

Social Justice and Australian Schooling: Understanding and Confronting 'Cruel Optimism'

Wyndham Lecture,
2 September, 2021

Professor Bob Lingard

***The Cure of Troy* by Seamus Heaney**

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave...
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

Emily Dickinson: 'Hope' is the thing with
feathers - That perches in the soul - And
sings the tune without the words - And
never stops - at all -'.

Raymond Williams: progressive politics is
about 'making hope practical, rather
than despair convincing'.

Martin Luther King: 'The arc of the moral
universe is long and moves toward
justice'.



The argument

- **Commitment to equality** of opportunity, perhaps outcomes for all in/from schooling (e.g. Alice Springs Declaration).
- **Gonski Review goal** – aims to ensure that: ‘differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions.... all students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances’.
- BUT, evidence (overwhelming) is that they are and remain so and probably background/student achievement correlation strengthening. We articulate and hold out this aspiration to all young people, but ‘compromised conditions of possibility’ of achieving for all young people: Lauren Berlant (2011) calls, ‘**cruel optimism**’.
- Why is this the situation? Structural Inequality, growing inequality; systemic funding inequalities, limited redistribution; non-holistic approach to policy making; data not used productively; reshape research work of AERO; pressures on teachers; pedagogies of indifference. **Politicians and policy-makers the problem; need to reassert commitment to common good; from cruel optimism to non-stupid optimism. Teachers and schools are not the problem. Structural and systemic inequalities and policies need to be a focus.**



Intellectual Resources

- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- C. Bonnor, P. Kidson, A. Piccoli, P. Sahlberg and R. Wilson (2021). *Structural Failure: Why Australia Keeps Falling Short of Our Educational Goals*. University of NSW Gonski Institute for Education.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Reid, A. (2019). *Changing Australian Education: How policy is taking us backwards and what can be done about it*. Allen and Unwin.
- Savage, M. (2021). *The Return of Inequality*. Harvard University Press.
- Save Our Schools website: *SOS Australia Fighting for Equity in Education*.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Penguin.
- Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C. and Schmid, M. (2019). *PISA 2018 in Brief 1: ACER*.



Social Justice and Education

- Pip, Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 'In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice'.
- Opening words of Amartya Sen's (2009) book, *The Idea of Justice*. He adds: 'But the strong perception of manifest injustice applies to adult human beings as well' (p.vii).



Social Justice and Education

- Focus on (defining) justice as abstract principles (transcendental definitions, e.g. Rawls); 'justice as fairness' as opposed to a focus on injustice and how to move towards justice in any given and specific society/social context (Comparative approach, e.g. Sen).
- Sen focus on comparative differences/injustices between people in specific situations (Savage, 2021, p.17).
- Mike Savage (2021), *The Return of Inequality*, argues similarly re a focus on inequality vs equality; non-transcendental concern with equality, focus on inequalities.



Social Justice and Education

- Agree with Sen, but in contemporary politics and policy social justice has been datafied and framed by metrics in what Mau (2019) calls the 'metric society' (*Like School* measures – 'fatalism towards structural inequality (Power and Frandji, 2010); PISA – strength of correlation performance and SES background); Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) extent of inequality affects student performance; reductive definitions, rearticulate equity as a measure of performance on tests.
- Social justice rearticulated as equity; equity as 'market enhancing mechanism' (Savage, 2011).
- Need to retether to a way of thinking about injustice (Lingard et al., 2014).



Social Justice and Education

- ‘Refusing to deal with numbers rarely serves the interests of the least well-off’ (Piketty, 2014, p.577).
- A way of thinking about injustice proffered by Nancy Fraser (2013): **Distribution**: ‘How much economic inequality does justice permit?’ (p.192) – **redistribution**; **Recognition**: ‘What constitutes equal respect, which kinds of differences merit public **recognition**?’ - misrecognition(p.192); impact of globalization – post-Westphalian, the frame.



Social Justice and Education

- **Representation:** ‘If **representation** is the defining issue of the political, then the characteristic political injustice is *misrepresentation*’ (Fraser, 2013, p.192).
- In context of globalization, focus on injustices: ‘how can we integrate struggles against **maldistribution**, **misrecognition**, and **misrepresentation** within a post-Westphalian frame?’ (Fraser, 2013, p. 208); must address ‘global injustices’ (Sen, 2009): UN’s SDGs, 2015-2030.



Confronting injustice

- ‘What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy’, John Dewey (1990, p.3), *The School and Society*.



Confronting injustice

- ‘Unless the tenor of the public-private debate also changes to incorporate the values and principles that privilege the common good rather than individual self-interest, then any new approach is destined to be subsumed by the ideology of neoliberalism’. (Reid, 2019, p. 78)



Confronting injustice

- ‘If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality of education for all others is degraded’ (Connell, 1993, p. 15).
- ‘An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage’ (Connell, 1993, p.15).



Cruel Optimism

- Berlant (2011), *Cruel Optimism*: ‘a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility’ (p. 24).
- Berlant links to precarity of many lives set against the American Dream, hope, desire that hard work in school and life, irrespective of background will lead to the future good life; schooling is important here for opening up opportunities for all, but....



Confronting the Cruel Optimism built into contemporary schooling

- The **Optimism**: the Melbourne Declaration on Schooling in Australia (2008) Two overarching goals: **Goal 1** Australian schooling promotes **equity and excellence**; **Goal 2** All young Australians become **successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens**.
- **Commitment to Action**: 'improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds' ...
- Updating in Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019: similar two overarching goals, some modifications.



Confronting the Cruel Optimism built in to contemporary schooling

- Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes **excellence and equity**. Goal 2: All young Australians become **confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community**.
- **Commitment to action:** Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their potential; Supporting all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage; 'have a sense of **optimism** about their lives and the future' (p.3).
- 'Australian Governments commit to ensuring the educational community works to provide equality of opportunity and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage'. (p.19)



Structural inequality and injustice in schooling

- 'Suspicion that attention to non-school factors—concentrated poverty, social services, housing and public health—will be used to excuse poor teaching has led to an accountability system narrowly focused on what happens within school buildings; in the process, we are missing opportunities to build more comprehensive databases that situate accountability for learning within broader social and economic contexts'. (Henig, 2013, p.xi-xii)



COVID 19 Impact: Opening up possibilities?

- Highlighted inequalities of multiple kinds
- Highlighted inequalities in school provision and in families.
- Yet: highlighted significance of and respect for science/research/experts in post-truth era ('objective facts' less influential in public opinion than 'emotion' and 'personal beliefs'); evidence-informed policy.
- Necessity of a focus on the common/collective good and global focus.
- Opens up possibilities for confronting inequalities and injustices in schooling; confronting cruel optimism.



Growing Inequality: Opening up possibilities?

- Mike Savage (2021). *The Return of Inequality*.
- Argues documentation and acknowledgement of growing inequalities and its dangers – opens up possibilities.
- Significance of Thomas Piketty's (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
- Significance of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's (2009). *The Spirit Level*.



Growing Inequality: Opening up possibilities?

- Savage: Significance of Joseph Stiglitz (2011) popular paper in *Vanity Fair*: ‘... in our own democracy, 1 percent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation’s income – an inequality even the wealthy will come to regret’ (p. 4.).
- Turning the focus on the super rich v poverty focus in policy.
- Importance of the new economic language of income percentiles: 1% cf 99% (Piketty).



Growing Inequality: Opening up possibilities?

- 'This targeting of 'the 1%' was powerful because it made inequality concrete' (Savage, p.5) cf Gini Coefficient (0-1).
- Savage asks: 'Why has inequality caught the attention of powerful and wealthy elites...?', rather than those affected by the depredations of such inequality (pp.13-14) ?
- Inequality a focus of the World Economic Forum, 'rising income and wealth disparity is rated ... as the most important trend in determining global developments over the next ten years' (p.15): social instability; Oxfam 2017 briefing: 'left unchecked, growing inequality threatens to pull our society apart' (p.15); Inequality the focus not equality.
- Globally: richest 1% own 43.4% of the world's wealth; low wage growth (Rowe, 2021).



UN's SDGs 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 2015-2030

- 1. No poverty.
- 2. Zero hunger.
- 4. Quality education: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.
- 5. Gender equality.
- 10. Reduced inequalities.
- 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions.

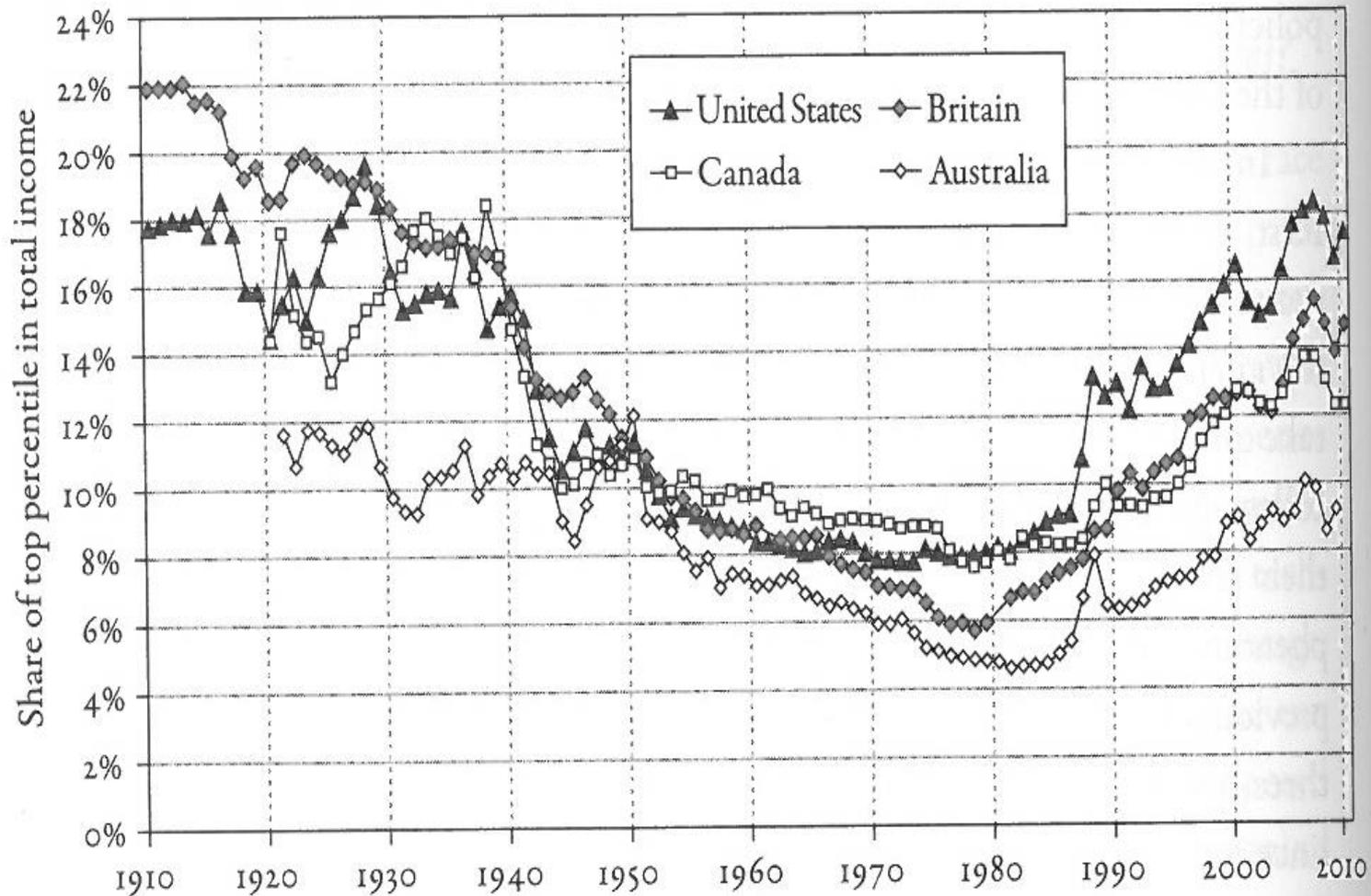


FIGURE 9.2. Income inequality in Anglo-Saxon countries, 1910–2010

The share of top percentile in total income rose since the 1970s in all Anglo-Saxon countries, but with different magnitudes.

Sources and series: see piketty.pse.ens.fr/capital21c.

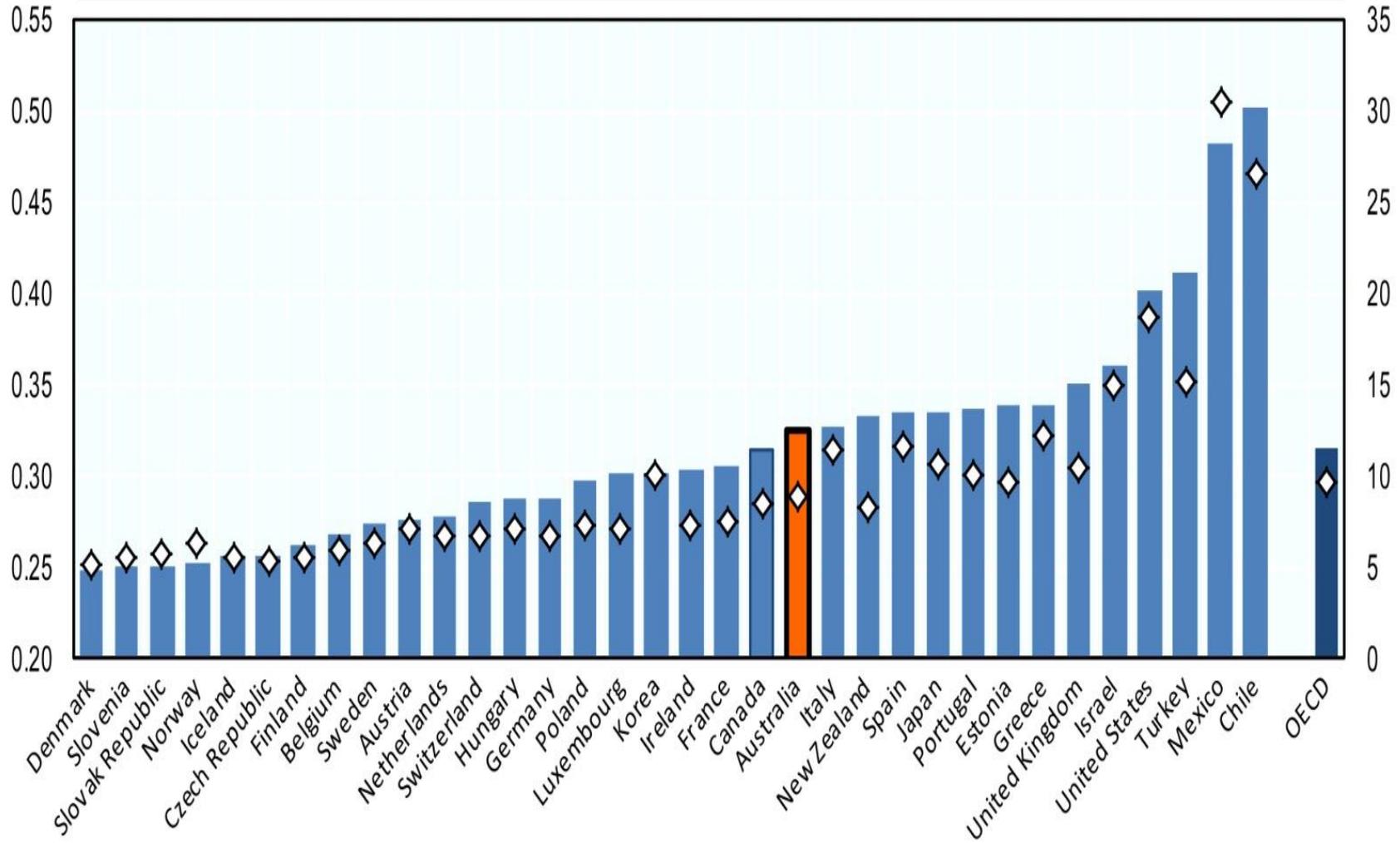


Growing inequality in Australia

- AB Atkinson and Andrew Leigh (2006) ANU Discussion paper, *The Distribution of Top Incomes in Australia: 1920 - 2002*.
- Argument: 1920s – mid 1940s: income share of top income group fell; rose briefly after war and fell through until early 1980s; 1980s and 1990s top income share rose rapidly and at the turn of the century: top share highest for past 50 years; share of top income group correlates with extent of overall social inequality
- Andrew Leigh (2013) *Battlers and Billionaires*. Sydney: Redback.

■ Gini coefficient (left scale)

◇ Gap between 10% richest and poorest average income (right scale)





Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010). *The Spirit Level*

- Sub-title of book: 'Why Equality is better for Everyone'. Basic position: rich nations have reached a level of affluence that no longer ensures gains in health, happiness or wellbeing (cf poor nations).
- The way forward for rich nations: reducing the gap between rich and poor, reducing the amount of income inequality, poverty has effects but the extent of income inequality in a nation also has a strong and independent effect: 'The evidence shows that reducing inequality is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life, for all of us' (p.29).
- Re schooling: if a nation wants higher levels of achievement amongst **all** students: 'it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement' (p.30). (macro policy settings of more redistributive policies or more equal wage structure or combination). Policy implications? School funding.



Debate about meritocracy

- Meritocratic and social mobility function of schools linked to the extent of structural inequality.
- Strengthening of achievement gap along social class lines globally (Chmielewski, 2019).
- Australia: PISA, performance/SES correlation strengthening; NAPLAN, intransigent SES/performance Correlation.
- Bernstein: 'Education cannot compensate for society'.



Debate about meritocracy

- Academic debate about meritocracy: Markovitz (2019), Sandel (2020), Wooldridge (2021).
- Wooldridge (2021, p.17): thinks critics right in their observation that: 'the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society'.
- Respect for all persons; growing inequality (merit and talent).
- Meritocracy and schools' role work if there is a limit on inequality; cf current neoliberalism, responsabilising individuals.
- Impact of changed migration policies (global talent war) (Brown and Tannock, 2009) on national commitments to meritocracy.



Debate about meritocracy

- Growing inequalities affect working of democracy.
- Muller (2021): two-fold secession from democratic life: the super rich and the very poorest at the bottom of the scale.
- Rise of scepticism about democracy, populism, post-truth, anti-experts/expertise.



Structural Issues v School, classroom reforms

- C. Bonnor, P.Kidson, A.Piccoli, P.Sahlberg and R.Wilson (2021). *Structural Failure: Why Australia Keeps Falling Short of Our Educational Goals*. Sydney: Uni NSW Gonski Institute for Education.
- International, National and State Data demonstrate strengthening correlation SES background and school achievement (Bonnor et al., 2019; Chmielewski, 2019).
- ‘... the current Australian school system is concentrating disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools’ (p. ii) – consequences.



Structural Issues v School, classroom reforms

- 'Edward Haertel from Stanford University has estimated based on various studies on teacher effectiveness that teacher differences account for about 10% of the variance in student test scores gains in a single year. If teachers account for up to 15% of the variability in student measured achievement in school, as research suggests, then the most opportunities for improving quality of education are found in the system-level conditions, including systemic structure. Similarly, reasons for inadequate performance of education systems are often in out-of-school conditions and how school systems are structured' (Bonnor et al., 2021, p. 6).



SES and student achievement

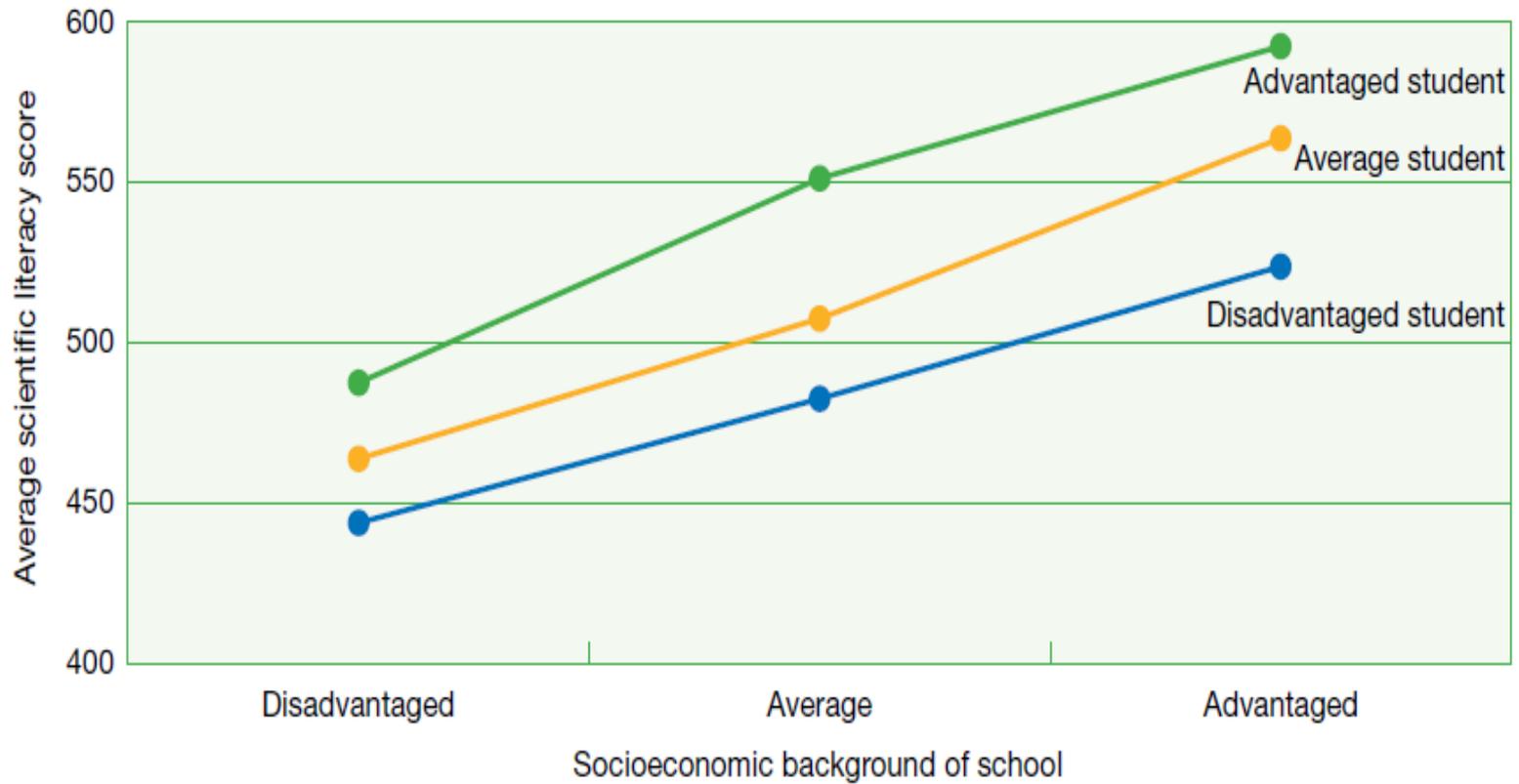
- ‘In broad terms the socio-economic status of Australian families makes the greatest contribution to student achievement, followed by the SES of the school itself, substantially created by which students are enrolled. School and classroom factors together explain around one-third of variation of students’ test scores, and even this includes factors such as school organization and leadership, curriculum, resources, teacher training, quality and distribution’ (Bonnor et al., 2021, p. 6).



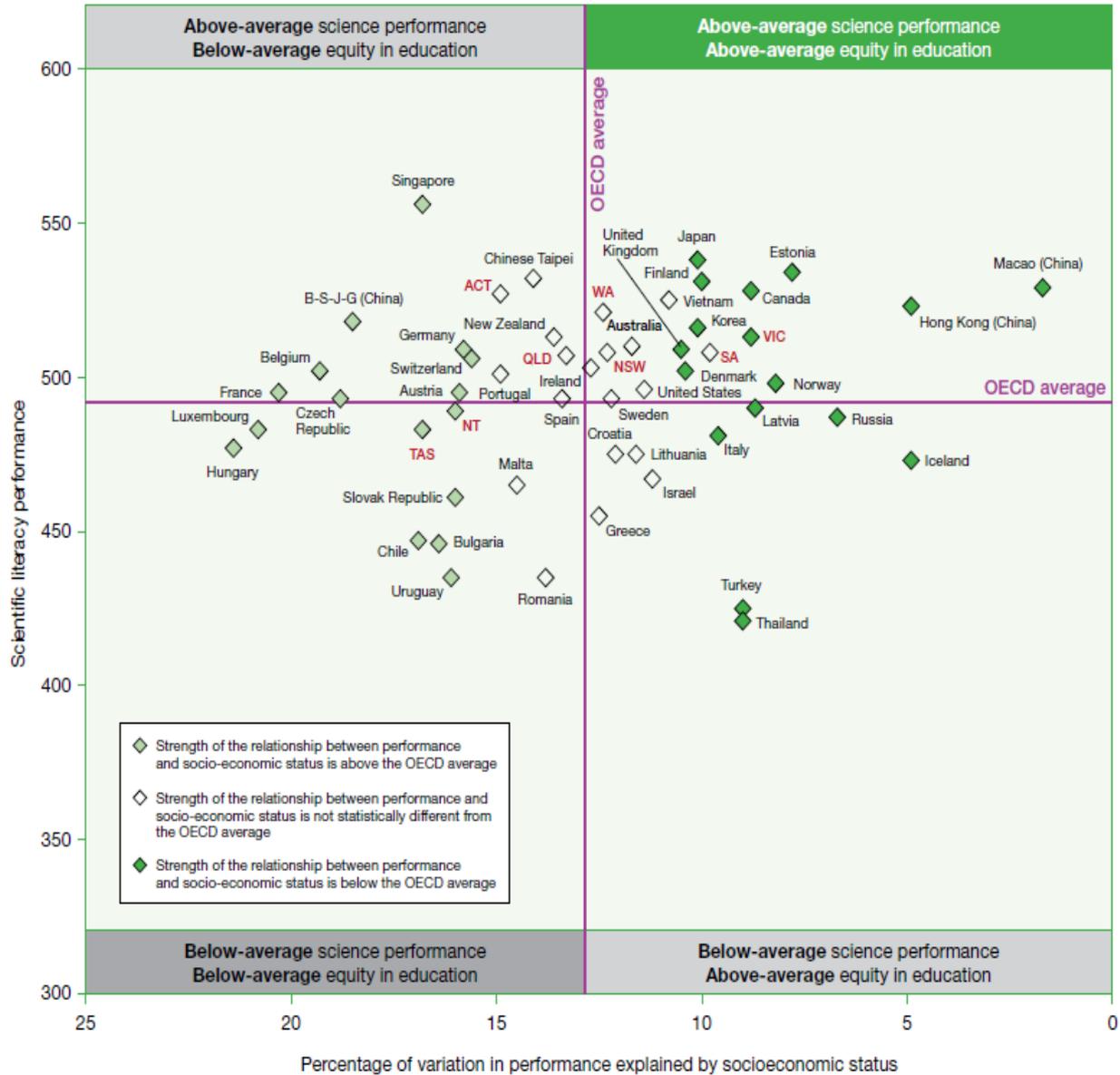
Effects of a Quasi-market policy framework

- 'In the government sector, for example, higher ICSEA schools are 26% bigger than they were in 2011, lower ICSEA schools are marginally smaller than they were in 2011. Lower ICSEA Catholic schools are around 10% smaller than they were in 2011. In general, higher ICSEA schools in all sectors are not only growing in size, but they also have an increasing concentration of high SES students. The reverse is happening in lower ICSEA schools' (p.6).
- 'The more advantaged schools have high proportions (>34%) of students from the highest socio-economic quartile. Among more disadvantaged schools those proportions are low (<10%) and declining' (p.7).
- 'The current reality is that while our concern about equity is rising, student achievement in schools disadvantaged on the basis of SES, location and sector is falling' (p.

Scientific literacy achievement of students and schools by socioeconomic background



Source: PISA (2015 report, p. 218)



Source: PISA (2015 report, p.214)



Australia and PISA performance

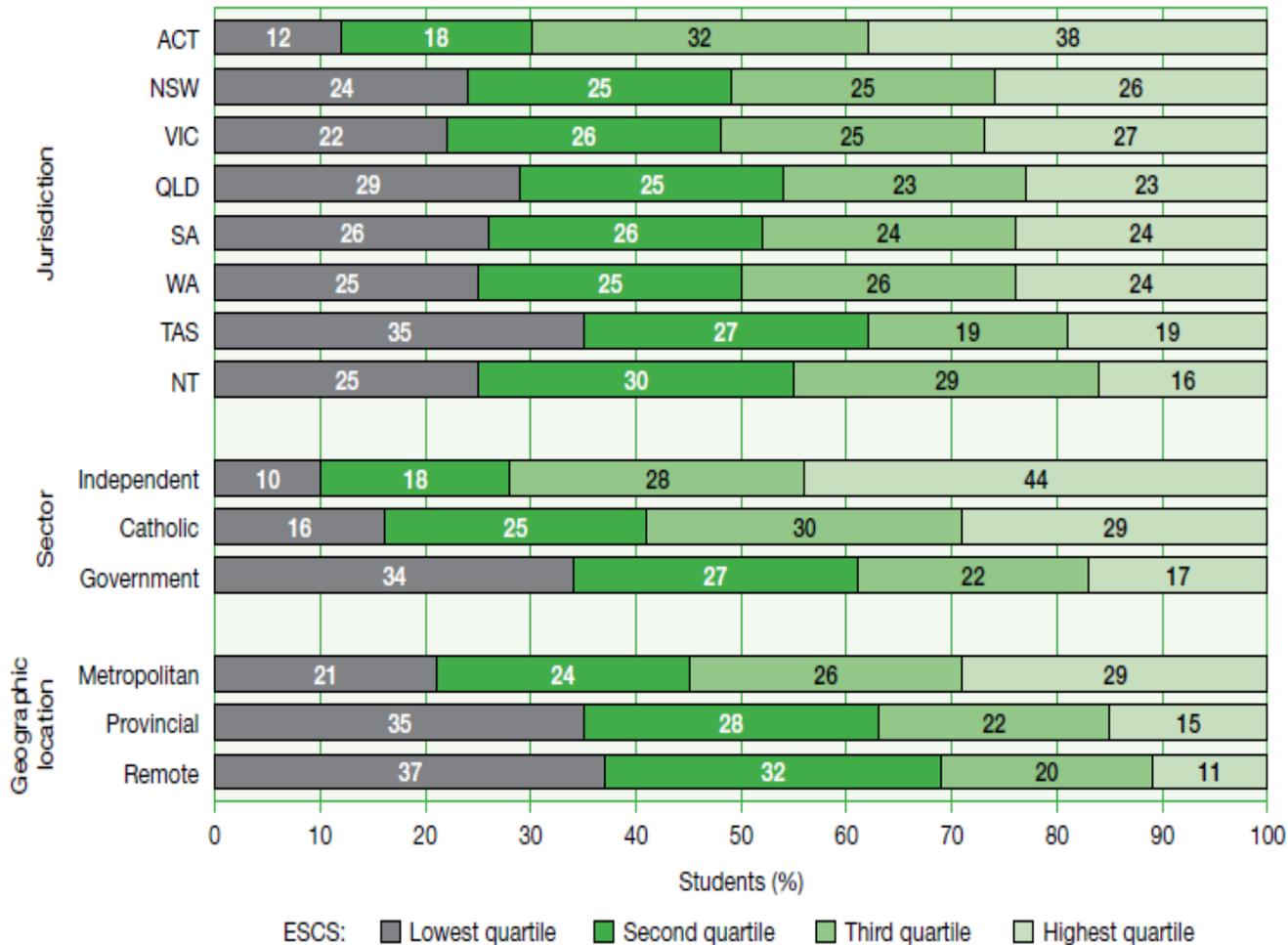
- 'Australia's average achievement in reading, maths, and science has experienced a pattern of long-term decline.' average achievement of a 15 year old in 2018 almost one year behind students in 2000 PISA on the three scales. (ACER, 2019)
- 'Average performance in reading, maths and science has declined in the long-term across all socioeconomic (SES) quartiles, with the largest declines recorded amongst the highest quartile'. (ACER, 2019)
- '...the difference in achievement between students in the highest quartile and students in the lowest quartile is equivalent to around three years of schooling'. (ACER, 2019)



Australia and PISA performance

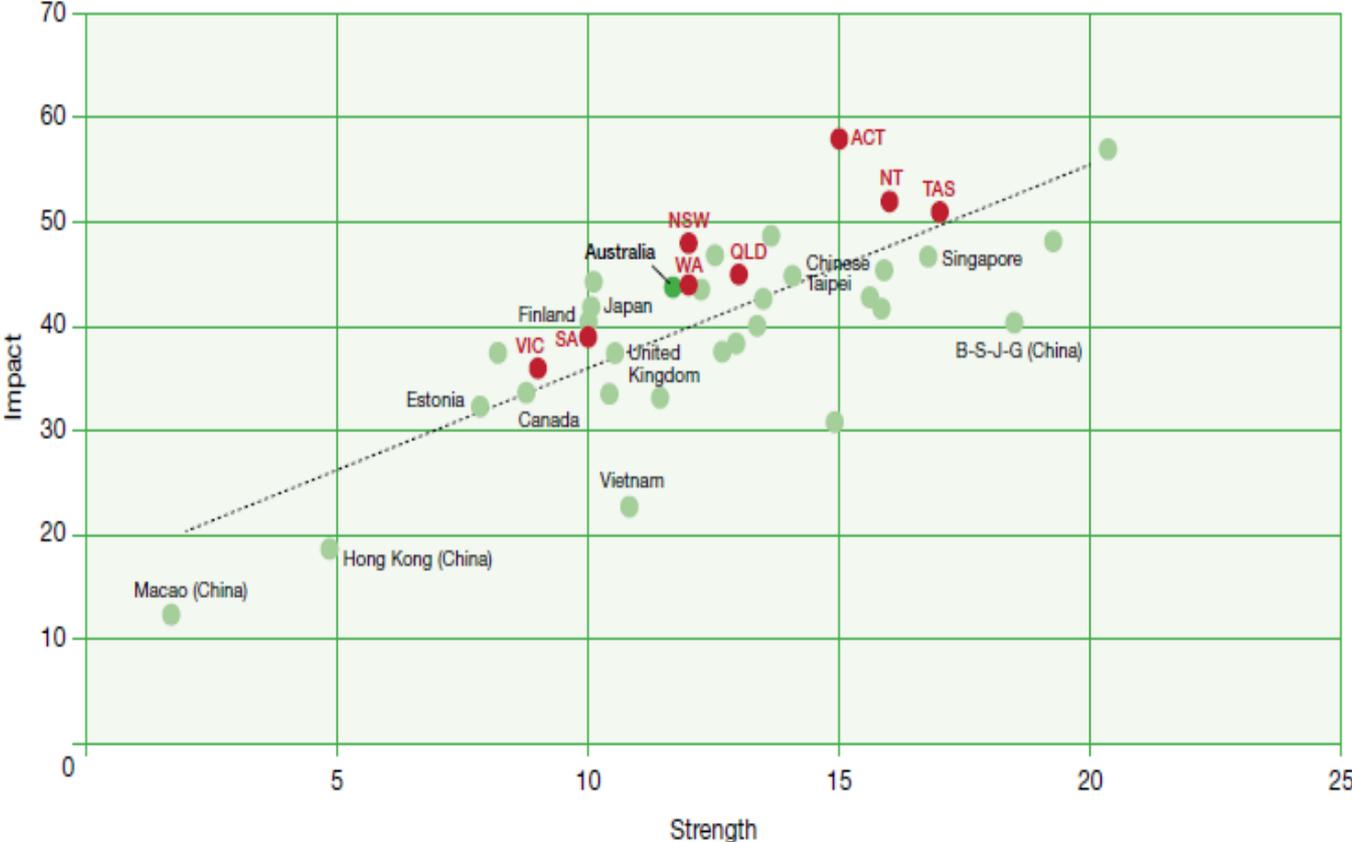
- 'Non-Indigenous students continue to outperform their Indigenous peers by the equivalent of more than two years of schooling'. (ACER, 2019)
- SES and school sectors: 'After adjusting for the SES background at both student and school-level, there were no differences in reading or science achievement between the school sectors'. (ACER, 2019)
- Comparing government and Catholic sectors and controlling for SES, government schools achieved at a higher level than Catholic schools. (ACER, 2019)

Proportion of students in each ESCS quartile, selected groups within Australia



Source: PISA (2015 report, p. 222)

PISA: Relationship between strength and impact of socioeconomic background internationally and for the Australian jurisdictions



Source: PISA (2015 report, p.209)



Dennis Condron (2011) 'Egalitarianism and Educational Excellence', *Educational Researcher*, 40 (2), pp.47-55.

- Addresses explanations for US's comparatively poor performance on international comparisons such as PISA.
- Challenges explanations offered solely in terms of 'cross-national differences in educational systems'.
- Rather, while not denying that systemic policy settings (e.g. funding) and schools can make a difference, demonstrates close correlations between amount/extent of social inequality and performance on such educational performance comparisons.
- Explores question of an 'equality-achievement trade-off' in schooling in affluent societies re comparative performance.
- Uses 2006 PISA data and the *Gini Coefficient* as measure of social inequality.
- Finding: the more equal / egalitarian societies, in terms of correlations at least, have higher average educational achievement, a higher percentage of high performing students and a low percentage of very low-skilled students.



What to do?: confronting cruel optimism

- Addressing societal structural inequality.
- Addressing systemic funding inequalities.
- Redistributive funding and related programs.
- Innovation programs.
- Holistic approach to policy making; excellence and equity rationales.
- Productive use of data for policy making and systemic learning.
- Rethinking educational accountability (Lingard et al., 2021).
- The work of schools and teachers; opportunity to learn standards.
- Research work of AERO.



Addressing systemic funding inequalities

- Reid (2019, pp.55 ff): argument that from time of Whitlam's systematising of federal funding for schools that entitlement (choice) has trumped equity concerns (needs-based funding).
- Details: 1976: government schools received 65% of Commonwealth funding cf 35% for non-governments; 2019 20% for government schools and 80% for non-government schools (Reid, p. 68).
- By 2023: government schools funded at 91% of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), non-government at 100% (p.69); add fees and donations etc.



Addressing systemic funding inequalities

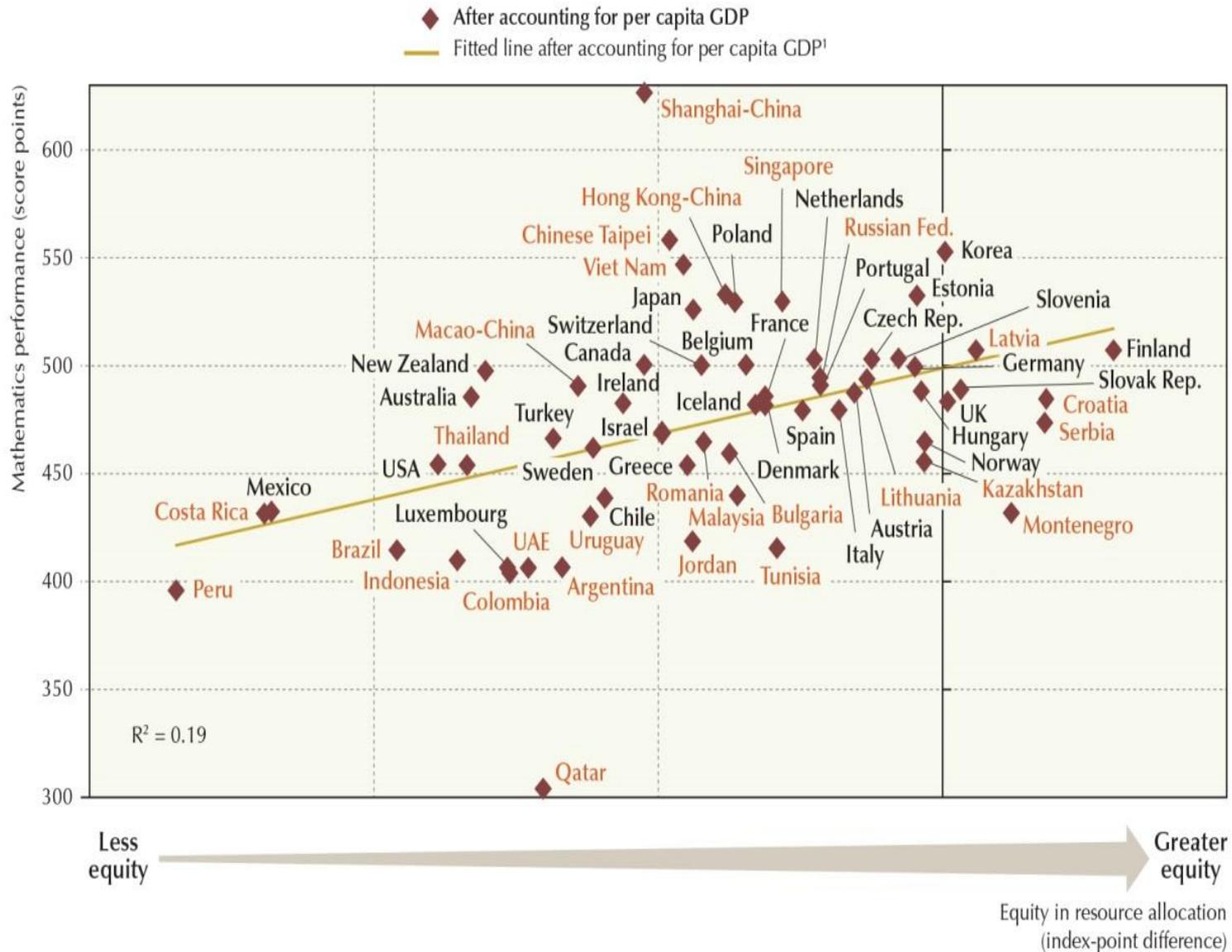
- Gonski Review (2011): all students complete Year 12; 'differences in educational outcomes not result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions' (Cobbold, 2021); base funding for all schools then additional needs-based loadings; nationally integrated funding model taking account of Commonwealth and state funding; SRS set too high and loads for low SES, Indigenous and ESL students set too low; no losers problem; encouragement of philanthropy (Cobbold, 2021).



Addressing systemic funding inequalities

- US National Bureau of Economic Research (2021): demonstrated that increased expenditure in low income schools led to increases in educational attainment ('adequacy-based school finance reforms' from 1990: (Cobbold, 2021): 'This led to increased expenditure in disadvantaged school districts above the state average to compensate for the increased costs of educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds' (Cobbold, 2021).

Students perform better when school systems allocate resources more equitably





Teachers and social inequality

- Success of John Hattie's book (2008) *Visible Learning* (London, Routledge): Meta-analysis is misread by policy makers and schools to indicate that teachers alone make all the difference.
- Hattie rightly argues that he is only dealing with those practices schools and teachers can have effects on. He also acknowledges that other external factors, such as socio-economic circumstances, poverty, and the like, might very well have more effect.
- Thus, he states, **'It is not a book about what cannot be influenced in schools – thus critical discussions about class, poverty, resources in families, and nutrition are not included – but this is NOT because they are unimportant, indeed they may be more important than many of the influences discussed in this book'** (pp. viii-ix). Relationality.
- Having said that, he does stress the great significance of 'reducing the variability in the impact of teachers (or more importantly raising the impact of all)' (Hattie, 2011, p.9).
- High stakes testing approach reduces the emphasis on intellectual demand in pedagogies and thus potentially reduces the impact of the teacher.
- Stephen Dinham (2013, p.94): 'The biggest equity issue in Australian education is a quality teacher in every classroom'.



Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2021)

- 'The Australian Education research Organisation is Australia's national evidence body, working towards excellent and equitable outcomes for all children and young people'.
- Funded from 2021 \$50 million over 3 years by Federal and State and Territory governments; Ministerial-owned company.
- Generate high-quality evidence, make it accessible, enhance the use of evidence in Australian education.
- Four Tried and Tested evidence guides for classroom teachers.
- Excellent and equitable – focus on excellence.





In/Conclusion

- Must address cruel optimism - achieve goals, necessary for both individuals and the society.
- Context: acknowledgement of growing inequality and its debilitating effects; Covid.
- Confronting structural inequalities; holistic and systemic approach as opposed to current dominant view – teachers and schools the issue.
- Excellence and equity work together: policy focus always on excellence.



References

- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- C. Bonnor, P. Kidson, A. Piccoli, P. Sahlberg and R. Wilson (2021). *Structural Failure: Why Australia Keeps Falling Short of Our Educational Goals*. University of NSW Gonski Institute for Education.
- Lingard, B., Sellar, S. and Savage, G. (2014). Rearticulating social justice as equity in schooling policy: The effects of testing and data infrastructures. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 35, 5: 710-730.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Reid, A. (2019). *Changing Australian Education*. Allen and Unwin.
- Rowe, E. (2021). *Journal of Education Policy*.
- Savage, M. (2021). *The Return of Inequality*. Harvard University Press.
- Save Our Schools website: *SOS Australia Fighting for Equity in Education*.



References contd.

- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Penguin.
- Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C. and Schmid, M. (2019). *PISA 2018 in Brief 1*: ACER.
- Save Our Schools website: *SOS Australia Fighting for Equity in Education*.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Penguin.
- Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C. and Schmid, M. (2019). *PISA 2018 in Brief 1*: ACER.