

The 'Education Revolution' redact

Mike Williss, 27 November 2009

The Rudd and Gillard education revolution is taking place by stages.

The first stage is about to take shape: the publication on the ACARA MySchool website of what Gillard claims will be "rich data" on each school in Australia. It will be the realisation of what she calls, borrowing from New York's Joel Klein, the "transparency agenda".

Controversially, that data will include the NAPLAN tests, diagnostic snapshots taken once every two years between Grades 3 and 9 of a very narrow, but certainly fundamental, area of learning.

That such data was not designed to communicate information about what schools actually achieve across the spectrum of academic and personal growth, or that its publication as school league tables will shame and embarrass both public and private schools that serve particular communities, seems not to worry Julia Gillard.

"I'm unapologetic about that," she told one reporter.

Nor is she worried that her sources of overseas inspiration seem not to stand up to scrutiny.

Conservative educator Professor Brian Caldwell, who hardly sees eye to eye with the Australian Education Union on most issues, [has described](#) (PDF 1.32KB) the New York City grades assigned to individual schools - one of the main "reforms" of schools chancellor Joel Klein - as "utterly discredited".

Dr Ken Boston, former South Australian and New South Wales education departments CEO, and more recently, for seven years the head of the United Kingdom's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [says](#) that since the introduction of NAPLAN-style tests in the UK, and their use to publish school league tables, "The school curriculum is narrower and poorer than it was when the tests were introduced in 1907."

In October, the biggest investigation into English primary education since 1967 [called for](#) league tables to be scrapped and for education to be reclaimed from politicians.

With Gillard determined to stare down opposition from parent and principal associations, education unions and academics, to Stage One of the education revolution, we need to know what "new resources and new reforms" she may be looking to unfold in Stage Two.

The two parts of the latter phrase may hold the key.

Rudd has made it quite clear that he is a financial conservative and that there is no blank cheque for education.

Yes, he's spent massive amounts of money on the computer roll-out and the schools building program, but as Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of South Australia, Alan Reid, has pointed out, "The BER is a strategy to address the global financial crisis - it is not an education strategy" (Reid, A (2009) "Is this really a revolution? A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda" in *Curriculum Perspectives*, Vol. 9. No. 3).

Gillard will continue to mention "new resources" to try and keep parents and education workers on side, but I suspect that it is the other half of the equation, "new reforms", that holds the key to Stage Two.

These will be structural changes to things like teacher recruitment, bonus pay based on student results, lengthening of the school day and school year, replacement of "underperforming" principals and senior staff, the setting of "no excuses" targets for improvement, and even possibly the entry of private operators in public schooling.

The appeal of such changes to the Rudd-Gillard team is two-fold.

First, social democrats Rudd and Gillard seem to have swallowed hook, line and sinker the effusions of Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee and Arne Duncan, the "big three" of neo-liberalism in US education. Anyone who saw Gillard's starry-eyed adoration of Klein, beamed in live from New York to SBS's *Insight* program a few months ago, will know we have a total convert, a believer in the cult of standardised testing and transparency.

Second, structural changes either don't cost much money, or they cost a bit but corporate backers can be found to bankroll significant parts of that spending, or the cost can be justified because it contributes to a weakening of those troublesome teacher unions.

One such "new reform" is due to be unveiled next year in Victoria. This is the altruistically-named Teach for Australia. Its [website lists](#) a star-studded cast of corporate backers. The scheme purports to place the "best and brightest" graduates into those schools that need them most.

It is a questionable scheme. [Research in the US](#) has shown that Teach for America appointees do not achieve any better student results than experienced and certified teachers. Like its sister scheme, Teach First in the UK, it has become popular with graduates, who have not trained as educators, because they are mentored by corporate personnel who offer to fast-track them into the much more lucrative world of corporate employment after they have served two years as teachers. During those two years they develop survival, planning and communication skills that will serve them well in the corporate world. They may or may not do much for their students, but they are under no obligation, after two years, to stick around and be accountable for their work.

Another "new reform" mooted by Rudd has been the "turnaround" model of Arne Duncan, implemented when he was heading education in Chicago (he is now Obama's Education Secretary). [Rudd has said](#) "... where despite best efforts, these schools are not lifting their performance, the Commonwealth expects education authorities to take serious action - such as replacing the school principal, replacing senior staff, reorganising the school or even merging that with other more effective schools." The literally fatal problem with this model is that the removal of staff who at least have some working knowledge of the sub-cultures of the youths with whom they are working also removes an important mediating influence that offers some guarantee of student well-being. The number of [student fatalities](#) has risen dramatically since the implementation of this reform in Chicago.

"Turnaround" philosophy is also "no excuses" philosophy. The prestige of Noel Pearson as a prominent Aboriginal lawyer has been used to fly this kite in Australian skies, just as he had flown the Teach for Australia kite. In October he published a long essay entitled "Radical Hope" in which he foreshadowed further changes to the curriculum and the structures for the education of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Speaking about the essay with Kerry O'Brien on the *7.30 Report*, [Pearson called for](#) "an extended day. So our proposal proposes to start school at eight and finish at five". Asked where this idea had come from, Pearson replied, "Well the model that we are looking at is what Barack Obama calls the 'No excuses Schools'. These are a set of public schools and charter schools that have a philosophy of no excuses. They believe that cultural background, socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, these are not educational destiny, they do not prescribe a destiny."

[KIPP Charter schools are typical of "no excuses" schools](#): heavily regimented, extremely authoritarian, 7.30am-5pm school days extended to two Saturdays per month, with a curriculum unapologetically focused on teaching to improve standardised test scores and attracting plenty of corporate dollars. True to her faith (in neo-liberal reforms) based policies for education, Gillard told a November 5, 2009 conference that [she supported](#) "New reforms and resources for disadvantaged schools to improve, for example through extended school hours models like the one proposed by Noel Pearson in Cape York."

Gillard has also fallen into line with the conservatives in dismissing that range of external factors that Pearson said did not "prescribe a destiny". She has [cited the work](#) of Professor John Hattie to state that "teacher quality" is the "single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and influence". No need, according to this viewpoint, for "blank cheques" or socio-

economic "excuses". If there are problems in student attainment, they reside in the quality and commitment of the teachers.

What Gillard doesn't point out, and what Pearson ignores, is Hattie's important caveat that there may be out-of-school influences more important than teacher quality, but which he chose not to look at in his study: his book isn't about "what cannot be influenced in schools - thus critical discussions about class, poverty, resources in families, health in families, and nutrition are not included - this is NOT because they are unimportant, indeed they may be more important than many of the issues discussed in this book. It is just that I have not included these topics in my orbit". http://www.nzherald.co.nz/maori/news/articlehas_already_indicated.cfm?c_id=252&objectid=10582708

Regrettably, Victorian education minister Bronwyn Pike that she will introduce the use of NAPLAN test results to identify teachers deserving of bonus pay. This is based on a belief that it will provide incentives to improve teacher quality. Almost to a person, teachers reject this type of performance pay, trusting in a collegiality and sharing of resources that sits easily within their profession but is simply not understood at all by corporate ideologues.

Behind all of these possibilities for Stage 2 lies the belief in turning education over to *market forces*. Addressing the National Press Club in August 2008, Rudd stated that "it's time to move beyond the outdated divisions between Commonwealth and State responsibilities and between public and private provision". But it was in his post-address session with reporters that [Rudd elaborated](#) on what his "transparency agenda", putting "readily comparable data" on schools for parents on the ACARA website, would really mean: "if some walk with their feet that's exactly what the system is designed to do."

If choice is predicated on competition, then competition is enhanced by a diversity of traders in the market place. The phenomenon of low-fee faith-based private schools has been driven by market fundamentalists. It has expanded the range of choices between public and private systems. But what about choice *within* a system? That's where the charter school operators of the US and the Academy operators of the UK add a new dimension to choice and allow a further retreat by governments from their responsibility to provide quality public education within easy access of local communities. The characteristic of both charters and Academies is publicly funded privatisation: the closing of "failing" public schools and their operational transfer to any range of corporate "charities" or for-profit educational providers. This is an issue on which the teacher unions and Professor Brian Caldwell part ways. He favours charters and Academies. Yet the [research indicates](#) they have high staff turnover and [do not deliver academically](#) (PDF 29KB). How many hostages to neo-liberal ideology do we need?

It is a sad reflection on Rudd and Gillard that they offer nothing that is progressive or improving as a compensation for the damage in the offing from the MySchool website and league tables.

Like Teach for Australia appointees, they believe they are the "best and brightest" and can breeze in for the tenure of their parliamentary terms and effect a "turnaround" without touching the factors that cause educational disadvantage, and disaffection and disengagement in marginalised youths and their communities.

Their sycophantic admiration for failed overseas policies frustrates the creation of a genuinely progressive Australian roadmap towards the improvement of public education.

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