

Against Kevin

Kevin Donnelly is senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University and regular columnist for many Australian media outlets. He is a conservative voice who attracts a lot of clickbait. He rails against multiculturalism, the teaching of Indigenous perspectives and was comfortable using the 'n' word three times during his 2019 book launch (Moran 2019).

Some of Donnelly's views are offensive and incorrect and some are just incorrect.

Bigotry

Donnelly sees himself as an anti-PC crusader. Political correctness is defined as language designed to avoid offense or discrimination. Therefore, to be anti-PC, is to be in favour of allowing language that causes offense or discrimination. This is clearly an aim of Donnelly's as we see in this complaint, "if you argue that marriage is between a man and a woman - generally, for the purpose of procreation - you're heteronormative; if you argue against gender transitioning, you're guilty of transgenderism" (Moran 2019). This is supposed to be a call to action, but it is just a statement of fact. Heteronormative defines sexual and marital relations as being most fitting between opposite genders. Being against gender transitioning is being against people being transgender - again, this is simply the meaning of the word. To Donnelly's hordes of keyboard warrior acolytes, however, saying $2+2=5$ is akin to some kind of great mental freedom. The problem with anti-PC crusaders is that political correctness is simply a method by which we can reduce bigotry and discrimination in our language.

Donnelly is against multiculturalism, likening it to cultural relativism: "Cultural relativism prevails where Australia is described as a multicultural, multi-faith society" (Donnelly 2021). Firstly, it is unclear how stating that Australia is home to more than one culture or faith is culturally relative. Cultural relativism, at its extreme, says we can't judge between the morality of different cultures. Okay, but how does allowing multiple cultures to exist mean Australia is culturally relative? Simple answer: it doesn't.

Ignorance as applied to education policy

The personal bigotry of one person wouldn't be a problem, except Donnelly has a lot of (generally demonstrably false) beliefs on education policy, and clearly a lot of people listen to him. He has strong views on why Australia has fallen in international education rankings such as PISA. Before I discuss this, I would just like to make a few points about this scenario. Firstly, Australia is one of the most successful countries in the world and yet isn't comparing so well on PISA. Therefore it is fairly clear that PISA success does not unambiguously translate to societal success, despite what our conveyor belt of clueless education ministers would have us believe. Secondly, the purpose of PISA is supposedly to compare systems so that they can learn from each other. The problem with this is that each country has so many within-country peculiarities that a simple comparison is inappropriate. Moreover, many strategies of national education systems cannot be replicated in very different countries. Many more pertinent criticisms of PISA have been made by people much more intelligent than me (see, for example, Zhao 2020). The obsession with PISA rankings seems to be yet another piece of ammunition for the true

Australian national sport: education bashing (and its many events: teacher bashing, school bashing, principal bashing, young people bashing).

Donnelly (2018) considers all of the following as reasons why Australia is declining in PISA. I will rebut each in turn.

1. The curriculum has been dumbed down, is overcrowded and does not have a firm grounding in the basics.

This one is just plain illogical. How can something be both dumbed-down and overcrowded? Surely an overcrowded curriculum would be too full, and therefore not dumbed down? How can something be both dumbed-down and not have a firm grounding in the basics? If the curriculum isn't grounded in the basics, what is it being dumbed down to? None of these three criticisms can be made together, as they're mutually exclusive. Moreover, international testing regimes like PISA and TIMSS specifically do not just test the basics. Indeed, TIMSS in particular focuses on problem solving and higher order thinking.

2. Teaching the wrong stuff - e.g. a focus on First Nations perspectives and less on Western Civilisation and Judeo-Christianity.

Well, unless PISA is a test of Western civilisation and Christianity (which thankfully it is not!), this point is meaningless and is simply a massive signpost to Donnelly's blatant biases. If he bemoans the lack of deep content knowledge why does it have to be about Judeo-Christian values, not about Aboriginal history? Aboriginal history is 65,000 years long! Judeo-Christian history in Australia is 230 years old. Surely there's deeper content in a time period 282 times longer.

3. "Inflexible schooling". This is a smokescreen for Donnelly's view that private schools do better than state schools.

Where to start with this one? Firstly, Australia is a massive outlier when it comes to private education. We have a much higher proportion of private schooling than almost any country in the world.

He believes government schools do worse because they can't hire and fire as easily. Yet there is a mountain of evidence that shows that teacher quality is indifferent to sector - the biggest discrepancies in teacher quality are within schools, not between them. Moreover, is Donnelly suggesting there is some large pile of excellent unemployed teachers just waiting to come into schools? This is fantasy.

Donnelly obsesses about competition between schools and students, but this has been shown time again to be anti-educational. Students, schools and school sectors working together produce far better outcomes than a competitive silo mentality does.

Donnelly uses sleight of hand to suggest that independent schools produce better outcomes 'even after adjusting for students' home background'. He doesn't mention that once you control for student prior academic achievement those 'better outcomes' melt away like the flimsy, elitist arguments they are.

In fact, dollar for dollar, state schools produce much better student outcomes than do private schools. A myriad of Australian-based research reports have come out over the last few years pointing this out (Chrysanthos 2019, Grattan Institute 2019, Munro 2018).

You will note that this hasn't stemmed the flow of parents sending their children to these schools though. This suggests, and is borne out recent journalism (Szego 2018), that parents send their kids to private schools for non-academic reasons.

4. Constructivist pedagogy.

Donnelly seems to wilfully ignore the fact that many systems (such as Scandinavian ones) that do well in international comparisons also use constructivism. Australia is NOT stand out in its use of constructivism.

Three quick points on what might actually be behind Australia's fall in PISA. What we need to ask is how is Australia's education system different to others?

1. The enormous number of independent schools - about 1/3. No other OECD country has anywhere near that amount. This siphons off top performing students, denying the peer learning that would be achieved by our entire student cohort if all students were mixed together. It is elitism plain and simple.

2. The prevalence of screens and smartphones in Australian schools and in society in general. Many other countries with high and increasing use of smartphones are also seeing their PISA results decline. And OECD (2015) research has demonstrated that the more computers there are in a school, the worse academic outcomes they are. Couple this with the fact that Australian schools have one of the highest numbers of devices per student in the world.

3. We have woeful rates of preschooling in Australia, particularly for 3 year olds (OECD 2019). Talk to a prep teacher about how many kids can't hold a pen when they start school.

It is interesting to note that Donnelly's attempt at critiquing the curriculum fell on deaf ears. Not only have his antiquated discriminatory opinions not been acted upon, the most recent Australian Curriculum proposals go in the exact opposite direction to what he would have wanted. As someone who like inclusion, that makes me happy.

References

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