free, compulsory and secular” movement had ruthlessly deprived the Catholics of the state aid they had until then enjoyed along with everybody else. The Catholics, as belligerent as their adversaries, refused to fold: the predominantly Irish church defied the dominant Anglo-Protestants and opted to go it alone. This they managed to do by combining very low fees and generally low educational standards with the very cheap labour of nuns, priests and brothers mostly imported from Ireland.⁸¹ For seventy or eighty years Catholic schools provided for one in five Australian students, but they quickly came to the point of collapse in the 1950s as students flooded into secondary schooling and, at much the same time, the supply of religious began drying up. By the early 1960s the non-government schools, most of them Catholic parish schools, had reached the point where, famously, they couldn’t even afford enough toilets.⁸²

What to do? The obvious solution was to do as a number of European countries had done (and as New Zealand would soon do): bring the Catholic schools within a more generously defined public system.⁸³ The Labor-inclined bishops might have been persuaded to that view had the price been right, but they were preempted by an unprecedented lay insurgency, mostly among

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parents, many conservative or, much the same thing at the time, sympathetic to the breakaway Democratic Labor Party. They wanted state aid, and they wanted it for their schools, as those schools were and as they had been for generations. An improbable alliance was formed with the other side of the class, ethnic and religious divide, the expensive “private” schools. The glue of this alliance? The claim on public funding, framed as the right to choose.

Whitlam rode to power in 1972 on a promise to fix the whole problem, a last-minute deal with the bishops, and a plan to set up a high-powered body to work out the detail at speed. Economist Peter Karmel’s committee, riding to Whitlam’s instructions, tried to cut out the wealthy privates but lost, and then retreated even further from asserting public control. One of the leading members of the committee and its successor, the Schools Commission, later went public with her fundamental concerns: “We created a situation unique in the democratic world [and] it is very important to realise this,” she said. “There were no rules about student selection and exclusion, no fee limitations, no shared governance, no public education accountability, no common curriculum requirements below upper secondary... We have now become a kind of wonder at which people [in other countries] gape. The reaction is always, ‘What an extraordinary situation.’”⁸⁴ A prominent Catholic layman offered much the same analysis in terms of veiled satisfaction, telling his colleagues in other countries that Catholic schools in Australia had achieved “a uniquely advantageous combination of government funding and relative autonomy.”⁸⁵ It was a remarkable reversal of the political fortunes of the Catholic schools and the public system.

The pros and cons of choice as a component of a schooling system have had something of a free pass simply because choice

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is now so entrenched and such politically dangerous territory.⁸⁶ It is difficult to see how choice in some form could or should be denied, but it is not hard to see that in its Australian form it does more harm than good. One obvious problem is that choice is unequal both in itself and in its social and educational effects. A few parents in the right income brackets and the right suburbs enjoy a virtually unlimited choice of school and type of school while most parents have little or no choice at all. Over the four or five decades since Karmel, agitation and electoral threats have claimed higher public subsidies in the cause of lowering fees to reduce the problem, but (as noted) subsidies have grown, fees haven't dropped and enrolments have continued to rise.⁸⁷

Choice of this kind might satisfy the cause of liberty, but it comes at the expense of both equality and fraternity. What was initially labelled the "residualisation" of the government sector is also the aggrandisement of non-government schools, with resort-like enclaves at one end of the school spectrum, relative slums at the other. That development came with a substantial demographic shift. A choice for this school is a choice against that one; it is exercised by parents who can opt for schools where their children will find others just like themselves in religion and/or ethnicity and/or income group and/or academic inclination. Schools, both the chosen and chosen-against, become less internally diverse while also becoming more different from each other, the obverse of what a multicultural, democratic society might want (or, you might think, what parents could want for their children).⁸⁸ A self-fuelling spiral develops, and not just in enrolment demographics. As the most difficult educational work is increasingly concentrated in the least favoured (and worst-resourced) schools, almost all of them in the public system, teachers are pulled towards less stressful and better-rewarded work in non-government schools.⁸⁹

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Understandably if regrettably, government schools, nominally required to be open to all comers and to be on their guard against cheating (out-of-zone enrolments), have increasingly tried to get their share of the plunder, sometimes unapologetically (most notably in the extensive NSW selective school system), often by various under-the-table arrangements and special programs.⁹⁰ Australian schools now have the highest concentrations of “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” enrolments — that is, of socially segregated rather than socially integrated schools — of any comparable country. An OECD comparison of more than forty national systems found Australia’s to be among the most competitive (that is, between schools) and among the least inclusive of the economically advanced societies. (By far the least competitive and most inclusive? The Scandinavians.)⁹¹ Segregation is often along religious and ethnic as well as class lines.⁹²

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These developments are sometimes represented by their critics as having been generated by neoliberal ideas from the United States, but they long predate the arrival of neoliberalism in Australia. They are the handiwork of a long and unhappy history of ever-increasing competition for positional goods and of schooling as an arena of social competition, rather than of ideas of whatever stripe. Nor are parents the sources or sustainers of the problem. Rightly regarding it as their responsibility to give their children the “best start,” they have every incentive to see that responsibility in terms offered by the system. In other words, most parents will do whatever they can to subvert equal opportunity and fraternity. Only public authority can hope to reduce the vast differences between families’ capacities to choose and to limit the extent to which one family’s choice is made at the expense of others.

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The revolution's faith that an injection of evidence about performance would shift the entrenched logic of choice in Australian schooling and lift the performance of schools was appealing but fanciful. A 2013 Grattan Institute study of parent and school behaviour across an entire region (Logan, south of Brisbane) made the unsurprising finding that the evidence of an increase in student performance flowing from "market-based and pro-autonomy policies" is "just not there." One problem, the report said, "is that not enough schools have local competitors that have the capacity to take on new students, are good performers, and are affordable." Even when parents have information about differences between schools, the "good" schools don't grow and the others don't shrink.⁹³ It is likely that My School's performance measures have had little impact on how and why parents choose; and that choice, when it is made, is shaped first by circumstances and then by word of mouth. My School is as likely to stigmatise "bad" schools as point to "good" ones.

Sometimes defended, occasionally celebrated, choice was above all protected by the ignorance of the revolution's chief adviser; as will be argued below, the effectiveness doctrine was unable even to notice the fact of the sector system. Its mania for outcomes and cognitive learning blinded it to what schools actually do and what increasing numbers of parents want them to do: have their children hang out with their peers or betters and so develop modes of self-presentation and forms of association useful in post-school life.⁹⁴

The economic argument: In 2007, as we have seen, Kevin Rudd promised an education revolution in the name of our economic future. It was "now clear, and widely accepted across the OECD nations" (he declared) that economic reform must centre on

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“investment in human capital.” In this we were falling behind. Australia’s “national investment” had not been keeping up.⁹⁵

Talk of what is “now widely accepted” has a misleadingly hot-news air to it. By the time Rudd spoke, nearly half a century had passed since the human capital idea was hot news, and then — in the early 1960s — it certainly *was* hot. The OECD had seized on an argument developed by a small group of University of Chicago economists in the late 1950s that promised to revolutionise the way education was thought about: education wasn’t an expense, it was an investment.

The news reached Australia in 1964 courtesy of the Martin inquiry into the tertiary education system. Martin was much taken by a table and a graph, both supplied by the Chicago economists via the OECD. The graph showed two diagonal lines running from bottom left to top right, along which were scattered the names of twenty or so countries. Up in the top right-hand corner were the richest and most educated (the United States and Canada); down at bottom left were the poorest and worst educated (Portugal and Turkey). The table showed much the same thing happening to individuals. The more educated the Americans (ie. American men), the higher their incomes. Those with no education at all earned only half as much as those with eight years of schooling; four-year college graduates more than doubled the school-only amount. This was “human capital” at work. Individuals and economies alike were more productive when they had more human capital to call on. Employees, employers and society would all be wise to invest because education offered an excellent rate of return.⁹⁶

The engine of these startling numbers, Martin argued (again following the OECD and the Chicago economists), was an increasingly complex and technological social and economic order and its ever-expanding numbers of knowledge-based occu-

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pations. That was where the education system came in. It was the key producer and distributor of knowledge, and knowledge was driving greater productivity. The economic harvest followed the educational plough. As time went by, human capital enthusiasts found yet more benefits education bestowed on the economy and the wider social order.⁹⁷

The idea soon ran into scepticism and some outright opposition. Was it confusing correlation with causation? Was growth in education an effect rather than (or as well as) a cause of economic growth? Why so much talk about the benefits but none about the damage done (by schools particularly)? Did education make individuals more productive or was it just that credentials bumped them up the queue so that they got the more productive jobs (and the social behaviours and outlook that come with those jobs)? By the mid-1970s a leading international authority on the economics of education could summarise the many strikes against human capital theory and conclude that its “persistent resort to *ad hoc* auxiliary assumptions to account for every perverse result” and tendency to “mindlessly grind out the same calculation with a new set of data” were signs of a “degenerate scientific research program.”⁹⁸

To worry away at the problems⁹⁹ the OECD brought together economists from every corner of a far-flung discipline, but it dearly wanted to annex education to the economy (it was the Organisation for *Economic* Cooperation and Development after all) and it needed the human capital argument to do so. It sponsored one “rethinking” after another, gradually shifting the emphasis from explanation to the safer ground of prescription, but it never abandoned the basic idea that education drives economic growth.

Both the critics and the rethinkers could have saved their breath, at least so far as Australia was concerned. In the thirty years

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following the Martin report the number of students in Australian schools more than doubled, in technical education tripled, and in higher education multiplied by a factor of twelve. In the decade from 1980 the proportion of the working-age population holding post-school qualifications rose from 38 per cent to 48 per cent; over the twenty-five years from 1989 the proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher tripled. Was this to fuel the ravenous economic machine? During the first of these periods (1980–90) the proportion employed in the skilled occupations rose not at all; in the second, the proportion of professionals in the workforce rose sedately from 15 per cent to 22 per cent.¹⁰⁰ And yet, after all those decades of educational expansion running well ahead of economic demand, Labor in opposition and then in government could still call for more, drawing on a version of human capital theory that could have come from the Martin report of 1964 to do so.¹⁰¹

In schooling, human capital theory wasn't just implausible; it was largely irrelevant. The relationship between school, work and further study in the lives of older teenagers is complicated, but by 2007, when Rudd called for revolution, schooling, in very general terms, had less to do with the economy than at any time since the 1950s. Then, the technical and agricultural high schools were complemented by “practical” subjects (typing for girls, woodwork for boys) in the comprehensives, and most of the students in “academic” streams left school not for tertiary education but for white-collar work. Fifty years on and the situation had changed dramatically: roughly three in every four students were being prepared not for work but for further study. The remaining quarter weren't being prepared for work either; most were being ejected with no real preparation for anything, and such work as these “early leavers” or “dropouts” could get was not in the “knowledge economy.”

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Many teachers wanted to do more and better for those who were so badly treated by schooling, the labour market and the social security system, but that was not the same as being fired up by the call to deliver economic growth. Nor was human capital theory of much use to schooling's policymakers. Apart from "more," what did it suggest about the shape and conduct of the sector? Education ministers and authorities didn't need to be told that more young people should stay longer at school; as they well knew, getting it was a lot harder than wanting it.

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Much more help was to be had from a quite different way of thinking about the education–economy relationship, but it found its way to few if any of those responsible for schooling policy. In this alternative argument an increasingly complex and technology-centred social and economic order does indeed need more "knowledge workers" (even if not nearly as many of them as the education system was producing), but education performs other and quite different functions as well, less as a driver of economic growth than as a distributor of its rewards.

On this view, the education system had moved over the course of the twentieth century from the margins to the centre of ever-intensifying competition for positional goods — goods establishing the possessor's position in the social order. That reality, and the ever-finer social differentiation it generates, were not lost on Britain's poet laureate, Simon Armitage, in his fierce poem "Thank You for Waiting." Beginning with an invitation to "First Class passengers only" to board the aircraft, it welcomes Exclusive, Superior, Privilege and Excelsior members, then Triple, Double and Single Platinum members, then "Mediocre passengers" and their ilk, until last and emphatically least come the

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scroungers, malingerers, spongers, freeloaders and “those holding tickets for zones Rust, Mulch, Cardboard, Puddle and Sand.”¹⁰²

That educational credentials are prized instruments in the scramble is obvious, as is the fact that ever-increasing numbers of families and students have tried to get hold of them via extended schooling. Less obvious but more important than individual competition is competition between occupational groups. Credentials, most acquired through formal education and conferred by educational institutions and authorities, are central to the efforts of occupational groups to position themselves as advantageously as possible. Credentials provide what the engineers, in their pivotal 1961 case before the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, called “definition by qualification.”¹⁰³ This definition the commission agreed to grant, with immediately gratifying results.¹⁰⁴

Definition by qualification works in a very straightforward way: define an area of work and close it off to all except those with a qualification acceptable to those already on the inside. In this the engineers were following many footsteps. Occupational closure by qualification had been pioneered in nineteenth-century Australia at two levels of the labour market, at the top (in the “professions”) by medical practitioners, and about half-way down by the trades.¹⁰⁵ Both added increasing quantities of formal education to learning on the job. With formal education/training came the credential that could be used to claim and then police exclusive rights to an area of work or practice.¹⁰⁶ Occupations able to point to health and safety in making their claim on public authorities did best. By the time the engineers had made their case, so many other occupational groups had defined themselves by qualification that defending a patch and maintaining relativities

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had become as pervasive as getting control of the patch in the first place.

Once that mechanism is understood, much that is otherwise puzzling about education becomes clear: why the system's expansion has so often run far ahead of production and productivity (because the rush to get credentialled creates a self-fuelling spiral); why so much learning and skill acquisition has been displaced from workplaces to front-end formal education (because credentials cannot be got from the workplace no matter how much usable learning it might provide); why schools' curriculum and assessment have been constructed to place every member of each cohort in a giant rank order made public and explicit by the ATAR (because credentials are the instruments of competition between individuals and groups, and schools are increasingly the arena of competition between individuals); why the school system first developed and then abolished technical education in favour of a general curriculum for all (because credentials not capabilities were at a premium and because an equal opportunity to win was increasingly demanded and provided); and why schooling has increasingly permitted and provided choice for families jockeying for position (because many well-placed parents wanted an unequal opportunity for their children).¹⁰⁷

In other words, the relationship between education and the economy is as much social, political and ideological as it is economic, a point lost on economists and its practitioners. Formal education is indeed much better than most workplaces at developing some forms of intellectual capacity needed in economic activity, and "the economy" suffers if these capacities are not available. But learning of other kinds is best done in the workplace. Human capital theory is prevented by its discipline's arrogance from seeing its own quite narrow borders and from realising that other

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disciplines might know things about the economy (not to mention the economy–education relationship) that it doesn't.¹⁰⁸ It is a loyal functionalist social science. All it can see are economic functions performed together with certain malfunctions such as “over-education” (resulting from what it calls “credentialism”). With rare exceptions its discussions of credentialism make no reference to, much less comprehend, key texts in the history and theory of credentialism.¹⁰⁹

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Students of credentialism are baffled by their critique's failure to get any real attention. The editors of a scholarly journal's special edition on “New Directions in Educational Credentialism” express dismay and frustration that “despite the strong and promising theoretical and empirical foundations,” despite some important work building on those foundations, and despite the explanatory power of the hypothesis, the sociological and historical literature of credentialism remains underdeveloped¹¹⁰ — and, it might be added, almost completely ignored by policy-makers.

One part of the answer to this puzzle lies in the status of the disciplines referred to. History ranks lower than the “hard” discipline of economics in the academic pecking order; sociology is lower still. The “soft” humanities and social sciences only rarely have the ear of the powerful. Perhaps most salient of all: the credentialism thesis blows the whistle on a powerful academic discipline, on powerful occupational groups, and on an education industry for which Rudd's call for “more” was more than welcome. Rudd's human capital theory sent policy off in the wrong direction entirely. Attention that should have been directed to the shape and content of schooling, its relationship with workplace

learning, and the need for much more learning in and through work¹¹¹ was directed instead to the system's size.

In schooling, what was imagined to be a big idea was in reality a small one. Human capital theory had very little to offer the schooling revolution by way of justification, explanation, guidance or motivation. Perhaps its main consequence was to extend the long failure by Australian governments to consider the merits and uses of a much more coherent if still-incomplete account of the relationship between schooling and the economy.

The equality argument: Equality was for Julia Gillard what the economy was for Kevin Rudd. It was the sun around which the planet of schooling revolved, an idea with a much deeper and more enduring appeal for her and for many parents and teachers than the economic argument, no matter how urgently put.¹¹² The idea that schooling should be equally available to all rests on an almost primal socio-psychological fact. Schools are for children and young people, and it's just not fair that they should be victims of the circumstances of their birth.¹¹³ When David Gonski addressed a large audience a year or two after the eventual demise of his recommendations, he was interrupted by applause only once, when he declared that differences in educational outcomes should not be the result of differences in “wealth, income, power or possessions.”¹¹⁴

Equality mattered to Gillard and to the government because they were Labor. The idea that schooling could be the great instrument of equality came into being at the same moment as the Labor Party itself, in the 1890s. Labor has long seen itself as the party of equality — of schooling, in schooling and, above all, *through* schooling. Its thinking was much influenced by the English Fabians of the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly by R.H. Tawney

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in his *Secondary Education for All* (1922) and *Equality* (1931). Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd, bright kids who rose through schooling, were beneficiaries of the Fabian vision.

Up until Tawney's time, equality in and through schooling seemed doable. It meant that everyone should acquire the three Rs at a school within reach of home, and that promising students (aka smart boys) should have the "opportunity" — a key word — to "go on." Schooling was the ladder; constructing it was the mission of the great education departments and, in a somewhat different way, of the Catholic parishes.¹¹⁵ These were the institutions that would make good on the romantic vision of a school-house and a teacher in every town and hamlet and, later on, would add a year or two of secondary education to some primary schools and provide secondary schools in the cities to rival the toffs' private colleges.

In the panicky postwar struggle to "get on" (and its flipside, the struggle to avoid falling back) equality became much harder to do. It was no longer a case of providing a basic education for all and finding the exceptional few who could be sent on their upward way. As schooling moved from the margins to the centre of the allocation of social places, everyone — children from every station in life, from country towns and hamlets to the capital cities, and then girls as well as boys — was to have an equal chance to do well. They stayed on to get it. By the early 1960s secondary enrolment increases were in double figures year after year; Queensland set the record at 20 per cent—plus three years in a row (1959–61).¹¹⁶

But secondary schools had been designed for the few, not the many. What to do with the flood of new entrants? What to teach them? How to handle them? Over three or four decades of fiddling with curriculum (same for all, different or dumbed down?), assessment (exams, or school-based or both?), student

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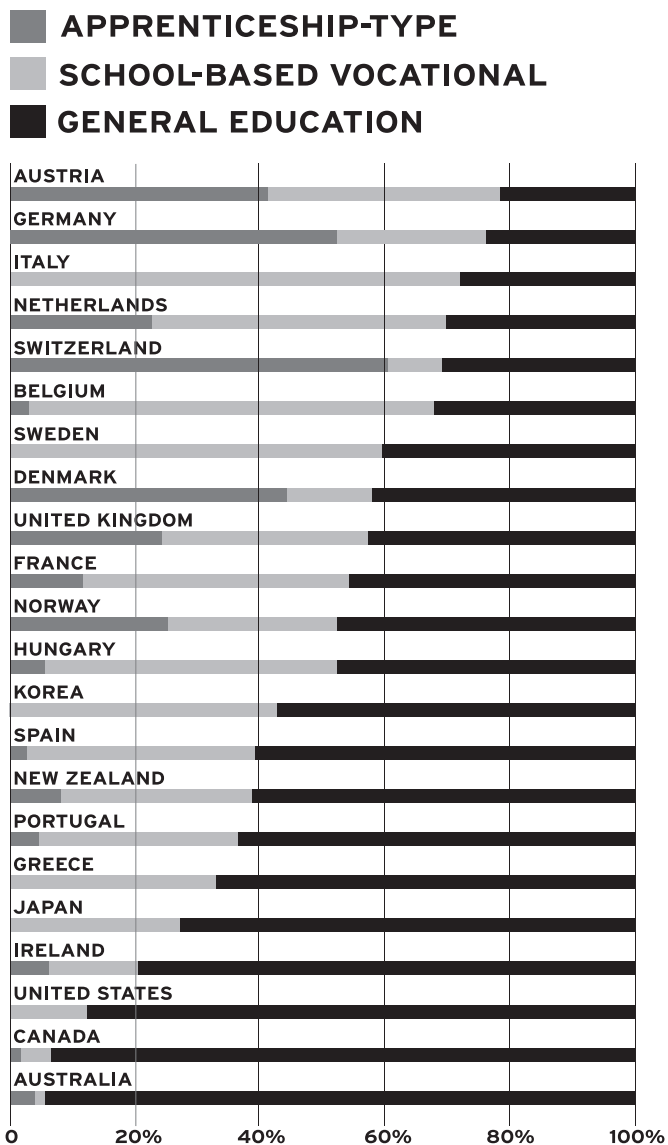
grouping (streaming or setting?) and the organisation of schooling (single-sex or co-ed, techs and highs or comprehensives?) an answer emerged: organise schooling as a single field on which all compete on terms as “equal” as possible, with the same kind of teaching, the same way of organising learning, the same kind of curriculum (or watered-down versions of it), the same forms of assessment, the same chance to arrive after twelve years at the gates to a giant rank order comparing every completer with every other. All would have this same *opportunity*.¹¹⁷

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That kind of answer appeared at much the same time in all economically developed societies, but the getting of it seems to have been particularly thoroughgoing in Australia. Was that because egalitarianism has an unusually large place in our sense of ourselves? Because we focused on social behaviour rather than social structure, preferring “equality of manners” — treating everyone as having a claim on dignity and respect irrespective of station in life — to equality in the stations themselves? That might help explain the particularly complete triumph of general education over technical streams, as shown in the chart, as well as the extraordinarily elaborate system of assessment that culminated in the ATAR. Equality was to be found in who does and doesn’t climb the ladder rather than in the length of the ladder and the distance between its rungs.

The focus on the distribution of climbers rather than the climb sponsored the rise to policy stardom of James Coleman, author of the seminal Coleman report (1966), and the subsequent rise in the United States, Britain and Australia of an entire academic sub-discipline, the sociology of education. Devoted to turning an essentially simple reality into complicated statistics, it

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS IN MAIN STREAMS IN OECD COUNTRIES



Source: Compiled from OECD data and kindly provided by Richard Sweet, formerly an analyst at the OECD.

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documented what just about any teacher already knew: the schooling game was rigged. The educationally rich generally got richer; the poor generally did not.¹¹⁸

This way of thinking about schools and their purposes was approaching its zenith when Whitlam arrived in Canberra with grand plans for schooling, mostly hatched by Melbourne-based Fabians and famously articulated by one of their number, Peter Karmel. Karmel's report installed a revised interpretation of equality at the centre of what would now be called the "policy discourse." Equality of opportunity wasn't enough; we must try for equality of outcomes.¹¹⁹ That didn't mean every student would reach the same level of attainment, but it did mean that every socially defined group — rich and poor, migrant and local-born, male and female, urban, rural and remote — would have a broadly similar pattern of educational attainment.

The proof of that pudding would be found in the proportions of these various groups completing twelve years, going on to tertiary education and, in due course, entering the more desirable occupations. That would be achieved by giving the "disadvantaged" or "under-represented" groups extra help in getting a foot on the educational ladder. Hence a new national Disadvantaged Schools Program that would do what it could to help those schools faced with the daunting task of making equal outcomes happen.¹²⁰

Most policymakers and many sociologists shared a number of assumptions: that the problem was in the school's clientele — in their lack of variously defined attitudes or values or attributes — rather than in the way schools worked; that the name of the game was movement up the ladder rather than the length of the ladder and the proportions of school populations on each rung; that mobility was *upward* mobility, making schooling all about levelling up; and, most distressingly of all, that equality will have

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been achieved when every group has its equal share of failure as well as success — an extended chance for all to succeed or fail, rather than success for all.

The equal outcomes strategy was no more successful than equal opportunity before it, for reasons both circumstantial and inherent. For one thing the constructors of the common schooling ladder overlooked some formidable obstacles. Australia's peculiar sector system gave the advantaged a much more helpful leg up than the disadvantaged got from their special programs, even though they had more cultural capital in the first place. The competition itself much better suited the advantaged than the rest; it was their kind of game. What's more, mobility is all about relativities; it is a zero-sum game. If you do well, I do relatively less well; for every individual or group going up the ladder another is going down the snake. If girls and the children of migrants gain ground, Anglo-Irish Australian-born boys will lose it. Both "equal opportunity" and "equal outcomes" latched onto the score at the end — who won and who lost; they had little interest in problems arising from organising schooling as a competition.

Ironically enough, just as women (and Aboriginal people, and others) were finding a language to name long-obscured aspects of their experience, working people were losing theirs. Now they were the disadvantaged, the ones who needed the help of their betters to catch up. Of course they are and they do, but they are also people who bear what two American authors called "the hidden injuries of class."¹²¹ They are people familiar with the experience of being ignored, patronised, put at the back of the queue to board the aircraft, humiliated and blamed, sometimes face-to-face, often by "the system." School, for at least some students, is an experience like that of workers in another celebrated US study of social class,¹²² a daily humiliation.

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The Fabians had the best of intentions, as did many researchers within the “inequality problematic” along with their colleagues in the effectiveness approach (on which more in a moment). So did the devisers of the OECD’s tests and the designers of programs for the disadvantaged. But the realities of class relations and the experience of class, lost in those ways of thinking, were at least half-grasped by many teachers. Among the few to think it through, or almost through, and to turn insight into action and thereby demonstrate the complicity of schooling in the production of all that is referred to by the omnibus term “inequality,” were teachers mobilised by the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and its remarkable journal, the *Secondary Teacher*.

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Incensed by the failure of government to cope with the massive growth in numbers staying on at school and inspired by radical ideas of the day, the VSTA and the *Secondary Teacher* ridiculed bureaucrats and politicians, campaigned for manageable class sizes, decent pay and an inspector-free profession, went on strike — and tried to figure out how extended secondary schooling could work for all and not just the privileged and the upward-bound.¹²³ They experimented with “descriptive” assessment (that is, assessment as feedback and encouragement rather than invidious comparison), they tried out a “negotiated” and “school-based” curriculum (an effort to start each student’s learning from the point they’d reached rather than where the syllabus or the textbook said they should be) and, most controversially, they assaulted those apex predators, the universities and their claim that academic merit was the only fair and appropriate basis for sorting the wanted from the not.¹²⁴ The VSTA cast doubt on the fairness of the competitive academic curriculum and pointed to

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its baleful effects on the many who weren't selected. They argued against selection by exam results; to spectacular controversy, they proposed a ballot instead.

The VSTA won its industrial struggles but not the fight for the equality to be found in providing a worthwhile experience of extended secondary schooling for every student. On that it was overwhelmed by the social and political clout of those well-served by inherited arrangements, by the limitations of their homegrown alternatives, by widespread ideas about the purpose of schooling and the fairness of selection by academic results, and most fundamentally by the intensity of the jostling for positional goods in postwar Australia and the drive to make schools one of its principal arenas. The mainstream curriculum and its methods of ranking were adjusted somewhat and the universities introduced "special entry" schemes for "disadvantaged groups," but more fundamental change was pushed into the backwaters of a few "community schools" and "alternative" secondary programs and certificates.

Despite being Victorian in conception, union in affiliation and Labor in execution, the revolution ignored what the VSTA and others had learned and reached back over Karmel and its special programs to Tawney and the idea that equality was all about opportunity. It wanted more Julia Gillards and Kevin Rudds, more winners from among the disadvantaged. It tried to persuade teachers in disadvantaged areas — almost all of them in government schools — that they didn't need to do anything different from what was done by other teachers and schools. All they needed to do was focus more sharply on outcomes in "the basics" and thus lift "performance" and with it their students' prospects. Teachers didn't buy it. The unique capacity of "equality" to mobilise was trashed along with the innerness of a grand idea.

THE REVOLUTION'S GUIDING IDEA FAILED TO GUIDE

In January 1986 a relatively new, relatively small branch of the modest field of education research was given a boost most researchers could only dream of. US president Ronald Reagan commended *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, a sixty-five-page booklet prepared and published by his administration. It provided, Reagan said, practical knowledge about education based on “some of the latest available research” for the use of the American public.¹²⁵ It was a small masterpiece of advocacy, and soon became an expression of US soft power abroad. Having taken up the idea that teaching was central and “attainments” in “the basics” vital, the Paris-based OECD conducted the first round of PISA in 2000. PISA’s triennial league tables, since expanded to include dozens of non-member countries, are feared by education ministers and governments around the world.¹²⁶

Under this canopy of institutional and political power, effectiveness research boomed. A 2010 survey found flourishing branches on school improvement, school effectiveness, educational change and teacher effectiveness.¹²⁷ A synthesis published at much the same time drew on more than 800 meta-studies, these in turn based on more than 50,000 studies of the effectiveness of “interventions” ranging from “small-group learning” and “mainstreaming” to “metacognitive strategies” and “student control of learning.”¹²⁸ Supported as a way of systematically and cumulatively lifting student attainment, particularly among the disadvantaged, effectiveness-driven reforms of one kind or another appeared in Asia, Latin America, Africa and Europe as well as in the United States.¹²⁹ They underwrote a comprehensive makeover of the school system in Britain by the Blair Labour

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government and, in due course, shaped a look-alike revolution in Australia.

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In Australia the representative figure is John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning*, that synthesis of 800-plus meta-studies, co-editor of the less celebrated but no less formidable *International Guide to Student Achievement* (2013) and big fish in the effectiveness pond.¹³⁰ Hattie's *Visible Learning* is a love letter to teaching by a born teacher. An eloquent, sometimes luminous essay, it professes to be "an exercise in theory-building," an investigation of the implications of "the evidence" for our understanding of teaching and learning. But that wasn't what pulled the crowd. For that Hattie must thank his presentation of "the evidence" generated by those 50,000-odd studies of effectiveness and digested in 800-plus meta-studies in graphics reminiscent of a motor vehicle's speedo, the needle pointing to the "effect size" of dozens of "interventions." How effective is making students repeat a school year? It's not; it comes in at -0.32 . Diversity courses? $+0.09$. Mainstreaming/ inclusion, reading recovery, "conceptual change programs"? $+0.27$, $+0.53$ and $+0.99$ respectively.¹³¹

The idea of "effect size" and, with that, of deciding which of many ways of working have been immensely popular among the teachers and principals for whom the problem of figuring out what works is all too familiar.¹³² Hattie's dashboard made it all much less daunting than it can otherwise seem. More generally, he and the effectiveness movement must be credited with bringing some empirical discipline — in fact bringing the very idea of empirical discipline — to the waffle endemic in schooling. They have generated a great deal of useful data, including much that has been used in this short book.

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Effectiveness research springs from the “scientific” branch of the academic discipline of psychology. Almost all of the foundational effectiveness work was done by researchers (including Hattie) trained in that discipline, using its methods and working within its span of interests. The larger origins of effectiveness research are, however, political and lie specifically in the tumults of the 1960s and 1970s, of which the VSTA and its radical ideas were very small symptoms. A form of schooling largely unquestioned until then was assaulted from below by the overwhelming numbers who stayed and stayed and from above by a hunger for the ideas of thinkers such as the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci (schooling as bourgeois hegemony), the anti-authoritarian Scottish schoolmaster A.S. Neill (love and freedom), the Brazilian Christian socialist Paulo Freire (schooling as liberation through “conscientisation”), the Austrian philosopher and priest Ivan Illich (learning yes, schooling no) and even the students of a tiny village school in northern Italy who — so their book claimed — declined to go forward until the slowest had understood.¹³³ At the other end of an exceptionally fertile moment was a complete rethink of “curriculum” typified by the social studies program “Man: A Course of Study,” inspired by American developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner¹³⁴ as well as a host of ideas (mostly half-baked) about “alternative” schools and countless calls for “innovation,” “community,” “diversity” and, simply, “change.”

So widespread were ideas such as these, and so directly did they speak to the failure of bulging schools to cope with the flood of new clientele, that the Whitlam government’s Karmel committee even quoted Chairman Mao. “Better ways will not necessarily be the same for all children or all teachers,” the committee observed. “This is an important reason for bringing responsibility back into the school and for allowing it to be exercised in ways

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which enable a hundred flowers to bloom rather than wither.” The committee went on to argue for “experimentation” as an antidote to “centralised manipulation of change,” and for “diversity in the organisational form of schools, in school–community relationships, and in the timing of the educational experience.”¹³⁵

None of these ideas was Australian;¹³⁶ all were imported, some from Europe and elsewhere, most from or via the United States. The reaction against them was imported too. Ronald Reagan’s endorsement of *What Works* did not come out of the blue; it followed his administration’s *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, a strident polemic against all things liberal and progressive in education. It ignored schooling’s purportedly liberal establishment and spoke directly to teachers, parents and the wider public. “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America a mediocre educational performance that exists today,” it cried, “we might have viewed it as an act of war.” That kind of schooling had placed the nation’s very security at risk. The antidote? *Standards* for student learning; *testing* to see if students were meeting those standards; holding students and teachers *accountable* for results.¹³⁷

This counterinsurgency, aimed at preserving schooling as almost everyone had known it, arrived in Australia via the OECD, through the Howard government, via a booming education research industry and, eventually, via Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.¹³⁸ Now that way of thinking about schooling and school reform, too, is in trouble.

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One line of criticism goes to the technical foundations of effectiveness research. Where do those effect sizes come from? From studies that take an “intervention” then deliver it to one group of

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students but not to another identical (or as near as can be) group using controlled-sample research.¹³⁹ If the students in the first group do better in some sense than the second group — where better usually means doing better in standardised tests of literacy and/or numeracy — then the intervention is “effective.” Just how effective is a question for further scrutiny of the numbers.

There is much to and fro about the technical quality of these studies, often centred on whether the randomisation of the two groups has been done in a way that excludes all possibility of systematic differences, but there are substantive concerns also. Unless the intervention and the effects are very precisely defined and controlled the arithmetic is approximate at best. But (the critics say) the real world of schools and of learning just isn't like that. No intervention and no effect exists independently of other interventions and effects. Effectiveness research in this view is pseudoscience, claiming to examine reality but actually examining artefacts created for the purpose.¹⁴⁰

Then there are the criticisms of meta-studies and meta-meta-studies, for which Hattie's work is often a lightning rod. Even if the findings of individual studies are close enough to reality to be useful, what happens when tens, hundreds, thousands of such studies are digested and turned into numbers? Putatively precise numbers? Numbers claiming, in Hattie's case, to be accurate to the second decimal point? Concerns range from flawed methodology and calculation errors to misrepresentation, questionable interpretation and conflicts of interest. To some, Hattie's work is “statistical malpractice disguised as statistical razzle dazzle,” “effectively meaningless,” “statistical nonsense,” “bullying by numbers” or simply “wrong.” Citing the “major impact” of Hattie's work “on Western education,” the Nordic Association for Education Research in 2019 gave a prestigious award to a demo-

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lition job on Hattie. *Visible Learning*, declared another reviewer, should have “absolutely no role in educational policymaking”; it and other meta-meta-analyses, declared yet another, “have ZERO educational value.”¹⁴¹

To many researchers the effectiveness approach is little better than snake oil distributed around the world by the OECD and its ubiquitous spokesperson, Andreas Schleicher.¹⁴² The OECD’s tool of trade is the standardised test. But the tests (the critics say) are both damaging and suspect. What do they actually test? The merest fraction of the curriculum. This reductionism is for many practitioners the cardinal sin. Many students don’t even try their best; one US study found that they “perform” if they are paid!¹⁴³ All three international test regimes try to reach across very different cultures, but the only way to do that is to strip the tests of vital culture-specific content and references; as a result they don’t measure the same thing anyway.

League tables also exaggerate small (and dubious) differences between countries, which serves the OECD’s own institutional ends.¹⁴⁴ When East Asian countries top the league tables it is asserted that that must be because their school systems know how to do schooling. But perhaps it’s just that conventional schooling is not as far from East Asian culture (including its willingness to push and cram) as it is from contemporary Western cultures?¹⁴⁵ In February 2023 Montserrat Gomendio, former secretary of state for education in Spain, former deputy director of education at the OECD and now research professor in education at the Spanish Research Council, published a root-and-branch debunking of PISA and the associated claims of effectiveness research. “According to PISA’s own data, after almost two decades of testing, student outcomes have not improved overall in OECD nations or most other participating countries.”¹⁴⁶ The OECD has

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consistently used its data-derived authority (Gomendio argued) to urge national policies based neither on the data nor on an understanding of the dynamics of national systems. Her title? “PISA: Mission Failure.”¹⁴⁷

The OECD itself has lent some indirect support to such assertions. “What works” depends on schools and teachers using and taking to heart research evidence as to what does and doesn’t work; but they don’t. A 2020 OECD study found that schools generally make little or no use of research; much the same seems to be true in Australia.¹⁴⁸ It is an item of faith in the research industry that its evidence *should* be used, and used often by all concerned. But is there evidence for *that*? The push to “use research” — as distinct from a push for more usable research — comes from above, not below. Australia, along with most OECD countries, has supported a substantial education research effort for decades; is there evidence to suggest that it has made a commensurate and positive impact on schooling?

Long anxious about relying for its influence (and its bread and butter) on a single array of tests, the OECD has broadened its span of interests and data collections to conduct surveys of matters such as student engagement, time spent by teenagers in study as against other activities, principals’ accounts of numbers of competitor schools as an indicator of marketisation, and reports from advantaged and disadvantaged schools about difficulties faced (or not) in providing a strong educational program. But the OECD’s position is not unlike Hattie’s. The thoughtful, speculative, genuinely useful stuff isn’t pulling the crowd or feeding institutional mouths or generating such extraordinary influence; that is down to those tests, those league tables making distinctions between dozens of countries almost as fine (and dubious) as effect sizes stated to the second decimal point. The

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OECD is now doing things it didn't do earlier in its career, but it is also going on doing what it's been doing for a long time. It is hoping to have its cake and eat it too.

Yet another and even more fundamental difficulty now confronts the OECD and the sizeable testing industry of which it is part: in the “economically advanced” societies the dominant “grammar of schooling” — its organisation, context and location — is in trouble and so therefore are the tests. Neither that grammar nor its tests are able to do what is increasingly demanded of them.

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As noted a moment ago, effectiveness research takes its focus and methods from the discipline of psychology. Psychology's chief concern is with the characteristics and behaviour of individuals. That matters, of course, but it is a long way from being the only thing that matters. Consider that central institution, the class. The class can be a source of energy, even delight, for teacher and taught alike, but it is often something else entirely, particularly in secondary schools with their high-rotation timetables. In the typical classroom more than three-quarters of talk is teacher talk, and when the teacher does ask questions almost all of the answers require only “surface” learning (recall of facts and the like). About half the typical class will already know about half the content of the typical lesson. Students spend most of their time listening, or pretending to. They get little feedback on how they are going; most of what they do get comes from other students, and most of that is wrong. Teachers routinely mistake busyness for engagement, activity for learning.¹⁴⁹

Why do teachers teach as they do? In the effectiveness account it is because they do not use effective teaching strategies,

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which in turn is because they have not absorbed the evidence of what works. The US historian of schooling Larry Cuban has offered a different explanation: teachers teach as they do as a “hardy adaptation” to the circumstances of their work, namely the class in the classroom. In those circumstances the teacher’s imperative is order, control, “discipline”; they concentrate on the cognitive, “teach to the middle” and, if necessary, throw their weight around.¹⁵⁰ For students, the imperative is to stay out of trouble, to cope with boredom by one means or another, to manage passivity (rather than activity), listening (rather than talking), remembering (rather than understanding) and complying (rather than engaging). School, said one commentator, perhaps channeling Cuban, is where students go to watch adults work.¹⁵¹

But what about all the things that teachers are *supposed* to do these days? Promote “student engagement” and “agency”? Provide for the fast, the slow and the in-between? Help those behind to catch up? Looming ever larger, what about the “general capabilities” such as communication and collaboration? They can be learned but not necessarily taught, and learned in and through experiences very different from those on offer in the typical classroom. In the circumstances of most teaching, teachers don’t and can’t do most of the things they know they are *supposed* to do¹⁵² any more than the revolution, wearing its effectiveness goggles, could see the grammar of schooling or how it must change. Effectiveness doesn’t do *organisation*, not of daily work, not of the schooling industry, not of the industry’s governance.

The findings of effectiveness research are useful, although more so for “policy” and to authors of books about schooling than to those who do the actual work. The underlying problem is that effectiveness research has been constructed on the wrong foundations. Seeking to replicate the heroics of medical research¹⁵³ it

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begins from the assumption that schools are distributors of the service of teaching in much the way that health services deliver research-based medical interventions. But schools are not distribution centres; they are sites of production. Students are never simply consumers or clients of teaching; they are producers of learning, a process in which teachers and teaching also play a part. The effectiveness of teaching matters, but within the much larger frame of all those things — and particularly organisational things — that determine the productivity of the learning process.

GONSKI

Gonski was widely mourned. Would it have worked had it been carried through? Would it have made a significant difference? It would almost certainly have disappointed hopes that sometimes amounted to imagining it would do what the rest of the revolution didn't. Even so, an implemented Gonski would have shown, in provisional form, why reform without *structural* reform doesn't work, and it could have provided a base for more structural reform as well as an example of it.

Gonski was different from the rest of the revolution in several respects. Drawing on a commissioned paper¹⁵⁴ that in turn drew on a sociology very different from the old social mobility tracking, it showed how political and cultural power inhering in the structure of the school system drove the steady residualisation of the government sector. Gonski understood that if you want schools and teachers to change then don't just tell them to or offer carrots and brandish sticks. Gonski knew that small changes don't work, or don't work well enough, in the absence of big changes, and that big change comes from politics rather than technique. It was the beneficiary of the unions' capacity to mobilise industrial aspirations and teachers' idealism. It was the only element of the

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revolution that combined top-down with bottom-up reform. In stark contrast with My School, NAPLAN, teacher standards, the National School Reform Agenda and all the rest, Gonski became a popular demand.

Gonski's escape from the suffocating mental world of the revolution's mainstream was, however, incomplete. Its powerful analysis of the toxic dynamics of the school system was confined to residualisation; the flipside, aggrandisement, was passed over lightly. Its focus on outcomes pushed into the background the very marked and steadily increasing class, ethnic and religious segregation of Australian schools. It commented pungently on bizarrely complex funding arrangements, but its own proposed system was scarcely simple — and how could it be in a system comprising three sectors in each of eight states and territories, each funded in its own way, with funding provided to all three sectors by both levels of government?

And what is “need,” really? If the need was, as the report insisted, to “ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions”¹⁵⁵ then public funding would have to compensate not for differences between schools but differences between the cultural capital students are able to bring to school. What would compensate for those differences? Need — understood as the need to reduce differences in cultural capital — would require *equality of total educational effort*. Present arrangements would be inverted; schools for the disadvantaged would be as far ahead as schools for the advantaged are now.¹⁵⁶ The point is not merely heuristic or polemical; if the idea can survive close scrutiny then “equal total educational effort” could serve as a light on the funding hill.

That approach, and its implications, Gonski did not consider. Nor did it consider the fact that funding is not the only

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driver of residualisation. Two sectors would still be free in a post-Gonski world to recruit, select and eject, while the third would continue to supply the recruits and provide for the rejected. Funding works hand in hand with *regulation*, a matter omitted from Gonski's terms of reference and therefore Gonski's report. Gonski left the sector structure as found; Gonski's terms of reference represented an acute and probably excessive sensitivity to the political power of non-government sector lobbies. The Gonski panel could have followed the Karmel committee in making discreet comment on its riding instructions, and perhaps even on their implications for the future, but it didn't.

Elsewhere Gonski was captive to effectiveness thinking. It absorbed the fixation on "outcomes" in "the basics" as the nub of "disadvantage" to the exclusion of the many other things that comprise the experience of the poor (aka "the long tail" of those who "start behind and stay behind") in a schooling system, and particularly a secondary school system designed for some but now required to provide for all. The notion that schools should control their "loadings" money was a step away from the long tradition of daddy knows best, but it was not a step away from the history of "initiatives" that try to reduce inequality by fixing up the disadvantaged without changing the arrangements that disadvantage them. What is the point (or the reasonableness) of asking schools and teachers to organise appropriate and worthwhile learning for groups of kids who are, as effectiveness research has never tired of pointing out, typically four or five "learning years" apart without changing the grammar within which they work? And particularly without tackling that grammar's domination by rankordering assessment that makes failure as normal as success?

Gonski was a mixed bag, though very much better than no bag at all. But the Coalition's "unity ticket" on Gonski was ditched

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within weeks of its taking office. New arrangements claiming to be needs-based were introduced in due course. As noted earlier, some non-government schools now get more from the public purse than their government school equivalents, with income from fees and elsewhere putting the icing on this generous cake. Of the revolution's major initiatives Gonski was the only one that deserved to be implemented, and it wasn't.

AN OVER-DETERMINED FAILURE AND ITS LEGACY

The revolution's failure was, as the historians would say, over-determined, the fruit of several fundamental misjudgements, any one of which would have been fatal. The government tried to make revolution top-down in a large and complicated industry in which it had only some influence and less control; it tried to go over the heads of systems and state/territory governments direct to schools and teachers but antagonised those it needed to mobilise; it failed to understand or acknowledge substantial improvements in the look and feel of schools, most of it wrought by the teachers whose unsatisfactory "quality" it blamed for schooling's "performance"; it chose a guiding doctrine that was in no way up to such a task and also subverted talk about lifting the standing and attractiveness of the teaching profession; its big ideas about economic purposes and equality were hackneyed, poorly thought-out and lacking in appeal and/or relevance and/or follow-through; its blithe endorsement of choice worked against efforts to reduce inequality. The one exception to these rules, Gonski, could have enjoyed some success, but it had serious weaknesses of its own and was a casualty of political mismanagement anyway. The revolution raised unfulfillable expectations by calling a grab bag of ideas, talk, programs and institutions a revolution, and failed other expectations as well.

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Failure is one thing; consequences are another. On the one hand, the revolution bequeathed the possibility of Gonski and a renewed belief that schooling could be the great instrument of equality. On the other and much larger hand, it did much that now needs to be undone, left much that still needs to be done, and created a series of obstacles to both undoing and doing. It offered an apparently coherent and much-needed sense of direction, but it was the wrong direction and came from the wrong source.

We are left with a relatively high incidence of poor “discipline”; a small (but rapidly increasing) number of students who are “disengaged” from school, uncentred in themselves and unmoored from the communities around them; a small minority who are ill-equipped for life and work; a larger minority who leave school with no usable qualification; a majority who survive twelve years but are short-changed intellectually and/or in broader capability; and wide and growing gaps in attainments, life prospects and ways of being.

The revolution installed what amounts to a centralised system of surveillance of schools based on a regime of national and international testing that ignores most of what schools do and should do, and it rationalised this with the glib doctrines of transparency and accountability. Promising an effective teaching profession, it left a disappointed and demoralised workforce. It erected an apparatus of policy formation and implementation so incapable that there is now no entity, national or other, no government, state/territory or federal, and no stakeholder or combination of stakeholders with a span of responsibility and authority sufficient to conceive and drive change of the kind and scale now required.¹⁵⁷

The revolution had a substantial impact on ways of thinking, a diffuse legacy difficult to grapple with. At the risk of oversimplification, it bequeathed two bodies of thought, the one unap-

pealing, misleading and sometimes simply wrong, the other more sympathetic but in bad shape.

As we have seen, the former — the effectiveness idea — was based on the belief that schooling is all about the consumption of teaching rather than the production of learning. It offered a trivialising account of what schools do and should do. It encouraged a toxic relationship between governments, systems, schools and teachers. It proposed, and the revolution accepted, that schooling should be regarded as having just one overriding purpose or task, a purpose greater than or a proxy for all others.¹⁵⁸ It asserted that it knew what works.¹⁵⁹ It claimed that the way students and teachers do their day-to-day work can be improved by disseminating ideas without also altering the circumstances of that work. It further assumed that “the system” could be changed without changing its organisation (the relatively modest Gonski plan excepted).

This body of ideas has provided the lingua franca of some popular and much professional thinking. An approach that didn't even exist in the 1960s and had no presence in Australia until the 1990s is now taken to be the commonsense view of how schools should be regarded and acted upon; indeed, the head of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority recently spoke in terms close to contempt for those who believe otherwise.¹⁶⁰ It is a view that rests on an entrenched epistemology, an intellectual system unable to see itself and with no inkling that it should try to, a paradigm within which “normal science”¹⁶¹ is conducted on problems set by that same paradigm using its preferred tools. It insists that “practice” be “evidence-based” — that is, based on its kind of evidence and its alone, an arrogance backed by two of the revolution's three national institutions, recently joined by the Australian Education Research Organisa-

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tion, as well as a worldwide infrastructure of testing and political intervention that stretches from the OECD in Paris to corporate heavyweights such as Pearson and ETS.¹⁶²

So saturated is contemporary thinking in this combination of language, assumption, technique and institutional power that a nominally independent reviewer, the Productivity Commission, could first find that the revolution's machinery didn't work, then present a mass of evidence to show how badly things have been going for "performance," for teachers and for schools, and yet fail to ask the obvious question: is there something the matter with this entire approach, with this way of thinking?

The second body of opinion — the Fabian tradition, to which Gonski (mostly) belonged and to which Julia Gillard often appealed — is currently less prominent than effectiveness thinking but has a much longer history and deeper appeal. It is marked by a faith in schooling, teachers and students, an enlarging spirit at odds with the narrow, punitive impulse of "effectiveness." But it shares with effectiveness a myopia tending to blindness to the workings of three structures that dominate Australian schooling: the structures of governance, of the sectors, and of daily work. Effectiveness and Fabianism share a counterproductive preoccupation with schooling's role in social mobility.¹⁶³

The central idea in the Fabian outlook is "equality," a grand idea indeed, but not grand enough to do everything it has been asked to do in schooling. Fully grasped, equality affirms our common humanity, but often it is reduced to supporting merely distributional thinking, particularly about class. It turns the eye from what some people do to others (and what it feels like) to seeing everyone in a single queue or competition in which some are advantaged and some disadvantaged. Equality has also encouraged an instrumental approach, as if all that matters is where

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people end up in the social hierarchy. Equality *through* schooling has stifled equality *in* schooling, by turning the whole system and those twelve formative years into a preparation and a selection, a mere means to other ends. Preparation and selection are necessary, and distributive justice is therefore essential, but as a measure of how schooling is going rather than as an operational objective.

Another difficulty in Fabian thinking: equality is assimilationist in tendency, implying in the case of schooling that everyone should be like those who have succeeded in schooling and now run it. Equality must be tempered by fraternity. The nearest thing we have to fraternity in current thinking about schooling is inclusiveness, often treated as a suburb of equality (or of equality's neighbour, equity). Inclusiveness has its own work to do; it accepts that everyone should belong, but not at the price of ceasing to be who they now are.¹⁶⁴ The last idea in that great trinity, liberty, has in Australian schooling put on the guise of choice, thus subverting both equality and fraternity. The revolution's deployment of choice arose from slapdash, short-term thinking as well as a limited awareness of the need for structural reform (shared in spades by the effectiveness approach).

Prerequisite to unbeaching the whale is the development of a way of thinking that takes good note of where effectiveness went wrong and restores equality to its full stature while accepting that neither equality nor effectiveness nor any other single idea, however grand, can be all things to all people. We need a larger and more generous way of seeing schooling, as coherent as possible but necessarily eclectic. We also need a more capable one — capable, that is, of framing and guiding long-overdue structural reform.

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Schooling sits on the shifting sands of interests and purposes; it is shaped by everything from large-scale economic, social and cultural change to biological and neurological development. No single way of thinking will reach across all these spheres, let alone understand all their interactions or settle once and for all what schooling can and should be. A larger, more capable and more comprehending way of thinking must draw on disciplines including philosophy, history and the social and other sciences¹⁶⁵ as well as informal, local and intuitive knowledge. It must be open to discussion, debate and judgement. It must have wide appeal, which means taking seriously what students and parents — all of them, and not just those who can choose or be selected — hope and wish for themselves or their children. Thinking about schooling is a work always in progress.

The binding agent of these or other disparate elements is not theory but *spirit*. As mentioned at the outset, Manning Clark once suggested that Australian political leaders were either enlargers of life or prohibitors and straighteners. The shift we need in thinking about schools is from the impulse to

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straighten to a commitment to enlarging life in and through schooling.

Constructing a quite different way of thinking about schooling might be difficult but it doesn't start from scratch. The substantial body of evidence drawn on in chapter 1 makes an important contribution by showing just how badly things are going and just how impotent existing "policy settings" are. That flurry of books about the "tyranny of merit" or "threats to egalitarian schooling," books assaulting policy "that is taking us backwards" or calling for "reimagining" or "revolution" or "transformation" or a "ground-up rethink" of what "learning systems" are needed to equip students for "societal challenges we can't yet imagine" — these are not just a sign of the times.¹⁶⁶ They and many others like them comprise a rich source of material for a new and very different approach that confines effectiveness thinking to modest quarters and makes better use of (among other things) the grand but frail ideal of equality. As important as any of these resources is what can be found in the schools. Slings and arrows notwithstanding, there is an energy there, harnessed to a quite new point and purpose, as is illustrated below. What some schools are thinking is as potent as what they are doing.

The work of constructing a different way of thinking is well under way, but pushing on will require facing its limitations too. Few of the many calls for structural reform specify the structures in question, and they show only limited interest in the workings of the system as a whole. It is much easier to find critiques of this or that aspect of the dominant mentality than a full analysis.¹⁶⁷ Most calls for change are merely oppositional and sometimes use off-putting jargon as well. With the notable exception of Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor's *Waiting for Gonski* (2022), they offer critique or imagine the possible or generalise about the

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direction of reform or speak of principles by which it should be guided rather than trying to work out the *how*: how to get from the criticised *here* to the desired *there*.

The giveaway is in the fix lists. Everyone has one. The Productivity Commission wants “diffusion of evidence-based practices,” better use of support staff, schools that stay open longer, “untimed syllabuses” and maybe charter schools or “academies.”¹⁶⁸ The Centre for Independent Studies canvasses restructuring federal funding, abolishing Canberra’s education department, “removing mandatory class sizes” and charging high-income families for using the public system, among other things.¹⁶⁹ John Hattie has proposed building confidence in the public system, increasing the proportion of students reaching Level 2 in maths and reading by age eight, making secondary schools more appealing and interesting places, and putting at least one Highly Accomplished or Lead teacher in every school.¹⁷⁰ The Grattan Institute suggests more help for teachers in tackling learning gaps, recognition for expert teachers, tackling the teacher workload problem, and focusing on student wellbeing and mental health.¹⁷¹

Most items in these and many other to-do lists arise from a genuine insight, but they raise several questions. Why do the contents of the lists differ so much? What do the items on each list have to do with each other? Would they support, counter or proceed independently of each other? Should they be pursued simultaneously or sequenced, and if sequenced, how? All miss something fundamental: in schooling (as elsewhere) everything is related to everything else. There is a kind of simple-mindedness in much of this “policy” thinking:¹⁷² if they haven’t learned, teach them; if there’s disruption in classrooms, improve “discipline”; we live in a digital age so install computers; if teachers don’t teach well, tell them how; if kids bully each other, run an anti-bullying

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program; if the government sector is losing customers, increase its funding.

But schooling is, as the currently vogueish term has it, an “ecology.” Simple see-it-fix-it approaches can get the fix wrong coming and going: they miss unintended consequences¹⁷³ and they fail to realise that a problem that pops up here may be generated (and have its solution) over there. A collection of insights into this or that part of the ecology, no matter how penetrating, doesn’t add up to a coherent understanding of how things work. No coherent analysis means no coherent strategy. No coherent strategy and you have the story of school reform over the past fifty years, one reform or innovation or policy after another, accumulating costs and complexity as well as problems old and new as they go.

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An “ecological” understanding is a step forward, but schooling is not simply an ecology. Its constituent relationships are organised or patterned, sometimes on a very large scale. In 1994 two US historians of schooling, David Tyack and William Tobin, grasped the organised nature of daily school life in the course of investigating a problem set by the work of their colleague Larry Cuban (introduced earlier). Cuban was a teacher, district superintendent and frustrated reformer before he became a scholar preoccupied by the unhappy history of US school reform. The puzzle, almost eerily familiar in Australia, was *why* it was unhappy. Why so much activity, so little change? The Tyack and Tobin answer: it’s to do with the arrangement of things, the combination rather than any one component of schools or school systems. It was they who called this combination the “grammar” of schooling, arguing that “standardised organisational practices dividing time and

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space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into ‘subjects’¹⁷⁴ govern the work of schooling in much the same way that grammar governs the use and meaning of language.

What makes the idea of a grammar of schooling so telling is the underlying concept of *structure*. Those with long enough memories will recall the birth of Australia’s own car, the Holden, novel not just in the fact but in its form: the Holden didn’t have a chassis. But what about towing the van, alarmed would-be Holden owners asked? How can you tow if there’s no chassis to fix a towbar to? Its manufacturer was quick to reassure the anxious: the strength of the car isn’t in the chassis but in the *structure* of the whole, in the way each part supports and is supported by other parts.

No analogy is complete, of course. The strength of schooling’s structures is in their flexibility rather than rigidity; they are more bamboo than strut or girder. Their flexible strength is often actively supported by groups that grow up around the structures and have a vested interest in their survival. Social and institutional structures, unlike automotive structures, are organic; they grow, and change; sometimes they can *be* changed. “Structure” is powerful in explanation and in prescription.

One of many ways of explaining the failure of the education revolution is that with the sole, incomplete and ultimately untried exception of Gonski it avoided structural change altogether. The most dangerous of sleeping structural dogs, the sector system, was tiptoed around in Gonski’s terms of reference and in accompanying government rhetoric. The same is true of the structure of governance, entrenched in all its complexity and incapacity. The grammar of schooling was kept out of view by the effectiveness lens; don’t look at the organisation of teaching

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and learning, the revolution urged, just look at what is in teachers' heads.

To consider whether and how the structure avoided by the revolution can successfully be confronted is the main task of this chapter. It is a central argument of this short book that the slow decline of Australian schooling will not be arrested or reversed in the absence of reform in each of three dominating structures — the structure of governance, of the sectors, and of the grammar. In other words, the case for structural reform lies not in desirability but necessity. Structural reform, like any other, can go wrong, and when it does the consequences are as large as the attempt. The knotted and perhaps intractable structural problems we now face derive from earlier upheavals, one of which began in 1872 with the passage of Victoria's Education Act, the other in the early 1970s. Their solutions have become our problems.

Those upheavals also offer two very different ways of going about structural change. The Whitlam/Karmel upheaval took the form of a big bang. The upheavals of the late nineteenth century, by contrast, unfolded over decades, rolling out across the six colonies and within each.¹⁷⁵ In our time, an approximate and very much larger example of cumulative structural change is the transformation over fifty years of a customs agreement between seven countries into the mighty twenty-seven-member European Union.

In whatever form, structural reform is risky. The big bang is more eruption than process, massive pressure finding an outlet with consequences very difficult to control or even predict. Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Cumulative reform, on the other hand, has to stay on track over decades, even generations. That requires a powerful internal logic and/or a brain, a headquarters of the kind seen in Brussels or, in a different way, in the piece-by-piece development of a single grammar of schooling by state education

departments.¹⁷⁶ One of our problems is that we have no Brussels (which means, by the way, that the lists referred to early in this chapter are prayers to an ineffectual god; none includes a fix prerequisite to most others: *fix governance*.)¹⁷⁷

What follows is not an outline or a draft for a strategy. It is (or tries to be) a series of related suggestions about targeting, sequencing and driving reform. With luck, it might comprise a starting point for the hard work of developing a more capable way of thinking about schooling and its future — capable, that is, of guiding restructuring. We begin with restructuring work and workplaces, the grammar of schooling, the least risky of the three, the most amenable to cumulative reform and to grassroots engagement as well as being much of the point and purpose of restructuring the industry and its governance.

RESTRUCTURING WORK, WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

To Tyack and Tobin the grammar is what can be seen: the thing they refer to as “egg carton” schools. But the grammar rules at the macro as well as the micro level, in system-level agencies responsible for curriculum, examination and credentialling, and their rules and procedures. It is sustained by outworks and buttresses, notably in industrial agreements cast in terms of classes taught, time allocations and subject specialisations.

The problem is not only in the grammar itself; it is also in its dominance. The grammar sits on the commanding heights; it is the route to schooling’s prizes. It is used for most educational purposes including several for which it is not suited. It takes up most available time and space. Its chief components are instruction and study, both core business for schooling, but being core should not make it the default setting. Forty-five-minute doses of instruction in subjects by teachers is sometimes the best way to

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bring students to the task of study and learning how to study, but often it is not. What is currently the dominant grammar should be just part of schooling's repertoire.

The formidable dominance of the grammar leaves reformers damned if they do and damned if they don't. Change just one or even several of those elements — building open classrooms, encouraging team teaching, introducing interdisciplinary studies and the like — and nothing much changes. Try to change them all and nothing much happens either. Grammars significantly different from the dominant form will be rejected outright or banished to the margins of the system (“alternative schools”), of the curriculum (“special programs”) or of clienteles (the resisters and the intractables). Ever since the secondary school was pressed to cater for everyone, its dominant grammar has functioned as a centrifuge, spinning off one satellite after another. Where the “vibrant alternative and community school movement” of the 1970s set out to create “richer possibilities for students,” alternatives are now “residual spaces, a last refuge for the troubled and disengaged.”¹⁷⁸ A 2012 audit found something like 400 “non-conventional schools” operating in more than 1200 locations, almost all of them providing for those the dominant grammar rejects and functioning to protect the grammar from its own inadequacies.¹⁷⁹

It is more than likely that this dynamic still has some way to run, but it is also true that the dominant grammar is under more pressure now than at any point since the unruly 1960s and 1970s. One sign and source of trouble is the intense dismay expressed by old hands; another is in new demands on the grammar, often made by its guardians.

First among these demands is “personalisation.” A flood of research has documented and quantified what teachers have long known: in just about any class some students are a long way

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ahead, some a long way behind, and most are somewhere in between. These gaps are now expressed in “learning years”; in most classes three, four or even five such years separate the fastest from the slowest. That same body of research has shown that the gaps don’t change much over time, that those who start behind (or ahead) are still behind (or ahead) ten or twelve years later. Since streaming is widely frowned on (although widely practised under various euphemisms) and “holding back” for a repeat year is rejected by almost everybody, teachers carry the can, as usual; a 2022 survey reports teachers as feeling under pressure “to differentiate learning and produce personalised learning plans” and to respond to “the diversity of students’ needs.”¹⁸⁰ There is, of course, an app for that; no “learning management system” these days would be seen without the (claimed) capacity to help teachers develop, deliver and monitor “personalised” programs.

Another demand is that something be done about the “mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum,” a classic expression of which is the Australian Curriculum (version 8.4) with its three “dimensions,” eight learning areas (divided into subjects, strands, sub-strands and threads) and up to ten levels, officially represented (apparently unselfconsciously) in a graphic that looks for all the world like a Rubik’s cube.¹⁸¹ The argument for “deep learning” has been persuasively made by the prominent author and consultant Michael Fullan; content-coverage learning, Fullan argues, doesn’t prepare young people for life after school and doesn’t engage them while they’re at school either.¹⁸²

Yet another: as well as acquiring knowledge young people must develop “general capabilities” — the capacity to communicate, to work with others, to learn and go on learning and the like. This line of thinking too comes from within schooling. The Aus-

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tralian Curriculum has from the outset specified seven “general capabilities”¹⁸³ and given them nominal parity with the eight content-based learning areas. But over the twenty or so years since the Australian Curriculum took shape, the stocks of the capabilities have risen as those of “content” have fallen. The ATAR is in steep decline. Its ancestor, the Anderson score, was devised to make selection for medicine at the University of Melbourne fairer¹⁸⁴ but in the 1960s and 1970s quickly grew into a giant of the forest. In recent years things have run the other way; the ATAR is increasingly criticised for its impact on still-forming lives, for selecting on academic attainment rather than suitability, and for narrowing what students do and learn, particularly in the senior years. It is, moreover, no longer the main gateway to most higher education courses.

The decline of the ATAR and the rise of “capabilities” are now joined by a chorus of concern about “student wellbeing.” The simple-minded response (in the sense referred to above) is to mount another “special program” for those most affected. But is wellbeing a thing? What does that which is labelled wellbeing have to do with the contents of containers labelled “engagement,” “school refusal,” “agency,” “discipline,” “behaviour,” “bullying” and the like?¹⁸⁵ One way to find out is to stop treating them as separate, an approach taken by a network of “sub-schools,” described below, with apparently impressive impact in all of these areas. The pressure on schools is to shift from cleaning up after the event to making less mess by doing core business differently.

In all this Australia is no odd country out. For reasons canvassed earlier, that one-time high priest of attainment, the OECD, has become a voice for change. It has been convening conferences and publishing reports on “schooling for tomorrow,” “investing in competencies for all” and the like since the turn of the century.

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By 2018 it had committed to a Future of Education and Skills 2030 project to find answers to “far-reaching questions” about the what and how of education so as to deliver “the future we want.” In 2023 came a report on “the classroom and beyond” to “steer away” from “knowledge-transfer-based learning and towards experiential learning practices which empower children by placing them at the centre of the learning process.”¹⁸⁶

In “steering away” Australia is a laggard. The “Gonski 2” review, which reported in April 2018, was instructed by the Coalition minister of the day to find “practical ways” to improve “outcomes” and deliver “excellence,” but at least some members of the review committee wanted “growth” (meaning steady progress in learning along with development of “the whole person”) to be the key. The report’s title — *Through Growth to Achievement* — registered its failure to please either side.¹⁸⁷ The report soon became a dead letter. It was followed by “national” projects (prompted by Canberra) to investigate “learning progressions” and “student profiles”; these too generated no clear movement in any direction except, perhaps, in New South Wales, whose government declined to entertain any such talk. Perhaps fingers have been burnt by big talk with small results, most recently in the case of the revolution but also, before that, by a national project aimed at restructuring teachers’ work.

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In the early 1990s a National Schools Project, or NSP, brought together employers and employees from each state and territory to see whether and how restructuring could lift schools’ “productivity.” Although the NSP had its antecedents in the school system¹⁸⁸ it wasn’t really a schools idea. The industrial Accords struck by Labor governments in the 1980s included a bipartisan

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(employer–employee) search for “structural efficiencies” by syncing a restructuring of industrial awards with restructured work and workplaces. For those schools that wanted to reorganise the workplace in whatever way, the NSP would support loosening the regulation of teachers’ work. Schools that came up with something viable would guide regulatory reform and serve as models for wider implementation.

The NSP got some things right and some not. It recognised that schooling, its distinctiveness notwithstanding, was also just another industry with a workforce, workplaces and engrained ways of doing things (many of them entrenched in industrial awards). It showed that terminology rarely used about schools could be at least as helpful as the familiar lexicon of curriculum, instruction, assessment and so on. It brought the unions in from the cold of a focus on terms and conditions to the exclusion of the nature and purposes of teachers’ work, a focus shared by powerful departmental industrial relations branches. It questioned the assumption that schooling had to go on being done as it had long been done.

But: there were far too many cooks, and the pot was far too big. Parties to industrial disputes and negotiations are numerous enough without multiplying them by eight (or nine if we include the Commonwealth). The NSP lost sight of the golden rule of school change: think big, start small. More limiting still: the unions soon made it clear that regulations could by all means be relaxed — unless they were the regulations governing class sizes, contact hours and the like that clustered around the dominant grammar like barnacles. The employers found a rationale for going along with the union demands: the problem wasn’t really in the rules but in the schools’ “culture.”¹⁸⁹ On top of all that the focus was on *teachers’* work (and at a stretch the work of support

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staff); no one saw students as the workers comprising the bulk of the workforce. The grammar was protected even as it was exposed to view in a novel way.

One moral of the story is that the grammar can't be changed without engaging the industrial relations system as a whole and the teacher unions in particular.¹⁹⁰ A second: both sides of the industrial divide will have to accept that the long attempt to solve the problem of teachers' work by reducing its quantum — smaller classes, more support staff, fewer contact hours — has just about run its course.¹⁹¹ The future is in changing the work itself; not just more of this and less of that, but work redesigned from the ground up. A third: the starting point for *that* is not teachers' work but *students'* work.¹⁹² One last moral of the NSP story (and one of the things the NSP got right): changing the grammar requires collaboration between macro and micro as well as by the industrial parties. The macro is stalled; the micro is not.

Two cases in point come from very different histories: one from a combination of New York's alternative schools scene and leftist Australian educational activism; the other from a tradition of sometimes abstruse research that includes among its alumni an educational psychologist in post-revolutionary Russia, a Danish mathematician of the 1930s and, in recent times, several prominent Australian researchers.¹⁹³ These very different histories have issued quite different but nonetheless complementary challenges to the dominant grammar. The New Metrics project and the Big Picture sub-schools are, jointly and severally, constructing a new kind of alternative, bidding not to clean up after the dominant grammar but to complement and relegate it.

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The New Metrics project takes its name from a simple proposition: we should measure what we value, but we don't. Much of what students are asked to learn and become is subordinated to what *is* measured.¹⁹⁴ Most assessment serves to place each student in a rank order of other students according to how much of the curriculum they have absorbed. These comparisons of each with all are usually made by teachers on the evidence of tests, exams, assignments. Comparison depends on giving each student the same test in the same way and assessing it in the same way too. Assessment is done *to* students rather than with or by them. In high-stakes assessments (Years 11 and 12 mostly) performances and assessments are highly structured and closely scrutinised for validity (do they in fact measure what they claim to?) and reliability (each and every time, irrespective of who does the assessing?). Elaborate statistical procedures underwrite the claim that twelve years of schooling can be summed up in a single numeral. (The numeral is usually thought to be a mark or a score, but in fact it refers to a position in a rank order.)

The alternative (and rival) approach is to assess how far and in what ways each student has progressed against standards of competence or capability. The means to this end: the “learning progressions” (sometimes called “developmental continua”) mentioned a moment ago, which describe growth or learning in a given area at each stage along the journey from beginner to expert. “Scaffolding” — work samples, videos, web links and the like — helps students and teachers understand what learning at each stage looks like, and makes sure (or as sure as possible) that students and teachers in one school understand the progressions and stages in much the same way as those in another.

New Metrics assessment has some things in common with mainstream assessment, but only some. Progressions too are

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closely scrutinised for validity and reliability, but through intensive work with teachers as well as by psychometricians. Constructed performances of various kinds can be used, but so can structured observations of “real life.” Assessors may include students and others as well as teachers, or some combination of them. Assessments are rigorous but also a source of help, guidance and encouragement to individuals. They find what the student is good at; they help students learn how to learn; and they make “personalisation” doable.

Over time, digital records of assessments accumulate to build a student profile, a picture of where each is up to, of what they know and are able to do. Profiles and their supporting evidence can provide the basis for certificates or credentials to be used in seeking employment and/or tertiary entrance, in which case selection can be made or supported by matching an applicant’s profile against a profile of course requirements rather than or as well as by rank order position.¹⁹⁵

The New Metrics project has so far focused on assessing the general capabilities that, in their nature, exist in what students do and produce rather than what they demonstrate in written tests or exercises. The project is unusual in other ways: it is a collaboration between schools and university-based researchers, not an “implementation” of what research has “found.” Participating schools — big schools and small ones, government and non-government, primary, secondary and K–12, urban and regional, high-fee and disadvantaged, in most states and territories — are helped (and help) in thinking about what they want students to learn and become, and in working out whether and how they need to change their learning design — essentially, the shape and character of the student experience — to help them do it. Among the schools’ discoveries: general capabilities can be learned and

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“evidenced” but often can’t be “taught.” And some can’t be learned in the usual classrooms either. How can students learn to communicate effectively or collaborate with peers and others or learn to learn independently by sitting up straight and listening? Or through study? Larry Cuban’s circumstances — the organisation of the work of students and teachers — are up for grabs.

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One version of what a very different “learning design” can look like is provided by Big Picture Learning Academies, forty small (maximum 150 students) schools-within-schools, government secondary schools, funded by government systems, most of them in Western Australia and New South Wales. Some Big Picture schools offer the early secondary years, most are senior secondary only, a few cover the full secondary program, Years 7–12. Like most government schools, Big Picture takes (almost) all comers — “school refusers,” dropouts and “troublemakers,” the “academically inclined” and members of “the long tail,” including double the mainstream proportion of kids with disabilities. Many Big Picture students are conscientious objectors — seven in ten say that they wouldn’t have stuck it out in the mainstream.¹⁹⁶ What they get is certainly not mainstream: not many “lessons” of the familiar kind, no “subjects,” no switching from one class and subject and teacher to another, no texts, no marks, no rank order. But, as in New Metrics, plenty of rigour. Each student develops a personal learning plan shaped by their “passions and interests” to deliver on six “Learning Goals”: empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, social reasoning, communication, personal qualities and knowing how to learn. “The Goals are designed,” says Big Picture, “to cover the key learning areas of learning” a young person needs to be successful in life “without being overly

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prescriptive or content-based.” Students get what they need as and when they need it “rather than having to wait for the appropriate stage of school or relevant part of the syllabus to be reached.” Each day begins with a meeting of an “Advisory” (something like a home class) of seventeen. The Advisory comes with just one teacher, convenor of the group, go-to person for students, guide and coach in the development of learning plans, and point of access to other teachers, mentors from outside the school, and other resources.

There are no exams. Instead students are assessed on what they know and can show and do; it is “strengths-based” and “personalised.” Each student receives a “term narrative” from their Advisor and each writes their own narrative to reflect on their learning each term. Each student exhibits their learning each term to a panel of teachers, peers, family and mentors. Those in the senior years must present a Senior Thesis Project that involves “sustained, in-depth and original work, often with the assistance of an academic mentor from a university or a practitioner from an industry, trade or art.” They also develop a Graduation Portfolio.

From the outset Big Picture graduates have been able to negotiate entry to a range of university and other tertiary courses on a case-by-case basis. But entering the world of further study and/or employment is now much assisted by a collaboration with the University of Melbourne and its New Metrics project to develop the International Big Picture Learning Credential (“international” because the credential has been exported back to the United States for use in eighty-plus Big Picture schools there). In Australia that credential has supported entry to university and other tertiary courses ranging from biomedical design, veterinary science, marine science and mechatronics to business law, exercise physiology, visual communication/design, teaching and nursing.

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New Metrics and Big Picture suggest what *changing* the core rather than just *adding* to it can do. Almost all who start in Big Picture schools are still there at the end. Not only do students stay; they seem to enjoy it. “Negative incidents” occur in Big Picture schools at around a tenth of the rate in the mainstream. Nine in ten students demonstrate “improved learning engagement, relationships and wellbeing.” Four in ten recent graduates went on to university, one in ten to an apprenticeship, two in ten into other vocational training and two in ten into employment. Graduates agree without exception that Big Picture “prepared them well for life after school.”¹⁹⁷ It is even possible that the “Big Picture experience” is of sufficient depth and strength to change students’ neurology.¹⁹⁸

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If talk about twelve safe, happy, worthwhile and productive years, for all, or about focusing on the productivity of learning rather than the effectiveness of teaching seem a bit abstract or “idealistic,” Big Picture suggests what they can look like. It demonstrates that students, like any other worker in any other industry, are productive according to the division and organisation of labour and the allocation of responsibilities and rewards and sanctions, as well as the character and quality of the supervision. It also suggests that students learn not just “in” the curriculum but from everything that happens to them at school, including much that is neither intended nor noticed by the typical school. Some of this other learning is done in the classroom, but most happens elsewhere. Students learn, consciously and unconsciously, about themselves and where they stand with others. They learn in their own way and their own good time how the world works, and who they are. They make themselves and each other.¹⁹⁹

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These realities are half-seen in the concepts of the “co-curriculum” and the “hidden curriculum.”²⁰⁰ They are often taken as inevitable, a given, perhaps desirable, perhaps not. The great opportunity now, for which the rise and rise of the “general capabilities” can take much credit, is to draw most of what goes on at school into the school’s program and in that way make good on the old idea that schooling should shape as well as educate. Schooling is not just an individual or family undertaking; it is a public undertaking too, less in the familiar sense of rights and responsibilities derived from public funding or even as coterminous with what governments do, but in the largest sense. It is a view of the school as a village delegated by the wider society to help “grow them up,” as the lovely Aboriginal phrase has it, working with students as they move from childhood to young adulthood, developing as well as educating.

Michelle Obama recalls her mother insisting that we’re not bringing up children in this family, we’re bringing up adults. So too schools.²⁰¹ By the time those labelled as “students” reach their twelfth year in schooling’s workforce they could and should be doing responsible, adult work in the maintenance and administration of the school and, first and foremost, in the organisation and conduct of the work of producing learning, an expansion and reorganisation of the grammar that could be made explicit and thereby guided and rewarded by progressions of the New Metrics kind. This is more than “giving” students “agency,” or getting them to “engage” with what’s put in front of them, or “putting them in control of their own learning,” or “making them good citizens of the school community,” laudable as such ambitions are; it is setting out to make the school more productive of development and growth as well as of learning, to take the school from being a place where children and young people go to watch adults work to one

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in which they become responsible members of the workforce engaged in the production of themselves, of each other, and of knowledge, understanding and capability.

New Metrics and Big Picture are not the only such exceptions to the grammar's rule²⁰² but they *are* exceptions. Big Picture spans one phase of schooling; what would a restructured grammar look like in the first six years of school? A harder question: Big Picture is in effect a greenfield site cleared within entrenched institutions. How many of the latter can incorporate the former, and how rapidly? With what effect of the one on the other? New Metrics is a part of an answer to that question, but only a part. Even though the New Metrics schools realise the next step is to change their "learning design," there is a long way to go. The history of "scaling up" in schooling is a litany of failure. Changing entrenched ways of working and thinking is slow, hard work; the effort of change has to be planned and sustained over long periods, more like the twenty or thirty years of the mining industry or defence strategy than the electoral cycle, about the best that schools and school systems can hope for as things stand. The excitement and kudos of doing something new is followed by the drudgery of implementing someone else's idea. Those who had the burning idea move on to bigger things or burn out or aren't equipped to shift from innovation to roll-out. If insurgent ideas and people make progress, the *ancien régime* mobilises and stiffens its resistance. Growth up from the grassroots depends on change in what's above and all round.

RESTRUCTURING THE INDUSTRY

The first and third of the structures that shape Australian schooling are not all that different from such structures in other countries — the grammar dominant in Australian schools is dominant

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in school systems around the world; the Australian way of dividing (and failing to divide) authority and responsibility between two levels of government is similar to that in the United States, Britain and other federal systems. But our sector system, with its three ways of organising funding and governance, its division between faith-based and secular schools, and its two ways of regulating school choice and student selection, is unique. It is also long-established, as we have seen, taking shape along with the emerging state school systems in the late nineteenth century.

All three of the big, deeply entrenched structures are defended by vested interests, none so heavily as the sector system; it has several times proved more than sufficient to “spook” Labor governments, as a former state minister for education put it. Whitlam’s Karmel committee tried to cut the high-fee schools out of public funding. It not only lost; it went on to deliver massive public subsidies with very little in return. The next (Hawke) Labor government proposed to transfer quite modest amounts from high-fee schools to the low-fee Catholic schools — *transfer* within non-government system funding, it should be emphasised, not cut — only to provoke uproar and the effective end of a cabinet minister’s promising political career when those modest transfers were construed as “Ryan’s hit list.” Two decades later another political career (and an election) were lost, perhaps thanks partly to “Latham’s hit list.”

An alchemy that could mix vestigial sectarianism with the organising power of the Catholic church and an exaggerated fear of higher fees was more than enough to spook Julia Gillard. The terms of reference for her funding review avoided anything that might be seen as threatening to non-government sector prerogatives, and it came with a guarantee that “no school would be worse off” (later upgraded, as we have seen, to “every school will

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be better off”).²⁰³ And as we have also seen, the review’s report eschewed even the most oblique comment on its cramping brief or the near-impossibility of designing fair and rational public funding without also regulating private funding.

Coalition governments have every political incentive to let well alone; Labor governments do not. Leaving aside the deeply felt commitment of many individuals in and around the Labor Party, Labor’s electoral appeal is as the party of equality, fairness and social inclusion, all made more difficult (or impossible) to deliver while the sector system goes on working as it has ever since the 1970s.

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What to do? One option is canvassed in some detail by Greenwell and Bonnor in *Waiting for Gonski*, subsequently elaborated in their *Choice and Fairness* (2023).²⁰⁴ Conceding that the sectors are here to stay, they propose changing the rules to make a “level playing field.”²⁰⁵ They want rules about school choice and student selection common to all schools along with a common needs-based funding system, including full public funding for any non-government school or system willing to sign a charter of reciprocal rights and obligations.

The proposal has much to recommend it. It marks a decisive break with a long-running old-left campaign to use public funding to lever religion out of the system.²⁰⁶ It recognises some of the limitations of the Gonski solution (and Gonski’s terms of reference), including its corrosive double standards on choice and selection and its ceiling-less private funding. It offers an appealing carrot: no more school fees!²⁰⁷ But what would no doubt appeal to many parents would not appeal to non-government school authorities. If Labor is spooked by the political power of the non-

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government systems, those systems are spooked by the prospect of governments paying the piper then calling the tune, not to mention the lower standard of living in a fee-less future along with the loss of political power. The high-fee schools, for whom public funding is just more icing on an already handsome cake, would almost certainly opt to go it alone, taking with them the capacity to cherrypick students and staff, to exclude and to be “exclusive,” and to make everything else seem second-best.

The argument could be developed in other respects. Greenwell and Bonnor give more attention to the sector system’s impact on “outcomes” than to social segregation and its consequences in the formation of enclosed financial, political and intellectual elites particularly. Nor have they tackled that other great driver of segregation in schooling, the real estate market. Families buy their way into the most desirable (and free²⁰⁸) government schools by paying a premium on a house in the school’s zone.²⁰⁹ Often taken to be beyond the reach of policy on schooling, it isn’t. The problem behind the problem is that the gradient from desirable to undesirable schools runs so steeply in the wrong direction. What if exceptionally desirable public schools — made desirable by funding pushed towards equality of total educational effort — were to be found in Mt Druitt or Broadmeadows or Logan or Elizabeth or Balga? It has been argued at several points that schooling has been profoundly shaped by its expanded role in competition for positional goods. Schools policy can’t do much about the competition but it is no innocent bystander. Funding is one of two key conduits by which social competition finds its way into schools (the organisation of schooling as a rank order competition is the other). Both work as they do because they have been allowed to.

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Greenwell and Bonnor's proposals have been advanced through articles and reports in the mainstream media, and have attracted increasingly favourable comment, though none yet from governments state or federal or from non-government school authorities. Full Gonski funding seems to be scheduled for the next federal budget; it would be open to the government to treat a revived Gonski as a first rather than last step in the direction of a level playing field. It could follow up with a review of choice and selection, and it could go on thinking about funding, including thinking about whether an effective funding floor requires a funding ceiling and whether need is best met by equalising the total educational effort available to each student rather than by needs-based funding to schools. There is no sign of any official thinking along such lines and, unfortunately, good reason to predict that there won't be. The government's watchword is steady, measured improvement. It faces demands for aged care, childcare and welfare well in excess of revenues. And its thinking is still grounded in the Fabian proposition that equality is to be found in opportunity; it is a long way from concluding, with philosopher Michael Sandel, that there's something profoundly wrong about a school system premised on escape.²¹⁰ Unlike the tribal elders, the government has not run out of patience with "opportunity" thinking. The argument for restructuring the industry remains incomplete; ways and means are yet to be fully spelled out.

RESTRUCTURING GOVERNANCE

There is not one governance problem to be dealt with but three: the close involvement of two levels of government in every aspect and corner of schooling; the fragmentation of authority and responsibility within states and territories; and the vexed relationship between systems (particularly government systems) and the

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schools. Much of the restructuring would have to be done *to* the restructurers rather than by them; they will not do it at their own initiative. But it is probably not overstating the problem to say that restructuring in Australian schooling, with the possible and partial exception of restructuring the grammar, can only be achieved with, in and through a restructuring of governance.

The central problem is the Commonwealth role. The so-called national approach, the creature of the Commonwealth and its money, has not worked and cannot work. There is no prospect of a fully national system; the states/territories would never agree to it, and they have the Constitution and the sheer weight of incumbency to make their refusal final. To that extent my earlier analogy with the construction of the European Union does not apply. If the national approach can't work as it is and can't go forward, then it must go back. But how far back? Ideally, and as canvassed by commentators from right, left and centre,²¹¹ back to 1960 or thereabouts, before the Commonwealth was dragged slowly at first and then with explosive force into every aspect of schooling in all three sectors in every state and territory.

The argument is strong, and it comes with the positive example of Canada, a federal system in a society very like Australia's and a school system doing much better than Australia's with very little federal involvement at all. But keeping the feds out is quite different from digging them out once they're in. "Stakeholders" are numerous and well-placed: a federal minister posing as the *nation's* education minister; a Labor Party that continues to see itself as schooling's white knight via the Commonwealth; legions of public servants employed in the four national agencies and in Canberra's department of education; the coordinating departments (prime minister's and finance) wanting to know what "they" are getting for "their" money; and powerful non-government

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sector lobbies which, as things now stand, can play one paymaster (the Commonwealth) off against another (the states/territories). All would resist movement in the Canadian direction.

Perhaps the best that can be hoped for in the medium term is a clearer division of labour. Canberra's "special programs," its "transparency and accountability" measures and its "policy" directed at schools and systems rather than at the school system as a whole don't work but do disrupt and blur responsibilities. The distinction between national and Commonwealth could be reasserted as suggested earlier and then expanded over time, perhaps turning the machinery of the National School Reform Agreements into a broker or clearinghouse. Cumulative structural reform might take us to a more devolved system in which states/territories could collaborate all-in or in sub-groups, ad hoc or continuing. That would be up to them, not the Commonwealth and its national mechanisms. Smaller states worried about being pushed around by Victoria, New South Wales or Queensland might consider banding together to protect their interests and advance their views.

The related problems — fragmented authority within states and territories, and the often controlling rather than encouraging relationship between schools and system authorities (mainly in the government systems) — have common origins in the decline of the grand departments of education. Constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to provide basic education for all — all, that is, except the one-fifth of the population who were Catholic and a tiny fraction of others — the departments were well suited to the task. They were not well suited to the task that so rapidly emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, however. In a sequence oddly reminiscent of the decline of that rather larger command economy, the Soviet Union, they lost one func-

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tion after another to new authorities and institutions and struggled to change the old habits of top-down micromanagers in the face of schools and teachers wanting to be masters of their own fates. As departments shrank and floundered but somehow hung on, power shifted to governments and ministers' offices. *Policy?* one former director-general fumed. *Policy?* There is no policy, just twenty-five-year-old law graduates in the minister's office wanting their pet idea implemented yesterday!²¹² Much ministerial anxiety comes from ever-increasing regulation of child safety and wellbeing as well as from monitoring provision for students with special needs or from designated groups.²¹³ But "teachers and school leaders" are on the money when they say that "Australia's school education system structure underpins many of the problematic aspects of regulation and the red tape burden on schools (such as overlapping Commonwealth, state and territory responsibilities, and differing governance arrangements across the sectors)."²¹⁴

Where to start? How to set about getting a better-coordinated, long-term strategy, a closer relationship between systemic brains and bodies, and a shift from top-down control to support and encouragement? Some very preliminary suggestions about starting points for hard thinking:

- The rules on which demands for accountability and transparency rest are mostly "thin" rather than "thick" rules. Thin rules combine with technology to hold out the enticing prospect of micromanagement from a distance through "data" (including, preposterously, data that can reveal what four-plus million students are and are not learning). Thin rules and their data have their uses as well as limits. But in complicated and various institutions such as schools, "thick" rules are mostly better — rules that don't "try to

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anticipate particulars” but “are akin to the instructions you’d give to someone who knows how to cook when telling them how to make your favourite pasta.”²¹⁵ Learning progressions of the kind discussed earlier are thick rules; they depend on and are devised for the use of people who know how to cook. The infamous government school inspectorates began their lives early in the twentieth century as enforcers of thin rules, but by the 1950s and 1960s at least some inspectors realised that they would be more useful as encouragers, supporters and disseminators of good ideas. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in Britain (now superseded by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) is often suggested as a way to institutionalise such an approach.

- Should we consider statutory authorities rather than or as well as departments answerable directly to a minister? The short-lived Schools Commission was exemplary in several respects: it was representative of interests but not directly so, cross-sectoral, expert, thoughtful, encouraging of ideas and debate, respected and supportive.²¹⁶ It was also limited — fatally, as it soon turned out — in being national, based in Canberra and tied to the federal government of the day. It was too far from the ground and depended for its leverage on control of bountiful funding. When funding dried up and the government changed, the commission was in trouble. It had taken the department’s place in the sun; the department and its allies in the coordinating agencies played a long game. Less than a decade from its days of grandeur, the commission was a shell, soon abolished. Which if any of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of statutory authorities, state/territory and federal, suggest how the Schools Commission’s pros could be mixed with fewer cons to deliver effective state-level, cross-sector, multi-function statutory authorities? By whatever means, schools must be

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put on a broadly common basis at arm's length from system authorities, and they in turn from the government of the day.

- What of think tanks, which deal in influence rather than power? The only think tank to have a substantial impact on Australian schooling in recent times is the OECD, in Paris; there is much to be learned from its example about how to make ideas work, although that endorsement applies to the OECD's surveys, think pieces, reviews and forums rather than its toxic testing program. The recently established Australian Education Research Organisation, or AERO, is a think tank of a kind, but working to the wrong brief, disseminating "evidence" about what exists rather than thinking about what doesn't but should. Could it (and its state/territory-level equivalents) be turned to documenting, thinking about and promoting discussion of the many efforts now being made in and around schools to reshape the work, workforce and workplaces of schooling? At arm's length from systems and governments?²¹⁷ If not, they should be dismantled and their funding transferred to new, purpose-built agencies.

- No aspect of governance is in more urgent need of restructuring than the relationship between systems and the teaching workforce. Here, as elsewhere, adversarial relationships have institutionalised thin rules, in this case in industrial agreements that specify terms and conditions in eye-glazing detail.²¹⁸ It is often said that these regulations aren't the real obstacle to reform, that those who want to get up and go will find a way around the rule book. But what about encouraging rather than just permitting? Or those familiar episodes when innovators fall foul of those who can deploy the rules?²¹⁹ A key objective of any move to bring teacher unions in from the cold should be a rethinking of indus-

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trial agreements that expresses a deep understanding of the learning process and of the nature of students' and teachers' work.

- Some of the capacity of systems to develop and pursue a big, long-term agenda was lost when teacher education was removed from the control of the departments and organised around theory rather than practice, making the universities the arbiters of what teachers need to know and, by extension, what teachers are for. That regression, a particularly unfortunate example of credentialism at work, was fuelled by the assumption that the answer to the many problems of teachers and teaching was to be found in becoming a “true” profession. Teaching does require (and will increasingly require) mastery of formal knowledge acquired through disciplined study. But it is grounded in embodied understanding, in the reflexes, the nano-decisions of everyday work built on relationships. There is no reason to believe that the recently released Scott report on university-based teacher education will have any more impact than its countless predecessors.²²⁰ The way to become a teacher is through an apprenticeship based in schools that use universities and other providers as collaborators or subcontractors, and funded by employers and from higher education funding. Such programs, organised around progressions drawing on the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s “professional standards,” would look more like Big Picture than a conventional university “professional preparation” program. A transition on that scale could only happen and work effectively within a collaboration between employers and employees.

ENGINEERING, GARDENING AND IDEAS

The argument of this short book is that the whale of schooling is beached, that current efforts to get it going again are not working

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and will not work, and that a different way of thinking about schooling, together with structural reform, is essential.

“Essential” does not mean “sufficient.” Incremental reform (“gardening”) is as important as structural (“engineering”), partly because schooling is so intricate — try to imagine the construction of a better grammar without the kind of detail work being done in the New Metrics project or by Big Picture, for example — and partly because the right kind of gardening offers the most plausible route to restructuring. Gardening turns into engineering if it belongs to a larger program or plan. The great limitation of school reform since Karmel is its exclusive reliance (again, Gonski excepted) on incremental reforms, cumulative of costs and complexity rather than of structural change. As increasing numbers of those debating schooling contemplate *structural* change it becomes important not to fall into the equal and opposite mistake of thinking that engineering and gardening are alternatives.

The catch-22 of the incremental route to structural change is Australia’s lack of a Brussels. The revolution tried to construct one but in ways that compounded the problem. For all the reasons canvassed in chapter 2 it is impossible to imagine that the national machinery and/or Canberra can conceive, coordinate and see through a decades-long restructuring of schooling’s work and workplaces or of the industry and its sectors. It is even harder to imagine the Commonwealth departing gracefully, demanding only that each state/territory make governance arrangements acceptable to the sector system’s stakeholders and capable of leading reform of that system and of fostering the development of a better grammar or grammars.

But why go on thinking with the revolution’s blinkers on? If we see the “national approach” as Canberra’s Trojan horse, the

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problem doesn't disappear but it certainly looks more negotiable. There is not one beached whale but several, a pod of eight in fact. History has constructed the states (and to a lesser extent the two territories) as viable entities, dense webs of institutions, understandings and arrangements within a defined space. The only thing they need from the Commonwealth is money. In the absence of a decision by the Commonwealth to withdraw — as urged across a wide political spectrum and in light of the Canadian example — why wouldn't one or more states simply pull out of the deal and design its own Brussels?

As things now stand the Commonwealth would win any such arm-wrestle; pitted against a seceding state the Commonwealth would win. But who would have imagined in 1963 that the imminent collapse of the Catholic school system would within a decade have turned into Catholic schooling's triumph (indeed its greatest triumph in nearly 200 years of struggle and conflict)? Who in 1973 would have imagined that ninety-nine of Karmel's one hundred flowers would be crowded out by the hundredth? Or that the white knight of the Commonwealth would turn into — what? — not quite an ogre but certainly not a dashing champion.

To take just the first of these examples of history's turning wheel: the difference between 1963 and 1973 was made by a movement or, more exactly, by several movements interacting with each other in complicated ways. They were driven by rapidly changing social, political and cultural circumstances but were shaped also by the protagonists and their ideas. The Catholic movement did well because it was well organised (by and within the church) and because it quickly sorted out what was on the table and what it wanted. Whitlam and the government schools did badly because they were divided and because they could not

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work out what to do. Whitlam hoped that Karmel and then the Schools Commission would somehow figure it out, but by then the sectoral horse had bolted.

In that unhappy tale lie several morals, including the importance of developing a larger, more generous view of what schooling can be, a view more capable of working out how to get from here to there. To nominate just one condition of success: the point and purpose of structural change is not (as is increasingly urged) to give Australia a “world-class learning system” or “twenty-first-century schooling” or a system that is “agile” or “flexible” or “responsive” or “adaptable” or anything else captured by any descriptor or combination of descriptors. It is to do whatever is necessary (and no more) to give every school a decent shot at giving every student a decent shot at twelve safe, happy, worthwhile and productive years to begin their working lives.

AFTERWORD

As anyone working in the office of a minister for education will testify, schools are prolific generators of “issues,” some all too familiar (teacher stress, discipline, homework, public versus private schools, teaching reading, single-sex versus co-ed, traditional versus open classrooms), others recent arrivals and/or minor and/or transient (teaching about climate change, ChatGPT, the science of learning, school chaplains, STEM, boarding schools for Indigenous kids, mobile phones in classrooms). Many such issues are not discussed here because they are second- or third-order or because they don’t require restructuring for their solution — or because they do. Several “issues” do require comment, however, because they are (or are thought to be) of prime importance in themselves or because they bear on the central argument.

Schooling for Indigenous children and young people, often relegated to the status of an “issue,” is crucial to the emancipation of Indigenous Australians and therefore of Australia. It is the focus of significant effort by governments, philanthropic founda-

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tions and other non-governmental organisations, often driven by or in collaboration with Indigenous people and their organisations. It is not at all clear what does or can “work,” or even what “work” means in this distinct and distinctively complex area of policy and practice. Nor does it fit within a general argument about schooling and school reform.

The information and communication technologies and curriculum are of similarly fundamental importance, but in a quite different way. Many expected or hoped that the ICTs would “disrupt” the schooling industry as they have disrupted others (the media industry, for example);²²¹ but they haven’t. To the contrary, their unstoppable march has stopped at the school gate. The ICTs are everywhere in schools but have made little if any difference to how their core business is done²²² — yet another triumph for Larry Cuban’s understanding of schools and school reform.²²³ Schooling, like the aged care or welfare or hospitality industries, is a way of structuring human relationships. Its entrenched and heavily defended organisation of the work of learning has combined with incapable governance to keep the ICTs outside these relationships. Far from driving restructuring, the ICTs wait upon it, along with much besides. Artificial Intelligence has revived some techno dreams and nightmares; it may well be potent to a quite new degree, but that is yet to be seen.

Many discussions about school reform take “the curriculum” as axial. The unstated assumption is that school is where students learn what teachers teach and that what teachers teach is the curriculum. Curriculum content matters, a lot, as the predicament of students and teachers in Florida and other US states well illustrates. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and its extensive design and consultation processes can take a good deal of the credit for sustaining a very different

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situation in Australia. But the intrinsic importance of the curriculum granted, reform of the curriculum in the usual sense of the term is not a lever of wider school reform. There is no chain reaction rippling out from curriculum reform. The key thing, so often forgotten (but understood by Big Picture and others), is the student's *relationship* with the curriculum, a question of organisation or structure rather than content.

On at least two matters more could have been said.

First: what to make of rising official and wider concern about the “new morbidities,” about “wellbeing” and “mental health,” about “school refusal,” “disruptive behaviour” and the like? And about their flipside, the pressure on schools to be more engaging, to provide more agency and so on? At the end of my concentrated effort to understand the present moment in schooling, these questions loom larger than they did at the outset. It now seems obvious that the problem is being misconstrued as a series of issues, that current responses will not work, and that its larger significance is being missed. As was suggested earlier²²⁴ it is at least possible that behind apparently galloping emotional and behavioural difficulties (along with chronic problems in “performance”) is something fundamentally wrong with the school–society relationship in Australia and at least some other Western societies,²²⁵ something that isn't wrong, or so badly wrong, in East Asia, where the traditional school regime is not so different from young people's lives elsewhere.

The importance and urgency of working out what's going on and what to do about it (including whether it strengthens the case for structural reform, in the grammar particularly) is all the greater when we remember that the problem falls most heavily on children and young people who most need school to be a place in their lives — perhaps *the* place — that *works*, and is looked forward to.

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Second: the question of cultural versus structural change. The view taken here is that at least so far as schooling is concerned, the structural chicken must come before the cultural egg — witness, for example, the significant shift in ideas and feelings triggered and focused by the Gonski proposals. As was suggested by two historians in respect of the National Schools Project: to say that the problem (whatever it happens to be) is cultural is both a truism and a way of doing nothing about it.²²⁶

The biggest cultural problem in Australian schooling is a cringe reminiscent of Australia's cultural cringe in the 1960s and 1970s. It is everywhere in schooling: in the endless longing of teacher organisations for teaching to become a profession like law or medicine; in low and declining standards of entry into teacher education courses; in acceptance of derisory levels of per capita funding for teacher education; in the insistence on extended front-end university-based teacher education to the exclusion of a standards-based apprenticeship model; in looking to human capital theory to justify better schooling; in arguing that better funding for schooling is good value because it reduces welfare expenditure; in buckling to the dictates of the education revolution; in adopting corporate-speak and the associated assumption that changing lives and relationships is just a question of technique; in the status anxiety that pushes researchers towards a version of “research” imported from medicine in the hope that it will provide teaching with a “knowledge base” and get them off the bottom rung of the academic status ladder.

Schooling, as well as being by several measures Australia's largest industry, is also one of its most fundamental, in the fullest sense of that term.²²⁷ There is more self-respect to be found in the adamant pursuit of schooling organised for the success

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of all than in the dream of becoming, someday, somehow a “true” profession.

A final note: some of the conclusions set out here are uncomfortable, and have been reached only reluctantly and eventually. Is the whale actually beached? As badly as all that? Is the way out as difficult? Even if the answers offered here are dismissed, I hope that the questions won't be.

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I have been lucky enough to have known a number of people involved in the story told here. Two of them, Bill Hannan and the late Jean Blackburn, have been close friends as well as colleagues and mentors, Bill as editor of the VSTA's *Secondary Teacher* and in a number of subsequent roles, Jean before, during and after her seminal years at the Schools Commission. They have had even more influence on my thinking than did the events in which they were involved.

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My greatest debt is to my partner in all things, Sandra Milligan, through countless and often robust conversations about ideas and arguments made here, through her pioneering work as director of the Assessment Research Centre (and now as executive director of Melbourne Assessment) at the University of Melbourne, work of national and potentially international significance, and most of all through her unfailing support.

NOTES

1. Reid (2019), page xiv; Caldwell (2023), page v; Lawrence (2023); Firth (2023); McGaw (2023); Masters (2023).
2. Rudd (2007).
3. Gillard (August 2010).
4. Savage (2021) is the most comprehensive and penetrating account of the revolution; for a summary of its early days, see chapter 1.
5. TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA (Program for International Student Assessment).
6. Gillard (August 2008). John Hattie was an early (Hattie, 2003) and prominent exponent of this view.
7. Gillard (August 2010).
8. Savage (2021), page 9.
9. Gillard (March 2009).
10. “The Committee is required by its terms of reference to consider the immediate financial needs of schools. The concept of need is not easy to define... The Committee considered four approaches to the concept [and] concluded that it should make its needs assessments along two dimensions: inputs of resources to schools and school systems, and degree of disadvantage of groups of pupils in particular schools.” (Karmel et al., 1973, paras 5.8 and 5.9).

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11. Education, Employment and Workplaces Relations References Committee (1998).
12. Dawkins (2007). The report was developed by a committee of state and territory representatives chaired by then head of Victoria's education department, Peter Dawkins.
13. Australian proficiency in testing and psychometrics has American origins. The Carnegie Foundation instigated and funded the early development of the Australian Council for Educational Research in the 1930s (Connell, W.F., 1980). The ACER's enduring focus on test development and deployment was acknowledged by the OECD when it appointed then head of the ACER, Barry McGaw, to lead its education division as PISA was being developed. The ACER and Australia have continued to punch well above their weight in the ongoing refinement, expansion and defence of PISA.
14. Visits to Australia by Joel Klein, the head of the largest US school system (New York) and by high-profile Stanford academic Linda Darling-Hammond came in the formative stages of the revolution.
15. Sahlberg (2011).
16. Nous Group (2011).
17. Gillard (September 2012).
18. Council of Australian Governments Education Council (2019).
19. Productivity Commission (September 2022), page 4.
20. Productivity Commission (September 2022), page 2.
21. See the very useful chronology in Greenwell and Bonnor (2022), and specifically page ix.
22. Review of Funding for Schooling (2011), page xiii.
23. Greenwell and Bonnor (2022), page 2.
24. Review of Funding for Schooling (2011), page xiii.
25. Ashenden (2013).
26. Thomson (2021), page 30.
27. Preston (2023), page 30.
28. Preston (2023), pages 8–9. Direct public subsidies are not the whole story; Preston provides a long list of other subventions including exemptions from payroll tax (which is, however, paid by public schools) and local government rates as well as various perks flowing from registration as charitable trusts.

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29. Preston (2023), page 8.
30. Thomson (2021), page 43.
31. The NEiTA–ACE study reports (NEiTA–ACE, 2021, page 8) that 87 per cent of their sample found their work “rewarding” or “very rewarding” but only two-thirds were “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” It should be noted that this and most of the other surveys drawn on here may contain some bias and, if so, a bias towards overstating the profession’s predicament. Many of the researchers concerned have themselves been teachers or otherwise inclined to take the teachers’ part; almost all work in institutions that depend on teacher education for their living.
32. Gillard (2010).
33. Most but not all — see Note 150 for the unhappy tale of a teacher captured on a widely circulated video.
34. Mockler (2022).
35. Longmuir et al. (2022).
36. Longmuir et al. (2022).
37. NEiTA–ACE (2021).
38. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022); NEiTA–ACE (2021).
39. Windle (2022), page 48.
40. Governance Institute of Australia (2022), page 19.
41. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2020); NEiTA–ACE (2021).
42. Mockler (2022).
43. Wilson (2023), page 4.
44. Goss and Sonnemann (August 2019), pages 8, 13.
45. Hare (2022).
46. Wilson (2022), page 5.
47. Compare the target of 450 recruits (Gillard, 2008) with just fourteen takers after two intakes. Half of the program’s \$16 million allocation was transferred to the already established Teach for Australia program (Topsfield, February 2013).
48. Goss and Sonnemann (2019), page 28.
49. Goss and Sonnemann (2019).

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50. NEiTA–ACE (2021), page 10.
51. Gillard (2008).
52. Kidson, Marsh and Dicke (2023).
53. Australian Education Research Organisation (nd). One of many ripples from the quality wave is a “Quality Teaching Academy”: “Our flagship program Quality Teaching Rounds [the Academy claims] is backed by more than two decades of research that shows it boosts teacher morale, enhances self-efficacy, and improves student learning” (*Teacher Magazine*, 29 April 2021).
54. Karp (2022).
55. Over the first decade or so of the century Hattie rose from academic obscurity to national celebrity as the guru of “effective teaching”; his books, professional development materials and workshops are bestsellers in Australia and around the world.
56. Productivity Commission (2023), page 169.
57. Freeman, O’Malley and Eveleigh (2014), page xv.
58. Earp (2023).
59. Freeman, O’Malley and Eveleigh (2014).
60. Taylor (2023).
61. On the construction of the Index, see Willms (2003), Annex A. The Productivity Commission summarises evidence on “engagement” and “student wellbeing” in various of its many publications on “school education.” Its final report on the NSRAs (2023) includes (page 140) a summary of each of the many Australian studies “linking wellbeing to learning and engagement,” and a summary of related national data. What the commission makes of these data is sometimes troubling, occasionally risible. It found, for example, that “a highly effective teacher who is one standard deviation above the average teacher, instructing a class of fifteen students, could increase the average lifetime earnings of the classroom by about \$530,000 per year” (page 170). That the commission’s principal concern is that wellbeing affects learning, aka “outcomes,” suggests that it is ethically challenged as well as blinded by its own science.
62. This study was led by Bryan C. Hassel for the American Enterprise Institute. Publication details do not appear on hard copy made in 2015 or on the institute’s website. Papers by Bryan C. Hassel and Emily A. Hassel (2009, 2011) suggest the approach taken in the analysis summarised here.
63. Mockler (11 July 2022).

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64. See Thomson's authoritative survey (2021). Until her recent retirement Thomson was PISA's go-to person in Australia.
65. Georgiou and Larsen (2023).
66. Lamb et al. (2020).
67. Productivity Commission (2022a), Part B, Section 4.
68. By "worksites" is meant "schools"; some schools have two or more campuses. "Workforce" includes, for reasons given later in this chapter, 3.4 million students (2007) as well as approximately 400,000 employees.
69. On the history of the departments, see Barcan (1980); Bessant (1983); Campbell and Proctor (2014); Miller (1986); Mossensen (1972); Thiele (1975).
70. This paraphrases a point made often and in varying ways by US historian Larry Cuban. On Cuban and his seminal work, see chapter 2.
71. Gillard and Rudd told the states and territories at the outset that there would be "accelerated pathways" and higher salaries for "the nation's most talented graduates," incentives for high performers, more teaching and less paperwork, and more autonomy for principals; that they would "demand greater transparency and greater accountability"; and that they would "insist" on "a system of individual school performance" (Gillard, August 2008).
72. Gillard (March 2009).
73. The NEiTA-ACE survey (October 2021) has 60 per cent of teachers saying that testing is ineffective, 52 per cent agreeing that there is too much of it, and 39 per cent reporting an increased focus on test results in their school. Another study concludes that "the reliance on top-down initiatives and standardised test data... serves to diminish the profession. Teachers still strongly believe in the importance of teaching as a vocation, but a significant number are becoming unhappy with what it looks like in practice today... [E]xternal accountability procedures [have] driven policy across all Australian jurisdictions for over a decade with little to show for it except stagnating student performance and exasperated teachers" (Windle et al., 2022, page 50).
74. Gillard (2009).
75. Windle et al. (2022).
76. Caldwell (2013).
77. Gillard (March 2009).
78. Far from questioning "choice," Gillard promoted a new rationale for it: "The microeconomic reform required [in education and health] involves improved market design — so that we work to create the conditions in which

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markets serve the public interest through vigorous competition, transparent information, accountability, greater choice and becoming more responsive to the needs of service users” (Gillard, 2010).

79. Even a “fundamental human right” according to Brennan, relying on the UN Charter of Human Rights (Brennan, 2021).

80. Better Education (2023).

81. Hogan (1978); Campbell and Proctor (2014).

82. Cardinal George Pell recalled in 2007 that one of his cousins, a Josephite nun, had a class of more than ninety children (Pell, 2007). See also Ashenden (2016).

83. Greenwell and Bonnor (2022); on New Zealand, see Greenwell (February 2017).

84. Greenwell and Bonnor (2022), page 14.

85. Croke (2007).

86. In a 2012 address to the Independent Schools National Forum Gillard assured her audience that she had “never looked at a big independent school in an established suburb and thought ‘that’s not fair’... I [think] ‘that’s a great example’” (Gillard, August 2012).

87. The picture is complicated, but only a little. Parents are moving out of non-government primary schools and into non-government (and particularly independent) schools for the socially more important secondary years. The government primary school share of enrolments rose from 67 per cent to 73 per cent over the past decade or so; in the secondary years the government school share fell from 63.4 per cent to 57.2 per cent (Vera-Toscano, 2022). Note that primary schools are smaller and therefore more numerous and more closely related to local demographics than secondary schools; it is at least possible that parents are using the housing market to have their primary school cake and, to a less marked extent, their secondary cake too. There is strong evidence that a “good” school attracts a real estate premium; see Davidoff and Leigh (2007); Grace (2023); Redman (2021); Heagney- Bayliss (2021, 2023).

88. Between 1976 and 2021 the proportion of students from families in the top income brackets (top 12 per cent) fell sharply in government schools (from 64 per cent to 43 per cent) and all but doubled (from 16 per cent to 31 per cent) in independent schools (Preston, forthcoming).

89. Preston (2023). One Victorian government system principal recruited recently by a high-end independent school quadrupled his salary.

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90. A recent report has 40 per cent out-of-zone enrolments in Victorian government schools (Grace, 2023).
91. OECD (2014).
92. Ho (2011, 2015). “Everyone remembers the tribes that populated their schools,” Ho argues. “Even if you didn’t like your fellow students, you had to learn to deal with everyone, and in the process, understand that diversity is a natural part of any social environment. If you went to a school that was culturally diverse, you had to learn how to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds, and perhaps even forge cross-cultural friendships. Schools are ideal places for this kind of cross-cultural interaction, and for this reason, play an important role in fostering everyday multiculturalism and social cohesion. Scholars of everyday multiculturalism have highlighted the importance of daily encounters with cultural difference in establishing an organic multiculturalism that is an ordinary part of people’s everyday lives. People learn to deal with each other in a practical and everyday fashion, and cultural difference is not a barrier to engagement and sometimes friendship. Ash Amin writes about schools, along with workplaces and other social sites, as ‘micropublics,’ where people from different backgrounds are thrown together and forced to deal with each other on a daily basis, in the process enabling ‘unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression.’ He argues that this routine, everyday negotiation across cultural difference is the best way to foster intercultural understanding” (Ho, 2015). What goes for ethnic differences probably also goes for other differences, including social class.
93. Jensen (2013).
94. Connell, R.W. et al. (1982), pages 42–51 particularly.
95. Rudd (2007).
96. Martin (1964). The key texts (Schultz, 1963; Becker, 1964) were published well after the groundwork was laid, as is often the case.
97. For a particularly innocent example of the genre, see Littleton et al. (August 2023).
98. Blaug (1976).
99. See, for example, OECD (2002).
100. Drawn from Anderson and Vervoorn (1983); *Australian Year Books* for 1954 and 1985; Burke and Spaul (2001); Burke and Rumberger (1987); Goozee (June 2001); Department of Employment, Education and Training (1993); Marginson (1987); Norton (2016); ABS data on workforce composition.
101. The limitations of human capital theory as a guide to policy had been thoroughly canvassed by then. A widely respected senior bureaucrat and an

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equally respected economist of education told a gathering of the powerful and the influential in 2013, for example, that Australian governments had failed to recognise that the theory told only one part of a complicated story, made unjustifiable claims to precision, and ignored how “human capital” is actually deployed and developed at the level of the firm (Noonan and Wade, 2013).

102. Armitage (nd), <https://www.poeticous.com/simon-armitage/thank-you-for-waiting>.

103. Lloyd and Rice (2008).

104. See Molhuysen (1962). The salary of an “average engineer” rose from £1750 to £2200.

105. The origins of the practice in the English-speaking world are much more distant, dating back to the medieval guilds, the first of which was established in 1155. The idea caught on; by 1377 more than fifty guilds were operating in London (Picard, 2017).

106. On the advantages to the enclosed, see two (critical) accounts of the example of the medical profession: Menadue (2022); Brooks (2023).

107. Armitage’s poem (see above) could be rewritten using vernacular categories of schools or students rather than categories of airline passenger.

108. For examples of the discipline’s limited self-awareness and even more limited comprehension of some education-related realities, see Leigh and Ryan (2008); Davidoff and Leigh (2007). But see also other and much more useful work by the prolific former economics professor, now federal government minister, in Leigh (2010) and Leigh (2013).

109. Including Berg (1970); Bills and Brown (2011); Collins (1979); Davis (1981); Dore (1980, 1997); Larson (1977).

110. Bills and Brown (2011).

111. See Sweet (2018).

112. This is not to suggest that Gillard rejected the economic argument. “Australia’s future prosperity depends on embracing a high-skill future,” she argued in the run-up to the 2013 election, “and therefore depends on lifting the performance of our schools” (Gillard, September 2013).

113. The argument that they shouldn’t be beneficiaries either is less often heard.

114. Letter of transmission to the minister (Gonski et al., December 2011).

115. Schooling was also seen, at least initially and by some, as a collective project, the means by which the working class would lift itself up. That vision was much more explicit and enduring in the Catholic schools, seen by most of

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those involved as getting the Catholics — the Irish and therefore the working class — out from under. In this they have probably succeeded; as no less an authority than Cardinal George Pell has observed, Catholic schools cater mainly to “the huge Australian middle class, which they helped to create.” Pell could also see the downside to this success: Catholic schools “are not educating most of our poor” (Pell, 2007, page 843). These days most of the Catholic poor can be found in government schools along with almost all of the rest of the poor.

116. Fitzgerald (1970), pages 171–72. These figures are for government schools only, but they enrolled three in four students at the time; Fitzgerald’s book was well titled: *The Secondary School at Sixes and Sevens*.

117. See Hannan (2009); Campbell and Proctor (2014).

118. Coleman let schools off the hook, arguing that they had little impact on social inequality. His findings were seconded by a massive US study summarised by sociologist Christopher Jencks in 1972. A key moment in the development of the contrary case — and of the effectiveness approach — was the publication of Rutter et al. (1979), which presented a mass of evidence to suggest that some schools were more “effective” than others for identifiable reasons, and that schooling could and should reduce inequalities generated elsewhere in the social system.

119. Karmel (1973) did favour “equal outcomes” over “equal opportunity,” but in a characteristically humane and thoughtful way: “Equality of opportunity’ as it has been interpreted in Australia has emphasised methods of selecting educational elites in ways presumed to be objective and fair... An equal valuing of people based on their common humanity might lead to a quite different interpretation” (para 3.27).

120. “As many of the factors that influence educational success are non-school ones, it is appropriate to identify schools needing special assistance on the basis of the populations from which they draw pupils” (Karmel, 1973, para 9.47).

121. See Sennett and Cobb (1972).

122. Terkel (1974).

123. For an account of the VSTA’s salad days by a number of those involved, see Hannan (2009). See also Hannan (1985), a collection of Hannan’s essays, most from the *Secondary Teacher*; and Spaul (1977).

124. For a detailed account of the evolution of “merit-based selection,” see Musgrave (1992).

125. The day after the announcement the government received 14,000 requests for copies; 185,000 were received in the first month, 300,000 by July.

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The department later claimed that it was the most widely read document in the history of educational research; nearly forty years later it still operates a *What Works* website. The booklet was organised around forty-one findings about how to make schools and teaching more effective, each finding briefly summarised in “plain language” and supported by five references to the research literature (Glass, 1987).

126. OECD, “About PISA” (nd). See also Note 13.

127. Teddlie (2010).

128. Hattie (2009).

129. Teddlie (2010).

130. Personable, hyper-productive, fluent as a writer and a speaker, Hattie is that archetypal figure of our day, the global education guru. He has also been a mover and shaker in policymaking circles. He was appointed chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership in 2014; the *Australian Financial Review’s* 2016 power survey put him at #1 in his field, well ahead of then-prominent Commonwealth and NSW education ministers Simon Birmingham and Adrian Piccoli (Dodd, September 2016). Hattie hit the big time with the publication of *Visible Learning* in 2009. The *Times Education Supplement* reviewer asked whether Hattie had indeed found the “holy grail” of teaching. Google Scholar has *Visible Learning’s* citations totalling more than 25,000, completely off the scale; even a spinoff (*Visible Learning for Teachers*) has been cited more than 7500 times.

131. Hattie (November 2017).

132. By 2015 the “international book publisher and professional learning company” Corwin could “announce” that it had been selected as the exclusive provider of the Visible Learning Plus Model of school change “based on the world-renowned research of Professor John Hattie of the University of Melbourne” and “arguably the most powerful school change model in the world.” “It not only gives you the evidence base to prove [*sic*] that what you are doing is effective,” the Corwin promo continued, “it also gives you the evidence gathering and analysis techniques you need to create an ongoing understanding of your impact on student learning and achievement.”

133. See Borg et al. (2002); Freire (1970); Illich (1971); Neill (1968); School of Barbiana (1970).

134. See Bruner (1977).

135. Karmel (1973), para 2.11.

136. In falling so heavily for the effectiveness argument the revolution joined an established Australian tradition of dependence on ideas developed in the

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United States and Britain. How much less trouble might we be in now had we been as consistently eclectic in our choices as the 1960s radicals were — and had we done some strenuous thinking of our own about the specifics of our own situation?

137. Manno (2023).

138. Effectiveness research (so the thinking went) had discovered how to fix schools; the way to fix systems was to learn from systems that had already put it to work in their schools. The idea of “learning from the best” became another conventional wisdom — see, for example, Jensen (2012); Crehan (2016); Ripley (2014). The titles tell the story: *Catching Up: Learning from the Best School Systems in East Asia*, *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way* and *Cleverlands: The Secrets Behind the Success of the World’s Education Superpowers*.

139. Two education researchers note that the recent Scott review of initial teacher education, or ITE, recommended more “randomised controlled trials” of different approaches to ITE, and that at much the same time the Australian Education Research Organisation, or AERO, urged teachers to conduct that kind of research in their classrooms. “It is naive to transplant the gold standard for specific kinds of research in medicine onto an entirely different discipline, such as teaching,” the two researchers argue. “Even in medicine (where they originated), randomised controlled trials cannot answer all questions.” The proposals represent “a lack of understanding of the nature of research” and of the reality of life in the classroom. AERO’s proposals in particular, “privileging” one kind of research over others, “suggests a bullying preoccupation with scientific measurement” (McKnight and Morgan, 2022). We could add that it also “privileges” the technical characteristics of answers over the worthwhileness of the questions.

140. Technical and other criticisms of the effectiveness approach accompanied it from the outset. For a cogent summary of concerns as they stood by the late 1990s (and still stand), see Coe and Fitz-Gibbon (1998).

141. For an extensive coverage of critics and criticisms, and of Hattie’s responses to them, see <https://tinyurl.com/visible-learning>.

142. Schleicher’s world is the world of testing and test-generated data. Before taking up his present position at the OECD he was at the International Association for Educational Achievement, home of TIMSS and PIRLS.

143. See Riddle (2021); Levitt et al. (2012).

144. For a summary of concerns and some indication of the extent to which they are held, see a letter to OECD education director Andreas Schleicher

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signed by “academics from around the world” (*Guardian*, May 2014). See also Schleicher’s response (May 2014).

145. Differences in student reactions to the “discipline” of classroom life are suggestive. A 2018 OECD survey of students on their classroom experience found that 14 per cent of Australian students reported that “students don’t listen to what the teacher says,” higher than the OECD average of 10 per cent and qualitatively different from Japan (2.1 per cent) and Korea (1.2 per cent). On “the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down” the figures were Australia 12.1 per cent, OECD average 9.1 per cent, Japan 2.3 per cent and Korea 1.5 per cent (Earp, 2023). Other explanations point to the widespread use of after-school coaching in many Asian societies and to the high proportions of East Asian students’ lives consumed by study, and explore the consequences for those young people (Cobbold, 2017).

146. The OECD itself claims that its work on education “helps individuals and nations to identify and develop the knowledge and skills that drive better jobs and better lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion.”

147. See Gomendio (2023); Gomendio and Wert (2023). Signs of doubt are visible elsewhere. A key figure in the Reagan administration’s sponsorship of *What Works* was then assistant education secretary Chester E. Finn. An indefatigable campaigner, Finn later led a prominent conservative think tank, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with the ringing declaration that it had stayed true to its founding mission — to drive US schooling towards excellence, standards, choice, testing and so on (Petrelli, 2022). And yet, after fifty years in that pursuit, just about every issue of Fordham’s (excellent) bulletins register alarm at the condition of US schooling. See the Institute’s *Flypaper* and *Education Gadfly Weekly*.

148. A recent report (Gleeson et al., December 2022) drawing on its own research and a substantial Monash University study concluded that while “teachers and leaders believed in the value of using research evidence,” they didn’t actually do it that much. AERO doesn’t appear to wonder whether actions speak louder than words; nor does it cite evidence to support its assumption that teachers and school leaders should use research evidence, or that using it is more important or helpful than other things that could be done with the time and energy outlaid. It offers only the tautology that using research makes teachers and leaders more likely to use research and more confident in doing so.

149. Hattie and Anderman (2013). The gap between what is often assumed to be the case and the reality (as reported by research anyway) can be found in

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other areas of school life — in “wellbeing,” for example. Evidence on “student wellbeing” across nine “dimensions” as reported in South Australian schools suggests that more students than would be generally supposed are having a miserable time of it. In the “connectedness to school” dimension, for example, only six in ten students reported high levels of connectedness. Among the shockers: slightly less than half had a strong sense of belonging in the school, and just over half reported that they were getting along well with other kids (the “peer belonging” dimension). See Productivity Commission (2022), pages 4–6.

150. What teachers most enjoy is “teaching” — standing up there and delivering a “good lesson.” Students enjoy a “good lesson” more than a bad one, but being on the receiving end of good teaching is not as much fun as doing it. Hence the “discipline problem.” One of the many recent surveys of teachers and their work (NEiTA–ACE, 2021) found that “behaviour management” was frequently nominated as the “greatest challenge they face.” Teachers explain that “just a small minority of disruptive students can have a large and negative impact on the majority.” Some 68 per cent indicated that they spent less than 10 per cent of their day managing “behavioural issues,” but for one in six it took more than half of the day. A survey of lower secondary teachers reported 14.5 per cent of class time spent on “keeping order in the classroom” (Freeman, O’Malley and Eveleigh, 2014). Anyone who has taught knows that the temptation to lose it can overwhelm; one teacher recently made headlines when a video showing her yelling expletives circulated on social media. “Sort that shit out,” she instructed one student in the course of providing feedback on an essay draft. “That fucks up your essay so bad.” Students (the school said) were offered “opportunities for counselling from our wellbeing teams” (Kirkham, 2023). The teacher wasn’t; she resigned. Often it goes the other way — an OECD survey found that intimidation or verbal abuse of teachers by students is much more common in Australian schools (reported by 60 per cent of respondents) than the OECD average (39 per cent). It could be (even) worse; where 16 per cent of Australian students reported “noise and disorder” in their classes, the figure for France was 23 per cent; for “students don’t start working for a long time after the lesson begins” the figures were 9.5 per cent and 18.3 per cent respectively. (See also Note 145.) An English teacher (nationality, not subject) recently reported from the front — namely, the outer suburbs of Paris — that the equipment was lousy and teachers badly treated and often absent, that there were students who knew that “they were not equal citizens in the eyes of the state,” that far-right political candidates were trying to turn it all into an issue of “authority” — and that the minister for education sends his children to a private school (Schwartz, 2022). One Australian commentator recently located the

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“discipline problem” in a lack of policy consistency across the school and hence in a failure of school leadership (Zbar, 2022). Perhaps the report from Paris has more to tell us about where the problem comes from.

151. The remark is often attributed to the English commentator Dylan Wiliam, but he says that it’s “an old joke” (Wiliam, nd).

152. Windle et al. (2022), Appendix B.

153. Hattie and Anderman are inspired by the example of “evidence-based medicine” as the means of “driving out dogma” (Hattie and Anderman, 2013, Introduction).

154. Nous (2011).

155. Letter of transmission to the minister (Gonski, 2011, page xii).

156. The point is nearly grasped by Bill Hannan in his imagined “Pariah College.” In Hannan’s account (Hannan, 2012) Pariah College is a kind of Geelong Grammar transplanted to the outer suburbs, complete with on-campus housing for staff, top curriculum and co-curriculum programs, a heated indoor swimming pool and, presumably, a principal on \$750,000 per annum rather than the miserly \$190,000 stipend granted to government school principals, along with top teachers cherry-picked with the help of highly favourable terms and conditions (including, no doubt, swank on-campus accommodation). But even a system with thousands of Pariah Colleges would serve only to even things up, not invert them.

157. For sheer ineffectuality it is hard to go past the example of initial teacher education, or ITE. Reports on ITE, piling up since the 1970s, totalled 102 by 2007 (Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007), all investigating one aspect or other of much the same problems and making much the same recommendations. The Rudd and Gillard governments made much of the importance of lifting standards of entry to ITE programs, of combining practice with theory, of support for new graduates, and so on, with the results reported above. Even the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s “standards” belonged to a history of fits and starts, including at least five attempts at much the same hurdle during the 1990s — and they ended up being “advisory” only. The saga has continued into the present. At least three committees have investigated/advised on ITE, producing (among others) a *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Report* (“Teachers hold the key to the future...”), another optimistically titled *Action Now*, and the Scott report, yet another in a series promising to “crack down” on ITE programs that failed to deliver the goods. A recent defence of ITE (Ellis et al., 2023) cited evidence that 73 per cent of teachers rated their own

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ITE as “good” or “excellent”; but that leaves one in four having an unsatisfactory or poor experience along with 45 per cent who felt “unprepared” to handle diversity and one in four unprepared to deliver on literacy and numeracy.

158. The outcomes obsession is not just blinkered. It is deadening. The executive summary of a recent AERO report begins as follows: “Research suggests that wellbeing correlates with learning outcomes, but understanding the direction and nature of this relationship, and how to ensure positive outcomes, is still something we are seeking to understand.” It concludes: “It is important that any national measure of student wellbeing focus on the components of wellbeing that: have the greatest influence on learning; are within a school’s ability to influence; [and] complement existing jurisdictional measures.” Just suppose for the moment a finding that improving wellbeing *reduced* outcomes? Would we then decide not to improve wellbeing? These are young people in pain, in institutions that have and absolutely should have a duty of care. AERO should be reminding them of it, not diverting their attention from it. The Productivity Commission seems to suffer from the same want of emotional intelligence — see Note 61.

159. And it was believed. An otherwise penetrating report commissioned by the Gonski review told the panel that “the key to improving the Australian education system is not in doing a lot of new things, but rather it is applying what we now know works in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable manner” (Nous, 2011, pages 8–9).

160. de Cavalho (2021).

161. Kuhn (1962).

162. Evidence-informed would be better, but even that doesn’t go far enough. Both “policy” and “practice” need to be judgement-informed, debate-informed, local knowledge-informed and purpose-informed as much as they need to be evidence-informed.

163. Problems arising from that preoccupation are discussed in chapter 3.

164. “Unbe” is a neologism coined by the great Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (Stanner, 1979).

165. Psychology, particularly through its theories of IQ and its derivative, the effectiveness approach, has been stretched well beyond its limited capacity to support schooling. Social, organisational and “humanistic” psychology have been little used and may have a contribution to make; “scientific” psychology does not.

166. Sahlberg (2011); Sandel (2020); Robinson and Aronica (2015); Reid

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(2019); Maddox (2014); Connors and McMorrow (2015); Greenwell and Bonnor (2022); Savage (2021); Caldwell (2023).

167. Savage (2021) being the notable exception.

168. Productivity Commission (February 2023).

169. Buckingham (2013).

170. Hattie in Bentley and Savage (2017), page 30.

171. Hunter (2022). Three more examples from many: a Draft National Teacher Workforce Plan proposes twenty-eight “actions” across six “priority areas”; the Mparntwe Education Declaration nominates eleven areas for action in pursuit of an even greater number of ambitions; and Julia Gillard, in one speech and statement after another, listed a hailstorm of actions, programs and plans.

172. The analytical equivalent works in “factors” and correlations.

173. When a tourist was attacked (not fatally) near Darwin by a saltwater crocodile in 2023 the Territory’s chief minister wondered whether it might be time to reintroduce culling. An ecologist (thinking ecologically) pointed out that culling is bad for humans as well as crocodiles — it can bring a false sense of security, damage the ecotourism trade and trigger struggles among crocs for newly vacated territories and hence create a new threat to public safety.

174. Tyack and Tobin (1994), page 454.

175. See Notes 69 and 176.

176. Western Australia brought up the rear of this movement; there as elsewhere the education department was its ultimate expression and agent. “Early in the twentieth century,” records the historian of the period stretching from the colony’s foundation in 1829 to 1960, “following a decade of rapid progress, public education in Western Australia achieved standards of effectiveness not previously contemplated in the colony. By 1903 the state school system consisted of elementary schools of varying sizes and types, evening continuing classes, a technical institution and a teachers training college. New subjects had been incorporated in school syllabuses, teaching methods had been modernised, payment by results eliminated and a large staff of trained teachers had been acquired... the state had seized the initiative and dominated the field of public instruction. The main instrument in the transformation was the constitution by statute in October 1893 of the Education Department... educationists directed the affairs of the newly established department and improved the performance of its schools” (Mossensen, 1972, page 88). Bessant (1983) provides a particularly

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compelling account of the construction of the grammar in Victoria.

177. The Centre for Independent Studies list, with its “abolish Canberra’s department of education” comes closest, and not by chance. In agitating for a market-like school system, as it has for many years, the CIS has been onto the right problem but hobbled by the wrong solution.

178. McLeod (2014).

179. Norrie (2012).

180. Windle et al. (2022).

181. Australian Curriculum, australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/structure/

182. Fullan (August 2020).

183. Seven if we count “literacy” and “numeracy” as the curriculum does, but five of the kind referred to here: critical and creative thinking, ICT capability, ethical understanding, personal and social capabilities, and intercultural understanding.

184. Musgrave (1992).

185. The origins and nature of problems in “wellbeing” and how best to respond to them are a matter for much discussion and speculation. Evidence on wellbeing is itself problematic: how far, if at all, is it an artefact of the increasing use of the language of “health” to describe emotions and experiences hitherto regarded as just the aches and pains of growing up? That limitation granted, there are good grounds for concern. An OECD survey found a fourfold increase (from 8 per cent to 32 per cent) — the third-greatest in the OECD — in the proportion of Australian students feeling “unconnected” from school between 2003 and 2018. A leading Australian researcher points to a “new morbidity” among children and young people: 600,000- plus children and young people with “mental health problems,” 200,000-plus obese or seriously obese, 350,000 child abuse notifications in a single year (2021), 60,000-plus starting school “developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas,” as well as increases in autism, ADHD, violence and aggression, and other “conditions” or “problems” (Oberklaid, 2022). Oberklaid wants schools to become “service platforms” for the delivery of integrated treatment by appropriately qualified professionals. At the other end of a spectrum of proposals and responses is a program described in some detail in chapter 3 that appears to suggest that the school itself is part of the problem and/or that it will be much more helpful to the extent that it is willing to change itself and the dominant grammar. The federal government seems to be falling between two stools, delivering neither all-embracing school-based support nor comprehensive change in the way schools work, offering

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instead a series of “initiatives” and “programs” — a “student wellbeing boost” (\$192 million), a \$10.8 million grant for a “voluntary health check tool,” a National Student Wellbeing Program (\$307.1 million over five years) to enable schools to appoint either a student wellbeing officer or a chaplain, and no fewer than four further “initiatives” claimed by Labor senators in recent defence of the government’s record on these matters (Education, Employment and Workplaces Relations References Committee, 2023).

The fragmentation of the “policy response” is mirrored in a flurry of investigations into this or that aspect of what looks increasingly like a complicated whole — “mental health,” “wellbeing,” “engagement,” “agency,” “discipline,” “behaviour,” “bullying” — in which the school, or more exactly the relationship in societies like Australia between life at school and life everywhere else, is implicated. See also Note 145.

186. OECD (2001, 2018, 2021, 2023).

187. Gonski et al. (2018).

188. Loudon and Wallace (1994), page 27.

189. “The elevation of culture as the dominant factor was a conclusion that suited the unions and the employers,” one analysis concluded. “Local union officials were reluctant to risk trading away parts of an edifice of regulation which they had erected to protect teachers’ working conditions. Similarly, middle managers in school systems were reluctant to devolve to schools power to alter centrally controlled regulations about staffing and finance. Both unions and employers wanted innovation but only on their terms, that is, essentially, within the existing regulatory framework” (Angus and Loudon, 2005, page 181).

190. This is not an eccentric view. No less an authority than the OECD’s Andreas Schleicher reports that an OECD “Summit on the teaching profession” concluded it was “essential” that governments and teacher organisations work together to build a new vision for the profession, and that “the quality of teaching and teachers cannot exceed the quality of the work organisation in which teachers find themselves” (Schleicher, 2011, page 63).

191. Average class sizes fell by more than 40 per cent between 1964 and 2003 and have continued to fall since then (Productivity Commission, 2012, pages 19, 20). Since 2009 the increase in non-teaching staff in the Victorian public education system has been double the increase in teacher numbers and triple the increase in student numbers (Cobbold, 2022). These figures are probably representative of other states/territories and sectors. A question arises of particular relevance to teacher organisations: what might be the relationship between (very expensive) class size reduction and increasing numbers of non-

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teaching staff (on the one hand) and the steady decline in teacher salaries over the same period?

192. The leaders of the VSTA were among the first to realise that mass secondary education demanded change in the work that students were asked to do, but they did not grasp all of the implications of that position. They pushed for regulation of teachers' work in ways that reinforced an organisation of student work that they were also trying to change — fewer contact hours, class size limits, classes to be taught by qualified subject specialists, and so on. The VSTA's industrial right hand didn't really understand what its educational left hand was doing.

193. Lev Vygotsky and George Rasch were famous as devisers of the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and Rasch modelling respectively. The ZPD is often regarded as the seed from which “learning progressions” grew; the Rasch model has been widely used to bring rigour to the assessment of learning, including assessments based on progressions.

194. Disclosure: the New Metrics project has been led by my partner Sandra Milligan as director of the Assessment Research Centre (and now as executive director of Melbourne Metrics) at the University of Melbourne, building on the work of her predecessor at the ARC, Patrick Griffin and his colleagues.

195. The devil is, of course, in the detail; the project is currently working with universities to see whether and how “matching” can be both efficient and reliable at scale.

196. Chadwick (2022).

197. The evidence provided here is limited in three ways: it is drawn from research conducted by Big Picture; it relates to Big Picture schools in NSW only; and it is an unavoidably small sample anyway.

198. The possibility is suggested by work at the USC Center for Affective Neuroscience Development, Learning and Education in a study that tracked brain development in sixty-five young people from Years 9 and 10 over the five or six years following. “Much as one's physical fitness improves when one adopts healthy eating and exercise habits... our data suggest that young people's development and learning depend less on their starting point than on their inclination to think and feel deeply about complex issues, to build personally relevant connections, and to find purpose and inspiration in their lives... underscor[ing] the need for support, safe spaces, and rich opportunities to cultivate these dispositions in school. The networks in the brain that are associated with these beneficial outcomes... are *deactivated* during the kinds of fast-paced and often impersonal activities that are the

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staple of many classrooms, testing experiences, and digital learning games” (Immordino-Yang, 2022).

199. Connell et al. (1982).

200. Dreeben (1968); Handy (1986).

201. Here as elsewhere the 1973 Karmel report is a long way ahead of most current thinking: “The Committee sees no reason why students should not at the senior levels be provided with a wide range of means of initiation into adult society which would both assist them in their vocational choice and allow them to appreciate the responsibilities involved in full adult status... There would be many advantages in the later years of schooling in giving teenagers an opportunity to partake in meaningful tasks where they have the chance to feel productive and to assume responsibility for the welfare of others” (Karmel, 1973, page 23, para 3.25).

202. There is a small industry of scholars, pundits and think-tank analysts concerned to clarify how new grammars differ from old. See, for example: a table of fourteen such areas of difference, ranging from “Purpose” and “Ethos” to “Places where students learn” and “Organizational model,” in Horn (2022); Fullan’s comparison of eight characteristics of the received grammar with “the six Cs” (character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking) in Fullan (2020), pages 654, 657; and the pioneering RISC (Re-inventing Schools Coalition) model’s six distinctions between “the 20th Century classroom” and the “RISC 21st Century classroom” (DeLorenzo and Battino, 2010).

203. Greenwell and Bonnor (2022), page ix.

204. Greenwell and Bonnor (2023).

205. The idea that reform of Australia’s sector system might centre on creating a “level playing field” has a lengthy provenance. Its most distant ancestor is a 1978 Schools Commission discussion paper on funding that used the term “residualisation.” The concept reached a wider audience in 1984 when the Australian Education Union’s *Australian Teacher* carried an article (“Residualization: What’s That?”) by Barbara Preston, and through much subsequent writing and agitation by her. The “residualisation” insight informed extensive academic and policy work including work joint and several by sociologist Richard Teese and educationist Jack Keating. That was in turn at the heart of a paper commissioned by the Gonski review (Nous, 2011); I was among the many who found that account of the dynamics of residualisation compelling, and subsequently puzzled over how the limitations of Gonski’s antidote might be overcome. The answer: follow the

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example of the Australian Football League, which in the 1980s had restructured its competition around a new and very different logic. The AFL (I wrote in 2013) “has discovered that competition is an unbeatable driver of autonomous clubs and of the game as a whole, *provided that* all play by the same rules (particularly on player recruitment and transfer) and with more or less the same resources, so that every team and its fans can realistically believe that they’re in with a chance, if not this year, then soon. To risk a heroically mixed metaphor, by running a comp in which dog is not permitted to eat dog, the AFL has succeeded in lifting all boats... and it accepts responsibility for those that aren’t [lifted]” (italics in the original). That understanding of the logic of the AFL is, by the way, consistent with a comparison of the very different effects of the AFL with its English (soccer) equivalent by economist, politician and sports nut Andrew Leigh (2013). The “level playing field” idea was subsequently promoted in various ways by a small group (Tony Mackay, Mark Burford and me) and then explored in some detail in a “level playing field” project convened by Nous consulting and funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation. Chris Bonnor and Tom Greenwell were involved in this project on the basis of work each had done on the problems of and possible alternatives to the sector system; they continued the project’s work with considerable energy and some success (and support from the Koshland Foundation) with, we trust, more to come.

206. Cobbold (2023).

207. Non-government school lobbies often claim that fees and other private contributions save governments something like \$9 billion per annum, an impressive proportion of a total annual spend of around \$60 billion. The Greenwell and Bonnor “full public funding” proposal presumes funding on the same (“Gonski”) basis as government schools; given that few non-government schools would be eligible for Gonski’s “disadvantage” loadings, and that most or all high-fee schools would in the Greenwell–Bonnor scenario opt to go it alone, the total would be very much less than \$9 billion. The call on the public purse would be further reduced if accompanied by the much-called-for (by Gonski, among many others) local planning mechanisms to reduce or eliminate wasteful service duplication (Greenwell and Bonnor 2022, pages 269–71). “Is there any other area of public policy,” asks a former state minister of education, “where the government funds its competitor and in so doing, reduces its own institutions’ capacity to perform and makes the task of performance more expensive?” (quoted in Preston, 2023, page 19).

208. Nominally anyway. Most public schools charge substantial fees euphemised in various ways. One survey estimated that fees and other expenses (school camps, uniforms, transport, electronic devices and so on)

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for one child over twelve years could exceed \$100,000 (Cassidy, 2023). Why there has been no serious effort to ban fees and to provide support on a systematic basis to at least “the disadvantaged” is a small political mystery.

209. See Heagney-Bayliss (2021, 2023); Davidoff and Leigh (2007); Sweeney (2021).

210. Sandel (2020), page 224.

211. Left: Caldwell (2013) recommended that the incoming (Abbott) government “vacate the area of school education” and “refrain from appointing a minister for school education.” Centre: then director of the Grattan Institute’s schools program, Ben Jensen (2013), argued that (as the *Weekend Australian’s* subeditor put it) the feds “could save education by staying out of it.” Right: the Abbott government’s National Commission of Audit (2014) proposed “a simpler arrangement whereby the states fund all schools, including the non-government sector.”

212. Personal communication.

213. “Overworked teachers are forced to spend less time teaching and more time grappling with complex paperwork as schools’ compliance obligations dramatically increase under incoming child safety regulations. The new NSW Child Safe Standards, which are based on the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, apply to all NSW schools as of February this year. They will be enforced by the Office of the Children’s Guardian from February 2023. Developed in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the ten principles go beyond what is typically thought of as ‘child protection.’ This includes a greater focus on student participation and community involvement, as well as equity and diversity. The changes add to about 300 laws and regulations around the country by which schools must abide, creating extra work for educators who are not trained as risk and compliance experts” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 2022).

214. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (December 2020).

215. Colin Burrow reviewing Lorraine Daston’s *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By*, in the *London Review of Books*, 1 June 2023.

216. For an account of the commission’s work by its moving spirit, see Blackburn (1977).

217. McDonald (2022).

218. See, for example, Fair Work Ombudsman (2020).

219. For a criticism of the “culture is the problem” argument, see Note 189.

220. See Note 157.

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221. “Catching On at Last,” *Economist* (29 June 2013).
222. See Higgins, Xiao and Katsipatiki (2012).
223. A selection of Cuban’s articles on the topic: “Computers Meet Classroom: Classroom Wins”; “Computers Make Kids Smarter — Right?”; “Techno-Promoter Dreams, Student Realities”; and “Laptops Transforming Classrooms: Yeah Sure.” Cuban’s book on the question was published in 2003.
224. See Notes 61, 145, 149, 158, 185 and 197.
225. One summary of the problem: too much schooling is so deeply impoverished that it actually stunts brain development. Remarks quoted earlier (Note 189) are worth quoting again: “Our data suggest that young people’s development and learning depend on their inclination to think and feel deeply about complex issues, to build personally relevant connections, and to find purpose and inspiration in their lives... underscor[ing] the need for support, safe spaces, and rich opportunities to cultivate these dispositions in school. *The networks in the brain that are associated with these beneficial outcomes... are deactivated during the kinds of fast-paced and often impersonal activities that are the staple of many classrooms*” (Immordino-Yang, 2022, emphases added).
226. See Note 189.
227. Mining employs 206,000, manufacturing 923,000, accommodation and food services 1.27 million, construction 1.22 million, and healthcare and social assistance 1.96 million (ABS Industry Employment Guide). And schooling? Most weekday mornings around 4.5 million people pass through the gates of its 9500-plus worksites — just over 300,000 teachers, 140,000 administration and support staff, and more than four million students. Around that core are many tens of thousands more in teacher education, coaching, mentoring, professional development, transport, consultancy, school camps, in vendors of IT, books, stationery, furniture and consumables, in union offices, professional associations and lobby groups, and in government departments and statutory agencies that administer, regulate, fund, monitor and employ. All up, more people work in and around the schooling industry than are employed in small business (4.67 million) (Eslake, 2022).

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