

Reframing Educational Excellence Through Improvement: Change and Continuity in Media Representations

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Abstract

This article investigates the extent to which media reporting challenges or reinforces socially exclusive models of educational excellence. Media reporting is particularly important in contexts of marketization, as schools compete for students and seek to carve out market niches. Based on an analysis of articles published over five years in a major daily newspaper in the Australian state of Victoria, a highly marketized setting, the findings indicate that reporting ignored social factors contributing to school-level performance. Further, reporting offered a prominent place to socially exclusive schools despite deliberate efforts to diversify the types of school profiled. The analysis points to media appropriation of a science-oriented discourse alongside selective use of data to fit a narrative of principal-led school transformation. The findings have implications for responsible and balanced use of school improvement measures locally and in other education systems.

Résumé

Cet article étudie dans quelle mesure les reportages des médias remettent en question ou renforcent les modèles d'excellence éducative socialement exclusifs. Les reportages des médias sont particulièrement importants dans les contextes de marchandisation, car les écoles se font concurrence pour attirer les étudiants et cherchent à occuper des créneaux sur le marché. Sur la base d'une analyse d'articles publiés pendant cinq ans dans un grand quotidien de l'État australien de Victoria, un environnement fortement commercialisé, les résultats indiquent que les reportages ont ignoré les facteurs sociaux

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contribuant à la performance des écoles. En outre, les articles accordent une place prépondérante aux écoles socialement exclusives, malgré des efforts délibérés pour diversifier les types d'écoles présentés. L'analyse met en évidence l'appropriation par les médias d'un discours scientifique ainsi que l'utilisation sélective de données afin de se conformer au récit d'une transformation de l'école menée par son directeur. Les résultats ont des implications pour une utilisation responsable et équilibrée des mesures d'amélioration des écoles tant au niveau local que dans d'autres systèmes éducatifs.

Keywords: / Mots clés : segregation, marketization, social restriction, mediatization, league tables / ségrégation, marchandisation, restriction sociale, médiatisation, tableaux de classement

This article investigates the extent to which media reporting challenges or reinforces the naturalization of socially exclusive schools as models of excellence. Within an educational hierarchy that separates students socially into different schools, “best” schools have often been defined as those that serve the most socially elite student populations (Teese & Polosel, 2003; Lamb, Huo, Walstab, Wade, Maire, Doecke et al., 2020). This is an extension of the myth of meritocracy—the idea that schooling is a socially neutral institution that recognizes and rewards the natural talents of students (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990). Just as school grades distinguish good students from bad, so too can collective student performance be used to distinguish good schools from bad. Schools that excel are understood to do so on their own merit, whereas, following Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis, it is the proximity of student populations to the cultural ideals and dispositions embedded in schooling as an institution that sets them up for distinction.

The intertwining of quality and social exclusivity is potentially challenged by measuring schools in terms of improvement, rather than raw academic performance. Thus, the proposal of focusing on school improvement, explored here through reporting in *The Age* newspaper, is potentially disruptive of a long-naturalized association between excellence and exclusivity. Reporting in *The Age* newspaper on school improvement presented itself as an example of “data journalism,” and one of its reporters is credited as a “data journalist.” As such, it transferred data analytic techniques from the scientific field into the narrative forms of the media field, projecting objectivity and credibility to its readership. This process is referred to as mediatization, understood as the transformation of an issue by the distinctive imperatives governing media production (such as newsworthiness, time pressures, alignment with existing news themes, simplification for a rapid publication cycle), as well as the effects generated on other fields, such as policy (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023; Doolan & Blackmore, 2018; Rawolle & Lingard, 2014).

In marketized education systems, where parental choice is a key driver of enrollments, there is scope for mediatization to be particularly influential. The media is a source of information that can guide parental decisions not only in choosing a school, but in wider educational strategies, such as deciding where to live and paying for tutoring (Windle, 2015). The Australian state of Victoria is an example of a highly

marketized system that also has a highly concentrated media market. Media reporting on the quality of individual schools in this market includes individual school profiles, annual league tables of the schools with the highest examination results, and stories of school improvement. Further, newspaper proprietors also publish guides to “good schools” and provide information on school performance alongside enrolment numbers, fees charged, and other contextual information. A noteworthy characteristic of Australian schooling is that state and federal governments publish extensive school-level data, with the federal government providing an online portal directed at parents, entitled *MySchool*. Although there is an on-paper prohibition on media outlets using such data to generate league tables, this is not respected.

It is in this context that *The Age* embarked on a series of annual reports of schools that have “excelled” through sustained improvement over the period of a decade, a novel methodology for identifying schools to celebrate. The first section of the article discusses the relationship of media reporting to the establishment and mystification of a social hierarchy of schools. The second section examines articles published by *The Age* in terms of discursive framing and the selection of schools to showcase. The findings suggest that the narrative of school improvement repeated across articles reinforces the myth of meritocracy, attributing school performance to the merits of principals and teachers alone, without regard for social influences. Further, great efforts have been made to retain a significant focus on socially exclusive schools through a complex and flexibly applied approach to selecting prize-winners. Although a wider range of schools are celebrated than in more conventional league tables, many of the socially elite winners are models of stability rather than improvement. Therefore, the nexus of excellence and social exclusivity gains an additional term—schools already at the top of a social hierarchy of schooling emerge as paragons of improvement. The final section of the article presents a closer analysis of a school that has shown strong improvement but has done so by apparently improving its market position, recruiting more middle-class students and ridding itself of working-class students.

Media reporting, meritocracy, and market

Media reporting amplifies and shapes market conditions driving segregation through the stories uncritically celebrating the highest performing students, schools, and principals (Baroutsis, 2016). Market pressures also drive schools and principals to promote themselves (Le Feuvre, Hogan, Thompson, & Mockler, 2023) and to resort to paid advertising, establishing a further relationship to media outlets. In 2019 in Victoria, schools and childcare providers spent over \$AUD29 million on advertising in a 12-month period, with private schools amongst the biggest spenders (Heffernan, 2019). Negative reporting on “failing” schools also generates considerable market effects, influencing public opinion, enrollments, and teachers’ and principals’ sense of their own work (Doolan & Blackmore, 2018; Elstad, 2009). The combination of news reporting and paid advertising centres the experiences of socially elite schools, while down-playing or masking the social foundations of their dominance. As such, mediatization is a part of the ideological processes establishing the myth of meritocracy in education, which is that each student (and hence each school) performs according to their own inherent worth, regardless of circumstances. This constitutes

symbolic violence—a form of oppression that is not recognised as such, and is instead viewed as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990).

Following Bourdieu's analysis, education is understood as a historical formation reflecting and favouring the dispositions and cultural investments of middle-class families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990), which in Victoria took institutional shape in the established private schools and select-entry public schools predating World War I. The mass expansion of secondary education post-World War II brought into classrooms a far broader range of students from across the socioeconomic spectrum. This produced some radical experiments in curriculum reform, but also mechanisms for internal separation: divisions between technical and high schools, academic streaming, and fee barriers in private education (Campbell & Sherington, 2006; Hannan, 2009; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003).

The established, socially elite secondary schools retained a disproportionate influence over curriculum, pedagogy, and examinations in Victoria, and gained further ascendancy with the advent of neoliberal policy reforms directed at devolving responsibility to school level (Windle, 2015; Windle & Fensham, 2024). Throughout the 1990s, reforms promoting school autonomy in the public education system pushed responsibility for enrollments and performance onto individual principals and schools, operating in isolation and in competition with each other (Connell, 2013; Lamb, 2007). The hierarchy of curriculum, learning environments, and resources in Victoria can be characterized as following a logic of social restriction, referring to an educational model that reaches excellence when confined to high socioeconomic status student cohorts (Windle, 2015).

Social restriction exists as a polarization between socially restricted schools (typically of high-fee private schools and academically selective state schools) and socially exposed schools catering to a broad range of students from diverse backgrounds. Social exposure impacts the regular functioning of schools to the extent that the knowledge, identities, and bodies of the students they cater to diverge from the narrow historical model developed for socially restricted schools. Socially exposed schools may seek to diversify pedagogical approaches or resort to draconian measures, such as rote-learning, back to basics drives, military-style discipline, cramming for examinations, or the introduction of streaming (Windle, 2015). A true alternative to the socially restricted/socially exposed dichotomy would be a “socially open” education system. In such a system, innovation and improvement would be driven by schools, students, teachers, and communities via horizontal accountability to communities (Lingard, Baroutsis, Seller, Brennan, Mills, Renshaw et al., 2014), rather than following top-down and competitive pressures. Schooling that is democratic and socially open would find exemplars of excellence across schools of varying social compositions serving a wide range of communities (Connell, 1993; Lingard et al., 2014; Mills, Riddle, McGregor, & Howell, 2022).

Media reporting can contribute to the logic of social restriction by mystifying its social foundations; that is, by presenting excellence as an abstract quality of schools, principals, teachers, and students, rather than as the product of relative position in a historically constructed hierarchy. However, more responsible and balanced reporting could also disrupt dominant and common-sense notions that school perform-

ance is independent of social context. The purpose of the present article is to understand the extent to which the prevailing market and media logic of celebrating the most socially restricted schools was indeed disrupted by the novel approach embraced by *The Age* newspaper.

Methodology

Articles reporting on schools awarded annual prizes by *The Age* for outstanding improvement covering a five-year period were examined. Each year the newspaper awarded schools for improvement and provided readers with an interactive interface where they could check change in performance over a decade for any secondary school in the state. In the first instance, a discursive analysis of how the prize-winning schools were framed by journalists was undertaken. The discursive framing was then compared with the performance data used by *The Age* to justify the selection of prize-winning schools. Award-winners are further examined in terms of their social composition.

The sample of articles was based on all publications featured in a series entitled “*The Age* Schools that Excel,” purporting to recognize “schools that achieve outstanding improvement in their VCE results over a decade” (Butt, Grace, & Carey, 2023, p. 14). Forty-eight articles appearing between 2019 and 2023 were first analyzed through the lens of mediatization (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023) to identify dominant framings of school quality and improvement. This method applies discourse analytic techniques that identify common patterns in phrasing, authorial voice, citation, and the invocation of individuals and discourses. These features are typically presented in textual examples; however, some elements have also been quantified. This analysis focused on causal claims made about improvement and sources drawn upon by journalists.

Measures of school improvement

Quantitative analysis sought to make use of the same indicators used by *The Age*, supplementing these with data on school socioeconomic composition. Improvement was measured over the period of a decade, and several indicators were reported for each year: median study score, percentage of study scores 40 and above, and Year 12 completion rates. Median study score is based on the median of all study scores of all students across all subjects at a school. Victorian students receive a study score out of 50 for each school subject attempted in their final year (Year 12). Study scores are based on a mix of school-based assessments and external examinations, then normalized centrally by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. The mean study score state-wide for students attempting any given subject is 30, with a standard deviation (SD) of 7. Just under 10 percent of students system-wide achieve study scores of 40 and above in any given subject.

Because *The Age* awarded prizes to schools with wide-ranging levels of improvement, these have been classified here as either negligible/small or robust based on the magnitude of change to median study score over a 10-year period. An increase of 3 points or more equates to a moderate to large effect size (a 3-point increase divided by the SD of 7 is 0.43, which can be considered moderate [Kraft, 2020]). Increases above 5 points can be considered as reflecting a large effect size using the

same criteria. An additional data point has been added to the analyses. Schools are considered to show robust and sustained improvement if they maintained moderate or large gains in the year following the award by *The Age* (that is, gains were sustained into an eleventh year). As Table 2 shows, just over half of the schools awarded prizes for improvement would be better characterized as having stable performance.

Measures of socioeconomic composition

Socioeconomic composition is measured by the distribution of students across four quartiles of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA). Socio-Educational Advantage is a composite measure published for each school by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Research Authority (ACARA), based on parental occupation and educational qualifications. A socially balanced school should have an equal spread of students in each quartile. A disadvantaged school will have a concentration of students in Q1 (the lowest SEA) and Q2 (second-lowest SEA). An advantaged school will have a concentration in Q3 (high SEA) and Q4 (highest SEA).

Socio-Educational Advantage is used to operationalize the theoretical construct of socially restricted schooling. Schools with two-thirds of enrollments or more from the top two SEA quartiles are classified as socially restricted (shown in pink in tables). Schools with two-thirds of enrollments or more from the bottom two SEA quartiles are classified as socially exposed (shown in blue in tables). Schools with more evenly distributed enrollments are classified as socially mixed (no colour in tables). Schools that change their composition to the extent that they move from one classification to another are shown in green in tables. Based on 2023 ACARA data, approximately 21 percent of Australian schools can be considered socially restricted, 36 percent can be considered balanced, and 43 percent can be considered socially exposed.

A second measure of socioeconomic segregation is the school-level Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). This aggregates student SEA data. The ICSEA ranges from 500 to 1300, and has a mean of 1000 and an SD of 100. This means that schools with ICSEA values lower than 1000 have some level of disadvantage, while those with values above 1000 have some level of relative advantage.

Results

A break from league tables

The “schools that Excel” series was framed from the outset as novel in several ways: in marking a break from league tables, in making scientific use of large-scale data sets, and in investigating the causal relationships involved in school improvement. The series further sought to appeal to readers on market terms. It provided an interactive feature where readers are encouraged to check the relative performance and improvement of “your school,” thereby aligning with existing information formats designed to inform school choice.

Reporting opened in the first year of the series by establishing a contrast with the narrow range of schools showcased in league tables, which are also published by the same newspaper. Such league tables present a ranking of the 10–20 schools whose students achieved the highest Median Study Scores in the state. The shift away from a league table logic was framed by journalists thus:

When [Victorian Certificate of Education] results are released every year, the same handful of schools often dominate the top of the league tables. While it's important to celebrate the success of these schools, what about all the other schools kicking goals? More importantly, what is driving improvements at these schools? (Butt & Cook, 2019, p. 10)

The question of what is driving improvement at individual schools became the focus of reporting on prize-winners. Articles typically presented innovations and positive qualities as described by the principal. This framing assumes firstly that there have been exceptional improvements achieved in the prizewinning schools, and indeed the distinction of their improvement and the way that schools have “earned” their place is constantly referred to. Further, the causal framing assumes that within-school measures are responsible for school performance, without reference to other influences, reinforcing the myth of the meritocratic school system where each school performs based on the talents of its principal and teachers alone.

Ensuring ‘diversity’ in the selection of winning schools

In setting up an improvement-focused series, *The Age* sought to showcase a wide range of schools, many of which advertise with the newspaper, offering more variety in news content and in positive exposure for potential revenue sources. Rather than simply award the most-improved schools, *The Age* devised a system that would guarantee at least 50 percent of private schools amongst winners (the largest spenders on advertising), selecting one private and one state school from four metropolitan and one regional area in each year. The newspaper gave the following presentation of its methodology:

We used Department of Health and Human Services boundaries to categorise schools as metropolitan or regional, and divided the metropolitan region into west, north, east and south Melbourne. One government school and one non-government (Catholic or Independent) school was chosen for each area based on their records of improvement at year 12. (Butt & Cook, 2019, p. 10)

Only the median study score was systematically presented as the rationale for the selection of individual schools (92 mentions), while the percentage of study scores 40 and above was occasionally mentioned (17 mentions). Other measures were not presented by *The Age* journalists as the reason for schools being selected as prize winners. Therefore, although it was not explicitly stated, it appears to readers of *The Age* that schools that excel are those with the greatest improvement in median study score. This is reinforced by framings such as the following labelling of the school awards section of the interactive panel: “shows the 10 high-gain schools *The Age* judged as having shown the best improvement in their results over the past decade” (Butt & Carey, 2022, p. 14).

The most cited sources were school principals (cited 71 times) and other school leaders (cited 18 times), parents (cited 37 times) and, less commonly, students (cited

30 times). The journalists sought to paint a lively portrait of school communities and of initiatives led by principals. These initiatives are then cast as the reasons for school improvement. For example, “We have found that it’s often small or simple ideas that can have the biggest impact on student results” (Butt & Cook, 2019, p. 20). Additional support for this causal attribution is drawn from outside experts. The following passage from the first year of the series illustrates the authority drawn from such experts for the journalistic framing used:

The Grattan Institute’s Julie Sonnermann says it’s important to identify what works well in improving schools. “We need to look at the quality of the teaching, the school leadership, the support for students for personal development and growth,” she said. “We need to make sure that we are picking up the factors that are the differentiators between good and bad schools and the way to do that is through rigorous research and analysis.” She said governments should play a role in expanding the practices that have been known to drive school improvement. (Butt & Cook, 2019, p. 20)

The think-tank expert, Sonnermann, only cites within-school contributors to improvement, indirectly offers endorsement of the reporting produced by *The Age* as “rigorous,” and argues for the replication of successful practices. These accounts serve to obscure and mystify the pathway to improvement taken by many schools operating under market pressures to innovate in their social selectivity, rather than their pedagogy or support (Lubienski, 2009).

It is noteworthy that no article offered alternative or dissenting perspectives to those presented by the principal and endorsed by the journalists and, less directly, by outside experts, of impressive improvement. There was consequently an extremely high level of discursive unity in reporting, akin to that found in advertorials.

The narrative framing of exceptional improvement was constant, even for schools where there was little change over time and where surrounding schools made similar, or even greater improvement than awarded schools. For example:

The Age’s analysis of VCE results data found non-government and state schools in Melbourne’s east recorded the most consistent performance year on year, so in a strong field, [2019PE] and [2019SE] stood out for managing to drive up their median scores. (Grieve, 2019, p. 15)

These two schools “drove up” their median score by a single point over a decade, identical to many neighbouring schools (Table 1). More realistically, these schools are characterized by stability and similarity to their peers. State school 2019SE not only did not “stand out,” but it was also outperformed by another state school in the same neighbourhood. *The Age* presented an altered methodology to justify this winner, using change over four years rather than 10:

Between 2012 and 2015, the school’s median study score improved from 30 (which put it level with the statewide average) to 32 and it has maintained those results every year since. (Grieve, 2019, p. 15)

Table 1. Comparison of 2019 Eastern Region winning and neighbouring schools

| | Median study score in 2009 | Median study score change over 10 years | % study scores above 40 in 2009 | % of study scores above 40 change over 10 years |
|---------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------|---|
| 2019PE | 33 | 1 | 11 | 6.5 |
| PC1 | 31 | 1 | 9 | -1.8 |
| PC2 | 35 | 1 | 22 | 4.5 |
| PC3 | 35 | 1 | 24 | 2 |
| PC4 | 29 | 1 | 8 | 3.7 |
| PC5 | 31 | 1 | 11 | -4.3 |
| PC6 | 36 | 0 | 27 | 9.1 |
| PC7 | 35 | 0 | 21 | -0.5 |
| PC8 | 38 | 0 | 35 | 5.2 |
| PC9 | 34 | 0 | 19 | -2 |
| PC10 | 36 | 0 | 25 | 4.8 |
| PC11 | 35 | 0 | 23 | -1.8 |
| PC12 | 37 | 0 | 34 | -4.1 |
| PC13 | 36 | 0 | 29 | 3.7 |
| PC14 | 36 | 0 | 25 | 3.7 |
| PC15 | 33 | 0 | 16 | 3.7 |
| PC16 | 36 | -1 | 25 | -0.4 |
| PC17 | 32 | -1 | 9 | -1.8 |
| PC18 | 36 | -1 | 30 | -8.4 |
| PC19 | 34 | -1 | 18 | -3.5 |
| PC20 | 36 | -1 | 28 | 3.7 |
| PC21 | 38 | -2 | 44 | -14.9 |
| 2019SE | 31 | 1 | 8 | 1 |
| SC1 | 30 | 2 | 8 | 2.8 |
| SC2 | 29 | 1 | 5 | 0.2 |
| SC3 | 28 | 0 | 3 | 0.5 |
| SC4 | 27 | -1 | 4 | -2.1 |
| SC5 | 30 | -1 | 5 | 1.5 |
| Mean | 33.5 | 0.0 | 18.8 | 0.4 |

Notes: PC = Private comparison school, SC = state comparison school

It is clear that editorial discretion has been used to select schools, deviating from the framing of data-based selection of schools that have shown exceptional improvement. In part, this is an artefact of the division of winners by sector and region. As the following section makes clear, discretion and the inclusion of schools with little claim to improvement within the exceptional improvement framing favours socially exclusive schools.

The social profile of prize-winning schools

Just over half of the schools would be better characterized in terms of stable performance, rather than exceptional improvement, and the “stable” schools concentrate social restrictive schools (shaded pink in Table 2). Table 2 shows all awarded schools,

ordered by the quantitative increase in school-level performance as measured by median study score. The school identifier consists of the year of award, sector (public or state), and location (Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western, Regional).

Table 2. Complete list of award-winning schools

| School | Initial ICSEA | ICSEA change over 10 years to award | initial median study score 10 years prior to award | Study score change over 10 years to award | Study score change in year post award |
|--|---------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| 2023PW | 1136 | 24 | 35 | 0 | -1 |
| 2019PN | 1150 | -32 | 32 | 1 | 2 |
| 2019PE | 1159 | -27 | 33 | 1 | 0 |
| 2019SE | 1112 | -22 | 31 | 1 | 1 |
| 2020PE | 1199 | -17 | 35 | 1 | 0 |
| 2020PS | 1128 | -4 | 34 | 1 | 0 |
| 2022PN | 1164 | -2 | 34 | 1 | 0 |
| 2022PE | 1168 | 8 | 36 | 1 | 0 |
| 2022PR | 989 | 19 | 27 | 1 | 2 |
| 2020PW | 1037 | 35 | 30 | 1 | 1 |
| 2019PW | 1121 | 35 | 33 | 1 | 1 |
| 2019PR | 1010 | 44 | 30 | 1 | 0 |
| 2021PR | 1129 | -30 | 32 | 2 | -1 |
| 2020SE | 1100 | -11 | 31 | 2 | 1 |
| 2020PN | 1109 | -7 | 30 | 2 | 1 |
| 2023PR (composition change from balanced to exposed) | 1017 | 1 | 28 | 2 | -1 |
| 2023SS | 962 | 12 | 28 | 2 | 1 |
| 2020SW | 954 | 14 | 26 | 2 | 3 |
| 2023PS | 1082 | 16 | 30 | 2 | 0 |
| 2019SW | 919 | 36 | 28 | 2 | 1 |
| 2021SW | 966 | 37 | 28 | 2 | 0 |
| 2019PS | 1103 | 38 | 33 | 2 | 2 |
| 2021PN | 1003 | 50 | 30 | 2 | 1 |
| 2023PN (composition change from balanced to restricted) | 1038 | 51 | 29 | 2 | 1 |
| 2022PS | 1124 | 57 | 35 | 2 | 1 |
| 2021PW (composition change from balanced to restricted) | 991 | 91 | 30 | 2 | 2 |
| 2021SS | 1132 | -31 | 28 | 3 | 3 |
| 2020SS | 956 | -10 | 29 | 3 | 4 |
| 2023SR | 976 | 7 | 29 | 3 | 2 |
| 2020PR | 1150 | 10 | 36 | 3 | 2 |
| 2023PE | 1130 | 18 | 32 | 3 | 1 |
| 2023SW | 925 | 36 | 25 | 3 | 4 |
| 2020SN | 985 | 48 | 28 | 3 | 2 |
| 2021SN | 920 | 56 | 25 | 3 | 3 |
| 2019SS | 1033 | 64 | 27 | 3 | 3 |
| 2021PS | 1003 | 82 | 27 | 3 | 4 |

Table 2 (continued)

| School | Initial ICSEA | ICSEA change over 10 years to award | initial median study score 10 years prior to award | Study score change over 10 years to award | Study score change in year post award |
|---|---------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| 2022SW (change from exposed to balanced) | 955 | 155 | 27 | 3 | 2 |
| 2021PE | 1206 | -47 | 29 | 4 | 4 |
| 2022SR | 966 | -14 | 26 | 4 | 2 |
| 2019SN | 1011 | -8 | 27 | 4 | 3 |
| 2021SE | 979 | -6 | 25 | 4 | 2 |
| 2022SE | 1057 | 35 | 26 | 4 | 3 |
| 2019SR | 1081 | -82 | 28 | 5 | -1 |
| 2022SS | 942 | 4 | 23 | 5 | 5 |
| 2022PW | 1038 | 22 | 26 | 5 | 4 |
| 2022SN | 954 | 77 | 23 | 5 | 6 |
| 2020SR (change from balanced to exposed) | 1019 | -33 | 28 | 6 | 6 |
| 2023SN (change from exposed to balanced) | 956 | 61 | 23 | 6 | 0 |
| 2021SR | 973 | 6 | 27 | 7 | 3 |
| 2023SE (change from balanced to restricted) | 1007 | 144 | 24 | 7 | 7 |
| Mean | 1014.8 | 24.8 | 27 | 4.1 | 3.1 |

Notes: for Sector, S = state, P = private, for Region, N = northern, S = Southern, E = Eastern, W = Western, R = Regional; Pink = socially restricted, no colour = socially balanced, blue = socially exposed, green = shift in category; Bold = Robust sustained growth

Many schools made negligible or small improvements in performance and extending the years under consideration by one additional year (final column) indicates either zero or negative growth for 13 schools. Schools gained an average of 2.8 points in the prize-winning period of 10 years, which dropped to an average of 1.8 points the following year.

Schools with small or negligible improvements were for the most part high-fee private schools. The celebration of these schools is puzzling, unless consideration is given to their role as the largest spending advertisers (Heffernan, 2019). Post-award study score change brings many schools to zero improvement, once again concentrated in socially restricted private schools.

Just 15 schools (30%, shown in bold in Table 3) increased their median study scores by at least 3 points and maintained those gains into the year following the award. Socially mixed and socially exposed state schools were more prominent among those with robust and sustained improvement. In short, media reporting on school improvement and its causes could be expected to focus exclusively on these schools.

Column 2 shows the school ICSEA score at the start of the decade and column 3 shows the change over a decade. Of the total, 33 schools (two thirds) increased their ICSEA in the decade over which data was used by *The Age*. The mean change in ICSEA was an additional 20 points.

A partial break from the league table logic

The “Schools that Excel” series does indeed considerably broaden the types of schools celebrated in media reporting relative to league tables, thereby challenging the nexus of excellence and social exclusivity to some extent. For example, Table 3 shows the “top schools” of 2023 (Koehn & Butt, 2023), which are among the most socially restrictive in the Victorian education system and owe their ranking to their highly selective intake. These schools cater to few low socioeconomic status students and are between 1 and 2 standard deviations above the ICSEA mean of 1000. Of 18 schools named, 15 are fee-charging private schools while the remaining three are academically selective state schools. All but one is located in metropolitan Melbourne and most were founded prior to the mass expansion of secondary education. That is, they are highly segregated and in an unassailable position of advantage.

Table 3. “Top Schools” published by *The Age* in 2023

| Rank and sector | Median Study Score | SEA Q1% | SEA Q2% | SEA Q3% | SEA Q4% | ICSEA |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1 (P) | 39 | 2 | 8 | 24 | 66 | 1165 |
| 2 (P) | 37 | 1 | 6 | 25 | 67 | 1159 |
| 3 (P) | 37 | 1 | 5 | 18 | 76 | 1189 |
| 4 (P) | 37 | 0 | 5 | 26 | 69 | 1160 |
| 5 (P) | 37 | 0 | 3 | 15 | 81 | 1199 |
| 6 (P) | 37 | 8 | 18 | 29 | 45 | 1104 |
| 7 (P) | 36 | 1 | 6 | 23 | 69 | 1164 |
| 8 (P) | 36 | 1 | 7 | 22 | 71 | 1140 |
| 9 (State selective) | 36 | 3 | 8 | 20 | 69 | 1182 |
| 10 (P) | 36 | 0 | 3 | 20 | 77 | 1189 |
| 11(P) | 36 | 1 | 5 | 25 | 70 | 1159 |
| 12(P) | 36 | 1 | 6 | 21 | 71 | 1177 |
| 13 (State selective) | 36 | 3 | 8 | 21 | 67 | 1170 |
| 14 (State selective) | 36 | 4 | 12 | 31 | 53 | 1134 |
| 15 (P) | 36 | 1 | 6 | 21 | 72 | 1173 |
| 16 (P) | 36 | 1 | 6 | 23 | 70 | 1160 |
| 17 (P) | 36 | 4 | 12 | 28 | 56 | 1133 |
| 18 (P) | 36 | 4 | 12 | 30 | 54 | 1127 |
| Mean | 36.4 | 2.0 | 7.6 | 23.4 | 66.8 | 1160.2 |

Note: Pink = socially restricted (all schools in this set are socially restricted)

Whereas the mean ICSEA for the “top schools” is 1160, 1.5 standard deviations above the mean, for “schools that excel” it is 1015, close to the mean for all schools. However, *The Age* has included a group of socially exclusive schools with little claim to improvement, and worked with principals to establish narratives of exceptional improvement, maintaining some continuity with the types of schools included in league tables.

Improvement through increased social restriction?

Considering only those schools with robust and sustained signs of improvement (i.e.

3 points or more maintained in the year post-award), this article returns now to the question of whether increased social restriction played a role. Previous research on marketization suggests that it encourages schools to seek improvement by innovating in the ways they select students (Lubienski, 2009). On average ICSEA rose by 26.5 points in this subset of schools (Table 4). However, the jump was greater for some schools and may provide an explanation for particular cases.

Table 4. Social profile of schools with robust sustained improvement

| School | Initial ICSEA | ICSEA difference over 10 years | Enrolment growth | % in lower 2 SEA quartiles at date of award |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------|------------------|---|
| 2023SE | 1007 | 144 | 379 | 13 |
| 2021PS | 1003 | 82 | 252 | 33 |
| 2022SN | 954 | 77 | 160 | 55 |
| 2019SS | 1033 | 64 | 186 | 25 |
| 2021SN | 920 | 56 | 106 | 70 |
| 2023SW | 925 | 36 | -52 | 79 |
| 2022SE | 1057 | 35 | 825 | 28 |
| 2022PW | 1038 | 22 | 976 | 38 |
| 2021SR | 973 | 6 | -19 | 72 |
| 2022SS | 942 | 4 | -221 | 85 |
| 2019SN | 1011 | -8 | 215 | 67 |
| 2020SS | 956 | -10 | 545 | 82 |
| 2021SS | 1132 | -31 | 397 | 23 |
| 2020SR | 1019 | -33 | -19 | 68 |
| 2021PE | 1206 | -47 | 222 | 7 |
| Mean | 1012 | 26.467 | 262 | 50 |

It is surprising that some schools gained a more socially exposed student cohort and nevertheless improved their performance, as such schools are often going through processes of residualization (Lamb, 2007). However, residualization also typically involves falling enrollments, while these schools mostly experienced strong enrollment growth.

Some state schools in middle-class neighbourhoods gained more middle-class students and began to look more like neighbouring private schools. A clear example is the first school in Table 4 (2023SE), which increased its ICSEA score by close to 1.5 standard deviations.

A profile emerges of improvement in socially exposed state secondary schools, some of which improved while their ICSEA remained stable dropped. Had *The Age* reported only on these, it would have avoided boosting some schools that have weak claims to improvement.

A case of improvement through social restriction

The school with the highest increase in ICSEA (144 points) enjoyed the highest increase in performance, presenting as a case of market repositioning (identified as 2023SE, in the first row in Table 4). The school went from being socially balanced

(with 44% in the top half of the SEA distribution) to socially restricted (with 85% of students in the top half of the SEA distribution). This school's median study score jumped 7 points and its share of top scores jumped 9 percentage points. Both were maintained in the year following award.

This state school is new, having replaced an older school on the same site. Year 12 enrollments increased from 98 to 125 over the award period. The school is located in the heart of market competition, in a middle-class neighbourhood where there is a high density of private schools. The school counts eight private and one state "competitor" within a radius of 2.3 km.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this school has sought to draw in students from private competitors, including by adopting features of those schools, such as a traditional uniform (blazers and ties) and the International Baccalaureate program. It also adopted features from an older era of state education, such as ability streaming, with advanced and specialist classes allowing for selection at entry. Further, it adopted a French immersion program and curriculum, providing an additional streaming mechanism.

In its first year of operation, the student population was right on the ICSEA mean and had an even share of students from each SEA quartile, similar to the predecessor institution. However, the school's marketing strategy was extremely successful with the highest socioeconomic status families. Top SEA quartile students went from 21 percent in 2014 to 58 percent of enrollments in 2023. Students from the bottom quartile represented just 4 percent of enrollments, down from 34 percent a decade earlier. 2023SE began its existence with over 100 low SES students, but this had dropped below 30 by 2022. Over the same period, it recruited 360 students from the highest socioeconomic status background quartile.

Low SES students were not displaced to immediate neighbours (schools within 5 km) but rather shrank in numbers across the local set of schools. Just 41 remained between a set of four neighbouring schools that together cater to 3574 students. Rather than standing out as a socially exposed school among socially restrictive private school competitors, 2023SE "ha[d] become a first choice" (Butt et al., 2023, p. 14). Nevertheless, the principal presented the school as diverse:

[The principal] says these specialised programs, regular academic testing and [2023SE]'s small size of 720 students ensures that teenagers don't slip through the cracks. "I feel like we have the ability to deal with anyone who walks through the door," he says. (Butt et al., 2023, p. 14)

Its success made 2023SE into a model for others, with head office endorsement from the Victorian Department of Education. According to its own website, A2023SE was named as an "Influence School" in "student learning, growth and achievement" by the Department of Education in 2018 and 2019.

Conclusion

A novel approach to reporting in *The Age* newspaper sought to diversify the schools that were positively profiled as examples of excellence. Although reporting framed the winning schools as selected for exceptional improvement over a decade, many

given awards made negligible improvements. The process of mediatization, by which the principles of commercial media production influence the way an issue is framed and influences other fields, appears to have shaped the presentation of school improvement in important ways.

Mediatization appears to work to reinforce segregation through the following processes:

- A desire to positively profile the types of school that are regular media advertisers (high-fee, socially restricted private schools). Had *The Age* considered only schools with robust and sustained improvement, it would have been faced with reporting primarily on socially exposed state secondary schools;
- A simplistic explanation of school improvement based on within-school innovations
- Providing an echo-chamber for think-tanks and experts promoting similar within-school explanations of school improvement;
- Offering evaluations of schools as a source of information for school choice by parents (for example, through the interactive data presentation and references to parental demand for particular schools 'of choice');
- Ignoring the contribution of socioeconomic composition and segregation to academic performance; and the strategies used by schools to restrict their student populations.

The last of these points needs some qualification. Although there are cases of schools with robust and sustained improvement that appear to have boosted performance by changing their students, there are others where composition has remained stable.

It should also be noticed that *The Age* is hardly alone in promoting the fantasy of school improvement as independent of social context, also prominent in the discourse of Australian governments, research agencies, and think-tanks (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Rawolle & Lingard, 2014).

The implications of these findings are that media reporting on school quality needs to be more transparent, more balanced, and more contextualised. Drawing inferences about improvement from interviews with school principals is risky at best and misleading at worst.

Although mediatization of improvement as analyzed here ignores and confounds the social dynamics of schooling, it has offered a novel departure from traditional league tables that look at raw student performance alone, privileging of the most socially restrictive sites. Such reporting could be additionally refined by seeking to shed light on system-level or shared improvements across schools, or on the reduction of inequalities, rather than on "crowning" winners. In addition, alternative measures of success need to be developed and shared by education systems to avoid a reliance on academic examination performance.

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