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DOI:
[10.1177/2043610618817370](https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610618817370)

Document Version
Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Riddle, S., & Heffernan, A. (2018). Education and democracy for complex contemporary childhoods. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 8(4), 319-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610618817370>

Published in:
Global Studies of Childhood

Citing this paper
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Global Studies of Childhood

2018, Vol. 8(4) 319–324

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DOI: 10.1177/2043610618817370

journals.sagepub.com/home/gsc**Stewart Riddle**

University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Amanda Heffernan

Monash University, Australia

Everywhere, children are facing extraordinary complexities and challenges in an increasingly globalised and hyper-connected world, in which flows of information, capital and people increasingly break down existing social, economic, political and cultural boundaries. Contemporary childhoods are simultaneously filled with possibilities and fraught with dangerous tensions as the big social apparatuses that drove much of the last century – Capitalism, Liberalism, Democracy – seem to be struggling, and in some places, entirely coming apart. Added to these complex social, economic and political concerns is a growing sense of unease – perhaps even dread – that we are facing a century of significant turmoil, from dealing with the multiple challenges of the Anthropocene and climate change, through to the continuing rise of reactionary populism and neo-fascism across the ‘democratic’ world in places such as Turkey, Brazil, Venezuela and the United States. It seems clear to us that democracy is in a state of profound crisis and with it, the commitment to raising children with a strong sense of civic virtue and cooperative responsibility. We suggest that one of the most pressing issues of our current global moment is how we collectively respond to these antidemocratic forces and what the potential role of education might be in equipping young people with the tools and knowledge to become powerful democratic agents of change in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world.

Since the mid-20th century, various education reform agendas from both progressive and conservative governments have shared a common belief that education both *can* and *should* actively seek to change society (Apple, 2013). However, since the 1980s, concerted efforts of neoliberal and neoconservative reformists across many places such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have managed to craft a compelling narrative of education as an individual commodity rather than a collective good, in which individuals are encouraged to compete in an entrepreneurial manner for access to educational opportunities. These market-based reforms have had the deleterious effect of further exacerbating existing social inequalities along lines of gender, race and class (Connell, 2013). One example of this can be seen in Australia, where the mantra of school

Corresponding author:

Stewart Riddle, University of Southern Queensland, Sinnathamby Boulevard, Springfield Central, QLD, 4300, Australia.

Email: stewart.riddle@usq.edu.au

choice and successive policies of governments of all persuasions has generated one of the world's most segregated schooling systems, in which social justice and equity are rearticulated in terms of access to products within educational markets (Lingard et al., 2014; Teese and Polesel, 2003). Further examples include the massive expansion of charter schools and voucher systems in the United States (Berliner and Glass, 2014), the reframing of equity as a problem of quality (Mockler, 2014) and the creeping commercialisation of public schooling (Hogan et al., 2018). In addition, we agree with Apple (2014), who argues that

Education is again witnessing the emergence and influence of powerful social movements. Some of these may lead to increased democratisation and greater equality, while others are based on a fundamental shift in the very meanings of democracy and equality, and are more than a little retrogressive socially and culturally. Unfortunately, the latter have emerged as the most powerful. (p. xxvii)

These retrogressive education policies have had a profound impact on how the purposes of early childhood, schooling, university and technical education have come to be viewed in utilitarian economic and functional terms by policy-makers, school leaders and even parents (e.g., Apple, 2014; Ball, 2017; Brown et al., 2010), in which the 'public' is collapsed into the 'private' (Gerrard et al., 2017). Consequently, young people simultaneously become both consumers and the products of the system. Inputs – in terms of government and private funding sources – are measured against the productivity of their outputs, often with significant repercussions for young people who already experience multiple factors of disadvantages in a system that is designed to produce winners and losers.

Of course, it is not simply a matter of social justice being rearticulated as having equal access to educational markets (Savage, 2013) through individualistic approaches to education as a private commodity or the illusion of choice within highly segregated education systems (Bonnor and Shepherd, 2016). At the same time, democracy is also rent asunder in the process, in which the commitment to a public ethos and collective action gives way to the responsabilisation and atomisation of individuals. The well-worn argument of 'get a good education and then get a good job' has become a hyperactive driver of an increasing culture of individual gain and blame – poor children are responsible for their low educational attainment because they choose to go to schools that underperform on national standardised tests and then they choose to not go on to further educational opportunities.

Perhaps the most astonishing trickery that neoliberal and neoconservative education reform has successfully achieved is the removal of considerations of race, class, geographical location, income and gender from public discourse about education. One clear example of this is the *bracketing out* of social disadvantage in the reporting of national literacy and numeracy testing in Australia (e.g. Riddle, 2018; Sellar and Lingard, 2014). The consequences are dire for young people living in complex situations of deprivation and disadvantage, as 'it provides the opportunity to let politicians, policy-makers and commentators off the hook by masking the persistent inequalities present in contemporary schooling' (Riddle, 2018: 28). This is evident in the perennial battle over Australian school funding, in which under-resourced schools serving disadvantaged communities are further residualised as a by-product of market-reforms, school choice and responsabilisation in education policies and practices.

In addition, we are seeing the spread of a specific form of corporate-driven schooling and constructions of childhood as a training ground for contemporary workers through the corporatisation of multiple levels of education, via multinational players, including Pearson and Bridge Academy, who have substantial corporate interests in early childhood education and schooling in places such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and poor communities in places, including the United

States and Australia. Large philanthropic organisations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are also promoting their own brand of commercialised education-as-product, using the language of progressive and emancipatory education to further entrench corporate-driven education reform – a corruption of Freire’s notion of education as the practice of freedom (e.g. Freire, 1972; Giroux, 2010). Democracy itself becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in the education market, packaged up and distributed by corporations who provide for-profit education in the form of ventures such as online charter schools, marketed to parents as a more democratic, personalised and accessible educational opportunity for their children.

We are facing some enormous challenges this century, including mass human displacement due to conflict, famine and climate change; increasing economic inequality and social insecurity; technological disruption to traditional modes of labour and the attendant precarity of workers; loss of biodiversity and species extinction; and growing political unrest and upheaval across the globe. It seems clear to us that the current mode of neoliberal and neoconservative governance is making little productive difference in responding to these challenges. Indeed, we would argue that we are rapidly approaching a point of crisis on multiple fronts. As such, this is where we come to the point of why we wanted to produce this Special Issue for *Global Studies of Childhood*, with an emphasis on the problem of education and democracy for complex contemporary childhoods.

At the heart of this Special Issue is our intent to present a series of propositional moves about education in multiple contexts and forms that makes some contribution to the notion of why democracy and education are so intricately entwined. We are interested in presenting a careful critique of the flows of education policy and practice by thinking differently – more democratically – about the significant challenges facing education and how those challenges connect to broader questions about agency, civic virtue, collective responsibility and action.

This Special Issue aims to bring together a small selection of papers that were originally presented at the *Re-imagining Education for Democracy Summit*, held in November 2017 at the University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Australia. The summit was broad-ranging in its scope and has spawned several different scholarly collections. These papers we share here tackle some of the specific complexities and challenges of schooling facing children and young people in an era of enormous uncertainty, upheaval and change. The authors address multiple questions of how education and democracy might be more fully realised despite the dangers posed by globalised neoliberal and neoconservative school reforms, including the increasing surveillance and accountability of teachers’ and students’ lives in schools and other education settings.

We have assembled a scholarly collection that take a range of empirical, methodological, conceptual problems, sharing politics and ethics of seeking to determine how we could better re-imagine education as being *for* democracy, within complex contemporary policy and discourse ensembles. These papers present challenges from perspectives that include Australian, New Zealand and transnational approaches or ways of thinking. The authors in this Special Issue explore issues of schooling and education in early childhood, primary and secondary contexts. The papers in this Special Issue pose problems that highlight the various ways current models of education are letting down our most vulnerable groups of young people. The collection also highlights the challenges and steering effects of contemporary neoliberal discourses on the work of teachers and school leaders.

Taken together, the papers challenge us collectively to work to reconsider our ideas and understanding of democratic education and what this might look like in research, policy and practice. Our Special Issue takes three phases, beginning with papers that interrogate some of the challenges facing contemporary schooling today, followed by papers that seek to re-imagine current practices, and concluding the issue with papers that move us forward into possibilities for re-imagining a more democratic education.

We open this Special Issue with Powell's exploration of corporate influences on education, with a specific focus on the exploitation of schooling as a site where corporations can build brand loyalty, improve their public relations, and turn profits. Powell suggests humorous and creative ways to empower children and teachers to speak back against the influence of corporations and politicians positioning the solution for many of society's 'wicked' problems as one that schools are responsible for. We shift then to Hardy, Hamid, and Reyes's exploration of the datafication of schools and their nuanced analysis of the ways teachers seek to balance performative requirements and a systemic desire for quick-fix improvements alongside more educative, long-term and complex approaches towards the use of data.

The second phase of the issue sees two papers conceptualising ways of re-imagining current practices and policies in education. Soong invites us to consider the ways that transnational teachers can provide a grounding for a more democratic education, reminding us that we live in a global era and that students could be better positioned to understand diversity and human rights, and better prepared for their own potentially transnational futures in a globalised world. Mays then shifts our focus towards early childhood education more specifically, drawing upon Picketty's ideas of educational convergence and collective representation to reconceptualise a stronger public education system.

The third phase of the issue provides specific ways of re-imagining schooling in more democratic ways. Baroutsis and Woods reconsider traditional understandings of children's literacy practices, moving beyond deficit discourses that place the blame for issues of standards and achievement onto individuals, and position children and schools in high poverty contexts who achieve well on traditional measures as 'heroic exceptions'. Instead, they suggest, we can focus on what children and their families can know and do now, shifting the onus for adaption back to educational and political institutions rather than the individual. Continuing this theme, Heggart, Flowers, Arvanitakis and BurrIDGE examine citizenship education as an underutilised area that can equip students with the knowledge, skills and experiences to collectively challenge oppression and injustice. They provide specific examples of how schools have undertaken this project of active citizenship education and suggest that this is a possible way to speak back to some of the neoliberal discourses of citizenship that permeate curriculum and resources to emphasise the individual and personal responsibility, rather than collectivism.

Finally, we round off our Special Issue with Robinson, Down and Smyth, who provide an example of listening carefully to young people and privileging student voice with Jacinta's story. They advance notions of how class stereotyping, and deficit thinking can impact upon young people and their imagined futures and explore ways to re-imagine a more humane and socially just school that is founded on democratic principles.

A key problem highlighted within this collection of papers is the way neoliberal and neoconservative discourses that permeate education systems have positioned the individual as the source of a problem – be it a problem with achievement, health or access to educational opportunities. As Mays notes, schooling in its current form can often reproduce the inequalities it is ostensibly seeking to redress. An inherent issue is the notion of deficit discourses, addressed explicitly by Baroutsis and Woods, who recognise that students impacted by deficit discourses are often exposed to a narrowed or inadequate curriculum and low expectations. Instead, they emphasise the role that families and communities play in education, shifting away from much of the traditional discussion in this area which places it as being solely at school. Robinson, Down and Smyth give voice to one student's story and in doing so, highlight the pernicious nature of deficit discourses. They explain that students such as Jacinta are not 'at risk', as we so often see in education literature and policy. Instead, students are *placed at risk* due to a 'lack of progress in addressing the substantive and complex historical, structural, and pedagogical forces impacting on student attainment'.

Several papers in this issue seek to provide opportunities to privilege student voice as a central commitment to democratic practice. We argue that we will never realise a truly democratic education system until students have a strong voice and are listened to by policy-makers, politicians, system leaders and educators. The privileging of student voice in educational research, then, becomes a vital component of re-imagining education for democracy. However, we also acknowledge the potentially problematic issues of researchers *appropriating* student voice and the voices of vulnerable participants, rather than working *with* them to co-construct research. We leave this as a provocation for future researchers – particularly those working towards socially just or democratic visions of schooling – to consider how we can work alongside our participants to co-construct research, rather than researching and moving on to the next project.

The overarching theme within these papers is one of possibility and hope. The collection of papers offers conceptual as well as concrete possibilities for thinking and action that seek to make space for democratic notions of education and childhood. We are offered these possibilities through targeted practices that move beyond deficit discourses and thinking in the papers by Baroutsis and Woods, Mays and Robinson, Down and Smyth. Powell also offers us possibilities for action that challenges the influence of corporate interests in schooling through humour and creativity. Heggart, Flowers, Arvanitakis and Burrige tackle pedagogy and curriculum and explore possibilities for activist citizenship education that potentially paves the way for a more democratic form of schooling, rather than the current individualistic approach found in curriculum and supporting resources. Soong provides alternative ways of thinking about education and educators, suggesting that by celebrating and embracing a globalised and diverse teaching workforce, we could generate and support diversity for a more democratically minded future. Mays present a strategy for possibilities of thinking about public education that could result in a reinvigoration of the links between learning, knowledge and social change. Finally, Hardy, Hamid, and Reyes explore some of the complex ways the datafication of education is playing out in one school, providing insights into the ways teachers are seeking to balance the performative logics that drive many of our current policies with more educative approaches to the use of data that proliferates schools and schooling.

Taken as a collection, we suggest that these papers present several propositional challenges for educators, parents, policy-makers and researchers who are committed to education as a practice of freedom and democratic participation. These are all examples of what Apple (2018) calls *thick* democracy, in which,

‘Thick’ understandings of democracy that seek to provide full collective participation in the search for the common good and the creation of critical citizens are up against ‘thin’ market-oriented versions of consumer choice, possessive individualism, and an education that is valued largely as a tool for meeting a set of limited economic needs as defined by the powerful. (pp. 4–5)

There is a challenge for us all, whether we are education researchers, teachers, policy-makers and activists or parents – or likely, some combination of these – is to consider how we can reframe our own encounters with young people in and out of education contexts to be more inclusive, more democratic and recognise the important agency and determination of young people to act upon the world. Our systems of formal education provide us with a unique site for encouraging the active participation of children in their own *demos*, teaching a love of civic virtue and collective responsibility to one another from early childhood, through schooling and into adult education settings.

We agree that ‘business-as-usual is not going to be good enough. We need a radical re-imagining of the role of the public in generating collective social good. Education generally, and schooling more specifically, must be a central part of such a project’ (Riddle and Cleaver, 2017: 12). It seems to us that there is no greater threat to education as a project of public good than the de-democratisation and marketisation of education in its many forms and institutions – early childhood, primary and

secondary schooling, technical and vocational training and universities. As educators, we need to keep asking ourselves how education might better nurture and develop practices of civic engagement, encouraging young people to see themselves as democratic agents who can work together collectively and collaboratively, to address some of the complex challenges of our contemporary times.

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Author biographies

Stewart Riddle is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood at the University of Southern Queensland. His research interests include social justice and equity in education, music-based research practices and research methodologies. He also plays bass in a band called Drawn from Bees.

Amanda Heffernan is a Lecturer in Leadership in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Amanda's research explores the changing nature of principals' work. She is currently researching the ways principals make sense of their work, and the development of their identities as school leaders.