

Australian National Education Frameworks: Tracing the Evolution of Social Justice Goals

Tebeje Molla, Deakin University, Australia

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Abstract

Although school education falls within the jurisdiction of state and territory governments, since the late 1980s, Australia has issued a national education declaration each decade to articulate shared national priorities for the sector. While these frameworks—Hobart (1989), Adelaide (1999), Melbourne (2008), and Alice Springs (Mparntwe) (2019)—consistently invoke equity and inclusion, their substantive commitments to social justice remain under-examined. This paper critically analyses how social justice goals are conceptualised in the declarations and how these framings have shifted over time. The paper distinguishes between two interrelated dimensions: *socially just education*, which concerns the creation of equitable and inclusive systems through fair resource distribution, culturally sustaining environments, and policies that remove systemic barriers; and *social justice education*, which focuses on developing students' critical consciousness, ethical reasoning, and civic agency through engagement with issues of justice and democracy. Using critical policy analysis, the paper identifies both continuities and shifts in the framing of social justice over three decades, revealing growing rhetorical attention to diversity and equity, yet persistent limitations in addressing deeper, transformative demands of justice. The paper argues for future national frameworks to adopt a more integrated and explicit commitment to both structural equity and critical democratic education.

Keywords: Australia, critical analysis, education declaration, policy, social justice

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Introduction

Social justice has long been a normative imperative in education, encompassing the belief that all learners—regardless of race, class, gender, geography, or cultural background—should have equitable access to high-quality, meaningful educational opportunities. It demands the redistribution of resources, the recognition of difference, and the transformation of institutional arrangements that sustain inequality (Connell, 1993; Gale & Densmore, 2000). In response, governments introduce targeted equity instruments and policies to address unjust inequalities in society and ensure that all students can participate fully in education.

Australia's federal system divides educational responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, with the latter holding constitutional authority over schooling (Lingard, 2010). State and territory governments oversee curriculum development, public school funding, and regulatory frameworks, while the federal government's influence primarily stems from its financial contributions and national reform agendas (Savage, 2020). This arrangement has created a policy dynamic where national goals are negotiated rather than mandated, often through forums such as the former Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the current Education Ministers Meeting (EMM).

With the aim of widening access and improving quality, since the late 1980s, Australia has released a national education declaration roughly every decade—beginning with the Hobart Declaration (1989), followed by the Adelaide (1999), Melbourne (2008), and Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declarations (2019). The national declarations are more than symbolic documents; they structure priorities, legitimise policy directions, and guide curricular and pedagogical decisions at all levels (Lingard, 2010). They are part of a complex policy architecture that includes intergovernmental agreements on school reform and funding. This paper analyses how social justice has been framed and reconfigured across the four declarations. In examining the declarations, this paper asks: *How have social justice goals been framed across Australia's national education declarations, and what shifts can be observed in these framings over time?*

The paper draws on critical policy scholarship, which views policy not simply as a set of official texts but as a dynamic, discursive process deeply implicated in the production and maintenance of power relations (Grace, 1998; Molla, 202; Ozga, 2021; Savage et al., 2021). From this perspective, policy documents are not neutral blueprints for action but are themselves active in *constituting* the very problems they purport to address, defining categories of “disadvantage” and legitimising certain solutions while obscuring others (Bacchi, 2009).

The primary sources of data were the four national education declarations: the *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* (1989), the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (1999), the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008), and the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (2019). While broad in scope, they set shared goals for schooling and influence downstream policies on curriculum, assessment, teacher standards, and funding. Their recurring invocation of terms such as “equity,” “inclusion,” and “diversity” positions them as important sites for examining how justice is framed in national education discourse. Given their decennial publication and official status, these texts also offer a valuable lens into how the social purposes of schooling have been variously imagined over time and across political contexts. To guide the analysis, two overarching themes were developed through a critical review of the literature: *socially just education* and *social justice education*. These two dimensions served as conceptual anchors for the analysis, allowing for a more precise interrogation of how justice is both structurally

supported and pedagogically enacted. The analysis proceeded through a thematic coding of the four declarations, using both deductive and inductive approaches. Initially, relevant statements were coded under the two predefined dimensions of justice.

Accordingly, the analysis attends to both the stated aims of the four national education frameworks and the assumptions, silences, and discursive shifts that underpin their framing of social justice. By tracing these shifts over time, the paper highlights how particular constructions of educational disadvantage have been normalised, rearticulated, or challenged, illuminating the evolving policy rationalities that govern the pursuit of social justice in Australian schooling. Mapping changes and continuities in the articulation of social justice goals can offer a window into how governments conceptualise justice, who they see as deserving of support, and which injustices they are willing to name. By situating the declarations within both theoretical and historical contexts, the paper contributes to deeper understandings of how national education policy frames social justice. It argues that meaningful engagement with both forms of justice is essential for addressing persistent educational inequities and for cultivating a democratic, culturally responsive schooling system. The paper also highlights the importance of reading policy critically to unpack what is promised, what is omitted, and what is rendered invisible in national visions of educational fairness.

The remainder of the paper is organised into two main sections. The first presents the two dimensions of the social justice goals articulated within these frameworks—*socially just education* and *social justice education*. The second section analyses the changes and continuities across the four declarations, tracing how social justice has been framed and reinterpreted over time. The paper concludes by reiterating key insights and identifying implications for advancing equity-focused policy in the Australian education system.

Social Justice Goals

Since 1989, national education declarations have served as key instruments for articulating shared educational aspirations. These declarations are developed collaboratively by all education ministers and reflect a balance between national priorities and state/territory autonomy. Importantly, each Declaration reflects the social justice imperatives of its era, particularly concerning equity, inclusion, and the recognition of cultural diversity (Savage, 2020). The Hobart, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Mparntwe declarations each show a progression in the scope and articulation of equity (Properjohn et al., 2024), shifting from individualised understandings of disadvantage to more structural conceptions of inequality.

Social justice in education encompasses a broad and evolving set of aspirations aimed at reducing inequality, affirming diverse identities, and empowering learners to engage critically with the world around them. Increasingly, scholars emphasise that social justice is neither fixed nor singular, but rather a multidimensional and politically contested objective, shaped by context and ideology (Apple, 2014; Gewirtz, 1998). Within this discourse, two core dimensions of social justice goals have emerged: the *provision of socially just education* and the *promotion of social justice education*. Together, these dimensions reflect both structural and pedagogical commitments and offer a conceptual framework for analysing educational policy and practice.

The first dimension, *socially just education*, concerns the creation of an equitable and inclusive education system. It entails the fair distribution of resources, the cultivation of culturally sustaining school environments, and the development of policies that address systemic barriers

to participation (Connell, 1993). This approach to justice is concerned with dismantling structural inequalities to ensure that all students—regardless of socioeconomic background, race, gender, ability, or location—have access to high-quality education. In the Australian context, scholars such as Connell (2013) and Smyth (2011) have argued that neoliberal reforms—particularly the expansion of market-based school choice and high-stakes testing—have undermined equity by entrenching disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

The second dimension, *social justice education*, focuses on the content and processes of teaching and learning. It aims to develop students' critical consciousness, ethical reasoning, and civic agency by encouraging them to engage with questions of justice, inequality, and democracy (Freire, 1970; Sant, 2021). This pedagogical orientation involves both curriculum and methodology: incorporating diverse perspectives, confronting dominant power relations, and adopting dialogic, participatory approaches to teaching.

Socially Just Education

The idea of “socially just education” underscores the importance of creating educational systems and environments that prioritise equity, fairness, and inclusivity. At its core, socially just education emphasises a commitment to ensuring that all students have substantive opportunities for success, regardless of their background, identity, or socioeconomic status (REF). In advancing socially just education, policies widen access to education. The curriculum is tailored to reflect diverse perspectives, histories, and cultures, promoting a more inclusive and representative learning experience.

In terms of advancing socially just education, the declarations reflect an evolution in the understanding and articulation of inclusivity. The Hobart Declaration (1989) and The Adelaide Declaration (1999) both emphasise equality of educational opportunities, focusing on special learning requirements and eliminating negative discrimination. The Hobart Declaration (AEC, 1989) marked Australia's first attempt to establish a unified national vision for schooling, introducing ten common goals aimed at ensuring foundational skills, civic values, and economic productivity. It emphasised equitable access to schooling for all young Australians, marking a foundational step in recognising governments' responsibility to provide education as a public good. However, while socially just education was implied through the focus on participation and access, the framing remained narrow, with limited attention to cultural inclusion or differentiated needs. The aim was “to promote equality of educational opportunities and to provide for groups with special learning requirements” (Australian Education Council, 1989, p. 186).

The Adelaide Declaration deepened the commitment to equity by acknowledging the diverse needs of students and the need to provide support structures to achieve common outcomes. It introduced language around inclusivity and support for disadvantaged students, moving closer to a recognition-based approach to justice. Some of the stated goals include:

Students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture, ethnicity, religion or disability, and of differences arising from students' socioeconomic background or geographic location.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students. (MCEETYA, 1999, p. 230)

Although the policy recognised the diversity of learners, it fell short of committing to structural reforms to dismantle the systems that create educational disadvantage, reflecting an incremental evolution in the framing of socially just education.

The Melbourne Declaration (2008) broadens the scope, explicitly addressing discrimination based on various factors. It marked a significant shift by explicitly stating that governments should support not only “equality of opportunity but also more equitable outcomes.” This emphasis on outcomes acknowledges that the same resources and access do not lead to the same results for all students. The document also stressed closing achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the equity goals included:

Provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location.

Ensure that the learning outcomes of Indigenous students improve to match those of other students.

Reduce the effect of other sources of disadvantage, such as disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7)

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) further advances this by explicitly promoting inclusive education free from any form of discrimination, recognising individual needs, and encouraging personalised learning. It foregrounds commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, cultural responsiveness, and the importance of wellbeing. The language reflects a fusion of redistribution and recognition, with stronger acknowledgements of historical and ongoing inequities. Notably, the Declaration includes references to community engagement and partnerships, hinting at representational justice. Thus, it articulates socially just education in a more multidimensional and relational way than its predecessors. The aim is to:

Encourage young people to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes, supported by parents, carers, families and the broader community. (Education Council, 2019, p. 5)

Support all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage: learners such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from regional, rural and remote areas, migrants and refugees, learners in out of home care, homeless young people, and children with disability to reach their potential. (p. 6)

Provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination. (p. 17)

The Alice Springs Declaration uniquely emphasises the need to empower learners to overcome barriers, promote personalised learning, and encourage young people to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes. It goes further, emphasising the need to recognise individual needs, overcome barriers, and support Indigenous learners to achieve their full academic

potential. The underpinning assumption is that compensatory opportunities are provided to create a level playing field for First Nations students.

Social Justice Education

Social justice education involves continuously engaging students in examining and evaluating the world around them from their unique perspectives. It focuses on curriculum, pedagogy, and student agency — equipping learners to recognise and challenge injustice within and beyond the classroom. This includes teaching about First Nations histories, critical engagement with power and privilege, and fostering active citizenship (Beresford et al., 2012; Dudgeon et al., 2017). Social justice education encourages critical thinking about social issues, fostering an environment where students can analyse, question, and engage with pressing societal problems. It engages students in analysing historical cases of injustice and contemporary inequalities across the political, cultural, economic, educational, health, and environmental domains of life. The aim is to build democratic, active, and fair citizens who value and promote social justice. While the declarations increasingly gesture toward both, the former has often received more policy attention, whereas the latter — particularly in its more critical and transformative forms — remains underdeveloped in practice (Moodie, 2020).

The national education declarations support social justice education by prioritising cultural respect and instilling values of fairness and inclusion in students. The declarations exhibit a progression in acknowledging the importance of cultural understanding. The Hobart Declaration (1989) emphasises respect for cultural heritage, specifically mentioning Aboriginal and ethnic groups. It puts one of its aims as “to develop in students... a capacity to exercise judgement in matters of morality, ethics and social justice” (Australian Education Council, 1989, p. 187).

The Hobart Declaration’s commitment to developing “a capacity to exercise judgement in matters of morality, ethics and social justice” marks an early and significant recognition of education’s moral and civic dimensions. This statement embeds a vision of the student as an ethical agent, capable of critical reflection. However, the policy stops short of defining what counts as social justice or how it might be explored pedagogically. The mention of “understanding and respect for our cultural heritage” — especially for “Aboriginal and ethnic groups” — is notable for its time, but the framing centres on respect and tolerance rather than engaging with power, dispossession, or systemic injustice. The approach is largely civic-liberal, promoting social harmony without critically interrogating social hierarchies.

The Adelaide Declaration (1999) extends the Hobart framing to emphasise the value of cultural and linguistic diversity and reconciliation as a specific national imperative.

The expectation that “all students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity” marks a stronger pedagogical commitment to historical awareness and future-oriented civic participation. Importantly, the Declaration expected that “all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (MCEETYA, 1999, p. 230).

The promotion of “cultural and linguistic diversity” and acknowledgement of “the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society” are well aligned with the

nation's multicultural ethos. Still, the language frames students as beneficiaries of diversity rather than as critical actors equipped to dismantle inequality. The focus is on appreciation and participation, not transformation. This positions social justice education as a soft tool for cohesion rather than a radical force for equity.

The Melbourne Declaration (2008) calls for schools to build on local Indigenous knowledge and experiences as a foundation for learning. It takes a further step toward a transformative conception of social justice education by instructing schools to build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning. The Melbourne Declaration aims, *inter alia*,

ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning.

ensure that schooling contributes to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7)

This reverses the deficit logic often associated with marginalised students and elevates cultural capital as central to pedagogical design. The call for schooling to “contribute to a socially cohesive society” echoes earlier declarations but adds sharper attention to respect for “religious” as well as cultural and social diversity. However, the language remains largely instrumental, emphasising harmony over critique.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) presents the most ambitious articulation of social justice education. It retains the emphasis on cohesion and diversity but deepens the commitment to inclusion through stronger verbs and more relational language. It continues to stress the importance of inclusion of local, regional, and national cultural knowledge, fostering a more comprehensive approach to cultural inclusion and social cohesion. Some of the social justice education goals include:

ensure that education promotes and contributes to a socially cohesive society that values, respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity.

ensure that learning is built on and includes local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work in partnership with local communities. (Education Council, 2019, p. 5)

The recognition of “different points of view” assumes an expanded, dialogic classroom space, positioning students not only as participants in diverse societies but also as potential agents of transformation. Such an approach reframes education as a site of encounter—where difference is not merely tolerated but actively engaged as a resource for collective learning and ethical understanding. By promoting respect for cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, schools contribute to the cultivation of a socially cohesive society founded on mutual recognition and shared responsibility. The commitment to include the “local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” further underscores a pedagogical and moral imperative: to value Indigenous knowledges as central to Australia's educational narrative, rather than as peripheral additions. Working in genuine partnership with local communities invites educators to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards reciprocal relationships that honour place-based wisdom, foster intercultural dialogue,

and challenge historical exclusions. In this sense, the framework articulates a vision of social justice in education that is both redistributive and recognitive—seeking to equalise opportunity while affirming the plural identities and knowledges that shape Australia’s democratic life.

Changes and Continuities

Across the four declarations, a discernible shift is evident from a minimalist equity framework towards a more multidimensional conception of socially just education. A clear evolution toward a more expansive, detailed, and multifaceted understanding of justice in schooling is evident. The early Hobart (1989) declaration frames social justice primarily as *equality of opportunity* and support for students with special learning needs, while its corresponding social justice education goals emphasise moral development and cultural respect in broad terms. By Adelaide (1999), the focus shifts more explicitly to eliminating discrimination based on race, language, culture, disability, socioeconomic status, and geography, signalling a sharper policy recognition of structural disadvantage. Melbourne (2008) further expands this agenda by listing a wider range of disadvantages—such as refugee status and homelessness—and highlighting personalised learning as a vehicle for equity. Finally, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) adopts the most holistic and learner-centred framing, emphasising inclusivity, individual needs, empowerment, community partnership, and the co-construction of culturally grounded learning, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Across the social justice education column, there is also a notable shift from general cultural respect (1989) to increasingly explicit commitments to reconciliation, cultural diversity, and Indigenous knowledge as foundational to learning (1999–2019), culminating in a partnership-based, place-responsive approach in 2019.

In other words, the Hobart and Adelaide Declarations framed equity primarily as access and participation, aligning with liberal notions of meritocracy. These early declarations assumed a level playing field, with less attention to the deeper structural factors shaping educational outcomes. The Melbourne and Mparntwe Declarations, on the other hand, articulated equity more robustly, recognising systemic disadvantage affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and students from refugee and migrant backgrounds and the need for equity in learning opportunities, wellbeing, and digital access. The Melbourne Declaration includes more sustained reference to Indigenous cultures and histories, and the Mparntwe Declaration deepens this commitment by foregrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Further, while early declarations are largely silent on questions of participatory inclusion in education governance, the Mparntwe Declaration makes an important shift by recognising the agency of young people and advocating for greater involvement of Indigenous communities in shaping educational futures. However, as Properjohn et al. (2024) observed, despite progressive language over time, the declarations continue to reflect colonial dominance by framing Indigenous education within deficit discourses and assimilationist perspectives. Representation remains underdeveloped as a justice goal, with limited mechanisms proposed for shared authority or decision-making in education systems.

Despite these changes, the declarations also demonstrate enduring continuities in their core commitments to social justice in education. All four frameworks recognise that educational systems must work to address educational disadvantage and promote fairness in schooling outcomes—reflecting a consistent policy logic that equitable access and participation are central to Australian schooling. Similarly, across all declarations, social justice education is linked to fostering respect for cultural diversity, encouraging ethical and socially responsible behaviour, and valuing the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

While the specificity and language become more sophisticated over time, the underlying premise remains steady: education plays a crucial role in shaping a cohesive, respectful, and inclusive society. These continuities suggest that, even as contexts shift and policy language evolves, the foundational goals of equity, respect, diversity, and cultural understanding remain a constant across the national policy landscape.

Over the three decades spanned by the four declarations, we see a marked evolution in the way *social justice education* is framed. The Hobart and Adelaide Declarations focus on moral development and respect for diversity, positioning students primarily as tolerant citizens. While these goals are not insignificant, they rely on depoliticised conceptions of justice that skirt around questions of power, oppression, and resistance. Diversity is valued, but there is little sense that students are being prepared to challenge systemic injustice. By contrast, the Melbourne and Mparntwe Declarations reflect a maturing vision of social justice education. Melbourne introduces the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy, while Mparntwe goes further by embedding local knowledge systems and calling for partnerships with Indigenous communities. These shifts suggest an increasing recognition of students' sociocultural contexts as assets in the learning process and a growing commitment to empowering learners as agents of justice. Despite this progress, the overarching tone across all declarations continues to favour social cohesion and shared values over confronting structural inequality. The tension between celebrating diversity and confronting injustice remains a defining feature of Australia's national policy discourse on social justice education.

There is also a lack of conceptual clarity regarding equality and equity. Equality in education refers to the idea that all individuals, regardless of background, should have equal access to resources, opportunities, and educational experiences. The focus is on uniform treatment and distribution of educational resources, aiming to provide everyone with the same starting point and level of support. Whereas equity in education recognises that individuals may start from different positions, facing diverse challenges and needs. Equity aims to address these disparities by providing resources and support that are responsive to the unique circumstances of each individual or group. It may involve giving unequal opportunities for equal outcomes.

The patterns of change and continuity across the four national Education Declarations reveal a policy trajectory characterised by both increasing complexity and enduring foundational values. Over time, the declarations broaden from a relatively narrow focus on equality of opportunity to a more nuanced recognition of diverse learner needs, intersectional disadvantage, and culturally responsive education—especially with respect to Indigenous communities. At the same time, persistent commitments to equity, inclusion, cultural respect, and social cohesion anchor the declarations across three decades, demonstrating that while policy directions adapt to emerging social, cultural, and political contexts, the core social justice aspirations of Australian schooling remain stable. This interplay between continuity and evolution reflects a system balancing longstanding national values with the need for more responsive and sophisticated approaches to justice and inclusion in education.

Conclusion

The analysis of the four national education frameworks shows that Australia's governments demonstrated a progressive commitment to social just goals, expanding from a focus on equal opportunities to a more nuanced understanding of inclusivity, individual needs, and the empowerment of learners. While early declarations primarily addressed social justice through the redistribution of opportunities and the reduction of disadvantage, later iterations expanded

these concerns to include recognition of diversity, personalised learning, and the holistic development of learners. The Melbourne (2008) and Alice Springs/Mparntwe (2019) Declarations, for instance, move beyond a deficit-oriented framing of equity to incorporate wellbeing, empowerment, and local knowledge as integral to educational justice. These changes suggest a gradual evolution from a narrow focus on equal outcomes towards a more relational and culturally responsive understanding of justice. Parallel shifts are evident in the framing of social justice education—the moral, ethical and civic dimensions of schooling. Whereas the Hobart and Adelaide Declarations positioned social justice education in terms of moral reasoning and intercultural understanding, later declarations increasingly emphasise community partnership, reconciliation, and the value of Indigenous knowledges. The Melbourne Declaration introduces an explicit focus on social cohesion and cultural respect, themes that are deepened in the Mparntwe Declaration’s recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the call for learning grounded in local contexts.

These findings point to a need for policy work that consolidates, rather than merely accumulates, the progressive shifts evident across the four frameworks. A coherent way forward requires translating the declarations’ aspirational language into sustained, system-level action that centres cultural responsiveness, community partnership and the valuing of Indigenous knowledges. This includes resourcing schools to enact locally grounded pedagogies, strengthening mechanisms for accountability to equity goals, and ensuring that learners and communities historically marginalised within Australian schooling have a substantive voice in policy design. Advancing social justice in education will therefore depend on moving beyond rhetorical commitment toward practical, context-sensitive strategies that embed inclusion, recognition and relational responsibility within everyday schooling.

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Contact email: t.mekonnen@deakin.edu.au