Title: The Relationship between Policymakers' Choices of Outcome Indicators for

Children and Policies to Reduce Inequality Between Children: The Case of

Australia Since the 1980s.

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In Australia, as in many other OECD countries, public expenditure on children

has increased greatly since the 1980s. Successive Australian governments have

clearly stated that the purpose of this increased investment is to improve

average outcomes among children, reduce disparities in outcomes between

children, in particular between children from low and high income families, and

between Indigenous and other children, and improve levels of intergenerational

social and economic mobility. In this policy discourse, outcomes are defined in

terms of contributions towards increased economic productivity, or reduced

dependence on public welfare in adulthood.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, to document how outcomes have

been defined in Australian policy debates, and how collection of statistics has

focused in particular on a relatively narrow set of educational performance

indicators; and second, to examine trends since the 1980s in these indicators

(from surveys of household expenditure and edcuational knowledge) in the

context of trends in public expenditure on children. The analysis finds that

while public expenditure on in-kind services such as education and on cash

support for families has greatly improved living standards in low income

households and ostensibly sought to reduce inequalities in outcomes between

children, there is little evidence that the social gradient in educational

outcomes has improved much.

The paper develops an argument based on the writings of Pierre Bourdieu to

explain these findings. It focuses on contradictions in public education

policy, which pumped more resources into schools where low income children

attend, while at the same time maintaining or extending support for private

education that high income children go and supporting an ideology of parent

choice. It also focuses on the actions of high income families, who chose to

invest more in their children's schooling at the same time as policy was

directing more resources towards low income children. The end result: little or

no change in the social gradient.

The paper (still drawing on Bourdieu) concludes with a discussion of the

relationship between the narrowness of outcomes as defined in policy debates,

and social immobility. Children's outcome indicators play a crucial role, not

only in documenting inequalities between children, but also in spurring

competition between parents to ensure that their children do relatively well.

The narrower the breadth of indicators, the fiercer the competition, and the

less likelihood of social and economic mobility. The paper finally speculates

that if policy were to give legitimacy to a broader range of outcomes for

children (other than those relating to economic productivity), more diffuse

outcomes would result across all social classes, with a consequent equalisation

of the social gradient.

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