

# A Case for Radical Pragmatic Leaders and Personalised Learning Schools



# A Case for Radical Pragmatic Leaders and Personalised Learning Schools:

*Risky Public Policy Business*

By

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A Case for Radical Pragmatic Leaders and Personalised Learning  
Schools: Risky Public Policy Business

By Andrew Bills

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## THE AUTHOR

I worked for twenty years as a special education teacher and school career counsellor in disadvantaged public secondary schools attempting to make learning more meaningful and inclusive for young people who experienced it as alienating. I began working with special education students and then took my work into the realm of ‘alternative’ schooling, designing personalised learning programs that kept young people who wanted ‘out’ of schools connected to education through other ways. This called into play contextual and flexible forms of teacher labour with colleagues and ongoing negotiation with community stakeholders to better support the ‘disenfranchised with schooling’ young people we sought to help.

In an attempt to better address the phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL), I designed and led three ‘alternative’ learning programs/schools over ten years in three South Australian public secondary school communities. Commonly known as ‘alternatives’, ‘second chance schools’ or ‘flexible learning options’ (FLOs), these ‘safety net’ initiatives have become an attractive option for many early school leavers (ESL) in recent times. However, not satisfied with the educational rigour of ‘safety net’ schools, my colleagues and I worked to create aspirational FLOs proffering ‘turnaround pedagogies’ (Comber & Kamler, 2005) within more ‘personalised’ school learning environments. At the time I wondered: ***Shouldn’t secondary schools be redesigning themselves in more inclusive and personalised ways to better address early school leaving?***

In 2014, FLOs catered for 74,000 school ‘dropouts’ across Australia indicating a widespread engagement and inclusion problem with mainstream schooling. Add to this number the 50,000 ESL young people who have left formal education completely (Watterston & O’Connell, 2019). This new figure is a national disgrace. ESL and FLOs are the ‘canary in the mine’, highlighting the scale of the schooling engagement problem, most acute in Australian public secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities. They point to problems with the grammars of schooling and problems with education system policy architectures. They also highlight the need for educational leaders to work more closely together in collective forms of

inquiry and research to better understand how to lead schools for greater inclusion, learning engagement and socially just educational outcomes.

When I worked in the Education Department as a school reviewer and leadership consultant between 2006 and 2013, following my work in the ‘alternatives’, it became clear to me that leader and teacher work in SA schools was increasingly imposed upon by bureaucratic knowledge and standardised practice decrees. This imposition manifested in top-down policy approaches replete with missed opportunities for system wide policy learning, because an enabling culture of research and inquiry for all public education stakeholders (teachers, leaders, parents, students, community groups and bureaucrats) was lacking. Unfortunately, more taxpayer funded ‘regulatory control’ and ‘surveillance’ over teacher and leader work has not translated into system-wide improvement in educational outcomes for schools serving disadvantaged communities. In fact, I argue in this book that more top down neoliberal inspired education policy (standardisation, education markets, punitive accountability forms, new public management practices, measurement by numbers, disingenuous school autonomy and system infatuations with narrow high stakes testing regimes) unleashed upon schools have worked to heighten risk of ESL.

The overarching *case* explored in this book considers why so many senior secondary students are forsaking their educational entitlement in mainstream schools and what can be done to improve their learning and life opportunity. This *case* is considered through ten component case study perspectives, predominantly derived from peer reviewed ‘lived experience’ phenomenological and sociological research. Taken together, these component case studies offer insights into the imperative for school leaders in neoliberal times to become more radical and pragmatic in their leadership of schools, paying particular attention to investigating more personalised approaches to teaching and learning for those young people institutionally labelled as ‘at risk’.

## ACRONYMS

<b>AAR</b>	Apparent Attainment Rate—calculated from either the number of students commencing their SACE studies in year 10 and the number of successful SACE completers two years later at the end of year 12 or the number of students who commence secondary schooling in year 8 and the percentage of the year 8 cohort attaining the SACE four years later.
<b>ACARA</b>	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. ACARA is an independent statutory authority instituted to improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting. It is the agency for managing NAPLAN and the ‘My School’ website.
<b>AITSL</b>	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership—the school standards agency.
<b>ARC</b>	Australian Research Council.
<b>ARR</b>	Apparent Retention Rates—calculated from the numbers of students beginning year 8 secondary school in South Australia and then, four years later, the percentage of those young people undertaking year 12 (the final year of schooling).
<b>BIU</b>	Business Intelligence Unit.
<b>COAG</b>	Council of Australian Governments.
<b>DECD</b>	Department of Education and Child Development—former acronym for the current Department for Education.
<b>DECS</b>	Department of Education and Children’s Services— a previous acronym for the South Australian Education Department that then changed to DECD (Department for Education and Child Development) and currently the DfE (Department for Education).

<b>DfE</b>	Current acronym for the Department for Education in South Australia.
<b>ESL</b>	Early School Leaving.
<b>FLO</b>	Flexible Learning Options—alternative educational programs primarily designed for ‘students at risk’ to keep them connected to learning.
<b>FTE</b>	Full Time Enrolment in School.
<b>GEMS</b>	Global Equity Movement for Schools, coined by the author, to promote a multi-disciplinary contextual school improvement paradigm, informed by relevant research epistemologies rather than the GERM ‘few’, that seeks to turn around the damaging effects of neoliberal ideology in policy foisted upon disadvantaged school communities.
<b>GERM</b>	Global Education Reform Movement, a derogatory acronym coined by renowned former Finland Education Director, Pasi Sahlberg, representing the dominant paradigm of school improvement across the OECD, presenting in South Australia, known as SESI (School Effectiveness and School Improvement) in the research literature.
<b>Gonski 1.0</b>	A Commonwealth Labor Government commissioned panel of experts, chaired by David Gonski AC, which recommended a needs-based funding model for the distribution of Commonwealth school funding based on student need.
<b>Gonski 2.0</b>	A 2017 Commonwealth Liberal Coalition reconstituted Gonski 1.0 funding approach, injecting an additional \$19 billion into Commonwealth funding over a decade, with a promise that all schools and states would move to an equal share of the Gonski-recommended school resource standard (SRS).
<b>ICAN</b>	Interagency Community Action Networks, a South Australian social inclusion endeavour to join up service delivery stakeholders in disadvantaged regional and

metropolitan communities to better support the learning needs of ‘at-risk’ young people.

- ICAN-FLO** Inspired by ICAN work in South Australia, the FLO component represents a state-wide enrolment approach for students deemed eligible using an Education Department ‘engagement and wellbeing matrix’ of eligibility criteria.
- ICSEA** Index of community socio-educational advantage used on the ‘My School’ website.
- MCEETYA** Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.
- NAPLAN** National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy—a series of common literacy and numeracy tests for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 which commenced in 2008 and is conducted across Australia annually for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
- NYPR** National Youth Participation Requirement—came into effect in 2010 through relevant State and Territory government legislation. Under the NYPR, all young people must participate in schooling until they complete year 10; and if they have completed year 10, they must continue in full time education, training or employment (or combinations of these) until 17 years of age (ABS, 2017).
- P21** Partnerships 21—South Australian public education global budget management requirement undertaken by individual schools and introduced in 1999.
- PES** Public Education Statement for South Australia proclaiming the essence of public education.
- PISA** Programme for International Student Assessment, under the governance of the OECD, assesses triennially a sample size of 6300 fifteen-year-old or older students in participating OECD countries, focussing on proficiency in reading, mathematics, science and, in 2018, the new domain of global competence.

<b>RES</b>	Resource Entitlement Statement provided to schools on a per student basis for funding the teaching and learning programs in schools.
<b>SACE</b>	The South Australian Certificate of Education undertaken by students commencing in year 10 and generally completed in year 12 or by some students in year 13.
<b>Secretariat</b>	South Australian government statutory body that oversees the management and integrity of the SACE certificate.
<b>SACSA</b>	South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework.
<b>SES</b>	Socio-economic status is an economic and sociological combined measure of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation.
<b>SESI</b>	School Effectiveness and School Improvement also known as GERM.
<b>SI</b>	Social Inclusion.
<b>SIE</b>	Social Inclusion in Education.
<b>SIP</b>	Social Inclusion Policy.
<b>SRS</b>	School Resource Standard.
<b>STAR</b>	Students at Risk—Incorporates definitions ranging from sociological, psychological and Education Department perspectives. In the SA Education Department policy discourse, STAR students have been considered historically as those students at risk of early school leaving, embodying risk characteristics that present as barriers to learning.
<b>UFPLC</b>	University facilitated professional learning community
<b>WPR</b>	What's the Problem Represented to Be? Scholarly sociological Foucauldian policy work by Professor Carol Bacchi offering a policy problematisation methodology.

## INTRODUCTION

It's late 1992. In the Federal Parliament of Australia, during the lead up to a Federal election, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating infamously responds to Opposition Leader John Hewson's question; *...why won't you call an early election?*

Keating says...*the answer is, mate...because I wanna do you slowly.*

Transpose Keating's words into the educational realm. The major political parties of both persuasions (Labor and Liberal—both Federal and State) and their bureaucratic 'arms' have been *'doing' public schools in disadvantaged communities slowly for over 30 years and this 'doing' is hurting these schools more than ever before.*

Keating won the election and went on to take Australia further down the neoliberal road of government policy and practice. Since Keating, all political parties have continued down the same road. Unfortunately, this journey has led to damaging consequences for schools serving disadvantaged communities giving rise to an exploration of the issues and more hopeful ways forward in this book.

The book is written as a provocation for education students at universities, politicians, bureaucrats, secondary school leaders, teachers and parents of public school students to better understand how the neoliberal policy approach to public schooling has been nothing short of an abject failure for students from disadvantaged backgrounds: anathema to the essence of public schooling. Through marshalling a collection of peer reviewed research case studies, I build a case for educational leadership forms and contextually redesigned school learning environments, to better address the protracted 'wickedness' of poverty upon young people's learning in disadvantaged schools. At the end of each case study chapter, I provide discussion questions that can be considered by university education students or in school communities wrestling with the challenges of making the project of secondary schooling work for more students.

I argue current regulatory policies and their associated administrative demands upon the work of school leaders amplify managerial leadership

forms at the expense of much needed educational leadership. School leaders in an imposed managerial paradigm are positioned by their central bureaucracies as compliant conduits of policy prescriptions that in many cases do not work well for disadvantaged students. In other words, I argue that the amplification of teacher and leader standards and decontextualized top down policies with their associated administrative demands imposed upon public school leaders and teachers serving high poverty or rural/remote communities have not been helpful.

I also argue policy brokenness presents in disadvantaged public schools across Australia. This brokenness can be seen in the national literacy and numeracy testing regime called NAPLAN<sup>1</sup> where schools serving disadvantaged communities have consistently been the lowest NAPLAN results schools since the testing regime was rolled out over a decade ago (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016), even though a rationale for the testing was to lift educational outcomes in these communities. Policy brokenness for disadvantaged school communities can also be seen in the low equity tale of Australian PISA outcomes for year 10 students which is more pronounced than in many OECD countries. It can be seen in the ‘wave’ of early school leavers (ESL) who forsake learning in conventional secondary schools with many turning to ‘safety net’ school alternatives or choosing to forsake their educational entitlement. These students ‘fail’ or ‘fall’ into these programs or out of formalised learning completely.

Alongside this, the commitment to the 2011 Gonski 1.0<sup>2</sup> under Federal Labour repositioned into the 2017 Gonski 2.0<sup>3</sup> reconstituted ‘needs-based’ school funding model under the Federal Liberal-National Party Coalition, has fallen prey to politicisation from both sides of politics, notably in recent times with the Morrison-led Liberal National Party Coalition, promising an extra 4.6 billion dollars be distributed to the Catholic schooling sector on the basis of a ‘parent choice’ principle: a calculated political ‘sell’ used to shore up support for a Federal Liberal Coalition that appeared to be on the brink of election defeat in 2019. Needs-based funding is not sector blind: Education is politics!

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<sup>1</sup> NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy.

<sup>2</sup> Gonski 1.0 initiated by the Federal Labor Party is the Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report. December 2011. Expert panel chaired by David Gonski AC, Ken Boston, AO and Kathryn Greiner, AO.

<sup>3</sup> Gonski 2.0 initiated by the Federal Liberal-National Party offered an extra 19 billion dollars into Australian schools over 10 years when schools and states moved to an equal share of the school resource standard (SRS).

Policy brokenness cuts deep. Bureaucratically imposed school improvement dictates directed at school leaders foregrounding managerially inspired effectiveness and efficiency mandates have been growing in intensity for well over two decades but have failed to displace how postcode invariably indicates the winners and losers in high school completion (HSC) and competitive university places. Within all of this, the phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL) continues unabated despite 15 years of more taxpayer dollars than ever before siphoned into federal regulatory education bodies including AITSL<sup>4</sup> [20 million in 2019 for their standards regime] and ACARA<sup>5</sup> [35 million in 2019 for their high stakes testing and school league tables regime] and into state education bureaucracies like the school improvement or quality improvement branches and their growing data analysis sections. Why is it that after 25 years of neoliberal ideological rule in education that schools serving high poverty communities continue to have the lowest HSC outcomes? And why is it that disadvantaged students continue to dominate the early school leaving (ESL) statistics? Why haven't these protracted issues initiated grand scale government funded *independent* research to better understand the shortfalls of dominating education policy on disadvantaged schools?

And the list goes on. Institutional understandings of 'risk' in a young person comprise dominant psychological and medical diagnosis views, prioritising individualised treatment of the 'problem' child but lacking in considerations of problematic policy impacting schools. These diagnoses often present the non-compliant student through a pathological lens of 'deficit' and 'need' leading to policy interventions that target a student's behavioural deficiencies. Unfortunately, this policy orientation weakens the educational entitlement of many 'diagnosed' young people when they fall into scaled-up 'safety net' schools that do not have the resourcing to offer the same range of subjects, facilities and teacher specialists that mainstream schools are funded for. With over attention to a pathological view of the 'problem'

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<sup>4</sup> AITSL is the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. Budget estimate for 2019-2020 was **19,745 million dollars for 69 staff**. Sourced from the AITSL Resource Statement- Budget Estimates for 2019-2020; Table 1.1, p. 97 [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/aitsl\\_budget\\_statements\\_2019-20.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/aitsl_budget_statements_2019-20.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ACARA is the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. Budget estimate for 2019-2020 was **35,556 million dollars for 93 staff**. Sourced from ACARA Resource Statement- Budget estimates for 2019-2020; Table 1.1, p.76 [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/acara\\_budget\\_statements\\_2019-20.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/acara_budget_statements_2019-20.pdf)

student, comes a worrying silence about the need for schools to become more inclusive and engaging places to be for all young people.

These are just some of the fault lines present across the public education landscape. What this all means is that within a highly regulated Australian schooling system, taking account of the influence of both State and Federal education bodies, disadvantaged schools working within managerially imposed policy prescriptions and compromised ‘needs based’ federal funding arrangements are finding it extremely difficult to break through the ‘destiny effect’ of poor family background determines poor school results. Long term trends in the national and state regulatory regimes indicate that blaming school leaders and teachers for this malaise does not hold. A more enlightened conversation is needed; one that is relationally enabling and insightful, rather than the historically entrenched media, policy and politics discourse that has served to undermine the professionalism of teachers and leaders for decades.

Of course these issues warrant further examination to better understand why we are in this mess and what we need to do to get out of it. With protracted public policy issues presenting in early school leaving, student disaffection with schooling and the ongoing effects of poverty on learning, refreshed policies and systemic practices are needed. But with more policy attention in state education bureaucracies to ‘what works’, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘schooling effectiveness and schooling improvement’ (SESI) paradigms (Biesta, 2015; 2007) that are epistemologically unable to understand the complexity of life in particular schools and communities, and within all of this, more top down bureaucratic control regulating teacher and leader work, what can school leaders do?

Two further questions present. Why does South Australia (and Australia) continue to have a low equity public schooling system despite years of increased bureaucratic control over teacher and leader work? This forms part of the discussion in Part 1 of the book. The second question features in Part 2 of the book: What can school systems, leaders and teachers do differently to enable better schooling outcomes for improved life opportunity for young people living with disadvantage? The book problematises these two questions using case studies primarily focussed upon the South Australian public education system. To do this, it incorporates some analysis of the SA government’s public education policy and practice agendas over a 25-year period in the domain of STAR. Although there are contextual nuances concerning how South Australian disadvantaged young people are faring in schooling, there are also some

commonalities between South Australian disadvantaged communities and high poverty regions in the rest of Australia. On this basis, the book foregrounds a critical investigation into South Australian education policy impacting early school leaving (ESL) and offers insights for policy learning in other education jurisdictions in relation to better supporting the work of educational leaders in redesigning schools for more learning and life opportunity for STAR.

## **Summary of the chapter arguments**

### *Chapter 1: Neoliberalism's Contribution to 'Falling through the Cracks'*

Neoliberal inspired education policy has given rise to a competitive 'dog eat dog' education marketplace within a top down policy orbit of school, teacher and leader accountability, standardisation and measurement. With compromised 'needs-based' federal funding arrangements in play, public secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities have been put more at risk of becoming 'schools of last resort', with the marketplace positioning them as 'safety net' options for the poor, stratified with concentrations of high-needs young people. According to Smyth (2008, p.222), it was Prime Minister John Howard in 2007 who 'described public education as a safety net, which exists to guarantee "a reasonable quality education in the country". As a consequence, the principle of all schools, no matter their location, offering similar levels of opportunity to all students has been diminished by policy promoting a multiplier effect of disadvantage in public schools serving high poverty communities and an associated multiplier effect of advantage in schools comprising students from privileged backgrounds.

### *Chapter 2: Why Going from 'Good to Great' may not be so 'Good' nor 'Great'*

Greater investment in institutional regulatory control of leaders' and teachers' work and how Principals are being 'told' to do schooling improvement has continued along an increasingly regulatory trajectory for the last 25 years, making little difference to educational outcomes in disadvantaged school communities. In fact, current bureaucratic preoccupations with improved NAPLAN results as a measure of Principal competency and the 'good' school means public school leaders working with high concentrations of disadvantaged students are drawn to considerations of NAPLAN measurement rather than to how inequality works in their school and what to do about it. The reductionist policy logic

of NAPLAN growth as the signifier of the good teacher, good Principal and good school, measured in numbers, works against the public education principles of equity, equality and inclusion for all.

### *Chapter 3: The 'Tug of War' between 'Schooling' and 'Education'*

Historical and entrenched public secondary schooling forms are held in place by unhelpful standardised regulatory controls and bureaucratically directed administrative requirements, constraining much needed creative leadership approaches to whole school redesign and curriculum innovation in disadvantaged communities. This policy phenomenon works against radical innovation in schools to offer more personalised and meaningful learning experiences for all young people, particularly needed by those young people struggling to find a sense of belonging in their school community and meaningfulness in the curriculum on offer. This education tug of war must be won in disadvantaged school communities where to not experiment or innovate translates into forfeited student learning opportunities. For these schools, the educational mantra must be 'innovate (curriculum, culture, structure, pedagogy) at all costs'.

### *Chapter 4: Tinkering towards Inclusion, whilst Teetering towards Exclusion*

The exponential growth of South Australia's scaled up version of Flexible Learning Options (FLOs), a second, third or last chance educational option for young people disenfranchised with conventional schooling forms, or seen as mainstream non-compliant, is indicative of a public education system under considerable stress. This stress has been induced by long term underfunding, standardisation of teacher and leader work, accountability by measurement of the wrong things and market-influenced school stratification, undermining the very essence and purposes of public education. The neoliberal policy ensemble of accountability, standardisation and public underfunding works against life-centric relational schooling practices for the holistic formation of young people, bringing in its wake a loss of hope by many young people in the institution of schooling.

### *Chapter 5: Something 'Wicked' this Way Comes*

SA Education Department ICAN-FLO policy design for disadvantaged young people contemplating ESL is blinkered in understandings of how disadvantage works in school communities and families and what disadvantage means in terms of much needed school redesign and curriculum reform. FLOs overwhelmingly represent a form of streaming practice of the most disadvantaged, which neglects a structural 'enrolment'

logic that works against high school certificate (HSC) success, called the SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) in SA. FLO's attempt to solve a 'wicked' public policy problem, that is, the phenomenon of early school leaving (ESL), but the assumptions underlying how FLO's have become the policy solution for ESLs reveals a naïve social inclusion initiative that in practice can actually promulgate social exclusion.

*Chapter 6: Negotiating Schooling through Action Research in Neoliberal Times*

Critical action research offers a valuable school improvement methodology to foster personalised schooling redesign to re-engage ESLs back into learning and to reinvigorate schools that have lost their way. The two case studies in this chapter indicate that radical school redesign for learning engagement and inclusion is possible in neoliberal times, enabled when school leaders foreground collaborative inquiry and research in partnership with universities, schools and community stakeholders. This work can be systematised for policy learning and design. Collaborative action research endeavours have powerful things to say about how schools in a public education system can better support one another when public education is reclaimed as a collective commons with an overarching purpose of renewing the public.

*Chapter 7: Contextual School Improvement rather than the 'Standard' Recipe*

Leaders who invest in their teachers through ongoing 'appreciative' approaches to professional formation can keep new teachers glued to a profession that often loses them in the first five years. In this case study a Principal unhappy with de-contextualised 'national standards' courageously positioned his school community to develop their own contextual teacher and leader-generated standards in contravention of the official standards. These contextual teaching and learning standards became more meaningful and relevant to the presenting complexities unique to the school, offering teaching and learning benefits for young people. When new or inexperienced teachers are genuinely supported by experienced teacher and leader colleagues to address the existential challenges of 'being in teaching' and 'being in learning', schools grow an enabling culture of support and learning, promoting teacher efficacy and experimentation in the process.

### *Chapter 8: Appreciative Inquiry for Student Voice and Personalised Learning*

Appreciative inquiry offers a life-centric school improvement methodology in juxtaposition with dominant managerially inspired system improvement approaches measured by numbers. Building on what is best in practice in any organisation incentivises ongoing experimentation in teaching and learning. Its very practice contributes to embedding a culture of trust and, in this case study, engendering more hopeful ways of listening and responding to student and teacher voice for change. In this case study, this approach inspired ongoing work in the co-construction of a more inclusive, personalised and engaging curriculum and a more collaborative student and teacher learning experience.

### *Chapter 9: Liberating Cleverness and Hope through Research and Inquiry*

Liberating cleverness and hope in young people means showing them due respect as learners within a school community of genuine belongingness. To do this, schools can foster a culture of research and inquiry, making time available for all staff to do this deeply and well. In this case study, this manifested in leaders fostering cutting edge interdisciplinary curriculum design within rich forms of ICT use, using authentic assessment practices within cross-curricular inquiry that brought teachers, students and leaders together in negotiating curriculum and learning design.

### *Chapter 10: Leading Against the Regulatory Grain for Student Learning*

Leading disadvantaged schools in neoliberal times calls upon radical and pragmatic leaders who courageously work in the best interests of their students. These are leaders who hold in place the values and principles of public education, keenly aware of their agency and the enabling/disabling social, economic and political agendas at work. Knowing what they can do and can't do within the regulatory environment enables these leaders to navigate the neoliberal project of schooling covertly and/or overtly in the best interests of young people as learners, citizens and future workers. These leaders are critical policy readers, who understand the shortcomings and problems introduced by the neoliberal policy agenda, and who seek to work with colleagues to bring public education back to its essence.

# **PART 1**

## **RISKY PUBLIC POLICY BUSINESS**

# CHAPTER 1

## NEOLIBERALISM'S CONTRIBUTION TO 'FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS'

Keynesian economics guided Australian government fiscal policy post World War 2 up until the early 1980s. Keynesian logic heightened the responsibility of government to promote economic growth through fiscal means, underpinned by government social welfare responsibilities to attend to the needs of those less privileged in society. It was a policy ideology foregrounding government intervention for economic growth, alongside a belief in government responsibility for the social public good. This included valuing, resourcing and extending public education, public transport, energy, public hospitals, subsidised housing and social welfare support.

During Keynesian policy times, Australian public schools received the bulk of the Federal government's education dollar. However, during the 1980s, Keynesian economic policy in Australia was steadily dismantled. In the public education sphere, the last remnants of Keynesian policy saw significant federal government funding support offered to public schools serving poor communities. This 'needs based funding' gave these schools described at the time as 'schools running twice as hard' [compared to more privileged schools] (Connell, Johnston and White, 1991) much needed time and resourcing to undertake research experiments in teaching, curriculum design and learning practices, an initiative driven by an unfettered belief in the principle of social justice in education (Connell, Johnston & White, 1991). Known as the 'Disadvantaged Schools Program' (DSP), the overarching program goal of this significantly funded program was to bring the curriculum in schools serving disadvantaged communities to life in ways that were innovative, contextually engaging and more meaningful for those young people who lacked the societal privileges of others. The principle of social justice that imbued the program was based on an understanding that poor students needed extra curriculum support to access the curriculum and attain the same educational opportunities as their more privileged student counterparts. This was not a principle of poverty deficit, but rather a principle of fair go.

During the early 1980s, the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and the USA turned the western world toward neoliberal ideology. During this period the doctrine of neoliberalism in government policy and practice began to secure a political and economic foothold in policy ideology throughout the OECD.

During the next thirty years the economic liberals' vision crystallised into an ideology that was called neo-liberalism or, less kindly, market fundamentalism. (Manne, 2010, p. 10)

Neoliberalism has become the global economic theory of our time. It configures the free market as the best determiner of social, economic, and cultural exchange and welfare. Neoliberal advocates view the role of government as one of ensuring unimpeded reign of the economic marketplace. A key role of government within this view is to be a neoliberal policy gatekeeper, charged with using state apparatus to ensure the global free market economy is kept in place. In post-Keynesian times, welfare economics has been replaced by a reduction of government involvement in financial institutions and trade with the promotion of global consumerism. In relation to society, neoliberalism has given rise to an effective societal technology of control that promotes individual choice and consumerism as fundamental to a healthy and prosperous society, the neoliberal hallmarks of the good citizen, and hands more power to business to operate unimpeded in the economic marketplace. Neoliberalism has usurped the notion of community with economy which has led to societal side effects.

Neoliberalism has spawned a highly individualised society in which governments have handed over policy tools to unstable and profit-driven forces of the market. (Manne, 2010, p. 10)

Neoliberal ideology believes the market will reward those citizens who display market virtues: entrepreneurial endeavour and the right kind of educational capacities to participate effectively within the global market. In times of prosperity, the neoliberal proponents argue a 'trickle-down' effect occurs, benefiting all members of the community, rich and poor alike. However, in Australia and other OECD countries, 'trickle down' economics has seen the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and greater in number (Walmsley and Weinand, 1997; Eckersley, 2001; Hartman, 2005).

All Australians now live in a world where the economic and political power brokers vociferously defend the virtue of the market system. Power broker influence infiltrates schooling purposes, prioritising individual mobility and economic productivity, important in themselves, but downplaying a more

rounded 'liberal' education for a critically informed citizenry, vibrant democracy and more socially cohesive communities.

## **The 2008 Global Financial Crisis**

With 'trickle down' economics under increasing scrutiny by critical sociologists and some economists concerned about the widening gulf between rich and poor, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), initiated by unethical sub-prime lending practices in the USA, cast a greater shadow over the ability of the free market to truly look after its citizens.

Neoliberals once believed that as markets were self-correcting, their operation ought not to require the intervention of governments. Yet in September 2008, virtually no one behaved as if they believed this to be true. Everyone recognised that the market was completely powerless. Everyone looked to governments for immediate action and for a new long-term architecture of international financial regulation. (Manne, 2010, p. 10)

Some economics commentators argued the GFC spelt the end of the neoliberal turn because highly interventionist Keynesian economic policy was invoked to save the debt-ridden big banks in the United States. But extensive fiscal policy intervention represented only a temporary reincarnation of Keynesian economics even though it was instituted by many western governments, including Australia in the wake of the GFC. Some countries did too little too late. In Australia, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's strategy to plunder public funding into grand scale infrastructure development projects involving schools, roads and home insulation, to shore up the economy from recession, worked to immunise Australia from recession. Other countries in Europe (particularly Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal) experienced the full brunt of the recession. In hindsight, it is now clear that the neoliberal experiment only stalled, saved ironically through previously discarded Keynesian public funding logics.

The world quickly returned to neoliberal ideology in government policy and practice. This was seen as the best way to pay off the GFC debt. Some economists, critical sociology scholars and former politicians continue to argue for a radical re-examination of neoliberal public policy logics (Reid, 2019, Monbiot, 2016 in Reid, 2019, Rudd, 2009) because of the ideology's deleterious effects on social welfare and societal fabric, income distribution and educational equity, environment and economic growth. But the global reach of neoliberal ideology continues to invade policy and practice in developing countries, reproducing international institutional commonalities

in relation to economic, social and education system policies, priorities and practices.

In Australia, societal, economic and educational changes have not been haphazard. They have been shaped by dominant neoliberal government policy logics promoted by both major political parties. In the education realm, Smyth (2008) points out, "that nearly four decades ago, Australians lost their nerve and allowed their politicians to dismantle and effectively privatise their public education system" (p.222). He argues the long-running neo-liberal experiment in education has only worked to privatise public education, manifesting in an ensemble of policies that promote school choice as the way to uphold standards, encouraging school structures and cultures to take market based views, giving rise to government funding arrangements that have caused the middle class to flee public education and promoting a compliant view of educational leadership that serves managerial views about school improvement. This view of leadership is exactly what we don't want. Disadvantaged schools must do schooling differently in the interests of turning around ESL and better addressing the low equity tail in Australian schooling. Continuing with neo-liberalised schooling practices will only lock us into the same levels of inequality and inequity because education policy and practice will be more of the same.

### **Trickle-Down Economics and Struggle Street**

Many Australians navigate their lives through daily experiences of poverty. I consistently hear two reasons for the causes of poverty; one, and probably the most popular, derives from the media and the political 'right' and promotes the view that poverty is the fault of the people concerned: *they got themselves into this mess, they should be able to get themselves out of it*. The minority view, supported by The Smith Family charity, lays fault at the feet of an unfairly structured society, as did the 1975 Henderson report on poverty.

Poverty is inseparable from inequalities firmly entrenched in our social structure. Inequalities of income and wealth reinforce and are reinforced by inequalities of educational provision, health standards and care, housing conditions and employment prospects. (Henderson, 1975 p. viii)

Since the Henderson report, 45 years later poverty continues to present as a significant social issue in SA. Many of the same communities across metropolitan and regional zones of SA deal with ongoing generational health, education, housing and employment issues associated with poverty.

This is despite the adoption of neoliberal inspired New Public Management (NPM) approaches within all government agencies, where efficiency and effectiveness agendas, co-opted from the business world, have their way. With increasing numbers of people living below the poverty line and an increasing gap between rich and poor, some scholars continue to argue this is a consequence of the complex relationship between the capitalist marketplace and the policies of the State. Australian manufacturing industry has been crushed for some time. It has been unable to compete with manufacturing industries in developing countries where skilled labour on low wages has effectively wiped out Australia's manufacturing industry (Thomson, 2002).

The youth full-time labour market has all but collapsed, with growth only in casual and tenuous part-time work. Under neoliberal political rule, the labour market has been increasingly de-unionised, with more fragile contract-based and part-time employment arrangements in place, leaving many people under-employed. But it's in the outer metropolitan and regional areas of SA that poverty presents as most acute. For example, Adelaide's northern and southern suburbs have been hardest hit by the collapse of manufacturing.

Unemployment is almost six times higher in the most disadvantaged areas of the State, and South Australia has also experienced higher rates of workforce casualisation and underemployment as well as higher levels of welfare dependency and greater rates of growth in poverty and income disparity. (Newman, Biedrzycki, Patterson, & Baum, 2007, p. 9)

Poverty and social dislocation arise out of unfair structural conditions in society. Problematic economic conditions in SA, including the loss of car manufacturing, its associated industries and whitegoods manufacturers, once flourishing in the northern and southern suburbs of Adelaide, has nurtured regional pockets of social and economic inequality, presenting as the new economic normal. In the newly released *SA: The Heaps Unfair State Report* (2020), the executive summary describes South Australia's economy, industry and employment as:

...hard hit by the global manufacturing shift...since the 1970s and the global economic shocks over the same period. Notably, trends in employment and income over this time [1970 to 2020] include:

- The decrease in Manufacturing industry jobs and growth in the Health Care and Social Assistance industry in South Australia;
- Underemployment and underutilisation rates;
- The increase in part time and casual employment;

- The stagnation of income and persistence of wealth and income inequities;
- The freezing of Newstart Allowance since 1994 and its contribution to a progressive deepening of poverty for people in households relying mainly on that payment. (Baum and Womersley, 2020, p.7, bold emphasis added)

The report goes on to argue that these impacts have been hardest felt by low income workers, those reliant on social security payments and their families, especially youth, with the report also indicating health outcomes have been negatively affected. According to Baum and Womersley (2020):

Since the early 1980s, economic rationalist policies [**neoliberalism**] have been dominant in Australia, and lead to the privatisation of key government services. The privatisation of public housing stock, the growth in private schools, and the growth of the private health and social service sector, including employment services and private health insurance, were highlighted as increasing health inequalities in the state (p. 7 with bold emphasis added).

Peel (2003) positions these neoliberal induced impacts upon society's most vulnerable and powerless as meeting with a desensitised view of victim blaming, presenting poverty as a personal or group characteristic. According to Peel, poverty is not seen as symptomatic of a society which thrives, at great social cost, on the privilege, power and success of a favoured few.

## **The SA youth employment and education landscape**

Young people in South Australia's most socio-economically disadvantaged regions must now compete for tertiary education places and jobs within an economic environment that is characterised by significant social disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011, 2016). According to Wilson and Spoehr (2015), an increasing percentage of South Australians are living below the poverty line, manifesting in a widening gap between the rich and the poor. A 2014 Brotherhood of St Laurence employment analysis argued young people's employment opportunities in Australia had reached 'crisis point'. The report showed an average of 12.4 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in the year to January 2014 unemployed nationally, twice the overall unemployment rate. The Brotherhood's analysis also indicated that the region of northern Adelaide had a youth unemployment rate close to 20 percent. Young people's higher

rates of unemployment in SA over the period 1992 to 2020 have been a consistent trend.

The jobless rate in South Australia for 15-24 year olds rose to as high as 21 percent in 1992, and was at its lowest in 2007, at nine percent. Youth unemployment has been double the overall unemployment rate since 2001. Young unemployed people living alone, particularly those reliant on Youth Allowance or Newstart Allowance, live below the poverty line. (Baum and Womersley, 2020, p.27)

The nature and extent of disadvantage in SA is captured in the 2015 *Dropping off the Edge* report by Vinson and Rawsthorne. In this report, significant South Australian rural and metropolitan regions were analysed in terms of cumulative disadvantage comprising: (1) internet access, (2) unskilled workers, (3) rent assistance and (4) year 9 reading levels. This report featured a socio-economic map of SA, highlighting the most disadvantaged regions (see the red and yellow shading in figure 1 below). These regions are predominantly found in the rural and metropolitan areas of SA which have been ravaged by decades of manufacturing downturn and population attrition in rural communities, and an ongoing lack of employment opportunities and health support in the very isolated Indigenous 'lands' regions. The yellow shades on the map represent the significantly disadvantaged South Australian regions. The report indicated that seven of SA's Statistical Local Areas (SLA) presented in Australia's top 5 percent of most disadvantaged SLA's. In order of disadvantage these were: (1) Anangu Pitjantjatjara (Aboriginal 'Lands' Communities), (2) Ceduna, (3) Coober Pedy, (4) Maralinga Tjarutja (Aboriginal 'Lands' Communities), (5) Peterborough, (6) Playford-Elizabeth (Northern suburbs of Adelaide) and (7) Playford-West Central (the North-Western suburbs of Adelaide) which feature in the red shading in figure 1 below. A key commonality for young people living in these regions was non-engagement in work or study. According to Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015), the seven most disadvantaged SLAs in South Australia share vulnerability to specific indicators of social disadvantage that work to compound each other.

Unemployment as well as young adults not in full time work, education or training strongly shape the structure of disadvantage among the most disadvantaged SLAs. (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015, p. 88)