

# Impact of neoliberalism on education



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## 1. Introduction

Education is a dynamic process occurring in a continually changing context. The nature and structure of education is influenced by and intertwined with the society, culture and community of which it is a part. In recent decades education has changed significantly. Welch (2013) argues these changes have been affected by “ forces well outside education – and all too often, it seems, according to principles that have little to do with education” (p. 187). Today, more than ever, education functions within a highly political context involving a large range of stakeholders both from outside and inside education (Meadmore, 1999). In addition to students and parents, these stakeholders include “ communities, governments, political parties, industry and commerce” (Meadmore, 1999, p. 3). Each stakeholder seeks to influence the direction and outcomes of education so that their own agendas are met. The organisation and implementation of education continues to be widely debated. Education now operates in a complex context which is influenced by political and economic pressures at both national and global levels. This report discusses the emergence and rise of neoliberalism that has resulted in a refocussing of priorities in education policies and practices.

## 2. Changing concept of education

The concept of education and the learning that is offered continually evolves. Education plays a significant role in supporting society to develop and gain the knowledge, skills and attributes a society seeks at a particular time. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century educating children was significantly influenced by industrialisation and a rapidly growing population. Less child labour was

required and, in the name of progress, children were educated to become literate and moral citizens who could contribute to society by providing labour in the work force (Meadmore, 1999). During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Australia, state-funded education through legislation became available to the masses, which was “ free, secular and compulsory” (Meadmore, 1999, p. 4). The turn of the century saw educational reformists beginning to argue for the need for compulsory secondary education in order to strengthen communities and build the nation. However, educational inequities in opportunities and outcomes remained. The model of education available at this time was not one of equality and inequities continued on the basis of “ class, gender, race and geographic location” (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011, p. 22). Education continued to adapt in a changing context.

In the 1950s and 1960s education became more available for all children as a more inclusive social policy emerged. At the same time the rise of immigration, an increasing population and a growing economy demanded more skilled workers and professionals. A more socially democratic Australia began to see the purpose for education as more the means of achieving equality in society rather than just in providing the training of a subservient workforce. This turning point in policy, mirrored by developments in Canada, Europe, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, was considered “ the most significant systematic achievement towards educational equality” (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011, p. 25). The Karmel (1973) Report was the first large scale Australian national report on education that recognised past practices had not supported the development of a more equitable society. The Report provided recommendations and identified resource implications on how this

inequity could be overcome (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011). Funding of many of the recommendations in the Karmel Report was provided by the then Whitlam Government. Subsequently however, most of Karmel's recommendations 'passed into history' with the election of successive conservative governments and the rise of neoliberalism.

### 3. Rise of neoliberalism

Education is increasingly operating within the context of neoliberal philosophies. Since the 1970's the ideology of neoliberalism has increasingly become embedded in the structure of most Western societies (Welch, 2013; Mudge, 2008). The press towards neoliberalism resulted from a number of key events that initially took place independently in several countries.

Robertson (2007) refers to four significant 'epicentres' for these events. In 1979, the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and in 1980, the US President Ronald Reagan, drawing upon the US Federal Reserve's changed monetary policy, sought to break the power of the unions, deregulate industry and free up finance at national and global levels. In addition, China moved towards making the Chinese economy more liberal. Through these influences the emphasis was that "society should be shaped by the free market" (Curtin University, 2016). This is a key goal of neoliberalism.

There is much written about neoliberalism. It is a broad term and is not an easy concept to define (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). Welch (2013) considers neoliberalism is a philosophy "in which social policy is dominated by market principles, privatisation, free trade and deregulation, and individualism (individual responsibility)" (p. 193). Mudge (2008) describes neoliberalism as

being “ built on a single, fundamental principle: the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization” (pp. 706-707). The rise of neoliberalism has resulted in changing the characteristics of Australian society with a move away from the welfare state to a competition state. Sandel (2012) and Beckert (2009) describe Western society as having transitioned “ from market economies to market societies” (cited in Welch, 2013, p. 196). Relationships between government, society and the private sector have also been reshaped. Market-based competition and economic rationale is now at the centre of government economic and social policies (Davies & Bansal, 2007). Education was once protected from market competition by policies driven by the welfare state. The function of education was for the ‘ public good’ and to equally provide equity and access to all (Welch, 2013). Under neoliberalism, education has become part of the market. Peters (1999) considers education is now seen as “ services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace” (cited in Davies & Bansal, 2007 p. 254). Neoliberal reforms in education have produced radical restructuring resulting in, for example, the loss of specialist programs, resources and staff for specific disadvantaged groups. Many education services have become privatised (Welch, 2013). The corporate manner in which education is managed is one that values competition and economic proficiency. Education is now viewed as a business and operates within this context.

#### 4. Impact of neoliberalism on Australian education

The impact of neoliberalism on education has been rapid and profound. Education is increasingly being influenced by neoliberalism with a focus on “  
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promoting high stakes testing, accountability and competitive markets” (Hursh, 2007, p. 493). Broadfoot (2002) claims testing now “ shapes the goals, organisation, the delivery and evaluation of education” (cited in Meadmore, 2004, p. 26). The educational emphasis on and purpose of education has become outcome based with a focus on measuring student performance by way of testing and exams (Meadmore, 2004). The results of testing have become not only of interest to students, parents, teachers and schools, but also to governments both nationally and globally. Schools are organised to act like businesses and compete with other schools to attract students (Proktor & Sriprakash, 2013; Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011). Schools actively promote and advertise themselves in the marketplace of which there are “ markets within and across all sectors” (Proktor & Sriprakash, 2013). Parents are interested in results schools advertise because they want to send their children to the ‘ best school’ possible. No longer simple a debate about ‘ private’ or ‘ public’ schooling, parents have greater choice in deciding which school to send their children to and have enthusiastically adopted ‘ school choice’. School choice has become an integral component of the state and federal education policy and is supported by both major political parties (Proktor & Sriprakash, 2013). As the reputation of schools has become “ increasingly linked to test results” (Meadmore, 2004), there has been a ‘ zipcode’ effect. Property prices in sought after school zones have increased and the occurrence of the “ socioeconomic characteristics of where students live equates with their achievement on high stakes test” (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 304).

The Australian standardised NAPLAN test in basic literacy and numeracy skills was introduced by the Commonwealth Government in 2008. NAPLAN was devised to “ create data that will improve the achievement of students, will improve the equity of outcomes and overall improve Australia’s capacity for economic productivity” (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 300). All schools’ NAPLAN results are openly published on the My School website where comparisons between the performances of schools can be made. NAPLAN testing has divided opinion. Supporters of NAPLAN argue the results assist transparency and accountability and help parents make important decisions about their children’s education. Those who do not support NAPLAN argue the consequences are as vast as they are negative (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). Teachers claim NAPLAN has negative consequences on pedagogy and curriculum. Teachers perceive they are more likely to teach to the test and spend more time on the curriculum areas being assessed, which results in less student engagement and a narrowing of the curriculum (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). Australian research indicates when teachers adjust their teaching strategies to address the testing requirements there is a negative impact on struggling students (Comber, 2012, cited in Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). Instead of improving educational outcomes, high stakes testing widens the gap between the lowest and highest achieving students. Lowest achieving Australian students tend to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and include Indigenous students. The culturally assumed knowledge and language used in NAPLAN testing further disadvantages such students who may not have acquired the knowledge required in the testing, due to their living in a remote geographical location (Wigglesworth et al, 2011, cited in Thompson and <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-neoliberalism-on-education/>

Harbaugh, 2013). Meadmore (2004) claims “centralised tests are socially and culturally discriminatory” (p. 33). International research indicates that accountability through high stakes testing has had “little, if any positive effect on student achievement” (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, cited in Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 301).

In 2012, global testing through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) provided data on the performance of 15 year-old students in reading, mathematics and science from sixty-five countries that chose to participate. This global testing takes place every three years on a different group of students. Goldstein (2004) has “expressed concern about the cultural equivalence of test items” (cited in Perry, 2009, p. 82). Countries tend to see PISA as providing an opportunity to make a judgement of their education system relative to other countries through their positioning on the PISA table. Educational policy makers and other key decision makers frequently use PISA and other data produced from large scale assessments to make policy decisions and allocate significant resources. All parties need “to become better informed of the technical limitations of using international data if such achievement data is to be used to inform policy development and educational reforms” (Gillis, Polesal & Wu, 2016, p. 132). In all testing programs potential sources of social, cultural and gender bias need to be noted in order to make more informed decisions on any data collected. Children from Finland perform at the top or near the top of the PISA tests. However, in the Finland education system there are, for example, virtually no mandated standardised tests, any results are not publicised; the focus is on



encouraging children to learn how to learn; teachers are highly qualified, highly respected and paid accordingly; teachers have independence to work within broad national guidelines; any testing teachers undertake provides information for teachers on their children's learning (Hancock, 2011). The importance given to learning and not testing by the Finland education system differs from the emphasis on testing by most other countries and yet Finland scores highly on the PISA table.

## Conclusion

The emergence and rise of neoliberalism has resulted in a profound change in education. No longer is education seen as being for the public good. Education is now seen as being a business operating in a competitive environment with a key focus on high stakes testing and examinations measuring performance outcomes. Educationalists are increasingly concerned about neoliberal ideologies which have become embedded within the context of education. Neoliberalism is increasingly contributing to an inequitable society. If education continues to evolve on the current trajectory, the disadvantaged groups in Australian society will become increasingly marginalised. It is critical that Governments make relevant policies which are resourced appropriately to ensure a more equitable society for all.

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