

Reporting the ‘Education Revolution’: MySchool.edu.au in the print media

Nicole Mockler*

University of Newcastle, Australia

Launched in January 2010, the MySchool.edu.au website, which ranks and compares schools on the basis of standardised literacy and numeracy tests, has been the subject of intense media coverage. This paper examines 34 editorials focused on MySchool, published from October 2009 to August 2010, and identifies three key narratives in operation, those of distrust, choice, and performance. It argues that these narratives work together to reinforce and promote neoliberal educational discourses at the heart of the ‘conservative modernisation’ (Apple, 2009) of education and other social services. Together, the dominant narratives position MySchool and the ensuing newspaper-generated and published league tables as the solution to problems of poor performance, ‘bad’ schools and ‘bad’ teachers in the face of times characterised by self-interested teachers and governments keen to shirk their responsibility in the education arena.

Keywords: media analysis, politics of education, neoliberalism, myschool.edu.au, education policy, media representations of education

Introduction: The context

In Australia in 2007, Kevin Rudd won a ‘landslide’ election, on a platform underpinned by the promise of an ‘education revolution’. Since 2007, the education reform agenda has seen a broad range of policy initiatives, including most notably for this discussion, a move toward ‘transparency in reporting and assessment’ (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b).

As part of this transparency agenda, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) launched the myschool.edu.au (MySchool) website in January 2010, a site which in ACARA’s own words ‘provides an important opportunity for everyone to learn more about Australian schools, and for Australian schools to learn more from each other’ (ACARA, 2010). In short, the site provides information to the general public about school performance on national standardised tests undertaken as part of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Under NAPLAN, students are tested in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and the aggregated results of schools’ scores are published on MySchool, along with a comparison between local and

* University of Newcastle, School of Education, P O Box 127, Ourimbah, NSW 2258, Australia. Email: Nicole.Mockler@newcastle.edu.au

‘statistically similar’ schools, based on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). Immediately after the MySchool website ‘went live’, most newspapers across Australia industriously constructed and published league tables of schools in varying configurations.

In the tradition of work focused on representations of education in the media and the links between the mass media and education policy formation (Blackmore & Thomson, 2004; Cohen, 2010; Stack, 2006), this paper examines a series of representations of MySchool in the Australian print media. After a brief introduction to the articles examined and the process of analysis, this article identifies and discusses three key narratives at work. I argue that these narratives work together to reinforce and promote neoliberal educational discourses at the heart of the ‘conservative modernisation’ (Apple, 2009) of education and other social services. Together, the dominant narratives position MySchool and the ensuing newspaper-generated and published league tables as the solution to problems of poor performance, ‘bad’ schools, and ‘bad’ teachers.

A note about Australian newspapers

Only one of the 12 daily capital city and national newspapers in Australia is owned by other than Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited Corporation (which owns seven of the twelve dailies), or Fairfax Media (which owns the remaining four). Consistent with the orientation of the Murdoch media globally, News Limited publications tend to be more conservative in their orientation than those of Fairfax (although, as we shall see, there appear to be some significant variations amongst the Fairfax publications), and the one ‘independent’ publication, *The West Australian*, is generally regarded to be highly conservative in its orientation, having been consistently supportive of the Liberal/National coalition since its inception.

Four of the publications in the sample are broadsheet newspapers (*The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*), while the remaining eight are published in tabloid format, *The Australian Financial Review* being unique amongst these as it is widely regarded as a ‘tabloid-sized broadsheet’ newspaper. Table 1 below highlights the ownership and orientation of each of the publications in the sample, as well as the reported circulation levels in 2010.

Publication	Broadsheet/ Tabloid	Fairfax Media/ News Limited/ Independent	2010 Circulation
<i>The Advertiser</i>	T	NL	180960
<i>The Age</i>	B	FM	195900+
<i>The Australian</i>	B	NL	129166
<i>The Australian Financial Review</i>	B	FM	74733
<i>The Canberra Times</i>	B	FM	32364
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	T	NL	201687
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	T	NL	354252
<i>The Herald Sun</i>	T	NL	495000+
<i>Northern Territory News</i>	T	NL	19066
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	B	FM	209644
<i>The West Australian</i>	T	I	184545

Note: Circulation figures gathered via <http://www.thenewspaperworks.com.au>. Accessed 20 May 2011.

Table 1: Ownership, orientation and circulation of newspapers

The Melbourne and Sydney News Limited tabloids, namely *The Herald Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph*, have the highest circulation nationally, together accounting for almost 40% of total circulation. News Limited publications account for 66% of circulation, with Fairfax Media accounting for 25% and the one independent publication accounting for 9%. Tabloid publications account for 69% of circulation, with the remaining 31% being represented by broadsheets.

The articles

Beyond the production of league tables, the publication of MySchool provoked a frenzy across all domains of the Australian media. Between October 2009, when the impending launch was announced, and August 2010, when the data for this project were collected, a total of 484 articles was published in capital city or national daily newspapers that had MySchool as a primary focus. The data were collected via a search of ‘myschool’ or ‘my school’ on the Factiva database, using the Australian capital city and national daily newspapers as the selected sources.

This initial search highlighted over a thousand articles, of which 484 were selected as having MySchool as a primary focus. Further investigation highlighted that 34 of these articles were editorial pieces, almost half of which were published in the week preceding and the week after the website’s launch. Given the particular insight a collection of editorials might give into the orientation of publications toward a particular issue, the significant role of the editorial in cultural reproduction (Featherstone, 2002) and also the unusual situation of having access to a significant number of editorials on the same topic written over a short space of time, representing a substantial investment on the part of the publications in question, I decided to focus this analysis on these editorial articles. Table 2 below shows the origin of the 34 articles subjected to close analysis.

Publication	Editorials
<i>The Advertiser</i>	3
<i>The Age</i>	2
<i>The Australian</i>	7
<i>The Australian Financial Review</i>	1
<i>The Canberra Times</i>	8
<i>The Courier Mail</i>	2
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	2
<i>The Herald Sun</i>	2
<i>Northern Territory News</i>	1
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	3
<i>The West Australian</i>	3
TOTAL	34

Table 2: Number of editorials by publication

With the exception of a proportionally large number of editorials published in *The Canberra Times* (arguably one of Australia's most 'left wing' newspapers) and *The Australian* (generally regarded as one of Australia's most conservative), the spread of editorials across newspapers is relatively even, with two or three editorials having been published in most publications.

The editorials were not spread evenly over the course of the eight months: Figure 1 below highlights the distribution of the editorials by month. The November 2009 editorials coincided loosely with the initial discussion and previews of the website, and more specifically with a speech given by the then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, at the Australian National Schools Network Forum, in which she discussed at length 'our transparency agenda' and the role of the *myschool.edu.au* website in bringing this to fruition (Gillard, 2009). Both of the December editorials, published on the same day, drew on a press release made by the Australian Education Union (AEU) the previous day (Australian Education Union, 2009a) in which they announced their *Charter of School Accountability, Improvement, Assessment and Reporting* (Australian Education Union, 2009b), and called upon the Government to work against the construction of league tables.

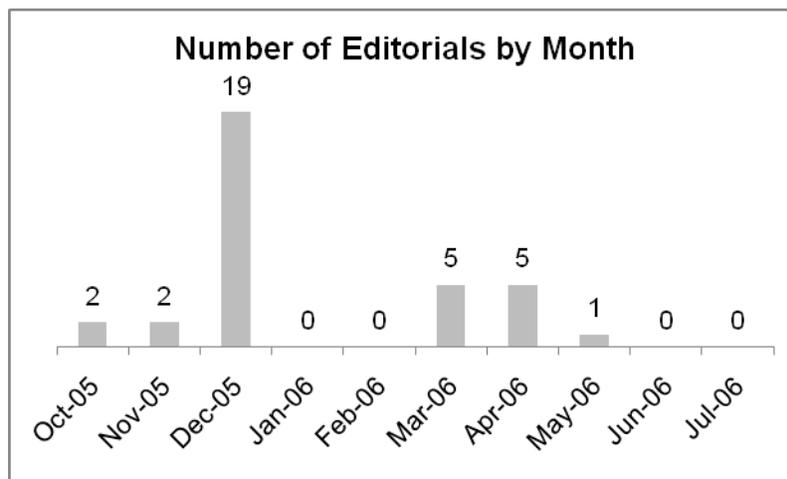


Figure 1: Distribution of editorials by month

More than half of the editorials in the sample were published over the course of January 2010, 12 of these on or in the four days following the website's launch on January 28, drawing on a series of press releases made by the Minister's office on January 21, 27, 28, 29, and 31, as well as press releases made by the AEU on January 28, 29, and 31.

Finally, 10 of the editorials were published in April and May 2010, over the course of the AEU's proposed moratorium on the 2010 NAPLAN tests, which was first mooted by the Union on April 9 (Australian Education Union, 2010b) and resolved on May 6, less than a week prior to the scheduled tests (Australian Education Union, 2010a). One final

editorial appeared in the *Adelaide Advertiser* in June 2010, responding primarily to an address made in Adelaide by an academic from the University of Sydney on the Federal education agenda. For more than temporal reasons, this editorial is something of an outlier, and will be discussed in more detail below.

Analysis of media texts

David Boje's (2001) framework for deconstruction analysis has been utilised in this analysis, with particular emphasis placed on the identification and discussion of the various narratives and metanarratives or 'regimes of truth' (Brown, 1991, pp. 192-193) at work in the public discourse. Boje's framework provides a useful 'way in' to rigorous deconstruction analysis which on the one hand is steeped within Derrida's (1999) theoretical framework while on the other is sufficiently practical for the analysis of specific texts and groups of texts.

In particular, I have examined the 'frames' in use in each of the editorials examined. Developed by Goffman (1974) in the 1970s, first adapted by Iyengar to media analysis (1990, 1991), and further developed as a tool of analysis of media texts by Robert Entman over the past 20 years (1993, 2003, 2007, 2010), 'framing theory' provides a mechanism for analysing the particular 'frames' through which news is reported while transcending simplistic notions of 'bias'. Of framing, Entman writes:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 51, emphasis in original)

In the course of analysis, I posed questions of the texts in the sample consistent with Boje's approach and emerging from Entman's discussion of framing. TAMS Analyzer was used to code the data over a number of iterations and the narratives identified below slowly emerged from this process, as I questioned the way the editorials were framed and the underpinning assumptions upon which their conclusions were predicated. Subsequent to this analysis, I searched for salient quotations across the texts in the sample that would allow me to elaborate each of the narratives in the discussion that follows. Of necessity, all of the texts in the sample are not represented in the extracts embedded in this discussion: of the 29 substantial extracts utilised, 21 of the 34 texts are represented, and a further 6 are used in the course of discussion.

Reading the editorials

Three narratives emerged strongly from the editorials. While these narratives are unquestionably linked and in some cases overlapping, they each represent a slightly different orientation to current debates around education policy in Australia. They are:

- The narrative of distrust;
- The narrative of choice; and

- The narrative of performance.

All but one of the editorials in the sample drew primarily on at least one of these three identified narratives. In 18 of the 34 editorials, one narrative was dominant; in 13, two of the narratives were equally prevalent; and in two articles, all three were equally represented. In one of the 34 editorials, none of the three narratives was present: this editorial, which appeared in *The Advertiser* in June 2010 ('School', 2010), responded in its entirety to an address given by an education academic at a local Adelaide research institute the week before in which she argued convincingly in the eyes of *The Advertiser* of the evils of the commodification and marketisation of school education represented in MySchool.edu.au. Each of the three dominant narratives is absent from the piece, which argues against free market forces and standardisation in education.

The narrative of distrust

The erosion of trust in social institutions under neoliberal regimes and its replacement with 'trust in mechanisms of explicit, transparent, systematic public accountability' (Ranson, 2003, p. 468) is well documented (e.g. Power, 1997). The narrative of distrust emerges very strongly across 19 of the 34 editorials. Distrust is expressed toward teachers and their unions, governments, and those who oppose the construction of league tables from MySchool data. Teachers, principals and bureaucrats who argue against the conversion of NAPLAN/MySchool data into league tables, on the grounds that it would potentially cement and reproduce social and cultural disadvantage, are positioned as self-interested and unwilling to commit to improvement:

Bureaucrats and principals of poor performing schools will not be able to use the social or economic poverty of their school community as an excuse for failure. They will be forced to look at how they resource and teach their students and justify their efforts.

Socio-economic disadvantage is often used as an excuse for low academic expectation – from teachers, communities and students themselves. ('Students', 2009)

Furthermore, the argument against league tables itself is derided as nonsensical, while as a counterpoint a less than useful dichotomy is offered that suggests that *either* social disadvantage *or* good teaching makes a difference to student performance, effectively ignoring the very complex and real interplay between these two variables:

The idea social circumstances inevitably shape school performance is plain wrong. While an encouraging home matters most, the difference in outcomes between similar schools proves teachers can make a difference. ('Top', 2010)

Teachers are right to be concerned. Often the difference between a successful student and one who struggles to meet benchmarks comes down to the quality of teaching. It is not in educators' interests for 'bad' schools to be shamed and subjected to unfair scrutiny. ('Informative', 2010)

Teachers and schools are generally positioned within the editorials as not to be trusted as a consequence of the self-interest in which they are said to act. MySchool is regarded as a tool that might force teachers and schools to 'lift their game' ('Informative', 2010;

‘Students’, 2009), evidenced in the way that ‘bolshie teachers worried that their own inadequacies will be exposed remain deeply opposed to the testing’¹ (‘Could’, 2010). When teachers are not seen as driven by self-interest they are often dismissed as driven by ideology (‘Accountability’ 2010; ‘Top’, 2010) and their protestations regarded as nonsensical. Even when teachers’ misgivings about MySchool and the construction of league tables are accorded a measure of sensibility, often this is short-lived:

Public school teachers and their union cannot be faulted for the strength of their aversion to data gleaned from national literacy and numeracy being published for public consumption but there is a fine line between determination and obduracy. The decision of the Australian Education Union’s national executive to black ban supervision of national literacy and numeracy tests for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 scheduled for May 11-13 is pig-headed and will do nothing (‘Union’, 2010)

There may be some basis for their concern but the boycott appears to be more about protecting the interests of teachers rather than those of the most important part of this debate – children. (‘Teachers’, 2010)

The editorials often draw upon the managerialist agendas of transparency and accountability as justification for the publication of results on MySchool and in league tables, and in the process, position teachers and teacher unions as obfuscators and subverters of these incontrovertible truths. For, like *quality* in education, it is difficult to argue against accountability and transparency. Teachers are said to ‘abhor the idea of accountability’ (‘Accountability’, 2010), unable to understand that

... the test results should be part of wider transparency and accountability about schools and their principals and teachers. The teaching profession should accept that it cannot shield misfits and time-servers. (‘Testing time for teachers’, 2010)

The narrative of distrust, however, is not solely confined to teachers, unions and ‘academic ideologues’ (‘Accountability’, 2010) opposed to the publication of league tables and/or the MySchool website itself. The editorials weave the narrative of distrust around the need for governments to be held to account also, and posit that without the publication of this information in the public arena, governments will (presumably, continue to) shirk their responsibilities with regard to education, a view that is both widely spread in these editorials and remains uncontested:

Leaving things up to the experts – keeping performance data secret within the bureaucracy as the critics of publication want – does not result in action. (‘Why’, 2010)

The Government will be watched closely to see whether it delivers on this promise and the money is spent. Over time it will be possible to use the website to track whether progress is being made in improving results in problem areas and this will ensure the Government can be held to account. (‘Website’, 2010)

Sadly only if the process is public can one reasonably expect governments to provide anything like the funding and support needed by underperforming schools. (‘A Test of Schools’, 2010)

The editorials use the narrative of distrust to position the media as the protectors and crusaders for the Public Good, against the lazy and self-interested likes of teachers, unions and governments. The notion that the league tables which ensue from MySchool

represent ‘full disclosure’ (‘Parents’, 2010) in the face of a teaching profession that has recently developed and employed ‘a language of obscure education jargon, an effect of which is to exclude the public’ (‘Shine’, 2010), and governments that need to be shamed into improving conditions in schools (‘Informative’, 2010), is strongly embedded in these editorials, forming a rationale for the creation of league tables linked to the common good as opposed to the interests of selling newspapers. As the *Canberra Times* noted in the lead-up to the MySchool launch (and, it should be noted, the compilation of their own league table): ‘... the fact is that news outlets love league tables because people want to hear about them’ (‘The test’, 2010).

The narrative of distrust was identified in only four of the 14 Fairfax editorials in the sample, and was entirely absent from those published in *The Canberra Times*. Conversely, this narrative was dominant in 13 of the 17 News Limited editorials, including all seven of those published in *The Australian*, and both of those published in *The Courier-Mail*, where distrust is spread amongst teachers, the Federal Government and teachers’ unions.

The narrative of choice

The notion of choice as tantamount to a basic human right is firmly embedded within neoliberal education policy discourses (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2008). Within these editorials, the narrative of choice claims that MySchool provides crucial and previously ‘unknown’ information to parents which alone has the capacity to enable them to make an ‘informed choice’ (‘Students’, 2009) regarding their children’s education. It is worth noting that the narrative of choice posits that all parents want, need and (now, thanks to MySchool) have choice, and that class and race barriers that might otherwise be seen to perhaps limit or mitigate one’s capacity to choose are completely absent from the discussion.

Parents ‘hungry for information’ (‘Our Schools’, 2010) who currently ‘have to strive to glean any meaningful measurable information’ (‘Informative’, 2010), with the advent of MySchool,

will be able to assess the performance of their child’s school and compare it with neighbouring schools and those in similar socioeconomic circumstances. They will know directly whether their child’s school is as good – or bad – as rumour and reputation would have it. (‘Informative’, 2010)

This notion that parents previously based their school choices on hearsay, or as one editorial expresses it, ‘anecdotes, local gossip and private schools’ marketing materials’ (‘A little’, 2010), pervades a significant number of the editorials, advancing the notion that the information provided on the website, as well as the subsequent media-devised league tables, represent a critical source, essential for making ‘one of the most important decisions in their lives: where to send their children to school’ (‘Rank’, 2010).

The narrative of choice also advances the idea that parents can be ‘empowered’ through the sharing of this information (‘A test the teachers’, 2010; ‘School site’, 2010), both to make sound choices and also to demand improvement from teachers, schools and governments:

For the first time Australian parents can see how their children's school is performing against its peers. For the first time they have the information they need to congratulate teachers who are helping their children to do their best and to put hard questions to those who are not.

For the first time they have something more than word of mouth when it comes to deciding which school will give their children the best possible education. ('A victory', 2010)

In an attempt to appear even-handed in relation to this issue (and perhaps to disguise their thinly-veiled desire to produce league tables because they do, as noted above, sell newspapers), the editorials sometimes suggest that NAPLAN results do not reveal the full picture of a school, although this observation is quickly juxtaposed with an assertion of the critical significance of that which they do reveal:

The second reason for publishing the figures is to give parents better information on which to base their CHOICE of a school. Simple aggregates of results in basic skills tests say a little about what a school is achieving but they do not reflect the full experience that each school offers. They provide a necessary basis though on which comparisons can be made which with other information provided by schools other parents and the community will give parents more confidence. ('Why', 2010)

Educators are right to be concerned about how schools will be compared, and how the information will be used. But that does not undermine the aim of the policy. Already, in some states, such information about schools is published every year. Queensland, for example, is providing crucial data every parent has the right to know. ('Students', 2009)

The narrative of choice presents the inevitable 'transparency' ('Parents', 2010) proffered by the MySchool website as the key to certainty when it comes to making choices about schools. The field of school choice is presented as something of an educational minefield, where the wrong choice will expose children to poor literacy standards and bad teachers. Armed with the 'arsenal of information' ('Teachers', 2010) provided by the combined power of MySchool and league tables, however, parents can be certain that they are no longer 'just guessing' ('Transparency', 2009).

Finally, MySchool holds the capacity to shore up parental (or consumer) choice by providing an objective, measurable alternative to the subjective opinions held by educators and educational researchers:

My School the NAPLAN tests on which it is based and media analysis will revolutionise education by making it possible to base decisions on data not the education establishment's dogma. They establish a marvellous model for other public services from universities to hospitals where consumers have a right to know which service providers are performing. ('Accountability', 2010)

The narrative of choice was identified in 18 of the 34 editorials, including five of the eight published in *The Canberra Times*, and it emerged as significant in only one of the seven published in *The Australian*, and in neither published in *The Age*. This narrative was spread relatively consistently across all other publications in the sample.

The narrative of performance

The narrative of performance posits that ‘performance’ – of students, teachers and schools – can best be quantified via the NAPLAN data and validly measured via the MySchool/league table process, which effectively compares and ranks schools. Thus, embedded in the narrative of performance is the assumption that competition is desirable, that a market-type force can operate within education whereby pressure to improve test scores pushes student ‘performance’ up. While good performance is narrowly equated with good NAPLAN results, the emphasis then falls on improving these scores regardless of the means, and the issue of position within the rankings becomes the real measure of success:

A school which steadily improves its position over time can be as much an attraction for parents and prospective students as one which is consistently at or near the top of rankings perhaps because it is a well-resourced private school with students from a high socio-economic background. (‘Schools’, 2010)

MySchool was touted in some editorials as the ‘real’ education revolution, as opposed to the Rudd/Gillard government’s \$16.2 billion investment in improving the physical resources of schools or their \$2.4 billion ‘digital education revolution’, designed to ‘contribute sustainable and meaningful change to teaching and learning in Australian schools that will prepare students for further education, training and to live and work in a digital world’ (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010a):

The real revolution is Education Minister Julia Gillard’s My School website which provides literacy and numeracy scores for every school in the country. Even better their performance is compared against similar schools. (‘League’, 2010)

At the height of the MySchool/league tables controversy in May 2010, when the Australian Education Union (AEU) was threatening a moratorium on the administration of NAPLAN tests, the editorial of *The Australian* made the following statement about the narrowing of the school curriculum that could perhaps be precipitated by the NAPLAN/MySchool/league tables interplay:

The bigger challenge to public confidence in the test is whether teachers react to NAPLAN by so-called ‘teaching to the test’. Critics say this narrows learning and is counter-productive to the NAPLAN goals. This is a spurious argument. If the test is good it is fine for teachers to direct their efforts at covering the material tested. (‘Testing time for schools’, 2010)

Recalling Gardner and Dyson’s argument that ‘the greatest enemy of understanding is coverage’ (1994, p. 18), as a statement about classroom practice this is, to say the least, uninformed and misguided. However, *The Australian* continues to qualify the statement, noting that while teachers might direct their teaching toward ‘covering the material tested’, there are limits to how far is reasonable and justifiable:

The problems arise only if the test dominates the learning experience with teachers drilling students on a limited range of material rather than offering a broad curriculum. This is an issue of the professionalism of teachers not the existence of the test. ('Testing time for schools', 2010)

Within the narrative of performance, comparison via objective, ranked means is seen as the only valid way to develop a clear picture of the performance of students:

The results of the standardised test and the My School website where they are posted are the clearest indicators available to a parent of how their child fares compared with others in their class and across the country. Parents have a right to this information and the community is entitled to know how schools are performing and whether they are improving. ('Teachers', 2010)

and teachers:

The biggest benefit is it enables parents to look up other schools – an enormous advantage for everybody wondering how their children's teachers rate. ('A test the teachers', 2010)

The Age stands alone in not constructing school league tables based on MySchool data, opting instead to argue (unlike its sister Fairfax broadsheet, *The Sydney Morning Herald*):

... that rankings will not produce general improvement and may harm those identified as poor performers. The Rudd Government is against league tables but it is possible to compile these. The Age instead has been mindful of the context provided by My School's 'Index of Socio-Educational Advantage' in reporting the nationwide school results. ('Schools ranking', 2010)

Others rail against the construction of 'simplistic' ('Students', 2009; 'Testing time for teachers', 2010) league tables before, in the case of the *Herald* in particular, taking the moral high ground in their high-profile publication of a league table in contravention of the NSW law.² Just over a week after declaring that:

League tables produced from simplistic comparisons of narrow data without taking into account student backgrounds can have demoralising results and actually reinforce disadvantage rather than helping equalise opportunity. ('Testing time for teachers', 2010)

The Sydney Morning Herald positioned itself as protector and supporter of quality education through the production and publication of one such league table:

Today consistent with that historic support for quality education the Herald publishes a league table of NSW schools. We do so fully aware of the controversy it is likely to raise – and in full knowledge that what we do contravenes the absurd inconsistent and oppressive law of this state ... But we take this risk believing that publishing this information is in the public interest. ('Why', 2010)

Similarly, *The Australian* positions itself as champion of the disadvantaged in the publication of its top 100 list some months later, in response to the proposed moratorium, claiming that

... a merit-based system in which achievement is acknowledged and celebrated in a manner such as the top 100 table of success is the surest path for schools to improve the chances of disadvantaged students gaining tertiary places and secure jobs. ('Merit-based', 2010)

The Australian, which provided round condemnation of the AEU's actions, cleverly separated the union itself from the 'classroom teachers' who form its membership at about the same time, arguing that teachers also have a right to access this vital information about their students' and their own performance:

The AEU's attitude reflects an assumption that its officials are the real clients of the education system, that *classroom teachers* interested to know how their school is doing have no right to the information ('Top', 2010, my emphasis)

We believe families students and *classroom teachers* are the people who matter most in our schools and they have a right to all the information necessary to improve the quality of children's education ("Accountability", 2010, my emphasis).

The narrative of performance speaks to the strong links that have been forged throughout the Rudd/Gillard Government's tenure between education and 'the productivity agenda'. Picking up on this, *The Australian* asserts that MySchool, far from highlighting disadvantage, is a tool for the creation of equity and equality, positioning those who disagree with the initiative as disbelievers in 'equality of opportunity':

But for all its faults My School will be welcomed by everybody who understands education is the engine of productivity improvement and social mobility. And it will be endorsed by all who believe in equality of opportunity in the right of all Australians to attend a school – be it public or private – that allows them to make the most of their abilities. ('League', 2010)

The narrative of performance thus positions those who oppose MySchool (represented as unionists and educational ideologues) as presumably too dull to understand the crucial role of education in society and the importance of 'improved performance' in the enactment of this role.

While present in some form in all of the articles other than *The Advertiser's* editorial of June 2010, as discussed in the introduction, the narrative of performance was dominant in only 13 of the 34 editorials, including eight out of the 14 published in the Fairfax press and only five out of the 17 published in News Limited publications. Five of the eight *Canberra Times* editorials were embedded with this narrative, as were two of the three *Sydney Morning Herald* pieces. Only two of the seven editorials published in *The Australian* were dominated by the narrative of performance, and none in *The Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun* or *The West Australian*, where the narrative of distrust was most strongly present.

Conclusion

Throughout the editorials, the narratives of distrust, choice and performance work together to provide a strong justification for MySchool and the ensuing league tables of which the prime beneficiaries are the newspapers themselves. Furthermore, they both draw on and reinforce neoliberal educational discourses that have emerged as both a tool

and consequence of the ‘conservative modernisation’ (Apple, 2009) of education over the past decade, in three key ways.

First, together they position competition as the ‘engine room’ of education. Competition between students and schools is seen as the key driving factor for improved results on standardised tests and therefore, improved performance. As noted above, this involves the assumption that a market-type force operates within education to the advantage of students and with an eye to ‘constant improvement’. While arguments about performance are often couched within the rhetoric of ‘improvement for all’, and as we have seen, conservative publications choose to portray themselves as champions of the ‘disadvantaged’, at the same time sound performance is equated with a good comparative rank (whether compared on MySchool to schools with a similar ICSEA score or by newspapers with every school in the state), there must always be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, and in order for one school to be shown to have ‘improved’, another must be seen to have declined. Embedded in this understanding of competition as the driving force in education is a belief that not all children and all schools can indeed succeed, and worse, a kind of delighted interest in who are the current winners and losers.

Second, the three narratives work together to sideline what educators might recognise as deep understanding on the part of students in favour of basic skills. Literacy and numeracy skills, conveniently measured in standardised tests that can be marked quickly and cheaply and that constitute the kind of assessment least likely to support student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2004) are privileged over that which is less measurable but perhaps more important in the quest to ‘[equip] young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of [the 21st century] with confidence’ (MCEETYA, 2008). The narrowing of the school curriculum is acknowledged not as a threat to good education, but at worst as a necessary evil if children are to learn how to spell and do long division. The linking of these basic skills to the productivity agenda, establishing an instrumental relationship between education and ‘getting a job’, is a further and associated means through which the three narratives reinforce neoliberal education discourses.

Finally, embedded in all three narratives to differing extents is the notion that ‘data’ can provide the solution to all educational ‘problems’, either real or manufactured. Measuring, sorting, ranking and re-measuring are seen as a preferable alternative to any kind of real education reform that might make a difference to actual learning, and the kinds of data that are valued are, of course, very limited in their scope and able to be defended as ‘objective’. By their very nature, they provide a superficial yet broad picture of the educational landscape, yet within the parallel universe of neoliberalism, ‘improvement’ even in these superficial terms constitutes significant and incontrovertible gains. Apple suggests that:

Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the common-sense of society. It has worked in every sphere – the economic, the political, and the cultural – to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives (2009, p. 240).

What we see at work here is the reshaping of these categories in action. The dogma of common-sense can make for compelling reading, and rarely in these editorials can a counterpoint or hint of contestability be found. The narrative of distrust asserts that teachers and other educationists act out of self-interest and ideology, effectively silencing

the voices of those with specialist or professional knowledge about the field. The narrative of choice points to a (manufactured) crisis in education, where parents require a particular type of information about schools organised in a particular form to prevent them from making (or continuing to make) ill-informed decisions about which school to choose, to the long term detriment of their children. Finally, the narrative of performance equates high NAPLAN scores with educational success for students, teachers and schools, and asserts that this success can best be measured by comparing schools through sorting and ranking. Through the lens of common-sense, these narratives position MySchool and the ensuing league tables not only as justifiable, but indeed necessary to the educational health of individual children and society as a whole.

John Street (2001) suggests that editors and journalists do not merely report to a target audience, but rather that they actively construct their audience through the performative nature of their work:

Readers and viewers are themselves constructed through the stories they see or read or hear; their concerns and worries are shaped and constituted by the way they are addressed by their papers and programmes (2001, p. 53).

Through the treatment of MySchool in the editorials examined, readers are encouraged to see the data contained in MySchool (in most cases conveniently digested in newspaper-produced league tables) as the solution to a problem they may well not have known they had. Furthermore, such a positioning encourages the public press to adopt nothing but the most populist, reductionist perspectives on the value, purpose and practice of education, and over time will work to further entrench neoliberal education agendas that are demonstrably and unequivocally bad for schools and their students.

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Notes

¹ It is worthwhile noting that often within the editorials the issue of NAPLAN testing itself is conflated with the publication of the results on the MySchool website and the subsequent construction of league tables by media agencies.

² In NSW, legislation was passed in 1997 preventing the publication of school league tables after a case in which a tabloid newspaper printed a photograph of the graduating class of a disadvantaged public school underneath the headline 'The Class We Failed'.

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