Co-designing educational policy: Professional voice and policy making post-COVID

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Abstract
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Co-designing Educational Policy: Professional Voice and Policy Making Post-COVID

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Abstract: The closing and re-opening of Australian schools during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequities. At the same time, it brought into sharp focus the critical leadership role of school principals and teachers in providing responsive and contextually relevant educational continuity. This paper explores two related reflections: first, that school leaders and teachers are best positioned to respond effectively to community needs, and, second, that their professional knowledge and experience should assume greater significance to wider educational policy. More direct and constructive input by educational professionals to the newly formed National Federal Reform Commission (NFRC) can contribute to policy aimed at reducing inequity.

Keywords: Educational inequity, professional empowerment, governance, policy development

Introduction

In the midst of a crisis, priority is rightly given to survival responses. The recovery phase, however, invites evaluation of those aspects from pre-crisis life which might be retained, reformed, or irrevocably lost (Boin, Hart, McConnell & Preston 2010). The urgency of COVID-19 resulted in the establishment of a temporary National Cabinet comprising the Prime Minister, state Premiers, and territory Chief Ministers on March 13, 2020. One major question considered by National Cabinet was whether to keep school campuses open or to close them and switch to home and online learning. They were guided in this task by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), comprising the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and each of the state and territory CMOs. National Cabinet agreed to a set of seven National Principles for School Education on April 16, 2020, based on ‘the AHPPC health advice that “on current evidence, schools can be fully open”‘ (Morrison 2020b: n.p.). Differences emerged between jurisdictions, and government and non-government sectors, including whether schools should remain open, or, if closed, how remote online
learning was to be operationalised. These differences created confusion and highlighted again that structural inequities continue to constrain Australian education (Reid 2016).

Out of this confusion, however, has already come considerable good. When forced remote learning was finally implemented, the extraordinary skill, knowledge, and value of the teaching profession came to the fore. The social and community leadership of principals expanded as they daily translated the National Principles into lived reality for their school communities, all the while caring for increasingly exhausted and anxious teachers. Situational and relational knowledge of their community (Mutch 2015) highlighted the importance of principals’ informed contextual decision making (Hallinger 2018). Thousands of teachers rapidly transformed curriculum, creating virtual classrooms, and developing novel ways to help students remain socially connected. These two crisis management responses can now inform and energise a post-COVID redesign of Australian education, one that is supported by the collective good will of politicians, yet is clearly informed and led by the education profession.

Localising the National Response

Initial responses to COVID-19 were cooperative between the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments. The Commonwealth Government provided financial support to the states and territories for health services, restricted entry to Australia, imposed quarantine self-isolation, and, on March 5, 2020, ‘activated the National Coordination Mechanism’ (Morrison, 2020a: n.p.). The explanation for this was to establish a whole-of-government approach to managing the emerging crisis. In doing so, the Prime Minister effectively framed the growing response to the pandemic as a collective one, beyond normal political partisanship. The pandemic, and its potential health, social and economic impacts, warranted closer collaborative decision making in the national interest, and thus on March 13, 2020, the Prime Minister announced the formation of a National Cabinet. This response presumed that states and territories should not act alone in the face of the crisis to achieve the outcomes required to protect the nation, but rather should work in cooperation.

Unfortunately, this solidarity was not forthcoming for schools. Following the National Cabinet meeting on March 22, 2020, some state Premiers unilaterally ‘broke ranks’ (Tulich, Rizzi & McGaughey 2020). The Commonwealth Government, on the advice of health experts, strongly recommended schools were safe and should remain open, but Premiers from New South Wales and Victoria, and the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory recommended students stay home, with early onset of school holidays and remote learning from home.

Confusion for students, caregivers, teachers, and principals was rife, deriving, in part, from Australia’s idiosyncratic school governance architecture. Because constitutional authority for school education rests with the states and territories, operationalising the national principles fell primarily to state and territory education departments, a position further complicated by
the presence of a large non-government sector over whom state and territory education departments hold little direct influence. For example, in New South Wales, less than two weeks after the National Coordination Mechanism was activated, a group of non-government school principals met with the Secretary of the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Chief Health Officer (J. Baker, 'The messiest part': The inside story of how NSW schools responded to COVID-19, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 29, 2020). Fissures were already appearing, with fears that non-government schools would pivot quickly to online learning, effectively closing their campuses, thus placing significant public pressure on government schools to do the same. Some non-government schools in Victoria also shifted early to remote learning, and pre-emptive home-schooling was rising (Creagh 2020), despite a consistent message that incidence of viral transmission among students was negligible. Principals publicly, and anecdotally to us, expressed growing anxiety amongst their staff, and complaints swelled about the impracticalities of applying physical distance requirements in schools (L. Hamilton-Smith, Queensland teachers say COVID-19 social distancing ‘impossible’ in crowded classrooms, *ABC News*, March 19, 2020).

**Localising Inequity**

When finally enacted nation-wide, replacing physical attendance at school with home and online learning exposed compelling examples of Australia’s increasing education inequity. Schools were left to find ways to minimise the effects of new modes of schooling for the vast majority of Australian students. Unsurprisingly, with many schools having little preparation, limited technology, digital pedagogical expertise, or technical support to deliver classes online, education experts warned of consequences based on these inequities (Graham & Sahlberg 2020). This was compounded for some school students who were digitally secluded with little to no access to technology, variable internet accessibility, and limited home support (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff & Margetts 2020). Absence of online connection for one school resulted in even turning to radio broadcast technology (S. Cousins, Children in this Australian town don’t have the internet, so their school has turned to radio, *SBS News*, May 2, 2020).

This was not unexpected. Independent research reports commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to inform National Cabinet’s decision making (Brown, Te Riele, Shelley & Woodroffe 2020; Clinton 2020) highlighted significant concerns about remote learning for vulnerable groups including students from socio-educationally disadvantaged communities, linguistically diverse backgrounds, unsafe home environments, rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and students who may have special learning needs. Consistent across the reports was that extended periods of remote learning would result in poorer educational outcomes for the most vulnerable Australians (Drane, Vernon & O’Shea 2020; Finkel 2020).

Structural and localised inequities further surfaced when discussion turned subsequently to student transition back to school. The Commonwealth Minister for Education raised the
spectre of altering funding arrangements for non-government schools if they opened campuses more quickly, a move that would likely pressure government schools over which the Minister holds no direct authority. It was suggested scheduled payments to non-government schools for July could be brought forward to June if non-government schools ensured half their students return by June 1, leading one Victorian non-government school principal to describe the offer as a ‘bribe’ (G. Hitch, Religious, independent schools offered $3 billion in advance funding to resume face-to-face classes by June, ABC News, April 29, 2020).

**Empowered Professionalism**

In the face of such challenge, however, what is also clear was the dedication, ingenuity, and professionalism of school leaders and teachers. While governments grappled with divergent needs and priorities, as well as confidence about clear messaging (Leask & Hooker 2020), principals and teachers pro-actively responded to best meet their students’ learning and wellbeing needs. In doing so, they exemplified the pre-eminence of contextually relevant decision making (C. Peterson, Return to class is going to look very different from school to school, Sydney Morning Herald, April 22, 2020), despite, at times, feeling genuinely fearful for their own health (Wilson 2020). They worked to mobilise resources and partnerships immediately to create new realities of schooling. School leaders and teachers became responsible for two simultaneous methods of delivering learning: at school to students whose parents were essential workers or could not work from home, and remotely to the majority of students via online classes. School leaders and teachers needed to make decisions swiftly based on what they considered was essential to their students’ learning, and how best to mobilise resources to teach both remotely and on campus. Concurrently, they supported the wellbeing and connectedness of students in their classrooms and provided support and resources to parents now schooling from home (Ziebell, Acquaro, Pearn & Seah 2020).

Publicly, and anecdotally to us, parents and the community shared how deeply appreciative they were of the humility, innovation, expertise, and sacrifices of school leaders and teachers (J. Baker, How COVID-19 exposed the fault lines in Australian education, Sydney Morning Herald, May 16, 2020). The new wave of cases which emerged during June and July indicates such localised and targeted response will remain for some time yet (Fitzgerald 2020), highlighting the need for ongoing care of educators’ own well-being (R. Collie & A. Martin, Teacher wellbeing during COVID-19, Teacher, April 7, 2020).

**From Local to National Leadership**

This responsiveness underpins our argument for greater direct inclusion of the profession in national policy development, not merely implementation. It represents hope, following the example of National Cabinet, that divisive partisan policy differences can be put aside in favour of an uncontested national good. Consonant with how governments looked to health
experts for guidance on school closures, the significant role and expertise of school leaders and teachers exemplified in this paper now commend a similar approach. Government responses to COVID-19 led to new modes of national leadership to address a major health crisis, and we argue these new modes of decision making and policy development should also inform how to address the ongoing inequities in Australian education exposed again through this pandemic.

Throughout COVID-19, National Cabinet consulted extensively with health experts, with all policy initiatives informed by the AHPPC. By contrast, it was to school educators that National Cabinet turned to implement, rather than develop, policy response. School leaders and teachers responded not with frustration and animus, but with ingenuity, creativity, and a total commitment to deliver the best education possible under the circumstances. Throughout this challenging period, school leaders exercised imperative autonomy, collaborating with teachers to deliver new ways of educating in unpredictable circumstances. As the pandemic shifts and reconfigures, school leaders and teachers are again responding to fresh challenges (Cahill, Shlezinger, Romei & Dadvand 2020; Department of Education and Training 2020), requiring nuanced approaches responsive to individual contexts, a mode of working that is often not possible within current education policy settings (Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson & Gavin 2019; Savage 2016).

The perceived success of National Cabinet in handling the pandemic has resulted in a decision to consolidate it as an ongoing governance structure. The Prime Minister announced on May 29, 2020 that a new National Federation Reform Council (NFRC) would be established due to ‘the success that has been yielded by the operation of the National Cabinet’ (Morrison 2020c). On June 12, 2020, National Cabinet announced six national priority areas of reform: Rural and Regional Australia, Skills, Energy, Infrastructure and Transport, Populations and Migration, and Health, with each having a National Cabinet Reform Committee. It seems perplexing to us that education is not a priority area in its own right, given the substantial evidence that inequity continues to grow (Piccoli, Bonnor, Wilson & Kidson in press). We argue that education should be an additional priority area, given its essential contributions to most of the reform areas. Prioritising education would also indicate genuine commitment to reducing the inequities entrenched in Australian schools.

We posit it is the profession’s expertise that should now lead national education policy through the NFRC. School autonomy policy typically originates centrally (Gobby 2013; McGrath-Champ et al. 2019), leaving school leaders to implement, rather than contribute to its design. We believe the NFRC is an opportunity to capitalise on a new way of co-operative national government working closely with experts. New education policy can be co-designed by practising education professionals thereby improving an education system that continues to manifest increasing inequity.
Conclusion

The temporary shift to online remote schooling has awakened a healthy appreciation for the leadership of principals and teachers, as well as the social community-sustaining role of schools. Temporal urgency for national education reform might not seem as acute as responding to a global pandemic, yet the moral challenge to do so is no less significant. Voices calling for overhaul of a national education framework to reduce inequity are not new, yet elements of governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic show that old ways of thinking and acting can change. We can move beyond the fallacy that change is unlikely because its scale is so great. The urgent reliance on non-partisan medical officers further exemplifies that professionally informed policy decision making can exist, if there is moral and political humility.

We must press these to the forefront of professional and scholarly discourse, harnessing the collective goodwill towards professional educators that has flowed from this pandemic. Sadly, the wider community has experienced first-hand how valuable principals and teachers are through having their direct contact forcibly removed for a brief time. Political discourse should now turn away from its ceaseless contestation and boundary protections, and focus on how we can best draw on the wisdom and moral purpose of professional educators, principals and teachers alike.

Australia has a newly iterated set of agreed educational goals which explicitly commit all Australian governments to ‘promote excellence and equity’ (Education Council of Australia 2019: 4); a door of possibility seems slightly ajar. We must push it open, bravely, and move beyond promote to achieve. This would be fitting acknowledgement that, as a nation, we have learned deeply from the profound lessons of COVID-19.

References


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