

Maintaining the Integrity of Public Education: A Comparative Analysis of School Autonomy in the United States and Australia

AMANDA KEDDIE

This article takes a critical comparative approach to examining autonomous schooling in the United States and Australia. Amid the market imperatives currently driving education priorities, its focus is on how autonomy can be mobilized in ways that preserve the integrity of public education. Through reference to key debates and research about school autonomy in the United States and Australia, integrity is defined with reference to three values: (1) public ownership (i.e., governance that is responsive to the people it serves), (2) equity and access (i.e., adequate funding and inclusive student admission practices), and (3) public purpose (i.e., prioritizing the moral and social purposes of education; Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008). The analysis is mindful of the resonances and differences between the education systems in the United States and Australia and the fluidity and complexity of the notion of autonomous schooling. Against this backdrop, the article illustrates the significance of embedding these values within school autonomy policy in order to preserve the integrity of public education.

Introduction

All international evidence points to the fact that the more autonomous a school, the better the outcomes for students.

Christopher Pyne,¹ Federal Education Minister, Australia

High-performing charters² have irrefutably demonstrated that low-income children can and do achieve at high levels.

Arne Duncan, US Secretary of Education

Government reforms in contexts such as England, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia, albeit to varying degrees and over varying time periods, have increasingly enabled the conditions for schools to exercise

¹ Christopher Pyne was Federal Education Minister at the time of writing. He left this portfolio in late 2015.

² Charter schools, while publicly funded, operate under a charter or contract with an authorizing agent who oversees and holds the school to account. Agents can include school districts, state boards of education, universities or organizations (both nonprofit and for-profit; see Hubbard and Kulkarni 2009).

Received May 23, 2014; revised June 5, 2014, March 12, 2015, and July 19, 2015; accepted August 14, 2015; electronically published March 21, 2016

Comparative Education Review, vol. 60, no. 2.

© 2016 by the Comparative and International Education Society. All rights reserved.
0010-4086/2016/6002-0002\$10.00

greater self-management. Granting schools more control and authority over their governance aims to generate more effective, responsive, and innovative education systems. These conditions are associated in policy discourse with improving school management and leadership, the quality of teaching and learning, and resource efficiency. Autonomous schooling is presented in such discourse as the flagship for driving up education standards. There is strong political faith in the idea of autonomous schooling as key to improving education. This faith is captured well in the above comments made by Australia's Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne and US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

For Smyth (2011) school autonomy is an education idea that has been "adopted around the world with remarkable speed and consistency" (95). Indeed, it is presented by proponents as inevitable—a necessary condition to enable education systems to compete on the world stage. Certainly, at a global or transnational policy level, influential organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank have endorsed school autonomy (see OECD 2011; World Bank 2014). The OECD, for example, which according to Rizvi and Lingard (2010) has established itself as an international organization par excellence in evaluating educational performance globally, draws on PISA data to illustrate a connection between greater school autonomy and improved student performance. The OECD (2011) also illustrates, however, the complexity of the relationship between school autonomy, school accountability, and student improvement, suggesting that autonomy and accountability need to be "intelligently combined" in order to improve student performance.

International endorsement and focus on school autonomy as a mechanism for driving up education standards is reflective of its status as a globalized policy discourse that is set within the parameters of another globalized discourse—accountability on international standards and measures such as PISA (Lingard and Rawolle 2011). These are key discourses within what Lingard and Rawolle (2011) describe as a "global field" that reflects a rescaling of politics and political authority to a supranational level. The authority of this global field is reflected in its driving of "national systems of education toward a similar policy outlook" (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 42), which has led to a new era of "policy borrowing" and sharing across countries (Lingard 2010). Such authority is not fixed, however; it actively constitutes and reconstitutes education policy and practice at a national level, with nation-states' differential engagement with it reflecting national and local histories and cultures (see Dale 2005; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Lingard and Rawolle 2011).

In relation to school autonomy, this differential engagement is evident in the great variance across and within nations in terms of take-up and efficacy. Such variance exemplifies the futility of pinning down a simple definition of school autonomy because it is "grounded in a particular politics at

a particular time . . . continually contested and rearticulated across time and political changes” (Lingard et al. 2002, 15). In the United States, for example, autonomous school governance has proliferated to include a diverse variety of for-profit and nonprofit stakeholders, while in Australia such governance remains more securely tied to the state. In both of these contexts, there is also great variance in terms of “efficacy.” Counter to the more general global findings of the OECD, research can find little conclusive evidence to link school autonomy with improved academic outcomes, notwithstanding conclusive indications that some autonomous schools, in line with Arne Duncan’s comments above, are working in highly productive ways.

In light of this evidence, it is generally agreed that autonomous schools have not yet delivered on their promise of school improvement and innovation. For progressive commentators across western contexts, this failure is in large part attributable to the ways in which free-market ideologies have seized the upper hand in this movement. As Ravitch (2010, 227) aptly puts it, while “the market serves us well when we want to buy a new car,” it is not the best way to deliver public services. Reflecting the hegemony of neoliberal policy and politics in the broader social world, these ideologies have become taken-for-granted as the most effective and efficient means of improving education.

For Lubienski and Lubienski (2013), the ongoing faith in market mechanisms to drive up educational innovation and standards has been strengthened with the increasing involvement of the philanthropic and corporate sector in public education. The strong and growing financial investment of this sector in public education, as these authors argue, has managed to obscure and effectively counter the (1) weak empirical justification for this reform and (2) the growing evidence that associates school autonomy with undermining public education.³ It has long been the view that school autonomy, when driven by market imperatives, compromises the “hallmark” values of public education, that is, public ownership, equity and access, and public purpose (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008).

This article takes a critical comparative approach to examining autonomous schooling in the United States and Australia. Amid the market imperatives currently driving education priorities, its focus is on how autonomy can be mobilized in ways that preserve the integrity of public education. Given its variance and complexity within and across education contexts, the focus here is not on pinning down a definitive view of school autonomy (Lingard et al. 2002). Rather, the focus is on the shifting political terrain within the United States and Australia that frames the policy imperatives

³ See Lingard et al. (2002); Darling-Hammond and Montgomery (2008); Smyth (2011); Lubienski and Lubienski (2013).

to grant schools greater self-management from centralized forms of governance. More specifically, the analysis considers how education politics at the national and more local levels mediate these imperatives in ways that are both enabling and constraining of the values of public education (as elaborated in subsequent sections).

The review begins with an explanation of the selection of the United States and Australia as contexts for comparative analysis, followed by an account of key literature and research relating to charter schooling in the United States. While charter schools are only one version of school autonomy in this context, they are focused on here, as they are perhaps the most prolific example of this reform in the world. From 1999 to 2013, the percentage of charter schools increased from 1.7 to 6.2 percent of all public schools. As of 2013, more than 2.5 million children were enrolled in more than 6,000 charter schools nationwide, with nearly 1 million names on charter school waitlists across the nation (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2013). These figures are expected to rise with the recent passing of a bipartisan bill in the US House of Representatives to increase federal spending on charter schools from \$250 to \$300 million (see Mendez 2014).

Following this account, the article highlights the values seen as contributing to the integrity of charter schooling: (1) public ownership (i.e., governance that is responsive to the people it serves), (2) equity and access (i.e., adequate funding and inclusive student admission practices), and (3) public purpose (i.e., prioritizing the moral and social purposes of education; Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008). These values, it is argued, support the integrity of school autonomy in their centring of educative rather than market-oriented goals. These values are then drawn on to critically analyse some of the key debates and policy trends currently shaping autonomous schooling in Australia.

The United States and Australia as Contexts for Comparative Analysis

There are distinct parallels and divergences between the United States and Australia in relation to education governance that provide a strong rationale for the choice of these nations as a basis for comparative analysis. Australia and the United States are both federal systems where education is ostensibly a state responsibility. These contexts share a substantive history of state- and local-level school governance as well as an established commitment to school autonomy as a driver of school improvement. There is also resonance across these contexts in relation to the debates for and against school autonomy. Such parallels provide a useful backdrop from which to consider the distinct differences within each nation that mediate how autonomy is taken up. Of particular interest in this article are differences associated with the diversity and complexity of education governance, and the

varying power and influence of federal governments on state education (Savage and O'Connor 2014).

The system of education within the United States is markedly more complex and diverse than the system of education in Australia. Across the nation there are approximately 14,000 districts. Each of these districts operates differently and with varying relations to state agencies (see Savage and O'Connor 2014). The key role of nongovernment policy actors, such as philanthropic foundations and corporate stakeholders, in national education reform in the United States has added significantly to this complexity. The system of education in Australia, by contrast, is much smaller and far less complex. There are, however, different challenges for this system such as those associated with providing quality education services across this nation's huge landmass with its particular population spread and concentration areas. This has led to, for example, challenges in resourcing, especially in relation to adequately staffing schools in rural and remote areas. Despite these challenges, the state and territory education systems in Australia are relatively cohesive with less district influence than in the United States. Moreover, while the influence of philanthropic and corporate actors on Australian state education is growing, educational governance is far less polycentric than it is in the United States (see Exley and Ball 2011; Savage and O'Connor 2014).

Another key difference between these two contexts is the varying power and influence of their respective federal governments. Although the states are responsible for schooling in both contexts, there are different funding arrangements across the United States and Australia. In Australia constitutional measures that provide for significant funding to state education from the federal government have led to substantial federal intervention in the governance of public schooling. In relation to equity, for example, such intervention has enabled redistributive funding to poor schools in poor communities through, for instance, policies stemming from the Karmel Report (Australian Schools Commission 1973) and the more recent "Gonski" reforms (Gonski [2011], although these reforms have been scaled back by Australia's current conservative government). By contrast, in the United States, local (not federal) taxation is linked to school funding; thus, federal intervention in the governance of public education is limited because there is less direct funding to the states. Under this arrangement, redistributive equity priorities are managed at a perhaps more disparate and fragmented local level (Savage and O'Connor 2014).

Certainly, the differences between these contexts in terms of system diversity and complexity and processes associated with federalism provide different conditions of possibility in relation to school autonomy reform (Savage and O'Connor 2014). Such differences are clearly important in considering how school autonomy can be taken up to either ascribe to or undermine the integrity of public schooling. The research and writing selected for this

article are set against this political and conceptual backdrop. The following provides an account of the charter school movement in the United States from which to situate the article's view of integrity.

The Charter School Movement

The charter school movement in the United States, which began in the early 1990s, is perhaps the most diverse and complex example of autonomous schooling in the world. The key imperative driving this movement was to improve the public school system, especially in relation to better addressing pronounced inequities associated with race and class (see Dingerson et al. 2008; Fabricant and Fine 2012). Such improvement was meant to occur through charter schools sharing their innovations and ideas with their sponsoring public system. Charter schools, while publicly funded, operate under a charter or contract with an authorizing agent who oversees and holds the school to account. Agents can include school districts, state boards of education, universities, or organizations (both nonprofit and for-profit; see Hubbard and Kulkarni 2009). Like academies in the United Kingdom, these schools are free from local district control and are granted flexibility in relation to the delivery of curriculum, the hiring of staff and setting of staff pay and conditions, and the determining of term and school-day duration.

Charter schools vary widely in scope, size, and type. There are, for example, publicly approved "stand-alone" schools that reflect the teaching and learning values of a particular community; nonprofit networked charters like the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) franchise, which is based on a common curricular and school structure; and for-profit charters, such as the White Hat schools, that are run by private industry (see Sizer and Wood 2008). Charter schools also vary widely in governance in relation to the different agreements they may have with their particular authorizing agent and the differentiation of governance by state, with some agents and states exerting greater control and regulation over schools than others in areas such as curriculum, assessment, teacher accreditation and broader goals like inclusion, citizenship and innovation (see Bulkley and Fisler 2003; Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Hubbard and Kulkarni 2009).

While the charter school movement was originally driven by a progressive agenda, its focus on devolution and deregulation meant that it also appealed to conservatives wedded to free-market and privatization ideologies. Many argue (see Dingerson et al. 2008; Fabricant and Fine 2012) that these ideologies have seized the upper hand in the charter schools movement—supported, of course, by the hegemonic status of neoliberal and neoconservative policy and politics in the broader social world and a seemingly ever-present moral panic about the dire state of American public schooling. Amid these policies, politics, and panic, mainstream politicians of all persuasions

have supported calls for greater and more rigid accountability through high-stakes testing. Certainly, at one level, charter schools enjoy a measure of autonomy and freedom, but such autonomy and freedom is set against a backdrop of unprecedented levels of state-imposed and international accountabilities in the form of an ever-increasing myriad of standardized testing regimes. This is a high-stakes environment where a school's success or failure, indeed its survival, depends on student performance on these regimes. Through neoconservative lenses, the choice and competition generated by the charter system is seen in this environment as a positive mechanism for driving up standards—an environment in theory that is set up to ensure that “good” schools (i.e., those that adhere to the narrow priorities of the high-stakes testing culture) flourish and “bad” schools (i.e., those that cannot measure up to this culture) fail and disappear.

As already suggested, there is much conflicting and inconclusive evidence as to the efficacy of charter schools in raising academic achievement. While some research highlights the great success of particular charter schools in improving educational outcomes, other research draws attention to their spectacular failure.⁴ There are critical factors that are seen as contributing to charter schools realizing their original progressive ideals. Such factors go well beyond a concern with how students perform on standardized tests—although this is obviously important—to a concern with maintaining the integrity of the “hallmark” values of public education: public ownership, equity and access, and public purpose (see Dingerson et al. 2008). For Darling-Hammond and Montgomery (2008; see alsoSizer and Wood 2008), this means ensuring that charter schools (1) are governed by and responsive to the people they serve, (2) are in receipt of adequate funding and inclusive in their student admission, and (3) prioritize the moral and social purposes of education.

Maintaining the Integrity of Public Education: Public Ownership, Equity, and Public Purpose

Within the current parameters of high-stakes accountability and competition, there are aspects of the charter movement that are seen as compromising the integrity of public education and, in particular, the core values of public ownership, equity and access, and public purpose. Such compromising is perhaps ironic given that it was the perceived failure of the public system to live up to these values that helped give rise to the charter movement (Sizer and Wood 2008). The first of these values, public ownership, is significant because it supports schools to be governed closest to the people

⁴ See Dingerson (2008); Lake (2012); Lubienski (2013); Welner (2013).

they serve and enables students, families, and the general public access to those with authority over the school (Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008). As explored further in the following sections of this article in relation to Australian education policy, these conditions can facilitate inclusive and participatory governance of schools where the school community can be involved in school decision making. Charter school type affects a school's capacity to reflect this form of governance; stand-alone charters, for example, are more likely to be responsive to, and inclusive of, their local communities while other charter arrangements, for example, large network charters, are more difficult and unwieldy to govern and monitor. They often adopt standardized and regulated approaches and boards that are not composed of the local community; they are thus less able to reflect localized and community responsive governance (see Dingerson et al. 2008; Sizer and Wood 2008). State policy also affects forms of governance that may support or undermine the value of public ownership, with some states requiring extensive parent and community participation in establishing a charter while others require little or no participation (Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008).

The complexity and diversity of public education in the United States and its increasing deference to the logics of the market seem antithetical to preserving the value of public ownership. Operating within this space, the charter school system has rapidly proliferated with many of its schools "rushed into operation and allowed to expand without careful evaluation" (Sizer and Wood 2008, 15) with dire results in some cities. In New Orleans, for example, the disaster of Hurricane Katrina led to a "flea market of entrepreneurial opportunism" (Dingerson 2008, 30) that dismantled the institution of public education, replacing it with a charter system that included very little public consultation or deliberation on the models that might be tried or processes for replicating what works in order to advance the system.

One of the original aims of the charter school movement was to promote and share innovation in order to improve all public schools (Dingerson et al. 2008). However, as Dingerson et al. (2008, xviii) argue, the "unfettered free-market ideology" framing this movement, "with its notion of propriety ownership of any formula for success, has been especially harmful in undermining" this aim. Not only are charter schools far less innovative than promised, when they do purport success, they tend not to collaborate with other schools to share what works and what doesn't work (see also Sizer and Wood 2008; Lake 2012; Lubienski and Lubienski 2013). This reality of propriety ownership and noncollaboration is clearly at odds with the ethos of inclusive and community/school-led governance reflected in the value of public ownership.

Equity and access are also core values of public education. There are concerns that the chartering movement is undermining equity in drawing material and human resources away from traditional public schools, thereby

promoting a deterioration of these schools. The worse these schools get, the more appealing the escape to charters becomes (Dingerson et al. 2008). This situation has created, in some areas, a view of public schools as dumping grounds for underperforming and under-privileged students (see Dingerson 2008). Converting public schools to charters does not reconcile or remedy the already highly segregated and stratified public education system; rather, it tends to perpetuate, or in some cases exacerbate, this segregation and stratification (Lopez et al. 2002; Ravitch 2010). This is because the chartering system, in proliferating school diversity and choice, amplifies competition between schools for their “market share” of students. Such competition increases the value and attractiveness of “good” schools (that tend to be class and race privileged) and decreases the value and attractiveness of “bad” schools (that tend to serve underprivileged students). While it is the case that charter schools have been consistent in serving disadvantaged communities in the recent past (Henig 2012), the chartering movement has contributed to an intensifying of the gap between privileged and underprivileged schools and students (Ravitch 2010; Fabricant and Fine 2012; Lubienski and Lubienski 2013).

This competition, according to Lubienski and Lubienski (2013), has not led to better outcomes and opportunities for students, but rather it has forced schools to focus on, and improve the impact of, their marketing strategies. It has also led to schools excluding costly and difficult-to-educate students. As Darling-Hammond and Montgomery (2008) explain, when market ideologies drive the agenda of charter schools, they are “likely to engage in admission practices that decrease their costs and increase efficiency” (99). While selective enrollment is prohibited in many states, there are tacit ways in which schools can exclude potentially lower attaining students. For example, schools may not offer services to high-needs students such as those with disabilities or ESL requirements; they may encourage these students to enroll at an alternative school; or they may adopt onerous admissions procedural requirements that deter or exclude these sorts of students (Ravitch 2010; Welner 2013). Additionally, many underprivileged parents and students do not have the social, cultural, or language resources to access relevant information associated with charter schools that may be appropriate for them (see Lubienski and Lubienski 2013). Such practices have contributed to grave inequities in the system, especially pronounced in relation to students with special education needs who are increasingly overrepresented in traditional public schools (see Dingerson et al. 2008).

The value of public purpose is associated with the social and moral outcomes of schools and their broader systems, a “moral compass” that, as Darling-Hammond and Montgomery (2008) argue, sways schools to work for the betterment of society. Current test-based measures of school success encourage competition, individualism, and exclusion; their narrow focus pays little heed to communal goals or the “common good.” As such, social and moral outcomes

tend to lack priority in many public schools (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Dingerson et al. 2008;Sizer and Wood 2008). The current environment does not encourage schools to focus, for example, on producing active and responsible citizens through critical curricula and pedagogy (see Dingerson et al. 2008). While fostering moral or social learning is far from an uncomplicated and unproblematic endeavour (e.g., it can generate restrictive and exclusionary understandings of difference and diversity that reinscribe the inequities of the status quo; see Gay 2000), such learning is nevertheless a mandated purpose of schooling in the United States, reflected in the value of public purpose.

The increasing involvement of the for-profit sector in charter school management is seen as further compromising these values. Of course, the notion of profit making appears antithetical to educative goals (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Ravitch 2010; Fabricant and Fine 2012). However, there are other concerns with for-profit charters. For example, as private corporations, they are not subject to the same levels of public accountability as other charters; thus, there is a lack of transparency in relation to their pursuit of educative and student-centred goals (Hanauer 2008; see also Fabricant and Fine 2012). Moreover, as large endeavours encompassing the management of many schools, they necessarily operate at a distance from their schools which (as indicated earlier) can be problematic in terms of public ownership and the monitoring of schooling processes and outcomes. These elements of for-profit chartering have led to their poor performance in many states (see Hanauer 2008).

The issues and concerns explored in this section illustrate the ways in which school autonomy can intersect with market ideologies to constrain the “hallmark” values of public schooling. These values offer a useful scaffold for critically analyzing some of the key debates and policy trends currently shaping autonomous schooling in Australia.

Autonomous Schooling in Australia

There has been renewed emphasis on the notion of autonomous schooling in Australia at federal and state levels. There are distinct parallels between the education and political discourses associated with autonomous schooling in Australia and the United States. Certainly, it is justified on a similar basis, most predominantly that it grants greater freedom to schools in governance and decision-making around issues of finance, staffing, and resourcing. As with the United States, political arguments for introducing school autonomy are focused on creating greater choice for parents and students; creating the conditions for principals and school leaders to better respond to the needs of their schools; removing the supposed inefficiencies associated with bureaucratic governance; and promoting innovation and re-

source efficiency toward improving the public education system overall.⁵ Also, similar to the United States, school autonomy is presented as a viable, indeed necessary, alternative to a public schooling system in crisis that is failing in its task of adequately educating Australian students (see Smyth 2011; Lubienski and Lubienski 2013).

Like the United States, devolution in Australian education has a long history. School autonomy and, more particularly, the idea that responsibility for schools should be devolved to the people involved in the task of schooling was promoted over 40 years ago in the Karmel Report (Australian Schools Commission 1973). While the Australian Capital Territory instated school autonomy reform in the 1970s, policies to support schools to self-manage were most pronounced and transformative in the state of Victoria in the 1990s, today the most devolved public education system in Australia. The Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative in the states of Western Australia and Queensland (introduced in 2010 and 2013, respectively) is the most recent attempt to generate greater school autonomy, although in both of these states, policies and processes of school devolution are far from new.

Consistent with the United States, governance of school autonomy differs widely from state to state but is similarly framed by broader educational governance that prioritizes market ideologies. Also consistent with the United States, these ideologies have gradually taken hold of autonomous school governance, with the initial idea of school autonomy (e.g., as in the Karmel Report) informed by a progressive agenda in relation to community responsiveness and equity goals (see Australian Schools Commission 1973; Fabricant and Fine 2012). In Australia, the alignment of market ideologies with education governance has become evermore embedded with the increasing use of, and legitimacy associated with, international and national measures of school success to evaluate and rank schools publicly, concerted efforts to devolve and reregulate schools around these measures, and commitment to the supposition that competition between schools will work in tandem with choice and accountability imperatives to drive up school performance. Like the United States, it seems also the case in Australia that whatever cannot be measured (through standardized tests) doesn't count, despite strong opposition even from more conservative quarters that challenges the narrowness and inadequacies of these measures in capturing school success (see Ravitch 2010; Jensen et al. 2013). There are also grave concerns, as in the United States, about the decimation of the public system under autonomous schooling, with many challenging the instating of this reform as an abrogation of state responsibility (and the risk and blame associated with this responsibility) to schools, families, and local communities (see Lamb 2007; Smyth 2011).

⁵ See Smyth (2011); Lubienski and Lubienski (2013); Gobby (2013a); Cobbold (2014).

Support for school autonomy in Australia remains strong despite evidence that highlights, as with the United States, the inconclusive relationship between increased school independence and improved educational attainment.⁶ Comparative research between schooling in NSW (a very centralized system) and Victoria (a highly autonomized system), for example, finds no significant difference in student performance on standardized international and national measures such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and NAPLAN (National Assessment Plan Literacy and Numeracy; see Jensen et al. 2013). Notwithstanding, the federal government has recently committed 70 million dollars to convert 1,500 public schools to independent public status by 2017 on the pretext that it will improve schooling and its outcomes in Australia.

These similarities provide a useful backdrop from which to consider some of the nation-specific factors that mediate how autonomy is taken up in the United States and Australia. As mentioned earlier, the diversity and complexity of the US education system contrasts markedly with the Australian system in relation to the influence of state and federal governance and the involvement of nongovernment players (Savage and O'Connor 2014). Market imperatives are much stronger in the governance of schools in the United States, especially with the involvement of the for-profit sector. This system is more polycentric and its chartering more diverse and complex in terms of type and governance. School autonomy in Australia is, by contrast, much more closely tied to the state; it remains the responsibility of state education departments to decide which schools are given independent status and, once they are granted this status, state departments tend to retain control over areas such as policy and strategic direction, performance monitoring and measurement, and curriculum (see Gobby 2013a; Cobbold 2014).

In Australia, like the United States, there has been strong research interest on matters of school autonomy in relation to the values of public ownership, equity and access, and public purpose. The following section explores these values in relation to key policy discourse currently shaping school autonomy in Australia.

Public Ownership

As explained earlier, supporting schools to be governed closest to the people they serve is key to the value of public ownership. Such public ownership can facilitate the conditions of inclusive and participatory governance where students, parents and the community are involved in managing and monitoring their local public school (Darling-Hammond and Montgomery

⁶ See Dempster (2000); Lubienski (2009); Kimber and Ehrich (2011); Jensen et al. (2013); Cobbold (2014).

2008). Focus in policy discourse at both federal and state levels in Australia is very much on this value. Policy associated with school autonomy at a federal level, for example, strongly encourages community and parental input (see Department of Education 2014a); however, as with the United States, state policy varies as to what such input might look like within the context of initiatives like the IPS. In Queensland, for instance, public ownership and participatory governance are touted as the major selling points for IPS, as the following statement on Education Queensland's website (State of Queensland 2014) explains: "The Independent Public Schools initiative recognises the best decision-making often occurs at a local level through direct response to local community needs and aspirations. . . . By becoming an Independent Public School, Queensland principals, teachers, parents and local communities have greater control and ownership of their schools."

Enhanced local governance, a locally tailored workforce, and public accountability, transparency, and performance are among the key opportunities that this initiative is said to foster (State of Queensland 2014). In further reference to maintaining public ownership, Education Queensland is explicit that IP schools in this state remain part of the public system with access to the same support as other state schools. This emphasis on remaining part of the public system is also a strong feature of IPS policy in Western Australia (from which the Queensland policy heavily borrows). Indeed, Gobby (2014) describes this feature as a key rationality that was crucial to teachers and their unions accepting this reform given their fears that they may lose the resources, entitlements, and protections of the public system under the IPS initiative.

Presently (at the time of writing) in Queensland there are 80 IPS. All 1,230 state schools can apply to become independent through an expression of interest process to Education Queensland. In this application, the values of public ownership are evident in the requirement that schools provide evidence that consultation in favor of the conversion has occurred across school stakeholder groups, including teachers, parents, and local community bodies (State of Queensland 2014). Further ensuring the maintenance of public ownership and setting up the conditions for participatory governance, there are key requirements stipulated by the Department concerning how IP schools are managed and monitored; for example, there are clear guidelines about the composition of, and duties associated with, the school council. Each council must include an equal number of elected parent and staff members (at least one each), elected student members along with the school principal (who cannot hold the position of Chair), and the leader of the Parents and Citizens association. The functions, terms of office, and meeting requirements of the council also support participatory governance of IPS. For instance, the council has the responsibility to "set the direction, culture and tone of the school"; it is required to approve and monitor the school's strategic plans and direc-

tion, including those associated with revenue and expenditure; members of council cannot hold office for longer than two years; and the council must meet at least twice in each semester with decisions about the school passed only by majority vote.

These conditions reflect the value of public ownership in their facilitation of inclusive and participatory governance. To be sure, there are other elements that are crucial in realizing this value within the context of school councils, for example, ensuring that the processes of decision-making about the school are appropriately informed and collaborative and that the focus of such decision-making aligns with broader educative goals such as high expectations for all learners. It is also important to consider the ways in which the broader climate will impact a school's capacity to foster genuinely participatory governance. Gobby's research (2013b, 2014), for example, examines school leadership within the IPS system in Western Australia. Consistent with research broader afield (see Exley and Ball 2011), this research theorizes the parameters of the IPS as new regulatory mechanisms of neoliberal government that harness and shape individual school autonomy to achieve political ends rather than local and particularized community and school-led goals. Notwithstanding, policy support for inclusive, community-led, and participatory governance is important in fostering public ownership, as is the support in emerging policy in some Australian states for creating new structures and networks to improve education services within and beyond the IPS system (see Department of Education 2014b). As a potential conduit for sharing innovation and improvement across the system (Dempster 2000), these structures and networks reflect the ethos of collaboration so important to the value of public ownership in relation to state education.

Equity and Access

Equity and access in areas such as material and human resource distribution to schools and student participation are hallmark values of public schooling. As noted earlier, Australia has perhaps been better placed than the United States in terms of federal intervention to generate greater equity within the public schooling sector through a strong policy history of redistributive funding. Notwithstanding such provision, there are concerns in Australia, as in the United States, that school autonomy is compromising equity and access across the public system through its promotion of social segregation and stratification. There has, for example, been an intensifying of the gap between schools serving the privileged and those serving the underprivileged, reflecting a residualization within the system with negative consequences for students living in poverty (see Lamb 2007; Smyth 2011). As Lamb's work (2007) in the state of Victoria reveals, such reforms have led to

much lower enrollments in schools serving the poor, who are also left to cope with much higher concentrations of the various groups of disadvantaged students. In this climate, as with the United States, there is evidence of covert enrollment discrimination to exclude lower attaining students. Another major equity issue relating to this residualization that is perhaps especially pronounced in Australia relates to the challenges of staffing. As noted earlier, the specific geography of the Australian context presents challenges of resource provision, especially adequately staffing “difficult” schools (whose student population is invariably disadvantaged). In these circumstances, moves within autonomous schooling initiatives to allow staffing to be determined at the school level may be detrimental for equity, as they signify the dismantling of an overarching centralized body responsible for staffing all schools equitably. School-level staff selection may contribute to residualization in the system with the best quality teachers selected to teach in the highest attaining schools.

Like the United States, there are also equity concerns in Australia associated with issues of enterprise and funding. There are clear expectations within the school autonomy movement for schools to be enterprising—for example, to work with business, industry, and community organizations in developing innovative partnerships and sponsorships that will provide extra support for students, schools, and the local community (see State of Queensland 2014). In Queensland, creating such partnerships and sponsorships would seem critical for IP schools to survive economically, given the nominal amount of financial support (\$50,000 on converting and a potential \$50,000 each year on application) these schools are granted to manage their autonomy. Business partnerships and sponsorships would also seem crucial in Victoria, Australia’s most autonomous state education system, where according to recent accounts (see Preiss 2014), many schools are unable to pay their staff. In this climate, schools have engaged in cost-cutting measures that clearly undermine student equity, such as reducing specialized support, employing fewer teachers, and increasing class sizes (see Lamb 2007). These are matters that, as mentioned earlier, are crucial to consider in working toward an equitable autonomous schooling system (Dingerson et al. 2008).

Despite the strong commitment to and intended growth of autonomous schooling in Australia, there is little emphasis or provision in policy discourse at both federal and state level for addressing such matters. This lack of emphasis has potentially deleterious consequences for equity. There is a danger, for example, that the newer systems of autonomy in Queensland and Western Australia will replicate the situation in Victoria where autonomous schooling has increased the stratification of public schools. There are, however, some positive aspects embedded in the policy of these newer versions of school autonomy that may serve to prevent some of this stratification. First, in both contexts, the take-up of this initiative has been relatively slow

and staggered over time; second, there are consultative and inclusive processes that are required for schools to convert; and third, there is recognition of the importance of school and community “readiness” for converting to independent status (see Melbourne University 2013). In Western Australia, for example, there are new development and selection programmes designed to build on the readiness of school communities for IPS status that include “structured opportunities for learning guidance and feedback” (Department of Education 2014b). These factors allow time, scope, and support for matters of equity to be carefully considered (Melbourne University 2013).

As in the United States, the stratification encouraged by school autonomy in Australia has highlighted inherent problems with the notion of choice. Choice within the context of public measures of accountability is a key underlying principle of autonomous schools in the United States (see Fabricant and Fine 2012) and Australia (see Smyth 2011). Policy in relation to these areas in Australia and the United States reflects assumptions that parents can make an authentic choice about the quality or otherwise of their local school. Such assumptions in Australia are apparent in relation to the *MySchool* website. This website details and compares schools on the basis of standardized test results and is, in all but name, a league table ranking all schools in Australia. One of the key justifications for introducing the site given by the former federal government was to provide parents with quality and accurate information about their children’s school. However, it is predominantly well-educated and informed (i.e., middle class) parents who are able to access and make use of this site in relation to school choice and accountability (Lingard 2011; Smyth 2011).

It is clear that the divisive effects of choice and devolution engendered by autonomous schooling environments need to be better addressed through policy. There are broader mandates at both state and federal levels in Australia that instate and provide guidance for pursuing equity in schools. Moreover, the predominant model of school autonomy in Australia can (in terms of its close ties to the state), to some extent, protect equity outcomes through provisions in policy described earlier that foster inclusive participatory governance. Nevertheless, there is insufficient policy attention to the ways in which school autonomy within a system based on choice and accountability can undermine equity and access and the democratic goal to serve all students equally (Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008).

Public Purpose

The value of public purpose is about prioritizing the moral and social imperatives of education toward the betterment of society. As with the United States, there are long-held concerns in Australia that such imperatives are

sidelined by the managerialism and narrow mandates of the current standards and testing culture.⁷ Greater school autonomy amid this culture is seen as further shifting the focus and ethos of schools away from teaching and learning to management and enterprise. The promotion of a business model of operating is both implicit and explicit in policy discourse about how autonomous schools are expected to operate in Australia. In the Queensland context, for example, as noted earlier, there is nominal funding provided by the state Department to support schools to convert to and maintain their IPS status, which can be seen as compelling schools to seek out business partnerships and sponsorship in order to manage and maintain their extra responsibilities as independent public schools. These responsibilities, as the research on self-managing schools in Australia has long highlighted, are substantial (see Dempster 2000). By recent reports, some schools are already floundering in their efforts at managing these extra responsibilities within the IPS initiative (see Dreyfus 2012).

A more explicit focus on a business model of operating is evident in the expectation that independent public schools will seek out sponsorship and industry connections. Indeed, the IPS initiative in Queensland is presented as an opportunity to work in new ways with local businesses and industry and to “pursue creative models of sponsorship, industry partnerships and infrastructure partnerships.” IP schools are also encouraged to include these “stakeholders” on their councils (State of Queensland 2014). Such expectations emphasise concerns of finance and enterprise and detract from a focus on teaching, learning, and the moral and social purposes of schooling.

On a more positive note, the close ties that autonomous schools in Australia have with the state enable a focus on public purpose. Certainly, there are provisions within the IPS policy that require schools to operate closer to their local community, as noted earlier in relation to public ownership, which can facilitate an overseeing of matters of public purpose such as social and moral learning. Like some state requirements in the United States, the IPS system in Queensland, for example, requires that schools articulate ways in which their conversion will benefit students and the broader community and how it will lead to innovation and improved student performance. While such parameters may not necessarily encourage social and moral learning that leads to active and critically informed citizenship, they do nevertheless provide a space for centering the value of public purpose in relation to this learning.

Additionally, there are important “out-of-scope” requirements within this policy that protect a focus on public purpose in delimiting the scope for

⁷ See Dempster (2000); McInerney (2003); Blackmore (2004); Kimber and Ehrich (2011); Gobby (2013a).

business profit and enterprise. For example, the school council cannot control funds or enter into contracts with the school; they cannot “acquire, hold, dispose of or deal with property”; and they cannot “establish a committee or subcommittee” (State of Queensland 2014).

While market ideologies are clearly evident and seemingly increasing in how school autonomy is framed in Australia, such policy conditions protect the value of public purpose. Importantly, the restrictions around business profit and enterprise as well as the requirements associated with public ownership delimit possibilities for the for-profit sector to run schools. This is significant. As noted earlier, schools operating under for-profit arrangements are less likely to prioritize public purpose values in their privileging of market and business ideologies. They are also less likely to share their innovations with other schools outside their group, given their competitive focus on obtaining their market share of students.

Conclusion

There is a strong and growing commitment to instating systems of public school autonomy across the world. This is a global policy discourse that intersects with international and national imperatives to produce particular effects. The comparative analysis in this article provided an account of how such discourses and imperatives are playing out within the United States and Australia. The resonances between these two contexts highlight the homogenizing effects of this global policy, while each nation’s differential engagement highlights important points of departure.

There are distinct similarities associated with the political discourse and education practices of charter schooling in the United States and self-managing or IP schools in Australia. In both contexts, there is political insistence as to the efficacy of this reform despite evidence to the contrary; in both contexts, school autonomy is justified along similar lines; and in both contexts, governance of school autonomy varies markedly from state to state. Furthermore, research in both contexts raises very similar concerns with the ways in which autonomous schooling, when driven by market imperatives, is undermining the integrity of public education, associated in this article with the values of public ownership, equity and access and public purpose. In relation to public ownership, there are concerns that autonomy in this environment is being taken up in ways that undermine inclusive, collaborative and locally responsive school governance; in relation to equity and access, there are concerns that this environment is promoting segregation and stratification between schools leading to practices of exclusion; and in relation to public purpose, there are concerns with the sidelining of the moral and social purposes of schooling.

Where the US system differs markedly from the Australian system is in its far greater devolution and complexity. The system of school autonomy in Australia is far less polycentric in governance; that is, it is more closely tied to, and regulated by, centralized authorities. The analysis of the Australian system presented in this article indicates the significance of these ties in relation to policy provision to support the goals of public ownership, equity and access and public purpose. In relation to public ownership, for example, there was a policy focus on inclusive and participatory school governance. In relation to the values of equity and public purpose, while there was a lack of adequate recognition of the divisive and stratifying effects of choice, there were particular aspects of policy in Queensland and Western Australia significant in protecting these values, such as requirements for schools to be responsive to and accountable for the needs of the school and local community through mandatory consultation and representation processes and to adhere to specific restrictions around schools' relationships with the business sector. Other aspects of policy in these contexts that were seen to protect these values were associated with the slow and staggered uptake of the IPS initiative and recognizing the importance of school and community "readiness" for converting to independent status. These factors allow time, scope and support for matters of public ownership, equity, and public purpose to be considered (Dingerson et al. 2008).

The article highlighted other conditions of possibility in the Australian context that supported these values. Unlike in the United States, the Australian education system is far less subject to the unfettered market logic of the private or for-profit sector and thus more amenable to a focus on public ownership, equity and public purpose. The more centralized and regulated system in Australia, including the greater federal power and involvement in education, may also support these values. A more equitable partnership in education in terms of state and federal investment would seem more likely (than a more inequitable partnership) to foster the sense of policy cohesion necessary to embed these values across state education systems.

International endorsement of school autonomy, as a mechanism for driving up education standards, is reflective of its status as a globalized policy discourse. It is clear that this discourse is driving "national systems of education toward a similar policy outlook" (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 42). However, as this article has illustrated, it is also clear that school autonomy is "grounded in a particular politics at a particular time," shaped as it is by national and local histories and cultures (Lingard et al. 2002, 15). Such fluidity and change, especially in light of the susceptibility of autonomous schooling environments to prioritize market imperatives over educative goals, provide a strong warrant for focusing on the values presented in this article as maintaining the integrity of public education—the hallmark values of public ownership, equity, and public purpose.

References

- Australian Schools Commission. 1973. *Schools in Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Blackmore, Jill. 2004. "Leading as Emotional Management Work in High Risk Times: The Counterintuitive Impulses of Performativity and Passion." *School Leadership and Management* 24 (4): 439–59.
- Bulkley, Katrina, and Jennifer Fidler. 2003. "A Decade of Charter Schools: From Theory to Practice." *Educational Policy* 17 (3): 317–42.
- Cobbold, Trevor. 2014. "Pyne's School Autonomy Myth." *Save Our Schools*. www.saveourschools.com.au.
- Dale, R. 2005. "Globalisation, Knowledge Economy and Comparative Education." *Comparative Education* 41 (2): 117–49.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Kenneth Montgomery. 2008. "Keeping the Promise: The Role of Policy in Reform." In *Keeping the Promise? The Debate over Charter Schools*, ed. L. Dingerson, B. Peterson, and B. Miner. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Dempster, Neil. 2000. "Guilty or Not: The Impact and Effects of Site-Based Management on Schools." *Journal of Educational Administration* 38 (1): 47–63.
- Department of Education. 2014a. "School Autonomy." <http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au>.
- Department of Education. 2014b. "Independent Public Schools." <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/independentpublicschools/detcms/portal/>.
- Dingerson, Leigh. 2008. "Unlovely: How the Market Is Failing the Children of New Orleans." In *Keeping the Promise? The Debate over Charter Schools*, ed. L. Dingerson, B. Peterson and B. Miner. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Dingerson, Leigh, Bob Peterson, and Barbara Miner, eds. 2008. "Introduction." In *Keeping the Promise? The Debate over Charter Schools*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Dreyfus, Ann. 2012. "All's NOT Quiet on the Western Front." *Education Review* 3:28–29.
- Exley, Sonia, and Stephen Ball. 2011. "Something Old, Something New . . . Understanding Conservative Education Policy." In *The Conservative Party and Social Policy*, ed. H. Bochel. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Fabricant, Michael, and Michelle Fine. 2012. *Charter Schools and the Corporate Make-over of Public Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, Geneva. 2000. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Gobby, Brad. 2013a. "Enacting the Independent Public Schools Program in Western Australia." *Issues in Educational Research* 23 (1): 19–34.
- Gobby, Brad. 2013b. "Principal Self-Government and Subjectification: The Exercise of Principal Autonomy in the Western Australian Independent Public Schools Programme." *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (3): 273–85.
- Gobby, Brad. 2014. "Putting 'The System' into a School Autonomy Reform: The Case of the Independent Public Schools Program." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37 (1): 16–29.

- Gonski, David, Ken Boston, Kathryn Greiner, Carmen Lawrence, Bill Scales, and Peter Tannock. 2011. *Review of Funding for Schooling*. Canberra: DEEWR.
- Hanauer, Amy. 2008. "Profits and Privatisation: The Ohio Experience." In *Keeping the Promise? The Debate over Charter Schools*, ed. L. Dingerson, B. Peterson, and B. Miner. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Henig, Jeffrey. 2012. "Charter Inroads in Affluent Communities: Hype or Turning Point?" In *Hopes, Fears and Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2012*, ed. R. Lake. Seattle: University of Washington.
- Hubbard, Lea, and Rucheeta Kulkarni. 2009. "Charter Schools: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future." *Journal of Educational Change* 10 (2): 173–89
- Jensen, Ben, Ben Weidmann, and Joanna Farmer. 2013. *The Myth of Markets in School Education*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute.
- Kimber, Megan, and Lisa Catherine Ehrich. 2011. "The Democratic Deficit and School-Based Management in Australia." *Journal of Educational Administration* 49 (2): 179–99.
- Lake, Robin. 2012. "Will the Charter Movement Rest on Its Laurels of Innovate and Expand?" In *Hopes, Fears and Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2012*, ed. R. Lake. Seattle: University of Washington.
- Lamb, Stephen. 2007. "School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia: A Case Study of Residualising the Poor." In *International Studies in Inequality, Theory and Policy*. Vol. 3 of *Education Theory and Public Policy*, ed. R. Teese, S. Lamb, and M. Duru-Bellat. Netherlands: Springer.
- Lingard, Bob. 2010. "Policy Borrowing, Policy Learning: Testing Times in Australian Schooling." *Critical Studies in Education* 51 (2): 129–47.
- Lingard, Bob. 2011. "Changing Teachers' Work in Australia, Rethinking Educational Practice through Reflexive Inquiry." *Professional Learning and Development in Schools and Higher Education* 7:229–45.
- Lingard, Bob, Debra Hayes, and Martin Mills. 2002. "Developments in School-Based Management." *Journal of Educational Administration* 40 (1): 6–30.
- Lingard, Bob, and Shaun Rawolle. 2011. "New Scalar Politics: Implications for Education Policy." *Comparative Education* 47 (4): 489–502.
- Lopez, Alexandra, Amy Stuart Wells, and Jennifer Jellison Holme. 2002. "Creating Charter School Communities: Identity Building, Diversity, and Selectivity." In *Where Charter School Policy Fails: The Problems of Accountability and Equity*, ed. A. S. Wells. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lubienski, Christopher. 2009. "Do Quasi-Markets Foster Innovation in Education? A Comparative Perspective." OECD Education Working Paper 25.
- Lubienski, Christopher. 2013. "Privatising Form or Function? Equity, Outcomes and Influence in American Charter Schools." *Oxford Review of Education* 39 (4): 498–513.
- Lubienski, Christopher, and Sarah Lubienski. 2013. *Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McInerney, Peter. 2003. "Moving into Dangerous Territory? Educational Leadership in a Devolving Education System." *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 6 (1): 57–72.
- Melbourne University. 2013. "Evaluation of the Independent Public Schools Initiative." Department of Education, Western Australia.

- Mendez, E. 2014. "Wisconsin Ranks High in Number of Charter Schools, Study Says." *Journal Sentinel*. <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/wisconsin-ranks-high-in-number-of-charter-schools-study-says-b99276654z1-261393951.html>.
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. 2013. *Delivering on the Dream: Annual Report*. Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
- OECD. 2011. *PISA in Focus*. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/49012097.pdf>.
- Preiss, Benjamin. 2014. "Schools Struggle to Pay Staff." *The Age*, April 24. <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/schools-struggle-to-pay-staff-20140424-zqyhi.html>.
- Ravitch, Diane. 2010. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic.
- Rizvi, Fazal, and Bob Lingard. 2010. *Globalizing Education Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Savage, Glenn, and Kate O'Connor. 2014. "National Agendas in Global Times: Curriculum Reforms in Australia and the USA since the 1980s." *Journal of Education Policy*. DOI:10.1080/02680939.2014.969321.
- Sizer, Ted, and George Wood. 2008. "Charter Schools and the Values of Public Education." In *Keeping the Promise? The Debate over Charter Schools*, ed. L. Dingerson, B. Peterson and B. Miner. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd.
- Smyth, John. 2011. "The Disaster of the 'Self Managing School'—Genesis, Trajectory, Undisclosed Agenda, and Effects." *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 43 (2): 95–117.
- State of Queensland. 2014. "Independent Public Schools." <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/independent-public-schools/>.
- Welner, Kevin G. April 2013. *The Dirty Dozen: How Charter Schools Influence Student Enrollment*. Teachers College Record. <http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17104.
- World Bank. 2014. *School Autonomy and Accountability*. <http://saber.worldbank.org/index.cfm?indx=8&tb=4>.