

**School Vouchers, parental choice and improved learning outcomes for students:  
Kevin Donnelly, June 9 – 10 *The Australian*: “Vouchers are the way to go”**

Kevin Donnelly argues that a decentralised education system, including some form of voucher system (with parents receiving an agreed amount of funding from government that they can then use to send their children to either government or non-government schools) is the “best way to strengthen schools, raise standards and, in an increasingly competitive and challenging international environment, ensure that more Australian students perform at the top of the league table”.

In supporting his position, Donnelly dismisses claims by the Australia Institute that there is no evidence increased competition and autonomy improve educational outcomes (see <http://www.tai.org.au/documents/downloads/DP88.pdf>). He is also dismissive of the AEU position that vouchers are socially and educationally divisive because they will lead to "greater segregation on the basis of race, religion, academic ability and socioeconomic status". Donnelly suggests that decentralisation will go a long way to freeing education in Australia from “provider capture”, by which he means the all encompassing control of educational bureaucracies, ‘educrats’, teacher unions and professional associations.

Donnelly cites reporting of US research into voucher schemes which have been trialled in Washington and New York as indicating that "the academic achievement of voucher students who attended private schools grew faster than the similar students who did not receive a voucher and attended public schools". He adds that research evaluating a Milwaukee scheme “arrives at a similar conclusion about the benefits of vouchers ; instead of lowering standards or creating social fragmentation, there is evidence that...students' test scores improved”.

## **THE FACTS**

While Australia scores well in the PISA tests, we are nevertheless a "high quality, low equity" country educationally as Barry McGaw has continually shown. Australia does extremely well on the tests in general, but the gap between our highest and lowest scorers puts us among inequitable nations. With respect to the 2000 PISA, for example, in the

case of Australia, the rate of payoff in increased literacy from increased social advantage is greatest at higher levels of social advantage - in other words, the more you already have, the more education in this country adds to your advantages. There is, of course, a link between SES and literacy achievement in all countries. Nevertheless, there *are* countries who appear in the PISA results as *both* 'high-quality' *and* 'high equity'. The existence of such countries demonstrates that there is no necessary trade off between quality and equity in educational provision. It is possible to achieve both together. Australia is not among these countries. In other words, Australia already has an education system in which social background has a significantly greater influence on educational achievement than in the OECD as a whole. One prime culprit in such inequality across the OECD turns out to be school stratification. McGaw shows that PISA results internationally demonstrate that early stratification into schools of different types, while it might be intended to provide in the most appropriate way for individual differences, tends to exacerbate differences among students, to produce low average performances and to reproduce the existing social arrangements with the socially disadvantaged placed in low-status schools where they achieve low-level results.

Vouchers are a key driver of such stratification and, hence of educational inequality. Donnelly is correct to claim that the issue of school vouchers is "fertile ground for public debate", particularly if, as a society, we value the ideas of justice and egalitarianism. However, more circumspect commentators on both sides of the debate in the US have been quick to point out that the sorts of claims Donnelly makes for vouchers are in fact highly debatable.

A long-term study of vouchers in the US by Witte concluded that vouchers are not necessarily effective in raising achievement and that, at best, the available research was still quite unclear. Apple and Bracey have suggested that the results for privately funded trials of vouchers in New York and Washington were "extremely mixed". In New York, "African-American students showed gains in both years of the study, but other ethnicities showed small, but insignificant, losses". In Washington, "African-Americans in grades 2 through 5 showed a significant gain in year one in math and a significant loss in reading. They showed gains in both subjects in year two. No other ethnic groups gained in either year. In grades 6 through 8, African-Americans showed

no change in math and a significant loss in reading in year one, but significant gains in math and no significant gain in reading in year two.” On the basis that “other researchers in other places in the US have yielded similarly equivocal results”, Apple and Bracey argue that “in spite of advocates’ statements that ‘vouchers work’ or ‘the market works,’ the impact of local conditions affect vouchers outcomes.” What Donnelly doesn’t tell his readers, for example, is that one researcher who analysed data from voucher programs in Milwaukee and New York City concluded that “if the voucher students scored higher, it might well be because they attended smaller schools with smaller classes.”

Internationally, as Apple argues, a number of studies (Whitty, Power, & Halpin; Lauder & Hughes; Gillborn & Youdell; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe) have demonstrated the negative effects of turning education into a market-driven institution with consequent privatisation, usually with a voucher or quasi-voucher system as the tool. These studies show that, except for a very limited group of students, placing schools on a market merely reinforces existing hierarchies, further stratifying education. Poor and working class children become even more marginalised. In America, vouchers are used to argue a case for poor black children to “escape” failing schools. While a small number of black children do indeed exit, the vast majority of such children either gain no benefits whatsoever, or they and their schools are left in even worse condition than before as they are forced to spend time and funds on maintaining their image – with much less of both being spent by teachers and administrators on curricular substance.

What drives the kind of choice which vouchers make possible are league tables. In England (and it is worth noting that it *is* now only England – the other countries in the UK having withdrawn from the system as soon as devolution allowed) where each school’s GCSE results are published locally, schools which began the measurement game with a successful, middle-class, school-oriented drawing area and did well in the GCSE soon became over-subscribed to the point where they are able today to actively select those students who will continue to drive this sort of success. Less successful students are relegated to less successful schools and the downward spiral has been self-perpetuating. Interestingly, the number of students actively excluded from schools (i.e. students who detract from the school’s public image) increased 2,000% in the UK between 1991 and 1993 as the league table culture took off in earnest.

Behind Donnelly's charges of "provider capture" and the "parlous state" of education in Australia, and in his linking of "the demands of parents and the marketplace", Apple would see the same reactionary attack on egalitarian norms and values that has been taking place in the US and the UK. (Tellingly, in the article being considered here, Donnelly limits his description of school "failure" to the public system.) The utopian promises that advocates of vouchers make with regards to the leveling of the playing field in education, with increased parental choice being somehow universally guaranteed and equality of access to a 'better' school for all students miraculously provided for, are instead a cynical falsehood. These illusory promises are, in fact, grounded in social Darwinism and destructive of the very communities it is claimed they will enhance.

In his book, *Educating the "Right" Way* (2001), Apple writes that for neoliberal critics

What is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are "black holes" into which money is poured – and then seemingly disappears – but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. For neoliberals, one form of rationality is more powerful than any other – economic rationality. Efficiency and an "ethic" of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximise their own personal benefits. Indeed, behind this position is an empirical claim that this is how *all* rational actors act. Yet, rather than being a neutral description of the world of social motivation, this is actually a construction of the world around the valuative characteristics of an efficiently acquisitive class type.

The reality in Australia is, just as it is in the US or the UK, that some individuals are better equipped to be "efficiently acquisitive". Any sort of voucher system is therefore destined to entrench existing social hierarchies and privilege. As Apple and Bracey put it within the US context,

it is often extremely difficult for parents who do not have flexible jobs and must often depend on public transportation to move their children around a city. While a few children may be helped by vouchers, there may be even less financial

support for inner city schools in the long run, leading to fewer resources for those parents who “choose” to keep their children in under-funded schools because, notwithstanding vouchers, they cannot avail themselves of private education.... Because, as previously noted, achievement outcomes from voucher programs are in doubt, [the idea that vouchers allow poor people to obtain a good education for their children] might better be stated as “vouchers might allow a few poor people to get a better education for their children.”

Developing this idea further, Apple has spelt out the likely consequences of turning school choice into a dog-eat-dog battle, which pits the already advantaged against the already disadvantaged. Vouchers become a form of middle class ‘gate keeping’: “By changing the process of selection to schools, middle class parents can raise the stakes in creating stronger mechanisms of exclusion for blue-collar and post-colonial peoples in their struggle for equality of opportunity.”

In short, league tables, vouchers and privatisation together form a complex of policies driving increased inequity. In England, this has led to a tiered public schooling system, in which some schools are able to select students because of demand for places based on their “success”, while other schools become “residualised” and are engaged in a “race to the bottom”. The beauty of league tables and vouchers for governments is that they provide “transparency” and, hence, “choice” for parents. In turn, the rhetoric of choice allows governments to retreat from supporting public institutions, to pretend that choice (such as the choice of a private education) is equally available to all, and then to blame the parent of those children not ‘selected’, despite their vouchers, for making the wrong choices by keeping their children within ‘under-performing’ schools.

As Apple argues, much of the literature in support of vouchers assumes that the root cause of the supposed decline in education is directly related to poor teachers and overly bureaucratic schools. This conveniently ignores the larger structural realities that link schooling to poverty. As Vinson has shown again recently, income and other social and economic factors – not type of school – have the most power in determining success in schools. This is not to be determinist or to ignore the potential role of schooling in

enhancing mobility, but it is far more honest about schooling than any neo-liberal argument about vouchers.

Vouchers and market-driven educational reforms reduce students to human capital. This makes the argument being put forward by Donnelly unpalatable for English teachers, regardless of the educational system we may teach in. To reduce human nature to the most basic of individualistic and competitive instincts, and to deny our students their humanity in the way neoliberal market-based educational reformers do, is to renounce the great humanist principles of our subject, culture and civilization.

## References

Apple, M.W. (2001) *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God and Inequality*, New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Apple, M. (2000) "Are Vouchers Really Democratic? □ A Response to Gary Rosens' 'Are School Vouchers Un-American?'" Available at:  
[http://eps1.asu.edu/epru/letters\\_to\\_editors/cerai-00-08.htm](http://eps1.asu.edu/epru/letters_to_editors/cerai-00-08.htm)

Retrieved 11/6/07.

Apple, M. and Bracey, G. (2001) *School Vouchers*, Education Policy Project Briefing Paper CERAI-00-31, Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Available at:  
<http://eps1.asu.edu/epru/documents/cerai-00-31.htm> Retrieved 11/6/07

Gewirtz, S., Ball, S., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education* (Philadelphia: Open University Press)

Gillborn, D. & Youdell, D. (2000). *Rationing Education: Policy, Practice, Reform and Equity* (Philadelphia: Open University Press).

Lauder, H. & Hughes, D. (1999). *Trading in Futures: Why Markets in Education Don't Work* (Philadelphia: Open University Press ).

McGaw, B. (2006). "Achieving Quality and Equity Education". *Lecture to Melbourne Education Research Institute*. Available at:

[http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkecentre/events/2006events/BarryMcGaw\\_presentation\\_Aug06.pdf](http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkecentre/events/2006events/BarryMcGaw_presentation_Aug06.pdf)

Retrieved 29/3/07.

Vinson, T. (2007) *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia*. Catholic Social Services Australia/ Jesuit Social Services.

Whitty, G., Power, S., & Halpin, D.(1998). *Devolution and Choice in Education*(Philadelphia: Open University Press).

John Witte, J. (2000). *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press).