Aust. Educ. Res. (2017) 44:373–390
DOI 10.1007/s13384-017-0243-x

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School autonomy reform and public education in Australia: implications for social justice

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Received: 20 June 2017 / Accepted: 19 August 2017 / Published online: 30 August 2017
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Abstract The renewed commitment to school autonomy reform in Australia is based on the view that it will drive up academic standards. There remains, however, little conclusive evidence to support this view. Simply instating the structural changes to bring about greater autonomy for schools within public education systems across the world has not led consistently to an improvement in academic outcomes. Indeed, in some systems, this reform is associated with increasing social injustices. As Australian education is engaging in new iterations of this reform at federal and state levels, it is both urgent and timely to reconsider the relationship between school autonomy and social justice. This paper provides a review of largely Australian-based research concerning school autonomy reform within public education. It considers how such reform has supported and detracted from social justice outcomes in relation to political representation, cultural recognition and economic redistribution. The paper's contribution to the field is theoretical in presenting a multidimensional account of the social justice implications of school autonomy policy and practice in Australia.

Keywords School autonomy · Public education · Social justice · Political representation · Cultural recognition · Economic redistribution

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Introduction

There is strong political consensus in contexts such as Australia, England, the USA and New Zealand, that greater school autonomy will drive up academic standards. While devolution in these contexts is far from new, there is renewed policy commitment to this reform and its capacity to generate more effective public education systems. In policy discourse, this reform purports to grant schools greater freedom in governance and decision making. Freedom from centralised authority is associated here with improving public education by creating the conditions for school leaders to better respond to the local needs of their schools and by promoting innovation and resource efficiencies at the school and system level (see Cobbold 2014; Gobby 2013).

Australian education has experienced a long history of school 'autonomy' reform. It was promoted over forty years ago in the *Schools In Australia* (or 'Karmel') Report (Australian Schools Commission 1973) and has had many iterations. The most recent version is the Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative at both federal and state levels. At a federal level, the Australian government has committed $70 million to 'build on current developments across the states to help schools become more autonomous and independent if they so choose' (see Australian Government 2015), while at a state level the IPS has been introduced in Western Australia (in 2010) and Queensland (in 2013) to support greater managerial freedom for a growing number of schools.

Despite this strong political and material commitment, there remains little conclusive evidence linking greater school autonomy to improved academic attainment. Whether examining the efficacy of academies in England, 'self-managed' schools in Australia or charter schools in the USA (Academies Commission 2013; Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Jensen et al. 2013), no definitive links can be found between school 'autonomy' and school 'improvement'. This finding bears out in comparative research between schooling in NSW (a very centralised system) and Victoria (a highly autonomised or devolved system) which finds no significant difference in student performance on standardised international and national measures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Jensen et al. 2013). Indeed, what is evident are links between this reform and increasing social injustice in schools and education systems across the globe. For many commentators (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Ball and Junemann 2012; Smyth 2011), this increase is attributable to the neoliberal logic driving centralised authorities' governance of school 'autonomy'. In theory, diversity of provision, parental choice and inter-school competition within and between public and private systems will 'improve' schools and therefore their systems by creating the conditions for 'good' schools (i.e. those that do well on external accountabilities) to flourish and 'bad' schools (i.e. those that do not do well) to be shamed into improvement or to close (see Apple 2010; Lingard 2010; Blackmore 2016). Set against a backdrop of increasingly limited resourcing to public schools and ever greater systemic accountability, school 'autonomy' has led

to injustices of representation, recognition and redistribution (as will be explained in depth later in this review).

At a global policy level, influential organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank have endorsed school autonomy as key to raising student attainment (see World Bank 2014; OECD 2011). There is, however, significant variance within and across nation states in how this reform is playing out grounded as it is within a particular politics at a particular time (Lingard et al. 2002). As education in Australia is ostensibly a state and not federal government responsibility, there has been wide variation in how school autonomy has been articulated at a state level. Victoria, as is well recognised, experienced radical reform under a version of this policy in the 1990s. The *Schools of the Future* policy driven by a combination of economic rationalism, competition and external accountability (e.g. standardised tests) resulted in the closure of over 350 (generally small, inner city or rural) schools to reduce systemic 'inefficiency'. The neoliberal agenda was to reduce government expenditure, reconfigure school governance through parental choice and undermine teacher unions (see Blackmore 1999; 2016). In other states, by contrast, versions of this reform during the same period did not lead to such drastic systemic change (see Lingard et al. 2002).

There is also wide variation of this policy across national systems. The systems of education in England and the USA are, for example, far more devolved and complex in their relations of governance than in Australia. School autonomy reform in England (through the 'academies' movement) has all but dismantled the system of local authority governance opening up state education to a proliferation of stakeholders who are now responsible for schools and schooling including state agencies, businesses, voluntary organisations, charities, social enterprises, faith groups and individuals (see Gunter 2012). 'Heterarchy' is one term used to capture the increasingly diversified, complex and opaque systems of governance relations in English schooling (see Ball and Junemann 2012). Another is 'systemless system' (Lawn 2013). Public education in Australia, by contrast, is less heterarchical and 'systemless' and more transparent in governance given its closer ties to, and regulation by, state and federal centralised authorities. While the relatively loose governance of the Catholic and Independent sector (which schools 34% of all students) is a different story, the greater centralisation of Australia's public education system, unlike in England and the USA, make it more amenable to supporting schools to meet their social justice responsibilities. Although state governments are legally responsible, the school sector is more open to direct state and federal intervention. For example, changes in the federal funding formula in the early 2000s increased funding to non-government schools to the detriment of public schools and generated growing inequality. Such inequality became a significant policy issue that resulted in a major review of funding to Australian schools (in 2011, colloquially referred to as the Gonski Report). This was a policy attempt to address the intractable issue of inequality in Australian schools and generated a more equitable model of needs-based funding provision across all education systems in Australia (Kenway 2013).

In this context, the issue of social justice has become paramount as a viable and quality public education is considered to be important for social cohesion, economic participation and growth, and health and wellbeing.

A multidimensional understanding of social justice

Nancy Fraser's work has been instrumental in shaping social justice philosophy, theory and politics in contemporary times (1997, 2009). She offers a model for understanding the broad scope and complexity of justice issues as occurring on three dimensions: economic, cultural and political. For Fraser, economic injustices arise when the structures of society generate maldistribution or class inequality for particular social groups; cultural injustices arise when institutionalised or hierarchical patterns of cultural value generate misrecognition or status inequality for particular social groups; and political injustices arise when some individuals or groups are not accorded equal voice in decision making about justice claims. Fraser's view is that justice requires 'participatory parity' in relation to each of these dimensions (2007, p. 17):

> …justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. On the view of justice as participatory parity, overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction.

Informed by this notion of participatory parity, Fraser's premise is that justice for all is possible when the constitution of political space ensures equitable representation (i.e. all social actors are accorded roughly equal political voice); when the status order reflects equitable patterns of cultural recognition (i.e. equal respect and esteem are expressed for all social actors); and when the structures of the economy reflect an equitable distribution of material resources (i.e. the distribution of material resources ensures all social actors independence). Pursuing participatory parity on these dimensions is not a linear or neat process given the complexity and inter-relatedness of political, cultural and economic justice issues. Fraser (2007) draws particular attention to the key problematics of reification and displacement associated with attempts to remedy injustices. Reification, according to Fraser (2008) has come to characterise many recent forms of identity politics where 'a single, drastically simplified group identity' is imposed. For Fraser, such reification is a troubling consequence of the shift in justice claims over the past several decades from a predominant concern with redistributive justice to an over-riding focus on (and proliferation of) recognitive (and/or representative) justice claims.

A worrying consequence of this shift, according to Fraser (2008) is its displacement of distributive justice claims—i.e. where claims for recognition (and representation) are abstracted from their institutional matrix and their entwinement with distributive injustice. This is exemplified in school autonomy reform when an emphasis on issues of recognition and representation (e.g. a focus on school and principal empowerment and parental choice) obfuscate or override a focus on

redistribution (e.g. the inequitable allocation of resources within the public system) (see Blackmore 2016).

In working to remedy political, cultural and economic injustices, Fraser (2009) advocates for an approach that identifies and seeks to transform the concrete arrangements or specific oppressions that impede parity of participation within schools and systems. This means rejecting a politics that reifies group identity in favour of a politics that is sensitive to the different and contingent ways in which struggles for representation, recognition and redistribution intersect in particular contexts to either enable or constrain participatory parity.

The utility of Fraser's work in theorising matters of education and social justice is evident in the expansive body of research and writing across a vast array of education areas and disciplines that draws on her work (see, for example, Gilbert et al. 2011; Huttunen 2007; Keddie 2012; Mills 2012; Tikly and Barrett 2011; Blackmore 2016). Fraser's work has wide resonance in its capacity to 'make the presently chaotic scene surveyable and intelligible' (Olson 2008, p. 2). It is offered here, not to dilute the complexity or inter-relatedness of social justice issues as they relate to school autonomy reform, but rather as a productive lens for organising and thinking about these issues.

Framed by this theorising of social justice, the paper's examination of school autonomy draws from a review of predominantly Australian-based literature that includes policy documentation, reports conducted by state aligned organisations and empirical research.

School autonomy reform and matters of political, cultural and economic justice

In policy discourse, school autonomy has, since its inception, been presented in progressive terms in its apparent alignment with equity and justice goals (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008). Within this discourse, there does appear to be support for the three dimensions of justice outlined by Fraser. Granting greater autonomy for schools in decision making, for instance, will potentially lead to political justice (i.e. according all voice). Promoting schools' responsiveness to their local and contextual needs will potentially lead to cultural justice (i.e. fostering a greater recognition and valuing of marginalised cultures). And more direct and increased flexibility in relation to school funding will potentially lead to economic justice (i.e. a more equitable distribution of material and human resources). In practice, school autonomy reform has both realised and undermined these justice imperatives. The following sections draw on Fraser's theoretical tools to examine first, how political, cultural and economic justice tend to be supported in school autonomy policy and practice and second, how they are undermined. The examples provided are illustrative and thus they are not intended to represent the vast history and scope of research in this space.

How is political justice supported in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

Matters of political justice might be seen as the centre-piece of school autonomy reform in reflecting efforts to accord schools 'a voice' in their own management. As noted earlier, the idea that responsibility for schools should be devolved to the people involved in the task of schooling, rather than predominantly from a centralised bureaucracy, was promoted over 40 years ago in the Karmel Report (Australian Schools Commission 1973). While the social democratic intentions of this initiative have been rearticulated in the face of economic and managerial reforms (heralded with the rise in the 1980s of the New Public Administration Agenda from the UK and New Zealand), this idea remains a key thrust of the most recent versions of school autonomy policy. The focus here is on fostering schools' greater independence, flexibility and freedom to manage, innovate and better respond to local communities. Queensland's Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative (introduced in 2013), for example, seeks, through its programme of school devolution, to enhance local governance and generate a locally-tailored workforce (Queensland Government, no date). In this policy schools and their leaders are positioned as uniquely placed to effectively and efficiently work with their local communities in productive and innovative ways.

Under the Queensland IPS policy, consistent with the tenor of other versions, systemic reform is facilitated through the Department 'empowering' IP schools to collaborate with other schools to improve their performance. IP schools are 'encouraged' to develop and utilise the peer expertise and mentorship offered by such collaborations in terms of professional advice and support as well as procuring their own professional development (Queensland Government, no date). To be sure, schools and school leaders have long collaborated in networks of varying kinds and types for varying purposes (Blackmore 1999). What is different currently (although differentiated across state jurisdictions) is the instating of policy provision for setting up networks as part of creating an autonomous system that is not only self-governing but self-improving (see Watterston and Caldwell 2011).

Despite the work pressure and intensification involved, principals have long embraced the imaginary of greater autonomy in Australia as they have elsewhere (see Cranston et al. 2003; Caldwell 2008; Thomson 2010; Kimber and Ehrich 2011). As Thomson (2010) points out, principals continue to both support and actively lobby for more and more autonomy as it accords them a greater voice in decision making about their schools. School autonomy reform reflects a sense of confidence and trust that school leaders can make a positive difference to their schools and the broader system (see Hamilton and Associates 2015; Keddie 2015b). Certainly, there is strong evidence to indicate the advantages and innovations arising for schools from the freedoms within this reform agenda for leaders to, in particular, make decisions about staffing and resourcing that are contextually responsive and enriching (see Leithwood and Menzies 1998; Keddie 2015b).

Another centre-piece of school autonomy policy that also potentially aligns with political justice is the notion of parent choice. As mentioned earlier, a central aim of

devolution is to open up and diversify the education system so that there is greater choice for parents and students. In Australia, as elsewhere, choice has been facilitated by policies such as de-zoning and funding based on enrolments (Marginson 1997). As Musset (2012, p. 43) argues, school choice in its goals of (1) enhancing parents' freedoms to decide where their children attend school and (2) improving student achievement through more equal access to high quality schooling, should be 'freedom enhancing' as well as 'justice enhancing'. In some circumstances, such goals are realised—i.e. when school choice reflects a 'balance to ensure that all parents and families are able to exercise it and benefit from it, especially those from disadvantaged families' (Musset 2012, p. 43).

Such a positioning of schools, school leaders and parents is consistent with the principles of political justice. Provision of freedom and choice in relation to school decision making reflects the potential to accord all who are involved in schools a voice towards a more equitable representation of school and local community interests. It reflects the potential to dismantle the institutionalised obstacles associated with political (mis)representation that prevent some individuals from participating on par with others (Fraser 2009).

How is political justice undermined in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

On the surface, it is difficult to argue against the key policy goal of school autonomy—i.e. that responsibility for schools should be devolved to the people involved in the task of schooling. However, when considering matters of political justice and the ideal of according *all* a voice, it is imperative to ask, who is really accorded a voice in the processes of school autonomy policy and to what ends? In terms of dominant policy discourse, it is principals who are positioned with the responsibility to mobilise this reform in ways that improve their schools and the broader system (see Queensland Government, no date). Such 'improvement', as noted earlier, is understood within the context of a myriad of external accountabilities and especially school performance on headline indicators (e.g. attendance and disciplinary data and NAPLAN outcomes). These indicators have become increasingly high stakes for schools within a competitive and choice-driven environment. They are mechanisms, as many have argued, that steer schools from the outside and from a distance (see Rizvi 1994; Blackmore 2011). While important in measuring school effectiveness, they circumscribe the freedoms promised in school autonomy reform and discipline school leaders to adhere to a narrow vision of education (see Thomson 2010; Niesche 2011; Ball and Junemann 2012; Tseng 2015). This is a vision regulated by a culture of compliance that privileges contractual rather than professional or moral accountability (see Blackmore 2011).

Teachers and their work are also disciplined within these mechanisms of audit and accountability with this impacting on the degree of professional autonomy they feel. There has been much written about the 'terrors' of performativity in teachers' contemporary work lives and the feelings of anxiety, fear and mistrust that preoccupations with compliance cultures have generated (see Ball 2003). Such

cultures tend to stifle rather than accord teachers a voice especially, as Cole (2011) points out, in schools where principals adopt a compliance perspective in leading their school. The increased freedoms that principals are granted in autonomised education systems thus do not necessarily lead to professional autonomy for teachers. In relation to matters such as staffing and resourcing (areas where principals are granted particular freedom and discretion and areas that directly affect teachers), school autonomy reform has compromised political justice for teachers. In particular, the processes of devolution within the context of changing markets, have led to an increasingly casualised teacher workforce (Blackmore 2016).

Also potentially stifling the voices of principals and teachers are the ways in which networks between schools have been mandated. As Blackmore (2011, p. 458) argues, referring to the state of Victoria, 'networks have been imposed as a policy fix and mode of governance in a project of reorganisation of education provision' and have undermined some of the organic networks or professional collaborations that teachers and principals rely upon. Blackmore (2011, p. 456) describes this reorganisation as generating an '"uncomfortable mix" of different governance regimes, each with their distinctive assumptions about the nature of power and authority and about the relationship between government and governed, state and public sector'. Set against the competitive backdrop of audit and accountability, and within increasingly opaque governance relations, this is an uncomfortable mix that is antithetical to the collaborative and democratic relations that networks are supposed to engender (see also Thomson 2010; Ball and Junemann 2012; Keddie 2015a).

Another major concern in relation to more open and diversified education systems is how they increase political injustices associated with school choice. It is well recognised that the option of school choice advantages some parents and students, for example, those who are capable of acquiring the information necessary to make well informed and optimal educational choices and indeed those who are able to relocate to move nearer to preferred schools (see Musset 2012; Blackmore, 2016). As Musset points out (2012, p. 43), school choice schemes 'do provide enhanced opportunities for some advantaged parents and students'. However, they tend to harm marginalised and low SES families who do not have the resources or information to take advantage of these schemes. The 'right to choose' discourse has reframed social justice as an individual choice and obfuscated the issue of structural disadvantage in parents' capacities to choose. School choice schemes, in this respect, have generated greater segregation and residualisation within the public education system and, in turn, maldistribution for the majority. The proliferation of different forms of schooling has led to new forms of exclusion, compounding the hierarchical tiering of schools on the basis of ability, class and race/ethnicity (Blackmore 2016; see also Smyth 2011). Relatedly, of course, are the 'gaming' practices schools engage in, playing the system in order to look good on external measures and so improve their position on this hierarchy (see Ball 2003; Smyth 2011; Niesche and Thomson 2017). Practices such as schools tacitly excluding more 'needy' (i.e. socially or academically disadvantaged) students from enrolment or test participation have been further enabled through the greater freedom and flexibility afforded to schools under school autonomy policy (see Keddie 2015b).

This section illustrates how the context of audit and accountability undermines the policy intentions of school autonomy reform (to accord all who are involved in schools a voice). The performative demands of this context reify schools, school leaders, teachers and parents in ways that undermine equitable representation (Fraser 2008). These demands deploy a simplified group identity politics that generate hierarchies of privilege and exclusion (e.g. principal autonomy is privileged over teacher autonomy while discourses of parental choice are exclusionary). Rather than dismantling the institutional obstacles associated with political misrepresentation, this reification shapes the 'freedoms' of school autonomy reform towards silencing and/or reappropriating stakeholder voices to comply with the game of audit and accountability (Fraser 2009).

How is cultural justice supported in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

As with political justice, school autonomy policy has opened spaces to enable cultural justice. Explicit in this policy is the expectation that schools will better respond to their local communities. As the federal IPS guidelines state, 'this initiative… will give more control of local decision making to [schools to] help encourage stronger links between schools, parents and the local community' (Australian Government 2015). There is also an expectation within this policy for schools to think beyond their locale to the global through, for example, learning from the exemplary practice of autonomous schooling systems in other countries and reaching out to international accreditation bodies in relation to improvement and innovation. These expectations create opportunities for schools to strengthen their identities and practice in ways that recognise and value the cultures of marginalised groups.

There is much evidence to indicate that schools are taking up these opportunities. Caldwell (2015), for example, in his report on school autonomy and achievement across Australia, presents data that highlight such practices. One of the Victorian primary case study schools in his research is located within a highly culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged community. At this school, autonomy was utilised with a particular emphasis on broadening the school's professional culture to reflect 'the international experience'. This involved key teachers visiting and learning from specific schools in New Zealand recognised for their high levels of community and parental engagement with Maori and South Pacific Islanders. Such visits supported this school's practices of cultural inclusion in relation to creating differentiated environments to foster interaction between the community, parents and the school.

At another Victorian primary school in this research, located in a regional city, autonomy was similarly mobilised to emphasise cultural inclusion and a 'global outlook'. At this school, a regional initiative called Team China (in collaboration with 'sister' schools in China and the local Senior Secondary College) involved student cultural exchange and language immersion programmes. Autonomy was also mobilised at this school to broaden extra-curricular opportunities, for example,

the introduction of a circus programme, as well as enhancing the school's wellbeing provision. This involved resourcing extra staff to work with students and families on wellbeing issues such as family violence, parenting and relationship issues and connections with external community support services.

In a further example in my own work (Keddie, 2015b) at an IPS secondary school in Queensland, extra material resources accrued from the direct funding model of this initiative were drawn on to provide improved support services for the school's large Indigenous cohort. These services included the employ of extra liaison staff to increase Indigenous students' attendance and more targeted support to raise attainment in literacy and numeracy. More broadly, the IPS initiative at this school (consistent with the case study findings above) was seen as strengthening the school's identity as an 'international' school prompting a more concerted engagement with international accreditation bodies.

Such practice is consistent with the principles of cultural justice in its focus on recognising and valuing cultures 'other' to the mainstream in Australia. Towards greater parity of participation for those aligning with these cultures, this practice may dismantle institutionalised obstacles associated with cultural (mis)recognition leading to more equitable patterns of cultural recognition (Fraser 2009).

How is cultural justice undermined in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

It is not difficult to find examples of culturally inclusive practice in schools whether they are part of autonomous education systems or not. Among the many important questions to ask in relation to matters of cultural justice is, who decides what culture to recognise and how is this culture being recognised? Such questions and their implications have long plagued social justice advocates within and beyond education (see Giroux 2003; Fraser 2008). Certainly, despite equity policy and practice in Australia that has long supported cultural recognition in relation to, for example, gender and Indigeneity, there is still a lack of consensus around the who and how of cultural recognition in schools, with particular implications for social justice. Views about what might constitute the social good can play out in both inclusive and exclusive ways at the classroom and school level in relation to cultural recognition (see Giroux 2003; Keddie, 2012). At the school level, for example, recognition in relation to gender (e.g. single-sex schools), ethnicity (e.g. Indigenous schools) or religion (faith-based schools) can reify difference and lead to exclusions which reinforce segregation, hierarchy and inequity at the system level (see Blackmore 2016). Such reification and segregation also tends to displace struggles for cultural recognition from their connection to and entwinement with distributive injustice (Fraser 2007).

Given that school leaders are positioned with the responsibility to shape school autonomy reform, they have much discretion in how cultural recognition plays out in their schools. In the school referred to above (Keddie, 2015b), for example, this discretion seemed to play out in ways consistent with cultural justice in supporting greater recognition for Indigenous students. The flexibility under IPS for this

school supported its already existing priority to foster greater equity for Indigenous students reflected, for instance, in their efforts to provide a range of curricula and extra-curricular activities that connected with and valued the cultures of Indigenous students. However, in another IPS school in this research, the discretionary aspect of IPS funding was seen as potentially constraining cultural justice. The head of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Unit at this school, for example, referred to IPS as 'disastrous' for her unit given the political contention surrounding these students, most of whom were of immigrant and refugee backgrounds. There was a view at the school that these students were not as 'deserving' a group as other 'needy' groups for targeted support. In this school, thus, the discretionary funding under IPS meant that the ESL unit was vulnerable to funding decrease or closure.

Probably the most significant impediment to cultural recognition within the context of public school autonomy reform is the imperative that schools ascribe to the narrow vision of education promoted by the performative demands of the audit culture. When principals and teachers are dogged by external accountabilities and when schools feel pressured to compete with each other in relation to these accountabilities, it is more than likely that they will narrow their curriculum and pedagogy to focus on these areas. As is well recognised, this climate has produced a degrading of curriculum and pedagogy and encouraged a teach-to-the-test mentality—sidelining the social, creative, aesthetic, cultural, moral and spiritual aspects of students' development (see Perry and McWilliam 2007; Apple 2010; Lingard and Sellar 2013). This sidelining has closed down opportunities in schools for culturally inclusive teaching and learning (Keddie 2012). While the freedom of school autonomy reform purports to foster flexibility for schools to 'shape curriculum offerings' to 'suit the needs of students' (The State of Queensland 2014) thus supporting cultural recognition, the demands of audit and accountability clearly curtail this freedom. This curtailing is especially pronounced in 'low' performing schools who struggle to meet these demands and who are subject to greater scrutiny and accountability than their higher performing (and generally more privileged) counterparts (see Smyth 2011).

We can see in these examples how recognition in schools will necessarily be shaped by narrow performative demands and is vulnerable to being co-opted within these demands at the expense of pursuing genuine equity concerns. These demands (just as with matters of political representation) encourage a reified group politics that washes out the complexities of cultural identity and obscures how matters of cultural recognition are inextricably political. The priorities and demands of the audit culture are neither conducive to identifying the inter-relationship between representative and recognitive politics nor to critiquing this relationship in generating misrecognition for particular groups (Fraser 2009).

How is economic justice supported in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

Education continues to determine employment credentialing and students' subsequent access to the labour market (Connell 1994; Gale and Densmore 2000; Mills and Gale 2010). Therefore, a key element of redistributive justice through schooling is to ensure that class disadvantaged students are provided with the support and opportunity to achieve at school on the measuring sticks that count, academic tests, so that they can gain future access to the economic benefits of society (see Keddie 2012). There is some evidence that school autonomy reform has led to improved academic attainment for some economically disadvantaged students. There is a plethora of 'good news' stories especially from England of 'failing' schools (i.e. those where students underperform on tests) being 'turned around' through the granting of greater 'autonomy'. While the links between this reform and improved academic outcomes are inconclusive, it does seem that if autonomy is directed towards actions that impact positively on these outcomes (especially when supported by schools building professional capacity and development to these ends) then improvement will follow (see Caldwell 2015).

School autonomy may also be mobilised to support the principles of redistributive justice through the explicit direction of material resources to support students of low socio-economic status. These include initiatives designed to improve school retention, participation and achievement; for example, food programmes, uniform/clothing provision, mentoring, family and parenting support, transportation and housing assistance, literacy support, and other community/social outreach services (see Keddie 2012). These initiatives are not necessarily related to school autonomy policy. However, there is evidence to indicate that school autonomy reform is being mobilised to support such initiatives (see Caldwell 2015). Greater direct funding and discretion over its use in terms of staffing and resourcing can, as we saw in the previous section in relation to Indigenous students, support redistributive justice (Keddie 2015b).

At a system level, the idea of making schools more like businesses is, for some, consistent with the principles of economic justice. Indeed, opening up education systems to the imperatives of the market where economic efficiency and competition drive education provision reflects an ideology that (from a neoliberal political standpoint) is consistent with a just and fair approach to managing matters of redistribution—i.e. the market is the ultimate arbiter of what is good, fair and meritocratic (see Hall 2011). Moreover, from this standpoint, economic justice is better realised through removing some of the costs and (apparent) inefficiencies of bureaucratic governance. Under these circumstances, a more equitable redistribution of material resources to those who most need it might be possible especially if framed by broader economic reform across the education system (e.g. formula-based funding models where resources are directly allocated to schools on the basis of individual needs and equity considerations). The impacts of such redistributive policy in terms of alleviating inequality and disadvantage have been mixed and have incited much contention. However, there is evidence to indicate that autonomous

school governance is facilitating the use of funds at the school level to variously support economically disadvantaged students in ways that were less possible under more centralised forms of governance (see Bandaranayake 2013; Keddie 2015b).

Such practice is consistent with the principles of economic justice. The focus here is on improving the academic attainment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds through a more equitable distribution of human and material resources. Towards greater parity of participation for economically disadvantaged students, these practices may dismantle institutionalised obstacles associated with economic maldistribution (Fraser 2009).

How is economic justice undermined in relation to school autonomy policy and practice?

Paradoxically perhaps given the arguments presented in the previous section, one of the main arguments against school autonomy reform is that it is profoundly compromising of economic justice. Devolved education systems shift the responsibility for education provision and governance away from the state sector to schools, local communities, families and individuals so that the state is no longer the primary locus of response in relation to education concerns (see Lingard and Seller 2012). The market imperatives of competition, economic efficiency and external auditing accompanying this shift have, as mentioned earlier, forced schools to run themselves like businesses (see Blackmore 2011). As many have argued for some time, this is a privatisation of state schooling that is problematic for redistributive justice in drawing increasingly limited public resources away from the public sector and in decreasing state intervention in ensuring the equitable distribution of these resources. This is a context of resource maldistribution, where public schools have the 'autonomy' to do more with less (Blackmore 2016).

And, as schools must govern themselves like businesses, the goals of enterprise and economic efficiency tend to be prioritised over educative goals. For many, these shifts and circumstances are entirely antithetical to schooling as a public good (Blackmore 2011; Kimber and Ehrich 2011; Smyth 2011). Additionally, as Kimber and Ehrich (2011, p. 186) point out, '…the focus on management arising from economic rationalist/managerialist thinking is inconsistent with the professional and personal values of school leaders and can contradict important ethics of care and justice'.

Amid these shifts, education systems in Australia, as they have elsewhere, have been transformed with relations between the state and private sector radically reconfigured. Education 'policy is moving away from state-dominated service provision to a mixed economy approach in which the state, the voluntary sector and commercial actors interact as co-partners in the planning and delivery of what previously were state services' (Blackmore 2011, p. 456; see also Lipman 2011; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Gunter 2012). Indeed, governments are increasingly looking to the voluntary and commercial sector for 'solutions' to education 'problems' which has led to an enabling within state regulatory mechanisms for increased private sector involvement (see Ball and Junemann 2012). Increasingly

visible in this arena are philanthropic and edu-business providers. The 'reduced capacity of the state has opened up spaces and opportunities for these providers to expand their role in schools and schooling systems, [often] on a for-profit basis' (Lingard et al. 2017, p. 3).

In relation to edu-business, the ever-rising emphasis on testing and related accountability infrastructures has been particularly conducive to the take up in schools of the vast array of new products and services at all levels of education (see Blackmore 2016; Lingard et al. 2017). To the ends of school improvement amid the parameters of audit and accountability, these products and services are highly varied, ranging from the procurement of teaching and learning materials, professional learning and school administration packages to the delivery of curriculum and school management through private providers.

This commercialisation of schooling has led to obvious concerns and questions about the vested and non-educative agenda of this outsourcing to the private sector and its impact on schools (see Lingard et al. 2017; Gunter and Mills 2017). Certainly, these trends mean that education systems and schools are more vulnerable to exploitation and corruption, as has occurred in the vocational education sector in Australia and the UK (Gunter and Mills 2017; Gunter et al. 2017). They are also less likely to reflect inclusive and democratic forms of governance. The enhanced role that private bodies and corporations are playing in shaping education policy in relation to agenda setting, research for policy, policy writing and policy enactment and evaluation is thus highly concerning (see Lingard et al. 2017; Mahony et al. 2004; Hogan 2015; Gunter et al. 2017).

In the examples presented in this section, we can see how the processes of devolution intersect with performative demands to shape how redistribution plays out at the system and school levels. The market imperatives driving these processes have generated a mal-distributed context where public funding to schools is increasingly being reduced and where systems of governance are opened up to the private sector. Against a backdrop where schools must run themselves like businesses to survive, the 'freedoms' of autonomy reform are being co-opted for enterprise purposes and gains, potentially compounding the inequitable distribution of material resources already a feature of the system (Fraser 2009; Blackmore 2016).

Concluding discussion

The preceding discussion has provided evidence that attests to the social justice possibilities of school autonomy reform. The independence and flexibility for principals in school management and parents in school choice can reflect political justice according to these stakeholders a voice in matters of school governance. Such independence and flexibility can also support cultural justice in freeing up schools to better recognise and value the cultures of marginalised groups and economic justice in leading to a more equitable distribution of material and human resources. School autonomy reform can thus work to dismantle the political, cultural and economic barriers that impede parity of participation for particular students.

The preceding discussion also provided evidence of the ways in which school autonomy reform can undermine social justice.

When thinking about the relationship between school autonomy and social justice, as this paper has argued, one must consider the broader context of maldistribution where public schools must do more with less and where audit and accountability drive their priorities (Blackmore 2016). It is this context that has 'furnished the stage' (Fraser 2009) upon which this relationship plays out. Upon this stage, the 'freedoms' of school autonomy reform are vulnerable to being deployed in ways that increase injustices of misrepresentation, misrecognition and maldistribution. As the examples in this paper illustrated, performative demands can reify schools, school leaders, teachers and students in ways that silence some voices while privileging and appropriating others and they can obscure or silence the politics involved in cultural recognition and the conditions and imperatives that have generated maldistribution within the system.

The reification characteristic of school autonomy reform might be seen as exacerbating maldistribution through its displacement of distributive justice claims (Fraser 2009). The primary focus in this reform is on questions and claims of political representation (e.g. empowering school leaders and providing choice for parents) which reflects an abstraction of these claims from their institutional matrix and entwinement with distributive injustice (Fraser 2008, 2009; Blackmore 2016).

In thinking about how this reform is being mobilised, it is important to consider the ways in which the public education system in Australia is still closely tied to, and regulated by, centralised authorities. In this respect, as noted early in this paper, it differs markedly from systems such as those in England and the USA in being far less devolved and polycentric and thus far more amenable to protecting the 'public' in public education. Centralised authority and regulation are imperative in ensuring that the 'hallmark' values of public education—i.e. public ownership, equity and access, and public purpose—are not undermined (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Smyth 2011).

In terms of social justice, such centralised authority and regulation are particularly important in preventing the further subjection of Australian public education to the unfettered market logic of the private, for-profit or philanthropic sector. Such subjection in England and the USA has greatly undermined these hallmark values (see Darling-Hammond and Montgomery 2008; Ball and Junemann 2012). The privatisation of public education in these countries has undermined (1) public ownership (e.g. in making it less possible for democratic, collaborative and locally responsive school governance), (2) equity and access (e.g. in promoting segregation and stratification between schools leading to practices of exclusion) and (3) public purpose (e.g. in sidelining the moral and social purposes of schooling). To some extent, Australian education is also experiencing these ill-effects. However, the greater centralised authority of our system and, indeed, the policy parameters of school autonomy reform at federal and state levels, do protect these hallmark values and will continue to be imperative in supporting schools to meet their social justice responsibilities (see Keddie 2016).

Broader redistributive education policies in Australia (e.g. the Gonski reforms at the federal level and various similar needs-based funding policies at the state level) will, for example, be crucial to school autonomy reform supporting a

multidimensional and inter-relational approach to social justice. Such centralised mechanisms can ensure that the representative and recognitive politics of this reform work with redistributive politics to transform the concrete arrangements that impede parity of participation within schools and systems (Fraser 2009).

This paper has argued that it is possible for schools to mobilise their autonomy to align with social justice goals; however, such mobilising is difficult and requires careful and creative navigation. It requires, as the examples in this paper begin to indicate, close attention to the ways in which this reform agenda can be appropriated within the demands of the audit culture to both reinforce and transform the political, cultural and economic obstacles that hinder parity of participation for particular individuals and groups. In relation to the latter, as some of the practices in this paper illustrate, a socially just mobilising of autonomy will eschew a politics of reification to focus on transforming the relations of domination and oppression that contribute to injustice (Fraser 2009). It will be about working within and against cultures of audit and accountability to marshal the freedoms granted within this reform to support (1) the democratic possibilities of principal and teacher professional autonomy and the generative possibilities of school choice, (2) the recognition and inclusion of culturally marginalised groups within local and global contexts and (3) the redistributive possibilities to direct material and human resources to class disadvantaged students. Fraser's theorising to these ends, provides a highly productive lens for thinking about the social justice implications of school autonomy policy and practice.

Acknowledgement I would like to thank Professor Jill Blackmore and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on this paper.

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