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**The (absent) politics of neoliberal education policy**

**Abstract**

Despite its ideological saturation, recent neoliberal education policy has been deeply de-politicizing in the sense of reducing properly political concerns to matters of technical efficiency. This depoliticization is reflected in the hegemony of a managerial discourse and the decontestation of terms like ‘quality’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’, as well as in the apparent consensus around the necessity of particular practices, such as the adoption of ‘standards’, the management of performance through ‘targets’ and ‘indicators’, and the implementation of high-stakes testing regimes. The reduction of the political to the technical is not only anti-political but anti-democratic, with symbolic violence often unrecognized behind appeals to consensus, commonsense and ‘rationality’. The current paper draws on the work of contemporary political theorists, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, to critique the depoliticisation inherent in neoliberal education policy. It does this by directing a critical lens on recent Australian federal government education policy, particularly its notion of an ‘Education Revolution’, which, in common with recent education policies in the UK and elsewhere, preempts politics through the deployment of instrumental and consensual discourses. The former reduces ethical and political values to technical, instrumental matters, whilst the latter disavows politics via a utopian harmonization of difference and contestation. The paper concludes with a call for a re-imagined politics of education that embraces an ethos of radical pluralization as a starting point for a renovation of the political in education policy.

**The (absent) politics of neoliberal education policy**

Throughout much of the capitalist world, we have lived through an astonishing period in which politics has been depoliticised and commodified (Harvey, 2010, pp. 218-219).

The various myths of the *totally* reconciled society – which invariably presuppose the absence of leadership, that is, the withering away of the political (Laclau, 2005, p. 63, emphasis in original).

**Introduction**

The relationship between policy and politics is marked by mutual imbrications (Ball, 1990; Dale, 1989) and reflects a shared etymology. As Codd argues, “Fundamentally, policy is about the exercise of political power and the language that is used to legitimate that process” (1988, p. 235). Both politics and policy are normative, rather than merely technical domains, in that each is concerned with values – their formulation, institution, reproduction and contestation; whereas policy concerns “the authoritative allocation of values” (Easton, 1953), politics concerns the process of prioritising those values (Stråth, 2005). The inseparability of educational policy and politics stems from the social and economic value attaching to education in society and the inevitable requirement, given finite resources, to make decisions regarding its allocation. Yet contemporary neoliberal discourses, for example those around issues of standards and accountability, are typically presented by politicians and policy makers as matters of technical efficiency rather than normative choices; as a consequence, their political nature, including the deep implication of these discourses with issues of socio-political power, is effectively backgrounded. My aim in this paper is to examine some of the strategies through which this shift from the political to the technical is achieved, using the Australian ‘Education Revolution’ as a case study, and to consider possibilities for reinserting politics.

The assertion that education policy has been reduced to a technical discourse is in itself not new. Writing over two decades ago, Shapiro (1990, p. 13) made the following, by now all too familiar, observation in relation to the educational pronouncements of Democratic candidates in the 1984 and 1988 US elections:

Notions of quantifiable results, demonstrable competencies, the search for verifiable and empirical criteria for judging excellence (of students and teachers), an emphasis on performance and discrete skills – these permeated all the candidates’ statements. There was a strongly shared desire to assimilate the process of schooling to the forms and methods of technology...to shape teaching and knowledge to a technical discourse.

Since Shapiro wrote these words, the educational policy arena has been subject to the full onslaught of neo-liberal political intervention in the form of marketization, privatization, standardization and accountability measures. Yet though the assertion of the political nature of education policy may seem obvious to many readers, I argue here that, despite its ideological saturation, contemporary neoliberalism in education disavows its political nature in a number of ways, most notably by reframing ethico-political issues in economic terms through processes of commodification and by assuming and promoting a broad consensus in relation to this economising agenda – in each case, backgrounding the struggle over values central to both policy and politics. In doing so, contemporary neoliberal policy tendencies simultaneously undermine the democratic potential of education, thus posing the challenge for educators (in many ways a ‘captive’ profession, Reilly, 1996) and education policy analysts, of how to resist “the process of de-politicisation of policy-making, the erasure of ideology, and the legitimisation of common sense” (Pykett, 2007, p. 307) and reinsert the political into policy debates.

In what follows, I will illustrate this depoliticisation at work in neoliberal education policy, using Australia’s education revolution as an example. I will then take up the issues this example raises in a broader discussion of the nature of politics in education policy, drawing on the key distinction made by Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005) and others between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ in order to argue that a focus on the latter is key to renovating the absent politics of neoliberal education policy.

**De-politicisation and the performative production of the education revolution**

A key policy agenda of the Australian Federal Labor government since their election in 2007, after eleven years of liberal (conservative) government, has been the so-called ‘education revolution’, announced in the 2008 policy manifesto, *Quality education: The case for an education revolution in our schools[[1]](#footnote-1)* (Rudd & Gillard, 2008). As is evident in its design, including features such as the setting of the text against a deep red background and the choice of the somewhat dramatic term ‘revolution’, *Quality Education* is clearly a ‘symbolic’ (Prunty, 1984, p. 5) policy document. Indeed, its deployment of the term ‘revolution’ can be read as an attempt to reference a wider social democratic tradition, whilst also suggesting a radical and dramatic shift in policy and practice. This conceit of new policies representing a clean break with the past is reiterated in subsequent public policy pronouncements making reference to the education revolution. For example, in a 2010 speech the then Education Minister and current Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, argued, “As Australians we have an obligation to the future, an obligation to ensure the Australian school students of today and tomorrow each get a world class education…Through the Education Revolution, as a nation we are *finally* shouldering that obligation and making progress” (Gillard, 2010a emphasis added). The revolution trope also features prominently in the titles of a number of speeches (e.g. Gillard, 2008a, 2010a), while the ‘clean break’ theme can be found in the titles of media releases relating to the My School website[[2]](#footnote-2), *My School website to provide unprecedented school performance data* (Garrett & Gillard, 2010) and *My School 2.0 delivers a new era of school transparency* (Garrett & Gillard, 2011). The use of such speeches and media announcements for the dissemination, promotion and ‘spinning’ of policy (Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004), in addition to reflecting the increasing mediatisation of education policy (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Wallace, 1993), creates the space in which a high profile policy like the education revolution can be recited and performed again and again. The result is that these rhetorical media acts to a large extent produce the very thing they claim to describe – politics via packaging rather than sustained debate (Franklin, 2004a, 2004b). But aside from its rhetorical and performative dimensions, what of the substantive content of the education revolution: in what ways is this also depoliticising?

**De-politicisation and the substantive content of the education revolution**

The policy document, *Quality Education*, makes numerous references to the unprecedented competitive global economic climate confronting Australia and the consequent need to reform Australian education. The following is from the ministerial foreword to *Quality Education* (p.5) is typical in this regard:

Australia faces significant challenges to its social and economic environment though an aging population and increasing international competition. The nation must invest in developing a world class education system and drive development of a workforce that is highly skilled, flexible and adaptable in responding to increasing global competition for skills.

Notions such as ‘the tough reality of international competition’ and the dominance of an economic agenda in general are stated categorically as matters of incontrovertible fact. Yet, as Steger (2008, p. 187) notes, “public policy based on economic inevitability appears to be above politics”, whilst simultaneously facilitating the *political* project of increasing the penetration and entrenchment of market modalities in all domains of society by interweaving ideological prescriptions with ‘factual’ explanations. This imperative modality reoccurs elsewhere in *Quality Education*, for example, p.35 emphasizes the need to build a ‘world class’ education system “ready to face the challenges of a globally competitive world”, while the conclusion reminds us of the ‘fact’ that “as other countries continue to advance, we cannot afford to delay” (p.36). This message is repeated in subsequent media announcements and speeches: as one example, in a speech in March 2010 to the Independent Education Union, Minister for Education, Julia Gillard (2010b), argued:

The education revolution is about offering the best opportunities Australia can provide. But in the global village in which we live there is also a tough reality. The tough reality of international competition. A reality which gives us a moment of pause. A moment in which to ask in which areas do we really achieve a world class standards?

The references to ‘the *global* village’, ‘the tough reality of *international* competition’ and the need to achieve ‘*world class* standards’ reflect the powerful influence of the global imaginary on education policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). But it is worth noting that the anxieties expressed here have surfaced regularly in times of socioeconomic change or turmoil, both in Australia and in other international contexts, as reflected for example in the debate surrounding *A Nation at Risk* in the US (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and that such anxieties are inherent to the competitive nation building aims of modern state education systems (Green, 1990). Against the background of this discourse of tough global economic competition, the promise of the education revolution to offer “the best opportunities Australia can provide” suggests an unproblematic link between education and individual economic success, reflecting the hegemonic penetration of human capital theory in education and ignoring the positional, rather than purely substantive, nature of educational qualifications (Marginson, 1997; Wolf, 2002).

But importantly for the purposes of this paper, the instrumentalization of education evident here is also symptomatic of a wider shift in the relationship between the neoliberal state and its citizens, one which “has become less a political relationship – that is, a relationship between government and citizens who, together, are concerned about the common good – and more an economic relationship – that is, a relationship between the state as provider and the taxpayer as consumer of public services” (Biesta, 2010, pp. 53-54). As Biesta goes on to argue, this pattern reflects the wider erosion of the political in contemporary neoliberal society: “Not only can it be argued that the relationship between the state and its citizens has been depoliticized. One could even argue that the sphere of the political itself has been eroded” (2010, p. 54).

The instrumentalization of education evident in the education revolution relies on another key component of neoliberal education policy, a logic of competition whereby students, teachers, schools and education systems are evaluated and compared in the belief that such competition will improve the performance of all. In this vein, *Quality Education* asserts, “there is good evidence, primarily from the United States and the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), that the publication of school-level test scores tends to improve the performance of all schools” (p. 31). Yet there are good reasons to query whether high stakes testing and the publication of test results is force for democratic openness it is claimed to be. For aside from the reduction of educational excellence to test scores (as if teachers and schools were previously unable to monitor and assess student progress), with its constraining effects on professional trust and collaborative relationships (Carless, 2009), and its narrowing effects on curriculum and pedagogy (Alexander, 2009; Au, 2009; Hursh, 2008; Stobart, 2008), competition is depoliticizing insofar as it naturalizes the current forms and content that are at stake in the game of education, as well as occluding wider structural and socioeconomic factors that impact on educational achievement (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006).

Instrumentalism is also linked to another tendency in neoliberal education policy, towards individuation or atomization, whereby educational institutions and agents are viewed as isolated and distinct elements, with little or no recognition of how they also comprise larger systems or structures, or of how the meaning of each can only be understood in relation to that larger whole. This individualisation is evident in the frequent lack of recognition of the key role of context in understanding the work of individuals. For example, the Australian government’s aim “to ensure high-performing teachers and principals are working in those schools where they are needed and where they can have the biggest effect” (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 23) assumes that outstanding teachers’ performance is a purely individual achievement and that they can therefore perform equally well in any situation. This neoliberal world of self-entrepreneurial individuals is also evident in the policy intention to offer “rewards for great teachers” (Garrett, Gillard, & Swan, 2011), which again assumes that individuals alone account for excellence and ignores material factors, such as resources, as well as less tangible factors, such as school ethos, all of which may play a significant role in individuals’ performances. Such individualisation resonates with Wendy Brown’s argument that “no matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticization always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject” (2006, p. 15).

So far my analysis has focused on the instrumentalism at work in the education revolution and has argued that an instrumental discourse, linked with and reinforced by discourses of competition and individualisation, has been part of a broader displacement of political questions by economic considerations. In this scenario,

Any idea of education as a public responsibility and site of democratic and ethical practice is replaced by education as a production process, a site of technical practice and a private commodity governed by a means/end logic – summed up, again, in that supremely techno-managerial question – ‘what works?’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, pp. 23-24).

But this apolitical instrumental discourse is complemented and supported another discourse – which I shall refer to as the consensual discourse – that privileges consensus over contestation. We can see this discourse at work in a brief section of *Quality Education* on “What schooling needs to deliver for Australia”, where the document asserts “the need to move beyond an education debate that, until now, has been overwhelmingly focused on inputs rather than student outcomes and has been run along sectoral lines” and states that “all governments acknowledge that we cannot hope to achieve the ambitious COAG[[3]](#footnote-3) schooling outcomes and targets unless we put this stale debate behind us” (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 33). For those unfamiliar with the peculiarities of school funding in Australia this may seem rather cryptic, but the reference is to ongoing debates around the funding of the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. The details of this debate need not detain us here[[4]](#footnote-4); the key point in terms of this paper is the discursive work being done to promote and achieve consensus and pre-empt antagonistic debate – something we are urged to ‘move beyond’ and to ‘put [this stale debate] behind us’. Further evidence of this resistance to antagonistic debate is offered by a speech from June 2008, in which the then Education Minister and current Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, notes “over the last decade in Australia, the focus of the schooling debate has been the competitive relationship between government and non-government schools” (Gillard, 2008b). She goes on to state that the government

Supports the right of parents to choose a school for their children. We believe that diverse provision is needed to meet the needs of a diverse and growing population. But we reject the proposition that there is a conflict between diversity and universal excellence (Gillard, 2008b).

In other words, there is only difference and diversity, not disadvantage. The refusal to encounter the possibility that some differences may be linked to systemic inequalities and structural disadvantages, and the belief that choice and diversity are the keys to social justice, all bears out Laclau’s comments about how neo-liberalism, underpinned by the magic of the market – something evident in Gillard’s emphasis on the right to choose – “presents itself as a panacea for a fissureless society” (2005, p. 78).

Resistance to any framing of education in Australian in terms of an antagonistic divide between advantage and disadvantage was taken up by the then Education Minister in another speech the following month:

Let’s not pretend to ourselves or to each other that our education system can be simply broken down into two groups with a disadvantaged public sector on one side and a highly resourced non-government sector on the other…I specifically reject the proposition that the only way to debate differential need in our school system in through the prism of the public/private divide…I specifically reject the proposition that every difference in educational attainment in this country is explained by differences in the socio-economic status, broadly defined, of the students. The debate we need to be having is not a sterile debate about public versus private. Instead it should be a rich new debate in which we wrestle with and then resolve the question of how to measure the needs of the children in each school and each community across this country (Gillard, 2008a).

In addition to offering a classic case of setting up straw targets – those wishing to debate issues of the public/private sectors in Australian schooling aren’t necessarily saying that this is the sole explanation of any and all problems in Australian education – the line of argument sets up a false dichotomy between viewing all education issues through a of public/private, disadvantaged/advantaged prism and discounting these divisions entirely so as to focus on “the needs of the children in each school”. The excluded middle ground that most critics of recent education policy in Australia would wish to occupy recognizes issues of systemic social disadvantage as factors that need to be taken into account *in concert with* a number of other issues in debating equity in education. Gillard’s strategy, evidenced here, of rejecting an antagonistic divide by promoting a consensus around the need to focus on individuals, is a prime example of the depoliticisation that Wendy Brown identifies as endemic to contemporary liberal democracies; such depoliticisation “involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other” (2006, p. 15). Gillard’s consensual position, in urging a focus on “the needs of the children in each school”, resists any acknowledgement of the role of systemic or structural factors, such as social inequality, and hence works to disavow the political.

Another classic instance of consensualism is found in the education revolution agenda to “simultaneously deliver equity and excellence in our schools”, an agenda that “can only be achieved, however, with the concerted and united national effort that focuses on improving the productivity of all Australian schools” (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 35). But aside from the consensualism, evident in the emphasis on all parties singing from the same song sheet, and the instrumentalism, obvious in the characterisation of schools as a locus of improved productivity, this statement is noteworthy as an illustration of the operation of fantasy – in the Lacanian sense – in education policy. Within this theorization, fantasy operates in a dialectical relationship with the fundamental lack that is inscribed in us through our entry into the symbolic realm, within which we are mere placeholders in a socially shared semiotic system that precedes and exceeds us. Fantasy arises as the vehicle of potential explanation and amelioration of this lack, whilst resulting from a continual denial/forgetting of the ontological impossibility of such fantasmatic fulfilment. As Dean puts it “what is crucial…is the way the fantasy keeps open the possibility of enjoyment by telling us why we are not really enjoying” (Dean, 2006, p. 12).

What seems to be overlooked in this fantasmatic vision of the simultaneous achievement of equity and excellence is that the means of achieving the latter, through the market-oriented policies of choice and managerialist-oriented performativity, and accountability policies grounded in instrumentalization, competition, and atomization, are fundamentally at odds with notions of equity. As Savage recently noted in the context of Australian neo-liberal education policies, “the social capitalist political-educational imagination of schools as excellent and equitable learning communities is difficult to take seriously when infused into the architecture of a globalising education system (and society) that is deeply stratified and structured to economise and discriminate between individuals in line with performance hierarchies” (2011, pp. 55-56)[[5]](#footnote-5). This sort of neat resolution of the seemingly paradoxical is one indicator of the fantasmatic realm, since “fantasies seek directly to conjure up – or at least presuppose – an impossible union between incompatible elements” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147). Such fantasies also serve to decontest and hence depoliticise both equity and quality by harmonising all potential discord between them and hence draining them of any sociopolitical tension.

We can also see the operation of fantasy-supported consensualism as a mode of depoliticisation in relation to the framing of teachers’ work in the Education Revolution and in particular, in the way teachers are positioned as the lynchpin of educational reform, student success and national competitiveness. Thus, in a passage on “High Quality Teaching in All Schools”, *Quality Education* asserts,

It is well established that teacher quality is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and results. In addition evidence indicates the improving the quality of the teaching workforce is fundamental to any overall improvements in schooling. The impact of teaching is cumulative – a poor-quality teacher not only imparts less knowledge for the period they teach the student, but can leave the student worse off when they later attempt higher levels of work. The 2007 McKinsey report, which identified features common to the world’s top-performing school systems, argues that the quality of an education system simply cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 21).

Consensus is claimed in the opening assertion of ‘well established’ truth regarding the pivotal position of teachers. But aside from the attempt at bracketing out factors like the socioeconomic status of students by restricting the claim to ‘in-school’ influences – as if the in- and out- of school contexts could be neatly separated (cf Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) – this statement is noteworthy as a classic instance of the ‘discourse of teacher centrality’ (Larsen, 2010). This discourse is underpinned by a fantasmatic element organized around a beatific, salvation narrative, whereby quality teachers and teaching will ensure the future success of all students, while education is positioned as the source of salvation for society, providing indispensible social and economic benefits – an implicit if unintended meaning implied in the very notion of an education revolution. The overall consequence, with the role of wider societal inequality in socioceconomic and educational success rendered invisible and irrelevant, is to add to the broader depoliticisation of education that is the focus of this paper.

Thus far, I have examined some of the ways in which Australia’s education revolution as a policy agenda has inherently depoliticising tendencies and that these tendencies can be seen reflected in, and to a large extent are the result of, its structuring in terms of discourses of instrumentalism and consensualism. But in order to take my argument further, and thereby shine additional light on the workings of the education revolution as an instance of neoliberal education policy, I need to locate the points made thus far within a broader discussion of politics and the nature of the political.

**On the political**

This ‘neo’liberalism is usually presented not as a particular set of interests and political interventions, but as a kind of non-politics – a way of being reasonable, and of promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government around the globe. Who could be against greater wealth and more democracy? (Duggan, 2003, p. 10)

In this section, I want to pick on some of the themes in the preceding discussion and link them to a broader consideration of the notion of ‘the political’ and what this implies for the presence/absence of politics in contemporary education policy. As an initial observation, it is worth noting that late capitalist society has been characterized by an eschatological tendency, evident in proclamations of the ‘end of history’ or the ‘triumph of liberal democracy’. Yet despite what we might describe as late capitalism’s penchant for premature closure – what Mouffe describes as the contemporary ‘post-political zeitgeist’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 8) and what Rancière refers to as ‘postdemocracy’ (1999, p. 95) – “the project of a critical theory of democracy in late capitalist societies remains as relevant as ever” (Fraser, 1997, p. 69).

It is useful at this point to highlight the distinction made by William Connolly (1995) and Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005), drawing on Heidegger’s ontological/ontical distinction, between the ontological notion of ‘the political’ and the ontical notion of ‘politics’. Whereas the former involves philosophical questions about the nature or essence of the political domain as such, the latter is concerned with the former’s manifestations in procedures, practices and institutions. Mouffe goes on to argue that, despite the pervasive presence of politics in the media, contemporary late capitalist society lacks an adequate definition of the political, in the sense of an arena of antagonism over fundamental questions regarding the nature of society, and that this in turn is the result of the dominance of economic and moral-ethical discourses, which I shall refer to as the instrumental and the consensual discourses respectively.

The dominance of instrumental discourses is clearly visible in neoliberalism previously described as economic rationalism, and, as we have seen in the preceding discussion, its manifestations are evident in neoliberal education policy, with its emphasis on utilitarian values as the philosophy underpinning the framing of nation-centric education policy. And of course, Australia is by no means unique in the subordination of education policy to utilitarian economic concerns. As Rancière notes, “the absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the ‘forms’ of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy” (1999, p. 113). Such an approach reduces the political to the mere technical and ignores the *political* creation, as opposed to natural origins, of the ‘free market’ and other elements of the contemporary global economic system (Chang, 2010; Monck, 2005; see also Polanyi, 1944). It thus represents a retreat from politics.

By contrast, the moral-ethical discourse of communicative rationality – evident in the work of thinkers like Habermas, Rorty and Giddens, and in ‘third-way’ notions of ‘beyond left and right’ – seeks to displace, or at least temper, the instrumentalism of neoliberalism with a deliberative and consensual political realm informed by free and rational discussion. But as a number of commentators have noted, the turn to morality and ethics as means of reaching rational consensus represents a retreat from politics: “the turn to ethics is a turn away from the political” (Guillory, 2000, p. 29; see also Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe in the same volume). What this consensual approach fails to recognize is that meaning is always relational, or differential, in the sense that it works through differences (E.g. 'good' is defined in relation to 'evil' rather than through purely positive meaning-content; cf Howarth, 2000; Torfing, 1999), and that the establishment of any consensus relies on the hegemonic exclusion of its ‘constitutive outside’, upon which the consensual viewpoint relies to define itself. This has conservative implications, for as Mouffe notes, “the refusal to acknowledge that society is always hegemonically constituted through a certain structure of power relations leads to accepting the existing hegemony and remaining trapped within its configuration of forces” (2005, p. 63). The result is a denial of the political, in the sense of antagonistic debate, often leading to the disenchantment and disengagement with politics characteristic of our times.

Consensus politics is also rejected by Rancière, for whom the political is understood in terms of a fundamental collision between two processes. The first of these is the ‘police’ process, which refers, not to the state’s law enforcement apparatus, but rather to the sedimentation and naturalisation of particular distributions of roles, resources, spaces and places that define the visible, thinkable and sayable (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). The second process is ‘politics’, a term Rancière reserves for “the open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality” (Rancière, 1999, p. 30). The emphasis Rancière places on the role of antagonism between the conservative tendencies of the police process and the radicalising and disruptive thrust of politics, means that for him a term like ‘consensus democracy’ is a contradiction in terms. Like Mouffe, Rancière is deeply sceptical about consensus – which he describes as “a catchword for our times” (Rancière, 2010, p. 188) – arguing that “it defines a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that evacuates the political core constituting it, namely dissensus” (Rancière, 2010, p. 188). Critically, for Rancière the political properly understood is constituted by difference and division:

A *political* community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political ‘people’ is never the same thing as the sum of a population. It is always a form of supplementary symbolization in relation to any counting of the population and its parts (Rancière, 2010, pp. 188-189, emphasis in original).

Although the consensual discourse may have arisen as a reaction to the perceived reductiveness of the instrumental discourse[[6]](#footnote-6), we can nonetheless recognize the operation of both the instrumental *and* the consensual discourses in current education ‘policyscapes’. Indeed, the two discourses operate as a form of discursive duopoly, each supporting and reinforcing the other, reflected in the global nature of the *consensus* around the *instrumental* purposes of education (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), as governments engage in policy borrowing (Finegold, McFarland, & Richardson, 1993; Lingard, 2010), as international tests like PISA increasingly shape policy in a number of countries (Grek, 2009), and as pervasive performativity and accountability regimes narrow conceptualizations of what it means to teach, learn, and be educated (Alexander, 2009; Au, 2009; Biesta, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Moore, 2004; Stobart, 2008; Taubman, 2009). The task of renovating the political in educational policy discourses thus assumes a degree of urgency. The following section sketches out some initial steps than might be taken in this direction.

**Conclusion: Re-politicizing education policy/traversing the economic fantasy**

Our contention is that the political and ethical have been drained out of public discourse on education and schools: the discourse is reduced to discussion of the best technical solutions for achieving predetermined and self-evident ends at the expense, at the expense of debate about critical questions, purposes, values and understandings or concepts. But the draining of politics *is* political (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p.21, emphasis in original).

My claim is not that economics has replaced politics on the neoliberal stage. This would itself be too neoliberal a claim. Rather, I am suggesting that there is an insistence within current discourse upon the separation between economics and politics itself, a separation that seeks to withdraw political stakes – i.e. the presupposition of equality – from the economic realm and from economic struggle (May, 2011, p. 148).

Using Australia’s Education Revolution as a case in point, this discussion in this paper adds support to Fielding & Moss’s contention that a central effect of recent education policy directions has been to depoliticise education policy itself. I have argued that this depoliticisation work has been accomplished through a dominant discourse of instrumentalisation, underpinned by mutually reinforcing discourses of competition and atomisation, that, as May notes, is seen as something separate to politics. This instrumental discourse has worked to align education with the imperatives of the market and managerial technologies of performativity, thereby naturalising a view of education as a technical, instrumental, rather than an ethical or political, enterprise. I have also argued that the establishment and reproduction of this instrumentalism is supported by a consensual discourse, which resists reading the educational space in terms of social or political antagonism, with the consequence that the constitutive outside of consensus, i.e. dissensus, is rendered unreadable and unthinkable. Underpinning this instrumental consensus are a number of fantasies – of the salvation of the harmonious and exponentially prosperous nation-state through education – which go some way to account for the affective ‘grip’ of what I have referred to as the contemporary instrumental and consensual duopoly.

One line of critical work for those who would challenge the depoliticisation effected by this duopoly is to name and confront the economic and political fantasies (what Žižek (1989, p. 65), following Lacan, refers to as ‘traversing’ the fantasy) underpinning neoliberal education policies at any and every opportunity. This would include challenging a number of hegemonic ideas, for instance: that increased productivity should be our ultimate social and educational purpose; that an emphasis on increased productivity is a reflection of economic reality rather than a political assertion; that increased accountability, rather than increased trust, is the key to educational excellence; that educational excellence achieved though a combination of managerial accountability mechanisms and market-oriented notions of choice is compatible with equity; that increased overall wealth benefits everyone in society; that there is no tension between the interests of individuals and that these can be unproblematically aggregated into some notion of overall social wellbeing and; that uncompromising support for the interests of the already advantaged in society can be reconciled with equity and social justice. To confront the contemporary policy consensus around these ‘truths’ and instead to advocate for a properly political – that is one based on antagonistic debate between genuine alternatives – view of education is a vital step in the critical task of renovating the increasingly absent politics of education policy. The democratic potential of education deserves nothing less.

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1. This document will be referred to by the short title, Quality Education, hereafter and all unattributed page numbers refer to this document. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The My School website was developed as part of the ‘transparency and accountability’ agenda that comprises a key plank of the education revolution and is where schools’ results in the NAPLAN (national assessment program: literacy and numeracy) tests are published for public consumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. COAG refers to the Council of Australian Governments, the peak intergovernmental body comprising the Australian federal, state and territory governments. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For those wishing to read more on this topic, the papers commissioned as part of an ongoing government review of school funding can be found at: http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Pages/PaperCommissionedResearch.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Social capitalist is the label adopted by the Australian Federal (Labor) government to describe its ‘third way’ policy agenda. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is evident in Habermas’s (1984) positioning of the practical rationality of the ‘life world’ as a space within which to resist colonization by the instrumentalism of the technical rationality of the ‘system’; this theme also pervades much of the work of the earlier Frankfurt School, e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)