

## ARTICLE

**THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: A LOOK AT EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES****DANIELLE DE SOUSA SANTOS<sup>1</sup>**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2233-192X>**DIRCE DJANIRA PACHECO E ZAN<sup>2</sup>**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/000-0002-3663-2232>

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents results of research carried out in the context of a post-doctoral internship that took place in 2019, which had as main objectives: 1) to analyze the Australian teaching model, from the recent reform implemented, considering the social and political context of the country; 2) to know the working mechanisms and structures that support this system. From the evidence consolidated in different academic studies and the examination of institutional documents, the research data allowed, among other aspects, to identify important marks that serve as a reference for understanding the education system in Australia. This text, specifically, seeks to identify how the inequalities within the Australian education system are presented. Also noteworthy is the financing model that paved the way for the privatizing logic of the Australian education system. Based on the analyzed data, it is evident that differences in performance in large-scale assessments continue to be a challenge to be overcome by educational policies. In this scenario, it seems evident that current Australian educational policies, including the current curriculum reform – strongly influenced by neoliberal political ideas – are not managing to face and reduce the persistent educational inequalities that characterize the country's education system. The interest in the Australian system is justified, among other aspects, by how it has been incorporated by business organizations directly involved in the formulation and implementation of Brazilian educational policies, as a successful model to be followed.

**Keywords:** Australian education system, educational inequalities, neoliberalism.

**O SISTEMA DE ENSINO AUSTRALIANO: UM OLHAR SOBRE AS DESIGUALDADES EDUCACIONAIS**

**RESUMO:** Este artigo apresenta resultados da pesquisa realizada no âmbito de estágio pós-doutoral ocorrido em 2019, que teve como principais objetivos: 1) analisar o modelo de ensino australiano, a partir da recente reforma implementada, considerando o contexto social e político do país; 2) conhecer os mecanismos de funcionamento e as estruturas que dão suporte a esse sistema. A partir das evidências consolidadas em diferentes estudos acadêmicos e do exame dos documentos institucionais, os dados da pesquisa permitiram, dentre outros aspectos, identificar importantes marcações que servem de referência para o entendimento do sistema de ensino da Austrália. Neste texto, especificamente, busca-se identificar

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como se apresentam as desigualdades no interior do sistema de ensino australiano. Destaca-se, também, o modelo de financiamento que sedimentou o caminho para a lógica privatizante do sistema de ensino australiano. Com base nos dados analisados, evidencia-se que as diferenças de desempenho nas avaliações de larga escala continuam sendo um desafio a ser superado pelas políticas educacionais. Neste cenário, parece evidente que as atuais políticas educacionais australianas, incluindo a atual reforma curricular – fortemente influenciada pelo ideário político neoliberal – não estão conseguindo enfrentar e diminuir as persistentes desigualdades educacionais que marcam o sistema de ensino do país. Justifica-se o interesse pelo sistema da Austrália, dentre outros aspectos, pela forma como ele tem sido incorporado pelas organizações empresariais diretamente envolvidas na formulação e na implementação de políticas educacionais brasileiras, como modelo de sucesso a ser seguido.

**Palavras-chave:** sistema de ensino australiano, desigualdades educacionais, neoliberalismo.

## **EL SISTEMA DE EDUCACIÓN AUSTRALIANA: UNA MIRADA A LAS DESIGUALDADES EDUCATIVAS**

**RESUMEN:** En este artículo se presentan resultados de una investigación realizada en el contexto de una pasantía posdoctoral realizada en 2019, que tuvo como principales objetivos: 1) analizar el modelo de enseñanza australiano, a partir de la reciente reforma implementada, considerando los aspectos sociales y contexto político del país; 2) conocer los mecanismos y estructuras de trabajo que sustentan este sistema. A partir de la evidencia consolidada en diferentes estudios académicos y el examen de documentos institucionales, los datos de la investigación permitieron, entre otros aspectos, identificar marcas importantes que sirven de referencia para la comprensión del sistema educativo en Australia. Este texto, específicamente, busca identificar cómo se presentan las desigualdades dentro del sistema educativo australiano. También es destacable el modelo de financiación que abrió el camino a la lógica privatizadora del sistema educativo australiano. A partir de los datos analizados, es evidente que las diferencias de desempeño en evaluaciones de gran escala continúan siendo un desafío a superar por las políticas educativas. En este escenario, parece evidente que las políticas educativas australianas actuales, incluida la actual reforma curricular, fuertemente influenciada por las ideas políticas neoliberales, no están logrando enfrentar y reducir las persistentes desigualdades educativas que caracterizan el sistema educativo del país. El interés por el sistema australiano se justifica, entre otros aspectos, por la forma en que ha sido incorporado por las organizaciones empresariales directamente involucradas en la formulación e implementación de las políticas educativas brasileñas, como modelo de éxito a seguir.

**Palabras clave:** sistema educativo australiano, desigualdades educativas, neoliberalismo.

## INTRODUCTION

International models of educational policies have been systematically incorporated into recent Brazilian policies, in general, disregarding the great socioeconomic and conjunctural differences between the national reality and the adopted models. In particular, we refer here to the experiences of other countries, which are taken as inspiration or even as a pattern to be followed by Brazil, such as Finland, Germany, Canada, Australia. These were the educational realities that notably inspired the current High School reform approved in Brazil. In a way, this process meets the guidelines of international organizations, such as UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, among others, which indicate the need for “models, categories, and guidelines” to be assumed by educational policies as a way of achieving a universalized world with a certain level of unification and committed to the consolidation and maintenance of the capitalist system (DALE, 2004).

In this sense, the experience of the Secondary Education Reform in Brazil corroborates what is already established and widely disseminated by the sociological literature. That is, the process of globalization, inherent to neoliberal ideology, has influenced educational policies in different countries, especially through the performance of international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, among others

Another important element is the so-called advocacy coalitions – coalitions of causes (BARROSO, 2009) –, groups that work in the production process of educational policies and are constituted according to their ideas about education and the school. In Brazil, for example, we have the *Todos Pela Educação* Movement (All for Education), maintained by foundations linked to companies such as Banco Itaú, Bradesco, Telefónica, Natura, among others. In addition to the use of knowledge, generally based on foreign models, which are selected according to their interests, there is effective participation and influence of these groups in the decision-making field of educational policies. In the words of BARROSO (2009, p.999-1000, author's emphasis),

The knowledge that is mobilized by these “advocacy coalitions” is selected according to the interests shared by the group and its effectiveness in manipulating the debate and influencing the different actors (in Parliament, in the Ministry of Education, in schools, in the press, unions, universities, etc.) [...] The knowledge that is mobilized is based on “good practices”, “foreign example”, “scientific evidence”, “business management”, etc. They are intended to persuade teachers, students' families, members of the administration, public opinion in general, of the existence of “a problem” for which “there is a solution”.

As an illustration of the above-described reference, we highlight the debate surrounding the elaboration of the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC- *Base Nacional Comum Curricular*), the central document for implementing the reform of secondary education. Regarding the issue of implementing this document, for example, we found on the website of the Movement for the Common National Base (MPBNC- *Movimento Pela Base Nacional Comum*, 2017) a section called international benchmarks, in which five cases of strategy for implementing curriculum reforms are presented: Australia, Chile, California, New York, and Singapore. We also highlight some articles published in newspapers in Brazil: “A model for Brazil, the formation of the Australian curriculum took 20 years” (TAKAHASHI, 2015); “Reform brings Brazilian secondary education closer to abroad, say experts: Canada, the United States, and Australia are cited as examples close to the MEC proposal for the stage” (KRUSE, 2017); “Australian school curriculum can be the basis for Brazil” (TOKARNIA; RIBEIRO, 2015).

In this scenario, we are particularly interested in the Australian model. This choice was because Australia has implemented an important educational reform since 2012; by the strong presence of Australian consultants in business organizations that took a privileged place in the formulation and implementation of educational policies in Brazil; for the performance of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as one of the “critical readers” of the final document of the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC) for Early Childhood Education and Elementary

School, published by the Ministry of Education, in 2017 (BRASIL, 2017); and the possibility of carrying out on-site research - the research was carried out in 2019 during a stay in the city of Sydney. ACARA is an independent statutory authority, created by law in 2008. Among the tasks assigned to this organization are the development of the Australian national curriculum, the National Literacy and Mathematics Assessment Program (NAPLAN) – an annual assessment for students in grades 3, 5, 7, and 9, which assesses literacy and math literacy skills with tests in reading, writing, math, and grammar – language conventions: spelling, grammar and punctuation – the creation of the program national data collection and generation site, the My School website, and the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), which developed the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

We know that the global movement of globalization, equity, and market competitiveness, which began in the 1980s, in the context of neoliberal ideology, boosted educational reforms, in different national contexts, to exercise greater control over schooling. According to Savage (2016, p. 833), in Australia, from this period onwards, unprecedented attempts were observed to produce greater control over educational policies, such as the “development of a national curriculum, standardized national assessments in literacy and mathematics, national standards for teachers and principals and a revised national model of school financing”. In this logic, the concept of equity, as Saviani (1998, p. 18) says, “justifies inequalities by allowing the introduction of utilitarian rules of conduct that correspond to the deregulation of the Law, enabling differentiated treatments and expanding the margin of discretion of those who hold the power of decision on an unprecedented scale”. Here we highlight that the political and polysemic character of the term “equity” denotes great debate and takes on different meanings, depending on the theoretical perspective adopted. For Freitas (2013, p.48), for example, liberalism cannot coexist with the notion of equality, since it attributes a central role to success and individual “effort”, which, at the same time, is the foundation of justifications for social inequalities. In this scenario, according to the author, the idea of equity requires a great effort from those who “have been given opportunities, especially the poorest”.

Thus, controversially, the search for quality and equity is also influenced by international organizations. Therefore, it is important to know that obtaining this quality and equity is governed by the logic of the market and the business world. However, the use of global comparisons as a way to improve the quality of education, through standardization and focused on the idea of “efficiency”, can cause greater educational inequalities, as it can lead to reductionism in curricula and, therefore, exclude those who most need the school to have access to the knowledge produced and accumulated by humanity. In a way, this is what Apple (2003, p. 85) points out when analyzing the impacts of recent educational reforms, committed to a project of “conservative modernization”. According to the author, these reforms are in tune with the interests of markets “...mechanized and made legitimate by a depoliticizing strategy...” and with conservative social values. The results of these reforms have meant greater control over the school, especially in the curriculum and teaching methods, and have accentuated social and educational inequalities.

With the strengthening of centralized systems of large-scale evaluations, the idea that it would be possible to monitor and control teachers and schools and, consequently, the quality of teaching, based on the exposure, to the society, of the results obtained. In this scenario, market action, whether through privatization or competition between schools, according to liberal ideologues, would “raise” the quality of education. However, we observe that the emphasis on more general assessment processes, to the detriment of student assessment, “makes quality an object of performance measures as the efficiency of the education system and not as equality of student results enrolled in schools in this system” (FREITAS, 2007, p. 974). Analyzing the Brazilian reality, Freitas emphasizes that even when it is carried out by schools, large-scale assessment can become a mechanism for hiding inequalities, since it cannot assess whether all students from lower classes who are currently in school, are democratical, they are learning.

It is also important to highlight that neoliberal policies develop in different ways in different contexts. In Australia, the direction taken by governments shows that educational policies in the last 30 years were driven by the neoliberal agenda that advocates education as a commodity. For Reid (2019, p.

60), “there is currently a strong element in public discourse and policymaking that sees public schools as a safety net provision for those who cannot afford to send their children to private schools.” The effects of these guidelines are analyzed by the author, who lists a series of consequences: 1) unequal educational outcomes; 2) a socially segregated school system; 3) a narrow view of equity; 4) residualization – a term coined to express the process of students moving from public to private schools – and privatization of public education; 5) impoverished understanding of educational responsibility; 6) division and deprofessionalization of educators; 7) impoverishment of the education knowledge base and growth of pseudoscientific knowledge. For more, see Reid (2019).

Still, about the Australian reality, data from the latest Population and Housing Census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics - ABS of 2016, organized by Preston (2018), indicate that, in 2016, public schools concentrated most students with income lowest family member; students with specific educational needs, who did not speak English well – or spoke no English at all –, who could not access the Internet at home, who had the worst housing conditions; and students who traveled the longest distances between their homes and school. According to the survey, in 2016, public schools enrolled 80% of students whose families were in the lowest income bracket – income of less than \$400 a week. Catholic schools enrolled 12% of this range, and independent schools enrolled only 8%.

It is important to point out that the main objectives of the work, carried out within the scope of the post-doctoral internship, are: 1) to analyze the Australian teaching model, based on the recent reform that was implemented, that is, the long path to the introduction of the curriculum national, 20 years; and, more specifically, to identify what were the factors that led to the creation and implementation of the current national curriculum in the Australian context after the victory of the Labor Party in 2007; 2) know the working mechanisms and structures that support the Australian education system. The exercise of producing this article, developed from the evidence consolidated in different academic studies and the examination of institutional documents, allowed, among other aspects, to identify important markings that are a reference for the understanding of the Australian education system. The analysis allowed us to deepen our reflections on the process of construction and implementation of the National Curriculum, the organization and structure of the Australian system, and how inequalities are presented within the Australian education system, a topic that will be addressed in this article.

## AUSTRALIA, A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Australia is a young country, located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the sixth-largest country in the world in terms of territorial dimensions (7,682,300 km<sup>2</sup>). As of August 2019, the population of Australia is approximately 25.4 million people. Its first inhabitants are believed to have migrated from an unknown point in Asia to Australia between 50,000 and 60,000 years ago. According to Tonkinson and Berndt (2006), the estimated population of Indigenous Australians – the Aboriginal peoples and peoples of the Torres Strait Islands – in 1788 ranged from 300,000 to over 1,000,000. Currently, according to 2016 data, these groups represent just 3.3% of Australia's population. The violent English colonization was responsible for the massacre and genocide of the first inhabitants of Australia. For more, see Ryan (2017). Despite some advances in guaranteeing rights, Aboriginal peoples and the peoples of the Torres Strait Islands still suffer the consequences of discrimination.

The Commonwealth of Australia was formed on January 1, 1901, by six self-governing British colonies that united to become one-nation states. Australia's political regime is organized through representative democracy and a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy with six states: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD), Northern Territory (NT), Western Australia (WA), South Australia (SA), Victoria (VIC); and two mainland territories: Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania (TAS). Canberra is the capital of Australia, and Melbourne and Sydney are the two largest cities in the country.

According to data from the Australian government (2019), Australia is a highly developed country, is considered the 13th largest economy in the world. It has a high-income economy, with the 10th highest per capita income in the world, and has the third-highest human development index (HDI) - 0.939. As of May 2019, the median weekly wage for full-time working adults was \$1,633.80. The

unemployment rate in August 2019 was 5.3% and life expectancy was 83 years old. According to 2016 data from the Australian Council of Social Service – approximately 2.9 million people or 13.3% of the population living below the relative poverty line. An estimated 17.5% of Australian children under the age of 15 are in poverty.

Schooling is similar across Australia, with slight variations across states and territories. It is generally organized into 13 years of formal schooling and is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 17. In general, schooling begins at age 5 and ends at age 17 or 18. Primary education, including one year of Early Childhood Education, lasts 7 or 8 years and is followed by secondary education, lasting 5 or 6 years. Secondary education provides for alternative studies or training arrangements aimed at the productive sector. In the final year of secondary education, students can study towards a certificate recognized as further studies by Vocational Education or Vocational Education and Training – VET – institutions and by all Australian universities (ACARA, 2018).

For Reid (2019, p. 55), “people from other countries are amazed by the complexity of the hybrid models of financing and governance of our education system”. States and territories are primarily responsible for funding public schools, and the Australian federal government provides supplemental assistance. Non-governmental and private schools – Catholic and Independent – receive the majority of funding from the Australian federal government, to be supplemented by states and territories. The Australian education system has 9,477 schools, of which 6,646 are public, 1,753 are Catholic and 1,078 are independent. According to 2019 data, the total number of enrollments in primary and secondary education is 3,893,834 (ACARA, 2019, online).

## EDUCATIONAL FINANCING

Despite the prominence of enrollments in public schools, we consider it pertinent to point out that historically there has been a significant decline in the percentage of students attending public schools: from 80% of the total of all stages in 1970 to 66% in 2018. This decline may be understood from the neoliberal logic that, incorporated into educational policies in Australia, changed the way schools are financed and, therefore, the idea of education as a public good (REID, 2019).

Controversially, public funding of non-governmental schools in Australia began in 1964 and was built around the debate “funding according to need and funding according to entitlement” (REID, 2019, p. 55). The idea of funding, according to the institution's needs, assumes that students from public and private schools are entitled to the same quality standard of excellence. Thus, public money should be allocated to private schools that needed to improve their standard. However, the funding model approved in 1974 extended funding to all private schools, including high-end schools. Until that time, the distribution of resources was based on the idea that money should be distributed differently to private schools according to need, “assessed against the resource standards index” (REID, 2019, p. 58). However, from 1976 onwards, the government began to distribute resources to all schools, regardless of need, which caused a decrease in resources for public schools. This change was justified by the “principle of the right to education”, which is based on the idea that, “since people who choose to send their children to private schools are taxpayers, private schools have the right to receive money from the government, as well as public schools” (p. 59).

The Gonski Report – prepared by businessman David Gonski –, announced in 2011 in the Labor government, prescribed a set of recommendations for federal, state, and territorial governments, which foresaw a change in the financing model, placing equity as the central point, which, in principle, would increase investment in the sector in which most of the students with educational disadvantages are located. However, these expectations were buried with the election of the Liberal Party in 2013. In summary, throughout the “comings and goings”, the logic of “law” prevailed in the Australian government's funding model. As a result, there was an increase in funding for non-governmental schools.

In 2015, the analysis by Bonnor and Shepherd (2015) suggested that in the following year more than 40% of Catholic school students would have average public funding equal to or greater than that received by public school students. The increase in public funding of private schools, to the detriment of public schools, was also highlighted by Cobbold (2018a). According to the author, the

education budget between 2009 and 2016 shows a cut in investment in public schools and an increase in Catholic and independent schools. Between 2009 and 2016, total government funding (Commonwealth and State) per student in public schools was cut on average by \$110; on the other hand, per-student funding for Catholic schools increased by \$1,171 and for independent schools by \$1,026. For more, see Watson and Ryan (2010) and Reid (2019).

According to the references analyzed in this work, this funding model has severe implications for increasing inequalities in the Australian education system, as it has created huge disparities between schools. While schools with fewer resources receive the majority of students with socio-educational disadvantages, private schools generally assist selected students with high backgrounds. Socio-educational advantages and disadvantages are measured by The index of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA), created by ACARA, which represents the levels of socio-educational advantage based on variables collected by each school, such as age, gender, the language of students, languages of parents, level of education, formal and/or non-formal, and level of occupation of parents.

Education funding policies and ideologies of choice and competition are important keys to understanding educational inequalities in Australia. The studies by Nogueira and Lacerda (2014), for example, highlight the impacts of “rankings” involving the choices of schools by families and the unequal distribution of “capitals”. They also point to inequalities in the possibilities of choices, since, in general, families with greater cultural capital can better decode information about the quality of educational establishments. In addition, the search for better-positioned schools in the rankings and, on the other hand, the selection of students by schools, favor the creation of the so-called “quasi-market” – an expression used to highlight the specificities of the school market, especially in the public sector. Through a circular movement of prominence and recognition of quality, increased competition, the possibility of selecting the best students, the high standard or “quality” of the school is maintained. We emphasize the article published in the newspaper *The Guardian*, referring to school rankings, made by the Australian press, based on NAPLAN data. The article reveals the impact on the perception of parents and students of the schools:

The annual rankings of year 12 results, which are published by major newspapers at this time every year, powerfully shape how students and parents think about schools. The top ranking school is often feted as the state’s “best”. [...]But there’s no denying it’s a hugely simplistic exercise - and one from which the wrong conclusions are often drawn. These rankings don’t take into account the different types of students different schools might admit or the types of subjects attempted by the. (TOVEY, 2018).

In the same direction, Dubet (2008) states that inequalities in school opportunities are also the result of parents' competences to know, or not, the “school market” because the school system has become extremely complex. Knowing its rules, its explicit and hidden codes allows for more efficient use of the system.

The discourse of choice, in other words, the commodification of education, has been incorporated into the education policy framework in many countries, including Australia. In this approach, we expect competition to improve the efficiency and quality of schools. One criticism that emerges immediately concerns the incompatibility between choice and equity.

One of the problems with this logic is that not everyone gets to choose. The possibility of choice, in general, is restricted to the most favored families. The choice may be driven by several factors: charging fees, access to transportation, and using students' academic results as part of the admissions criteria.

The type of commodification that has been taking place in Australia in recent decades results in a severe process of segmentation, associated with “selection” or “self-segregation” mechanisms, which have increased the challenges of Australian public schools.

The change to private schools means that public schools now overwhelmingly shoulder the challenges associated with having 82% of low-SES students. More than this, public schools carry the vast majority of other groups of students who bring with them various forms of educational

disadvantage and challenge, including 84% of Indigenous - students, 87% of students in very remote areas, and 76% of students with. (REID, 2019, p. 72).

Ball (2007) asserts that the critique of “education as a public monopoly” is an important key to understanding the expansion of the educational market. The central idea is that the private sector would better and more efficiently meet the expectations of families, giving them the possibility of choice and, therefore, competition between schools would improve the quality of education. However, as we saw earlier, this possibility does not exist for everyone, since such choices depend, on the one hand, on the cultural capital of families; on the other hand, schools, which select the best students by criteria that are more or less clear and lawful. In this way, they seek to adjust the profile of students to the profile of the school.

## CURRICULUM AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Based on the analysis carried out, we can affirm that the curriculum reform process in Australia was influenced by international organizations, based on the commitment of these bodies to the current phase of capitalism, that is, education is taken as a key to respond to the transformations of relations of work, to changes in the production process (DALE, 2004). According to Savage (2017), in Australia and internationally, curriculum reforms since the late 1980s have tended to strongly frame schooling in economic terms. “As a result, the kinds of knowledge and skills young people learn in schools have been reimagined (and in some cases entirely transformed) in line with economic and market-based forms of reason” (SAVAGE, 2017, p. 156-157). As a result, the official curriculum is increasingly evaluated and reformed based on its ‘usefulness’ in preparing young people for the evolving global knowledge economy. The author calls these trends the “curriculum economy” and emphasizes that curriculum reforms in Australia have dominated: the expansion of applied and vocational curricula in schools; and the promotion of the 21st-century skills agenda. Despite these influences, for most participants in the study carried out by Kunhi (2019) on the production and implementation of curriculum policy in Australia, more specifically the so-called “curriculum for the century 21”, aligning the Australian curriculum with OECD guidelines and recommendations could improve Australia's position in international test rankings. We also believe that a good position in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) leaderboard could validate not only the education system but also the country's economy on a global scale. However, even though it remains above the OECD average score, the performance of Australian students in PISA assessments has been declining since the first test in 2000.

Even with the support of state and territorial governments and different sectors of society, the reasons that drove the construction of the national curriculum implemented from 2012 onwards were the subject of great debates. The issue of inequalities stands out among the main critical arguments, whether as a disbelief in the ability to overcome it only through the curriculum, or because of the fear of its increase as a result of the reform.

However, there is the existence of a common premise that the Australian curriculum should be quality and equity-oriented, as follows:

**Quality** – the Australian Curriculum will contribute to the provision of world-class education by establishing the knowledge, understanding, and skills necessary for life and work in the 21st century and common high standards of performance across the country. **Equity** – an Australian Curriculum provides a clear and shared understanding of what young people should be taught and the quality of learning expected of them, irrespective of their circumstances, the type of school they attend, or the location of their school (AUSTRALIA. Melbourne Education Goals Statement for Young Australians, signed December 2008, p. 5, emphasis added),

we can think about whether the structure and content of the Australian adequately allow the achievement of these objectives. For a better view of the issue, we consider it pertinent to present the manifest meanings of the ideas of quality and equity in this context.



In Australia, and the world in general, the logic of the market has guided the concepts of quality and equity that guide educational reforms. The use of global comparisons, such as PISA, strengthens the idea that it would be possible to monitor and control schools and, consequently, the quality of teaching. In the same way, the logic of the market feeds notions of meritocracy, competition, and choice, which claim links with ideals of justice and opportunity, that is, equity. In this perspective, we can say, according to Saviani (1998), that equity is the concept that is in tune with a time marked by the naturalization of the market, social relations of capitalist production, and the exploitation of workers.

In this sense, market educational policies are seen, like Savage, Sellar, and Gorur (2013, p. 162) points out, “as drivers that promote equity, based on the assumption that all parents are able to demand and obtain quality education for their children, irrespective of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, their social capital, their migrant status, gender or other factors”.

It is also important to consider different perspectives on the Australian curriculum and its suitability in terms of diversity and inclusion. In this sense, studies such as those by Drummond (2012) and Roberts (2018), for example, discuss the disadvantages of students from rural or remote areas, especially in terms of representation and recognition of their culture and reality. For Roberts (2018), the Australian curriculum has an explicit economic orientation, based on the values of the “global metropolitan-cosmopolitan” world, which positions other values as “outdated, undesirable and from the past”. So that “equity’ is constructed as access to the globalized economy [...] facilitated through access to a singular curriculum. These values are so universal that not providing access to them, and the future they promise, is seen as an injustice” (ROBERTS, 2018, p. 206).

Similar themes are also discussed by Rigney (2018) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Considering the limits of the cross-sectional approach to the subject, teacher training, and the narrowing of the curriculum according to tests, the author questions the potential of the Australian curriculum to reduce gaps in performance between indigenous and non-indigenous students and the impact on the understanding of the Aboriginal knowledge among all Australians. “Evicting Aboriginal content from the curriculum core leaves Aboriginal knowledges and epistemologies vulnerable to further colonization” (RIGNEY, 2018, p. 197). Based on a scathing critique of Acara, Lowe, and Yunkaporta (2013) claim that it is fair to conclude “as weak, often symbolically and irresponsibly” the current inclusion in the Australian curriculum of topics related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and affirm that “these flawed documents have passed to school systems and teachers to develop curriculum that addresses the content” (LOWE; YUNKAPORTA, 2013, p. 12).

Perry and Southwell's (2013) research examined the different appropriations of the academic curriculum by secondary schools in Australia. For the authors, the academic curriculum “includes the traditional academic subjects of humanities (literature, history, foreign languages), mathematics, natural sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics) and social sciences (sociology, economics, psychology)” (PERRY; SOUTHWELL, 2013, p. 3). The study found that socioeconomically disadvantaged schools offer students less access to key academic curriculum subjects that are important for university entry. Access to academic or more professional curricula is also related to the school sector – non-governmental or public –, the size of the school, and the socioeconomic composition of students. The analysis showed that access to the academic curriculum is closely related to the socioeconomic composition of the school. Students who attend a school with medium or high socioeconomic status have greater opportunities to access an academic curriculum with a wide variety of subjects, including an advanced level. On the other hand, for students with lower socioeconomic status, access to the academic curriculum at the advanced level is precarious. Regarding the differences by school sector, the main findings of the study indicate that government schools offer, on average, fewer academic subjects and fewer advanced subjects compared to schools in the independent sector. However, in this case, access to the academic curriculum can vary substantially according to the socioeconomic composition of the school. On the other hand, Catholic schools “offer a large range of academic curriculum at the advanced level and guaranteed access to the core subjects, regardless of the socio-economic composition of the school.” (PERRY; SOUTHWELL, 2013, p. 14).

Considering the social commitment to provide a “fair opportunity” for all, the study by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA, 2018) on inequalities in Australia

demonstrates that curriculum inequalities in Australia are problematic because of several reasons. First, they create barriers for students who live in less privileged regions and cannot afford private schools. Second, they limit students' access to knowledge in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, which, according to the document, would be a key policy objective of the Australian government's innovation agenda. In the state of Victoria, for example, only 30% of rural public schools and 65% of metropolitan public schools offer advanced mathematics. Third, they increase segregation between schools, given that a significant proportion of middle-class families, in general, choose schools, especially secondary schools, based on the academic offer of schools. According to the study, “well-off rural families, for example, often send their children to board at private schools in capital cities, in part because of limited curricular offerings at the local school” (CEDA, 2018, p. 62), promoting a continuous cycle of school residualization and educational disadvantage as it reduces the ability of local schools to offer a solid set of academic options.

Based on the discussions raised by the research mentioned above, we can say that the choice of knowledge that should be taught is a central point in the debate regarding the implementation of a common curriculum. In this scenario, Brennan and Zipin (2018) draw attention to the fact that “conventional” curriculum policy insists on not recognizing that the curriculum is not neutral. In his words, the Australian curriculum “continues the implicit premise that expertly chosen 'best knowledge', provided 'equally' to all, will lead to greater equality of outcomes” (BRENAN; ZIPIN, 2018, p. 179). According to the authors, this logic did not work in the past and does not seem to be working now.

In the line of “what should be taught”, the alignment of the curriculum with the performance of large-scale assessments that promote the standardization of the curriculum is another important issue in the debate on confronting educational inequalities. The need for standardization for improving educational indicators can be seen in Australia by the creation in 2008 of the national assessment – the NAPLAN.

More careful discussions about test results are needed, as different studies –Apple (2003), Dubet (2008), Freitas (2011), Reid (2019), and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) – have pointed out the deleterious effects of tests on a large scale, such as PISA and NAPLAN. Among the issues raised by the studies, we highlight the narrowing of the curriculum – the core curriculum – and the shifting of learning objectives from a more integral perspective to the focus of the demands of standardized tests. That is, the focus of pedagogical work becomes teaching for tests. In this direction, Reid (2019, p. 40) asserts that NAPLAN is no longer “a mechanism to check the pulse” of a part of the educational system, becoming the reason why schools exist. According to the author, as more goals based on NAPLAN are defined, the curriculum becomes more restricted and teachers teach for the test. In summary, we can say that the standardization of curricula, instead of mitigating educational inequality, worsens it even more. In line with what has been stated above and without disregarding the complexity of the issues raised, it is possible to infer a disconnect between the objectives and the materialization of the Australian curriculum, since the evidence based on data from large-scale tests, for example, point to an inconsistency between policy objectives and outcomes. They show differences in the quality of students' learning due to their social origins, the types of schools they attend, the location of their schools, and other variables that we highlight below.

## **A LOOK AT THE RESULTS OF LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS**

Exams such as PISA and NAPLAN are the subject of pertinent and forceful criticism, as reported by Freitas (2011), Lingard (2016), and Reid (2019), among others. However, the results of these widely publicized exams have been the basis for the formulation of public policies here in Brazil and Australia. With the justification of monitoring the quality and effectiveness of education systems, the OECD, through PISA, mobilizes the results to disseminate “models of success”.

Although there are differences in the use of data, that is, the data made available by the OECD are reinterpreted and used in different ways and with different objectives, depending on the political actors and the national context. In general, according to Lingard (2016), the PISA results are used more for “outsourcing than for policy learning”. From this perspective, the idea of

“externalization” is used to refer to countries that “use PISA results to drive reforms that are already being developed, as a legitimizing narrative” (LINGARD, 2016, p.611). Also, we highlight the use of comparative results in a disconnected and decontextualized way from the policies of the countries with the best performances. Furthermore, “it is important to note that OECD analyzes of PISA tend to exaggerate the significance of policies on systemic performance and to underestimate structural inequalities” (LINGARD, 2016, p. 617). This perspective is in line with the warning by Freitas (2007), according to which the results of PISA and other large-scale evaluations are used to certify a supposed “quality of education”, that is, the quality of education has been assumed, in these education reform projects, as synonymous with performance in large-scale assessments.

We believe that PISA results should be analyzed as a reference, and not as absolute truth, since PISA assesses reading and problem-solving skills in Mathematics and Science and not the education system as a whole. The test can assess the pattern of reading and problem solving, but it will not be able to explain, for example, why black children have difficulty accessing. In some countries, this is an issue that is not raised, due to the small presence of its population, while in others, blacks represent more than half of the total national population, as in Finland and Brazil, respectively (ALAVARSE, 2016). In the case of Australia, some studies point out that, once differences in the socioeconomic background of students are controlled, public schools perform the same as private schools. See Larsen et al. (2020).

However, for this text, which is to present and analyze educational inequality in the Australian system, these data on student performance gain importance. Through them, it is possible to examine some of the specifics of this education system. We recall that one of the objectives of the so-called Revolution in Education of the Rubb Government (2007-2010), which promoted a curricular reform, was to place Australia among the five countries with the best performance in PISA.

The release of the 2015 PISA results has gained prominence in Australia, due to the steady decline in results since 2000. When comparing the 2000-2015 period, Australia's average score was 581 points to 510, a drop of 71 points. According to Reid (2019), the drop in the international ranking was pointed out by several sectors of the national media as “crisis”, “catastrophe”, “disgrace”.

In each edition, the PISA test has an emphasis on one domain. In 2015, the emphasis was on mastering Scientific Literacy. Australia's average of 510 in science is above the OECD average of 493 points; however, the Northern Territory and Tasmania scored below the OECD average, 489 and 483 points, respectively; and the same occurrence in Reading and Mathematics was revealed for the territory of Tasmania. The differences between states or territories can be explained by different factors, among which the number of students who are in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic level stands out – in this case, the territory of Tasmania, for example, concentrates, according to the report of the OECD, a greater proportion of disadvantaged students than any other state or territory. This reflects, to some extent, the relationship between socioeconomic origin and test performance.

In the evaluation of PISA, the data point to a better performance of schools in the non-governmental sector in public schools, for the performance of indigenous students. That is, in scientific literacy, indigenous students performed significantly lower than non-indigenous students. According to the document PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's results –, the difference in scores between indigenous and non-indigenous students is equivalent to approximately two and a half years of schooling. The test also showed a difference in performance between students from metropolitan areas, provinces, and remote areas: only the average of students from metropolitan areas (517 points) is above the OECD average.

Analysis of Australia's performance in science literacy shows that students in the highest socioeconomic quartile achieved an average score of 559 points, significantly higher than students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile, who achieved 468 points. This difference of 89 points represents about three years of schooling.

As for the analysis of equity in learning opportunities and outcomes, which considers the relationship between socioeconomic status and performance, the 2017 document, cited above, points out that, in Australia, the effect of socioeconomic origin on performance in scientific literacy was greater than the average across the OECD. The difference between advantaged and disadvantaged students was

88 points on average in the OECD, and 92 in Australia. This equates to about three years of schooling or a full level of proficiency.

The NAPLAN results also corroborate the PISA test results. According to NAPLAN results data (2018), in all domains – reading, spelling, writing, grammar, and mathematics – non-indigenous students score higher than indigenous students. In grade 9, the last year of primary education, for example, the differences may represent more than two years of schooling. Nationally, across all domains, students in schools located in the most central and important geographic regions have the highest average scores, and students in schools in very remote geographic locations have the lowest average scores. Following the same trend, the average scores on the scale are higher for students whose parents have higher levels of education. We also observe this trend in the variable parental occupation, the average scores are higher for students whose parents have higher levels of occupation. Observing the historical series, regarding the variable, indigenous and non-indigenous students, we observed that in 2008, the first year of application of the NAPLAN, 78.6% of indigenous students had scores below the national average, among non-indigenous students the rate was 96%. In 2018, five years after the first assessment, the rate of indigenous students with scores above the national average in Mathematics, in the ninth year, rose to 82.1% and the rate of non-indigenous students was 96.4%, therefore, there were no significant changes between 2008 and 2018. Overall, in 2008, 70.2% of ninth grade students scored above the national average, 582.2. In 2018, this number was 66.3%, with the national average being 595.7. Complete data is available in the document *Achievement in reading, writing, language conventions, and numeracy national report for 2018*.

Riddle and Lingard (2016) point out that, since the PISA tests began in 2000, and consequently the decline in results in Australia has been observed, the actions of the federal government for education have included a significant increase in federal funding for private schools, the implementation of NAPLAN, MySchool, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

According to the OECD (2019), in countries where schools were less socially diverse, less equitable education systems were observed. These data lead Cobbold (2019) to state that “Australia is one of those countries. It has high levels of choice, high competition between schools, high social segregation between schools and high inequality in education” (COBBOLD, 2019).

Similarly, the OECD report called *Equity in Education: breaking down barriers to social mobility* (2018) –, based on PISA 2015 data, points out that 51% of disadvantaged students, that is, Australia's poorest students are socio-economically disadvantaged schools. On the other hand, the most socioeconomically favored schools concentrate only 4.6% of students with socioeconomic disadvantages.

We consider it important, before we continue, to explain how the socioeconomic status and profile are defined in the report. In PISA, a student's socioeconomic status is typically measured by the economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) index. It is a score constructed from the following variables: students' family history, parents' education level, parents' occupational status, number of books and other educational resources available in the household, and household goods. According to the report, the analysis of household goods is intended to replace the analysis of income. The document considers the following definitions:

Socio-economically disadvantaged students as those whose value on the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) is among the bottom 25% of students within their country or economy. Socio-economically advantaged students as those whose ESCS is among the top 25% of students within their country or economy. The same logic is employed for the socio-economic profile of schools: Socio-economically disadvantaged schools are schools in the bottom 25% of the national distribution of the school-level ESCS index, which is calculated as the average ESCS index among students in a school. Socio-economically advantaged schools are schools in the top 25% of the national distribution of the school-level ESCS index. (OECD, 2018, p. 19).

According to the report, Australia has the fourth school system with the highest concentration of disadvantaged students, in schools with the worst conditions, among OECD member countries, only ahead of Mexico, Hungary and Chile. Cobbold (2018b), analyzing the aforementioned report, draws attention to the “double risk” for students from families with low socioeconomic status, since “Social segregation in schools compounds the effect of individual socio-economic background on achievement and exacerbates gaps between rich and poor” (COBBOLD, 2018b). In other words, students from families with a low socioeconomic level are harmed both by their socioeconomic condition of origin and by the low socioeconomic level of the school. The author also highlights that the limited resources with which some schools work contribute to the unsatisfactory results of disadvantaged students.

The data show that schools of low socioeconomic status have more teacher shortages, more teacher absenteeism, less qualified teachers, fewer fully certified teachers, fewer highly qualified teachers, more inexperienced teachers, higher teacher turnover, and more teachers on short-term contracts than favored or high socio-economic schools. According to the data in the report, 21.1% of students are in schools where learning is hampered by teacher absenteeism, and 25% of teachers who work outside the training area, in the case of Science, are in disadvantaged schools. These schools also have the highest percentages of teachers with less experience. Approximately 28.5% of students are in disadvantaged schools, “where science teachers said that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered by inadequately or poorly qualified teaching staff” (COBBOLD, 2018a, p. 8-9). Another survey by Cobbold (2017), based on 2015 PISA data, indicates that approximately 95% of Australia's disadvantaged schools are public schools.

Nevertheless, the rate of teacher absenteeism in Australia, both among favored and disadvantaged schools, is one of the lowest among OECD countries. It is also relevant to identify that the percentage of science teachers with a university degree and specialization is 90.7% in disadvantaged schools and 96.1% in favored schools, one of the best rates among OECD member countries.

In 2019, the OECD released the PISA 2018 result, and, once again, the results confirmed the decline in the performance of Australian students, and more alarmingly for the country. For the first time, the performance of Australian students in the domain of mathematics has fallen to the OECD average, achieving the worst result since the beginning of the tests in 2000. In the article published in the newspaper *The Guardian* (KARP, 2019), Tanya Plibersek, of the Labor Party, declares: “If our children cannot read, write and do math and science, then we have failed”, and says that the results are a wake-up call for the current Liberal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan described the results as “very disappointing and alarming” but, according to the newspaper, “it pushed the responsibility onto states rather than reviewing the issue of federal funding to improve outcomes”. The topic of financing was criticized among those interviewed by the newspaper.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Educational inequality can take many forms in different contexts. In Brazil, the great social, economic, cultural, racial, and regional differences deeply mark the education systems and, consequently, the schools, the teachers' working conditions, the quality of the education offered, and the students' school trajectory, especially in school success or failure. Such differences are expressed, for example, in the illiteracy rate among the population aged 15 or over, which in the North region reaches 13.9%, while in the South and Southeast regions the rate is 3.3%. The difference is also revealed between blacks and whites: among white people, the illiteracy rate is 3.9%; among those who identified themselves as black or brown, the percentage rises to 9.1% (IBGE, 2019). Therefore, variations in education systems and sectors, and how policy is re-signified and incorporated by schools and teachers, require a much wider scope of research than that proposed in this work. However, considering that Australia is a rich and developed country and has a high-quality education system, the existing educational inequalities, evidenced in the documents and research reports analyzed, are reasons for great concerns and debates for Australian society.

As suggested by the studies cited in this article, current educational policies implemented in Australia, including curriculum reform, were forged from the neoliberal agenda, in the name of quality and equity. The logic of the educational market, based on the right to choose, replaces the idea of education as a public good. Furthermore, Australia has introduced other elements of the neoliberal approach, such as, for example, the control and accountability of teachers and schools through large-scale assessments, in this case, the NAPLAN. Currently, the identification of results through performance measures has become the main mechanism for informing society about the quality of education. However, the use of data has promoted, in Australia, a high degree of competition between schools and, consequently, of segregation and inequalities. It seems licit to us to admit that the educational market contributes to the deepening of educational inequalities, whose effects are also an object of concern in Australia. Cobbold (2019), for example, asserts that Australia is an excellent example of the impact of the education market on social segregation: “School choice has been at the centre of education policy for the last 20 or more years”. Furthermore, “Australia now has one of the most socially and academically segregated school systems in the OECD and has highly inequitable education outcomes” (COBBOLD, 2019). According to data from the OECD report, Australia, along with Sweden, had the third biggest difference in science literacy scores between the highest and lowest performers: 336 difference. The average across OECD countries was 309 points, and the smallest difference was 234 for Mexico.

Furthermore, we can observe that these inequalities are partially motivated by socioeconomic differences, as exemplified by the fact that 50% of students whose parents did not complete year 12 – equivalent to our High School – did not reach the international benchmark of educational skills, in comparison to 13% of students whose parents completed grade 12. Students attending schools in provincial and remote communities have substantially lower scores than their peers in metropolitan regions, and indigenous students have significantly lower scores than their peers non-indigenous. Thus, it is students of the lowest socioeconomic level, indigenous students, and students residing in rural or remote areas who experience the highest levels of educational inequality. Socio-economic inequalities are amplified at school because, in general, socially disadvantaged students attend disadvantaged schools with lower educational resources compared to favored schools. As OECD data show, disadvantaged schools in Australia have more students per teacher, more teacher shortages, more absenteeism, more poorly qualified teachers, more teachers teaching outside their field of training, more inexperienced teachers, higher teacher turnover than occurs in the most favored schools. Access to academic curricula in high school is also substantially different, including, for example, access to subjects such as literature and advanced mathematics, which are not offered in all schools. Rural or remote schools, on average, offer half the number of academic subjects as larger secondary schools in metropolitan areas.

Under the logic of neoliberal ideology, the Australian funding model paved the way for the expansion of private schools, encouraging parents – especially the most favored families or families with high socioeconomic status – to leave public education, contributing to the privatization dynamic of education. On the other hand, less favored families, from groups with lower socioeconomic status, remained in public schools. In this context, the debate on financing occupies a central place, since the model adopted, based on the “right to choose”, has paved the way for the privatization of the education system.

Without disregarding the advances and benefits related to the implementation of the national curriculum, such as the debates that involved different sectors of society in the curriculum development process and the recognition of the importance of including themes related to the history and culture of the first inhabitants — the aborigines and peoples of the Torres Strait Islands — and their relationship with Asian countries, or even equity as one of the prescribed goals, it is important to consider the criticisms that point to the limitations of the current curriculum. The studies show, among other aspects, the superficial or marginal character that themes related to the history and culture of the first inhabitants occupy in the curriculum, as well as the little support for the equitable distribution of pedagogical resources aimed at schools and teachers.

From the understanding of this reality, we understand that the specific way in which neoliberalism developed in Australia is an important key to understanding its impact on that country's education system. We found that economic purposes, more specifically, the discourse of “human capital” and its supposed importance for economic development and competitiveness in the world market, gained centrality in the educational field. In the name of efficiency, the private management model began to be applied to education. As in other contexts, neoliberal logic has changed how the nature and purposes of public education are understood by society. Understanding what is public and what is private, in all the complexity of this issue, is central to the debate on Australian education.

Given the reference described in this text, it is clear that inequality in the Australian education system is strongly linked, albeit not exclusively or directly, to the funding model, to the different socioeconomic compositions of Australian schools - including training, absenteeism, and scarcity of teachers – and the socioeconomic status of students. We can also infer that the educational policies implemented in Australia amid neoliberalism are not contributing to reducing the educational inequalities existing in the country.

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Author 1 – Data collection and analysis, text writing, and final review.

Author 2 – Project supervisor, data analysis, and text writing.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest of a financial, commercial, political, academic, personal, or any other nature.

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