Fairness perceptions of educational inequality: the effects of self-interest and neoliberal orientations

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Abstract

The Australian education system features considerable socioeconomic inequality and is a frequent source of controversy in Australian public life. Yet meaningful reform to this system has proven elusive. In this article, we examine the public's fairness perceptions of educational inequality based on parental financial capacity, using an online survey of adults ($N = 1,999$) from New South Wales, Australia. We asked about the fairness of inequality in school resources and education quality, and used a scenario in which students from high-income and low-income families had achievement gaps due to differences in educational experiences. Respondents had diverse perceptions about the fairness of educational inequality, but most perceived the scenario as unfair or very unfair. The partial proportional odds models showed that self-interest and neoliberal orientations predicted people's fairness perceptions of educational inequality. The findings of this study have implications for achieving meaningful reform of the Australian education system that is in line with public opinion.

Introduction

'Fairness' in contemporary education systems is frequently the focus of popular and political consternation. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, collects data on equity in education systems, particularly

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the degree to which educational outcomes can be linked to categories of advantage or disadvantage, such as socioeconomic status (OECD, 2018). In Australia, equity has also been a purported policy focus, with national declarations on schooling over the past 25 years citing equity in education as a core goal (Stacey & Mockler, 2023). And yet, the OECD has designated the Australian system of public and private schools as one of the most highly segregated in the world (OECD, 2019). The Australian school system features persistent gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students and is the subject of frequent public debate (although seemingly little policy action) regarding the public subsidisation of wealthy, fee-charging private schools (Cobbold, 2019). Australia, therefore, makes for an interesting case internationally when considering fairness perceptions in education, by examining whether structural inequality is perceived by the public as inequitable. This case can thereby provide insight into how public opinion may function to support such a controversial, yet seemingly intractable, public policy settlement as that currently found in Australia. As such, in this article, we examine people's fairness perceptions of educational inequality based on parental financial capacity and the factors that influence their fairness perceptions, from the market-oriented context of the Australian education system.

The Australian school system

The Australian school system includes a large private sector in which schools can charge fees without limit. Approximately 35% of students attend independent or Catholic private schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021), with the sector having expanded considerably since the 1980s (Stacey, 2020). The Australian school sectors, while highly internally diverse, also feature a clear pattern of segregation. According to Thomson (2021), 41% of government schools can be categorised as 'disadvantaged schools' compared to just 3% of Catholic schools and less than 1% of independent schools, where disadvantaged schools are defined as 'those whose average intake of students falls in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status' (p. 42).

Despite this pattern of segregation, the Australian government provides some financial support to all schools, including those that charge fees. School funding in Australia is a frequent topic of, at times, 'poisonous' debate in Australian public life (Forsey et al., 2017). A good example of this are the 'Gonski' reforms to school funding, which came with a substantial price tag given the committee's remit to ensure that no school would 'lose a dollar' (Gonski et al., 2011, p. xvii). Australia has purportedly moved to a 'needs-based' funding system based on the Gonski model; however, reports abound that while private schools are often funded above their stated level of need, many public schools are yet to achieve their base level of funding and are unlikely to do so under recent projections (Cobbold, 2019). Indeed, there remain considerable disparities in material resources between schools. As Thomson (2021) summarises:

> While many government schools struggle with outdated and worn out facilities, lack of physical resources such as photocopy paper, broken down or

inadequate toilet facilities and a lack of teaching staff, some elite independent schools are spending astonishing amounts of money on capital works, including theatres with orchestra pits, indoor Olympic size swimming pools, wellness centres, and equestrian centres. (p. 30)

In addition to this, human resources and staffing can also vary considerably across schools according to their capacity to hire additional staff support (Stacey, 2020).

The Australian system of market-based education has had particular implications for parents who may feel pressure to be a 'good parent' by strategically choosing a school for their children. Choice of school can be made in consideration of factors including family tradition, location, religious or secular values, and the desire to be near 'people like us' (Campbell et al., 2009). Choosing a 'good' school rather than simply sending one's child to the local public school is, it would seem, increasingly considered a marker of good parenting, especially mothering (Proctor & Aitchison, 2015). These choices reflect a commercialisation of parenting (Ball, 2004), in which parents craft their children by purchasing educational opportunities. Even when parents are concerned about social justice issues, this appears to have limits in influencing their interaction with the system. For instance, in Rowe and Lubienski (2017), parents who avowed an ideological preference for public education still sought to have their children attend schools with others 'like them'.

Indeed, while school funding amounts are often debated, the market-based, choice-driven structure of the system is rarely questioned (Stacey, 2022). This reflects how school choice has become a kind of 'newly invented fundamental right' (Campbell & Proctor, 2014, p. 225) for Australian parents. Indeed, a 'discourse of choice' is arguably a core part of neoliberal social settlements more broadly, with choice understood primarily as an inherent good for the individual rather than as a potential mechanism of social inequality (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). In the marketised education system, good parents are good consumers of education, with the good of one's children appearing to take precedence over the concerns of the collective.

Neoliberalism and educational inequality

The normalisation of choice in Australia is despite evidence of the adverse implications of such a system for the equitable achievements of students. For example, Sciffer et al. (2022) investigated the effects of the socioeconomic composition of students in a school on individual students' outcomes as a way of understanding the effects of school segregation on school effectiveness. It was assumed that segregating low SES students into low SES schools exacerbates pre-existing social inequalities as it adds school-level disadvantage above individual-level disadvantage. Sciffer et al. (2022) found that Australia alongside the United Kingdom, had the highest socioeconomic compositional effects among English-speaking countries, a finding they attributed to Australia's support for private schooling. Similarly, Parker et al. (2019) argue that a rapid increase in between-school stratification in achievement over the last 10−20 years in Australia is most likely driven by an increase in school choice and the change of its nature and importance—school choice has become a

central parenting concern and a mechanism of class divides (Parker et al., 2019). While Australia is particularly extreme in segregating its students across schools and sectors, achievement gaps associated with students' socioeconomic backgrounds have been a persistent problem for many countries (Schleicher, 2019), and the 'segregation of students along social and economic lines contributes to the persistence of inequalities due to family background' (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018, p. 38). As such, data from Australia may prove internationally instructive when considering the public opinion that may underlie inequitable education systems and structures.

Behind this international pattern of achievement gaps is, arguably, a neoliberal approach to the management of education. Educational reforms driven by neoliberalism have exacerbated educational inequity in many countries including, but not limited to, Australia (Sahlberg, 2016). The common core of neoliberalism is the primacy of market-based competition (Mudge, 2008) and the norm of individual responsibility or self-reliance (Amable, 2010). Accordingly, many public sectors, including education, have undergone reforms characterised by deregulation, marketisation, and privatisation (Sahlberg, 2016). Private providers have been brought in to perform many tasks in the education system, and public education has been made to mimic the private sector (Ball, 2004). Since the late 1980s, the Australian school system has embraced not only the school choice model described above but also the complementary neoliberal policy technologies of test-based accountability, an emphasis on individualised teacher quality, and the use of private sector management practices (Stacey & Mockler, 2023). As neoliberalism operates as a pervasive social, cultural, and economic logic internationally, in this article, we examine the public's fairness perceptions of educational inequality based on parental financial capacity, from the Australian context in which a particularly extreme educational market logic operates alongside competing notions of egalitarianism and a 'fair go'.

Fairness perceptions

Fairness is understood in many different ways. The notion of fairness is often used in a broad sense to refer to things that seem right, legitimate, or justified (Hooker, 2005; Olsen, 2011). In this broad sense, the notions of 'fairness' and 'justice' are often used interchangeably. In a narrower sense, fairness is commonly considered as applying the same rules impartially and equally to each agent (i.e., formal fairness) (Hooker, 2005). But it is possible to apply bad or partial rules to all claimants impartially and equally (Hooker, 2005). Accordingly, 'substantive' fairness moves beyond mere impartial applications of rules and considers the appropriateness of rules to be applied. In a distributive context, fairness requires an appropriate satisfaction of relevant claims in accordance with relevant criteria (e.g., desert, agreement, or needs) and relevant side constraints (e.g., moral obligations) (Hooker, 2005).

In education, the concept of fairness is mainly discussed in relation to equity. Equity implies equality (i.e., equal treatment of equals) and the appropriate accommodation of differences. In the education context, equality is often used in conjunction with educational opportunities, not educational outcomes. Some inequalities are considered fair (Olsen, 2011), e.g., differing scores given to excellent performance

and poor performance in a mathematics exam. When inequality is considered unfair, it is inequity (Olsen, 2011). An unequal distribution of educational opportunities based on students' social and family backgrounds is commonly considered unfair and thus, inequitable. Nevertheless, people may have different views about the criteria to be used and the side constraints to be considered in determining the fairness of distribution. Indeed, fairness or justice can mean different things to different people (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018), leading to divergent views of fairness even when presented with the same situation.

It is important to understand divergent views of what is 'fair', given that the public's fairness perceptions of inequality can determine their support for policies designed to reduce inequality. For instance, Alesina and Angeletos (2005) demonstrated that society's beliefs about the fairness of income inequality influenced its choice of redistributive policy. Studies have also found that if people believed that inequality was meritocratically deserving, they were less concerned about inequality (Mijs, 2019) and less likely to support policies designed to reduce inequality (García-Sánchez et al., 2020). Although public support may not be necessary or sufficient for policy implementation, public opinion can constrain or enable policy decisions as elected policymakers have incentives to stay close to the majority opinion (Valant & Newark, 2016). Thus, it is essential to understand the public's fairness perceptions of educational inequality to develop equity-oriented educational policies that are supported by the public.

The present study

In this study, we investigated people's fairness perceptions of educational inequality based on parental financial capacity. The public's views about educational inequality and initiatives to reduce it have received little attention from researchers (Valant & Newark, 2016). Such an omission is particularly notable in Australia, an ostensibly 'egalitarian' country where considerable gaps in educational attainment and the funding of schools prevail (Forsey et al., 2017).

To understand the factors contributing to people's fairness perceptions, we examined people's financial situation and parental status as variables representing self-interest. Studies have found that people who believed they had higher social positions perceived inequality as less unfair (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Hvidberg et al., 2020). For example, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2015) found that individuals with higher subjective status were more likely to consider inequality as fair, less likely to consider redistribution as fair, and less likely to support redistribution. Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2015) further explained that subjective status elicited patterns of policy preferences that were consistent with self-interest, and their policy preferences were justified by their beliefs about fairness. We also considered the effect of having children in the school system. For instance, people with children may give salience to the role of education in securing the life chances of their children. In contrast, people without children may give salience to the role of education in building a competent workforce. The prominence given to the different roles of education may influence people's fairness perceptions of educational inequality.

Finally, we considered that a pervasive neoliberal orientation towards social policy may influence people's fairness perceptions. Some advocates of neoliberal educational reforms argue that parents should be able to purchase education, like how they buy groceries at a supermarket, where competition brings better products at cheaper prices (Abowitz & Stitzlein, 2018). People with such a perspective are likely to perceive that it is fair to pay higher prices for higher-quality education. Conversely, they are likely to consider it fair to provide lower-quality education to children whose parents cannot afford higher prices. Thus, the research questions in this article are: (1) Do people perceive educational inequality based on parental financial capacity as fair? (2) Are people's perceptions of fairness predicted by self-interest and neoliberal orientations?

Methods

Participants

The data presented in this article came from a larger study that investigated people's views about educational equity. Participants ($N = 1999$) were adults between 18 and 89 years old ($M = 50.1$, $SD = 17.3$) from the state of New South Wales (NSW), where 32% of the Australian population resides (ABS, 2020). A quota sample was employed to ensure that the study sample resembled the NSW adult population regarding five key demographic variables: age, gender, education, income, and region. Qualtrics Panels assisted with recruitment and sampling. The sociodemographic information of the study sample is shown in Table 1.

The demographic composition of the study sample was similar to that of the NSW population reported in the 2016 Census (ABS, 2017, 2018). However, the study sample had higher proportions of people who were female (52% versus 51%), aged 65 or over (27% versus 20%), lived in rural or remote areas (12% versus 6%), had children (66% versus 62%), and had a university degree (35% versus 23%), and a smaller proportion of people who were not in the labour force (34% versus 41%). The 2016 Census provided data on all individuals (e.g., gender) or persons aged 15 or above (e.g., employment). This may explain some of these demographic differences.

The percentages of the political party that the respondents voted for also mirrored the percentages of the first preference for the party in the 2019 federal election (Australian Electoral Commission, 2019). For example, the Liberal–National Coalition received 43% of the population vote in NSW, which matches the voting pattern in the study sample (when the valid percentages are calculated). People's political views could be related to their choice to participate in a survey on educational equity. So, this similarity provided more confidence in the quality of the sample.

Table 1 Sociodemographic information of the participants

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	948	47.4
Female	1042	52.1
Non-binary or missing	9	0.5
Age group		
18–34	486	24.3
35–64	983	49.2
≥ 65	530	26.5
Region		
Metropolitan	1335	66.8
Regional	418	20.9
Rural or remote	246	12.3
Highest level of education		
No high school	285	14.3
High school	370	18.5
VET, TAFE, or certificate	637	31.9
University degree	707	35.4
Employment status		
Full time	766	38.3
Part time	383	19.2
Unemployed	138	6.9
Not in the labour force	683	34.2
Missing	29	1.5
Party voted for		
Liberal–National Coalition	730	36.5
Labor	678	33.9
Greens	163	8.2
Other parties	135	6.8
Did not vote	148	7.4
Prefer not to answer	145	7.3

$N = 1999$. *TAFE* technical and further education, *VET* vocational education and training

Data collection

We developed the questionnaire from the relevant literature and a small-scale qualitative survey. Some relevant questions were identified from the literature on public opinion about education and schools (e.g., Leahy & Selwyn, 2019), social attitudes (e.g., Curtice et al., 2019), social values (e.g., Sheppard et al., 2018), and distributive justice (e.g., Marshall et al., 1999). Because those studies were not about educational equity, we modified the relevant questions, e.g., converting an item stating the lack of ability as the cause of poverty to an item stating the lack of ability

as the cause of underachievement. Also, a small-scale qualitative survey was conducted with the academic and professional staff ($N = 89$) at the authors' university to gather their views about issues related to educational equity. Emergent themes and expressions used by the respondents were employed to develop the questionnaire. Subsequently, three academics in relevant fields examined the appropriateness of the wording and the content validity of the questionnaire items.

The questionnaire included 60 items about the current state of educational equity in the Australian school system, beliefs and attitudes about educational equity, opinions about educational policy in Australia, preferences for practice and policy strategies to achieve educational equity, and demographic information. The online questionnaire was completed anonymously at the end of 2019. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university. In conducting this study, we adhered to the ethical principles and standards stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)—Updated 2018* (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2018).

Measures

The present study utilised survey items pertinent to answering our research questions. Dependent variables (i.e., fairness perceptions) included *fairness of inequality in school resources*, *fairness of inequality in education quality*, and *fairness of the scenario*. The question about the fairness of inequality in school resources asked whether it is fair that children of affluent families attend schools with more resources, with the definition of 'resources' left open for respondents' interpretation. To assess fairness perceptions of inequality in education quality, respondents were asked whether children of high-income earners should receive a better-quality education because their parents pay more taxes. Although this question did not use the word 'fairness', it was deemed suitable for capturing people's fairness perceptions as it asked about the propriety of such inequality. The third dependent variable was fairness of the scenario shown below:

> Think of a society where most of the children from high-income families go to schools with highly qualified and experienced teachers, and most of the children from low-income families go to schools with poorly qualified and less experienced teachers. As a result, children from high-income families perform better on nationwide tests than children from low-income families. How fair or unfair do you think this is?

Student outcomes may be influenced by various school-level factors, such as student composition, school climate, school leadership, teaching, and resources such as school facilities and staffing support. In this scenario, we chose the difference in teacher quality as an example of contrasting school conditions, which was likely to resonate with the public. We note, however, that the actual relationship between teacher 'quality' and student outcomes, especially when comparing differently advantaged educational settings, is by no means clear (Stacey, 2020). The respondents were asked whether this hypothetical situation was fair. Note that the

scenario clearly linked achievement gaps to the inequality of educational experiences based on family income whereas fairness of inequality in school resources and fairness of inequality in education quality did not. The response options for fairness of the scenario were very unfair, unfair, neither fair nor unfair, fair, and very fair. The response options for fairness of inequality in school resources and fairness of inequality in education quality were converted from the degree of agreement to the degree of fairness.

Independent variables were indicators of self-interest (i.e., *parental status, financial situation*) and neoliberal orientations (i.e., *student responsibility, collective responsibility, school competition, and performance-based funding*). Parental status included no children, younger children (≤18 years), and adult children only. Financial situation referred to the difficulty or ease of making ends meet. For regression analysis, response options were collapsed into three categories: difficult (which included 'difficult' and 'very difficult'), neither easy nor difficult, and easy (which included 'easy' and 'very easy'). The question relating to student responsibility asked whether students are responsible for their own success or failure in school. To assess collective responsibility, respondents were asked whether society is responsible for closing achievement gaps. For school competition, respondents indicated their level of agreement with the statement that the quality of education improves when schools compete. The question relating to performance-based funding asked whether performance-based school funding motivates schools to work harder to improve student performance. Although Australia does not have a performance-based funding model, we included this item because it has been recommended by the proponents of neoliberal school systems, such as Hanushek and Lindseth (2009). Furthermore, it would enable us to capture public sentiment regarding competition-based policy technologies. Student responsibility, collective responsibility, school competition, and performance-based funding had a 5-point Likert scale format (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree').

Data analysis

Because the dependent variables were ordinal variables, an ordinal regression model was employed. As the proportional odds (PO) model is the most used ordinal regression model (Fullerton & Wallace, 2007), the PO model was first fitted to predict fairness perceptions. However, the Brant test indicated that the parallel regressions assumption was violated on several independent variables, which would have led to an incorrect or misleading interpretation of the PO model results (Williams, 2016). Thus, the partial proportional odds (PPO) model was fitted and chosen as the final model. Multinomial and stereotype models were also compared to enhance confidence in the choice of model. The PPO model had a smaller Akaike's information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) than the multinomial or stereotype models (see "Appendix").

For PPO regression analysis, the response options of fairness perception variables were reduced from five to four by collapsing the categories of 'fair' and 'very fair' because the scenario had a small number of responses in the category of 'very fair',

which would have resulted in small cell sizes. Given the sizable discrepancy between the study sample and the NSW population regarding employment status and education, employment status (not in the labour force=1 and the rest=0) and education (university degree=1 and secondary school or lower=0) were included as control variables. The sample size of PPO regression was decreased ($N=1968$) due to missing data. All statistical analyses were performed using Stata 17 (StataCorp, 2021). The PPO model was fitted using gologit2 (Williams, 2016), with the autofit option selected to identify variables that needed the proportionality constraints relaxed.

Results and discussion

Fairness perceptions of educational inequality

Regarding the question of whether it is fair that children of affluent families attend schools with more resources, there was almost an equal split between the respondents who perceived it as unfair or very unfair (37%) and those who perceived it as fair or very fair (34%) (see Fig. 1). Regarding inequality in education quality, the number of people who chose unfair or very unfair ($n=1178$, 59%) was 3.6 times larger than the number of people who chose fair or very fair ($n=327$, 16%). Concerning the scenario, 6.2 times more people chose unfair or very unfair ($n=1247$, 62%), compared to people who chose fair or very fair ($n=198$, 10%). Nevertheless, it was notable that over a third of respondents did not consider the scenario unfair or very unfair (28% chose 'neither fair nor unfair' and 10% chose 'fair' or 'very fair'),
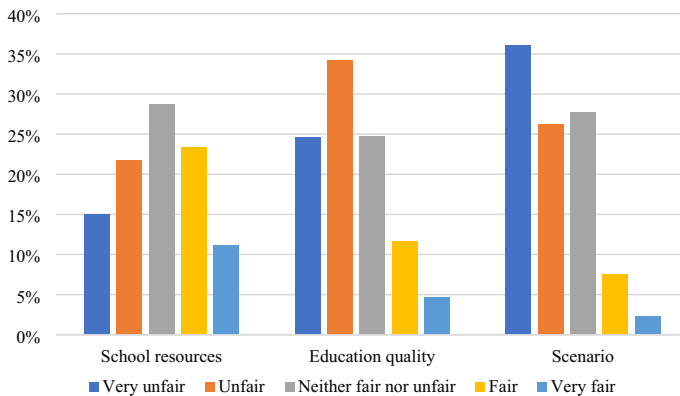

Fig. 1 Fairness perceptions of educational inequality. $N=1999$. Fairness of inequality in school resources asked whether it is fair that children of affluent families attend schools with more resources. Fairness of inequality in education quality asked whether children of high-income earners should receive a better-quality education because their parents pay more taxes. Fairness of the scenario asked: think of a society where most of the children from high-income families go to schools with highly qualified and experienced teachers, and most of the children from low-income families go to schools with poorly qualified and less experienced teachers. As a result, children from high-income families perform better on nationwide tests than children from low-income families. How fair or unfair do you think this is?

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables

Variable	n	%	M	SD	Correlation					
					1	2	3	4	5	6
Parental status										
No children	690	34.5								
Children ≤18 years	685	34.3								
Adult children only	624	31.2								
Financial situation										
Very difficult	168	8.4								
Fairly difficult	405	20.3								
Neither easy nor difficult	693	34.7								
Fairly easy	468	23.4								
Very easy	260	13.0								
Prefer not to answer	5	0.3								
1. Student responsibility			3.16	1.03	–					
2. Collective responsibility			4.00	0.89	– 0.10***	–				
3. School competition			3.21	1.01	0.22***	– 0.03	–			
4. Performance-based school funding			3.29	1.00	0.23***	0.04	0.41***	–		
5. Fairness of inequality in school resources			2.94	1.22	0.26***	– 0.16***	0.24***	0.24***	–	
6. Fairness of inequality in education quality			2.37	1.11	0.24***	– 0.29***	0.28***	0.23***	0.40***	–
7. Fairness of the scenario			2.14	1.06	0.23***	– 0.34***	0.22***	0.19***	0.37***	0.46***

$N = 1999$. *M* mean, *SD* standard deviation. The table presents Spearman's rank-order correlations. ***$p < .001$

despite the obvious unequal educational opportunity presented in the scenario and the prevailing discourse of equal educational opportunity in Australia and globally. As shown in Table 2, the three dependent variables on fairness perceptions of educational inequality were moderately correlated.

In addressing the first research question (do people perceive educational inequality based on parental financial capacity as fair?), these results, therefore, confirm a diversity of views. This diversity of fairness perceptions could originate from the use of different criteria. Fairness of distribution primarily depends on relevant criteria and relevant side constraints that are applied (Hooker, 2005). In judging the fairness of educational inequality, some respondents might have used the criterion of desert, focusing on parents having an output (e.g., the quality of education offered to their children) that accords with their input (e.g., the amount of money spent). This may be particularly the case with the question about resourcing, where respondents might have felt that tangible school resources, such as access to swimming pools, are reasonable facilities to be 'purchased' via school fees and inequality in such resources is not 'unfair' as those facilities, while providing a benefit to students, may not directly impact educational outcomes. Other respondents, however, might have thought all children have equal rights to learn and thus, it was unfair to have unequal educational experiences. In particular, the explicit connection between unequal educational experiences and students' achievement gaps made in the scenario might have prompted more respondents to utilise the criterion of equality (i.e., equal opportunity in education). The respondents who chose 'neither fair nor unfair' might have felt ambivalent about the fairness of educational inequality because they considered both criteria to be relevant.

Predicting fairness perceptions of educational inequality

PPO regression results confirmed that self-interest and neoliberal orientations predicted fairness perceptions of educational inequality. Figure 2 displays a summary of these results. We next examine these findings in more detail, beginning with parental status and then financial situation, as measures of self-interest; before exploring the findings concerning neoliberal orientations. Details of these findings are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Parental status

First, regarding self-interest, it is evident that the effect of parental status on fairness perceptions differed by the inequality situation. There was no effect of parental status on the fairness of inequality in school resources. The respondents with adult children were less likely to endorse the fairness of inequality in education quality and less likely to say the scenario was fair or very fair, compared to respondents without children. The effects of having younger children (≤ 18 years) on fairness perceptions differed by the inequality condition examined. Compared to the respondents without children, the respondents with younger children were more likely to perceive inequality in education quality as very unfair and at the same time were more likely to endorse the fairness of the scenario.

Fig. 2 Odds ratios from partial proportional ordinal regression predicting fairness perceptions of educational inequality. $N = 1968$. *VU* very unfair, *U* unfair, *N* neither fair nor unfair, *F* fair or very fair. Reference groups for categorical variables are 'no children' and 'financially difficult'. Only statistically significantly different odd ratios are presented

Table 3 Partial proportional ordinal regression predicting fairness perceptions of inequality in school resources

Variable	VU vs. U, N, F		VU, U vs. N, F		VU, U, N vs. F	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
University degree	1.00	[0.84, 1.19]				
Not in the labour force	0.75**	[0.62, 0.91]				
Parental status (no children)						
Children ≤ 18 years	1.14	[0.93, 1.40]				
Adult children only	0.89	[0.72, 1.11]				
Financial situation (difficult)						
Neither difficult nor easy	1.48*	[1.10, 2.01]	1.17	[0.93, 1.48]	0.99	[0.78, 1.26]
Easy	1.29*	[1.05, 1.60]				
Student responsibility	1.37***	[1.25, 1.49]				
Collective responsibility	0.36***	[0.29, 0.43]	0.54***	[0.48, 0.62]	0.95	[0.84, 1.06]
School competition	1.34***	[1.22, 1.47]				
Performance-based school funding	1.47***	[1.29, 1.68]	1.29***	[1.15, 1.44]	1.46***	[1.29, 1.64]
Intercept	19.18***	[6.84, 53.75]	1.28	[0.64, 2.55]	0.03***	[0.01, 0.05]

$n = 1968$, *OR* odds ratio, *CI* confidence interval, *VU* very unfair, *U* unfair, *N* neither fair nor unfair, *F* fair or very fair. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$. Reference groups are in parentheses. Only one set of coefficients is presented for variables that meet the proportionality assumption, whereas three coefficients are displayed for variables that did not meet the assumption

Table 4 Partial proportional ordinal regression predicting fairness perceptions of inequality in education quality

Variable	VU vs. U, N, F		VU, U vs. N, F		VU, U, N vs. F	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
University degree	1.00	[0.83, 1.19]				
Not in the labour force	0.73***	[0.60, 0.88]				
Parental status (no children)						
Children ≤ 18 years	0.68**	[0.52, 0.89]	0.80	[0.63, 1.01]	1.25	[0.94, 1.67]
Adult children only	0.66**	[0.49, 0.88]	0.41***	[0.32, 0.54]	0.42***	[0.29, 0.61]
Financial situation (difficult)						
Neither difficult nor easy	1.63***	[1.24, 2.13]	1.08	[0.84, 1.38]	0.72	[0.51, 1.01]
Easy	1.62***	[1.24, 2.13]	1.00	[0.78, 1.28]	1.06	[0.79, 1.44]
Student responsibility	1.11	[0.99, 1.23]	1.34***	[1.20, 1.49]	1.48***	[1.29, 1.70]
Collective responsibility	0.44***	[0.38, 0.52]	0.55***	[0.49, 0.62]	0.76**	[0.65, 0.89]
School competition	1.45***	[1.32, 1.59]				
Performance-based school funding	1.26***	[1.12, 1.41]	1.49***	[1.32, 1.68]	1.86***	[1.56, 2.23]
Intercept	10.48***	[4.45, 24.68]	0.35**	[0.18, 0.71]	0.01***	[0.00, 0.02]

$n = 1968$, *OR* odds ratio, *CI* confidence interval, *VU* very unfair, *U* unfair, *N* neither fair nor unfair, *F* fair or very fair. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$. Reference groups are in parentheses. Only one set of coefficients is presented for variables that meet the proportionality assumption, whereas three coefficients are displayed for variables that did not meet the assumption

Table 5 Partial proportional ordinal regression predicting fairness perceptions of the scenario

Variable	VU vs. U, N, F		VU, U vs. N, F		VU, U, N vs. F	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
University degree	1.10	[0.92, 1.32]				
Not in the labour force	0.85	[0.70, 1.04]				
Parental status (no children)						
Children ≤ 18 years	1.25*	[1.02, 1.53]				
Adult children only	1.01	[0.79, 1.30]	0.97	[0.75, 1.25]	0.50**	[0.33, 0.76]
Financial situation (difficult)						
Neither difficult nor easy	1.56***	[1.23, 1.99]	1.41**	[1.10, 1.80]	0.70	[0.48, 1.04]
Easy	1.74***	[1.40, 2.16]				
Student responsibility	1.21***	[1.09, 1.34]	1.39***	[1.25, 1.55]	1.45***	[1.23, 1.71]
Collective responsibility	0.42***	[0.37, 0.48]	0.45***	[0.40, 0.51]	0.64***	[0.54, 0.76]
School competition	1.31***	[1.19, 1.44]				
Performance-based school funding	1.30***	[1.16, 1.45]	1.21**	[1.07, 1.37]	1.79***	[1.47, 2.18]
Intercept	4.15***	[1.98, 8.67]	0.71	[0.36, 1.41]	0.01***	[0.00, 0.02]

N = 1968, *OR* odds ratio, *CI* confidence interval, *VU* very unfair, *U* unfair, *N* neither fair nor unfair, *F* fair or very fair. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$. Reference groups are in parentheses. Only one set of coefficients is presented for variables that meet the proportionality assumption, whereas three coefficients are displayed for variables that did not meet the assumption

In interpreting these results, it is possible that parents of current or future school-going children might have paid more attention to the social mobility goal of education. Under this goal, education becomes a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful competition for more desirable social positions (Labaree, 1997). This reflects the research literature on school choice and parental engagement in schooling, where sending children to a school with high performance or a good reputation is considered a marker of good parenting (Proctor & Aitchison, 2015). It is perhaps unsurprising that parents, if understood as self-interested education consumers, may desire a stratified education system like the scenario. Conversely, from the perspectives of citizens and taxpayers, schools should provide good-quality education to all children to produce competent citizens and skilled workers (Labaree, 1997). The respondents without children or with adult children might have prioritised these alternative societal goals and perceived the scenario as more unfair.

However, parental status was not a significant predictor of fairness perceptions of inequality in school resources and had somewhat opposite effects on fairness perceptions of inequality in education quality. Unlike the scenario, these two inequality conditions did not clearly link achievement gaps to unequal educational experiences. Moreover, inequality in education quality was not clearly specified as inequality at the school level. It might be that some respondents with current or future school-going children interpreted it as receiving education with differing qualities within the same school and thus, perceived it as very unfair. Given the intricacies, the effects of parental status on fairness perceptions need further investigation.

Financial situation

The regression results also revealed that the respondents with financial comfort (another element of self-interest) tended to perceive education inequality based on parental financial capacity as fair. There were significant effects of financial situation on all fairness perception variables, and overall, financially comfortable respondents were more likely to endorse the fairness of educational inequality across all fairness perception variables than those with financial difficulty. This finding broadly supports the idea that people's fairness perceptions of inequality depend on their social positions (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Hvidberg et al., 2020), albeit focusing on different inequalities (i.e., educational versus economic). A possible explanation is that people give salience to different criteria in judging fairness depending on their circumstances (Elenbaas, 2019). Another potential explanation is that compared to people with lower socioeconomic status, people with higher socioeconomic status have a stronger focus on the self and reduced concerns for others (Manstead, 2018). In judging the fairness of educational inequality, financially comfortable respondents might have prioritised the correspondence between the costs and benefits, which serves their own interest—they have the greater purchasing power to win the competition in the 'education market'. Conversely, respondents with financial difficulty might have given salience to equal educational opportunities.

Neoliberal orientations

Finally, neoliberal orientations significantly predicted fairness perceptions of educational inequality. Across all fairness perception variables, the more people favoured individual students' responsibility, school competition, and performance-based school funding—neoliberal policy instruments, the more they endorsed the fairness of educational inequality. On the contrary, the more people agreed with the collective responsibility to close achievement gaps, the less they endorsed the fairness of educational inequality. With the rise of neoliberalism, education systems worldwide have implemented reforms toward marketisation and privatisation. In this settlement, education has become commodified, and parents have become consumers of education for their children (Ball, 2004). For people who endorse such directions, it would be considered fair to receive a better educational 'service' when paying more. Thus, in the 'education market', unequal educational experiences based on parental financial capacity are the consequences of fair transactions and thus, equitable. The consistent effects of neoliberal orientations on all fairness perception variables found in the present study seem to indicate the considerable influence of neoliberalism on the public's views of education.

To further illustrate the effects of self-interest and neoliberal orientations on the fairness of educational inequality, we also examined the predicted probabilities. Figure 3 displays the average adjusted prediction of fairness of the scenario by self-interest and neoliberal orientations (given the consistent effects of neoliberal orientations, figures for two other inequality conditions are almost identical). According to the PPO regression predicting the scenario, all things being equal, the probability of choosing very unfair was 7% among respondents with self-interest and neoliberal orientations, whereas the probability was 78% among respondents with no
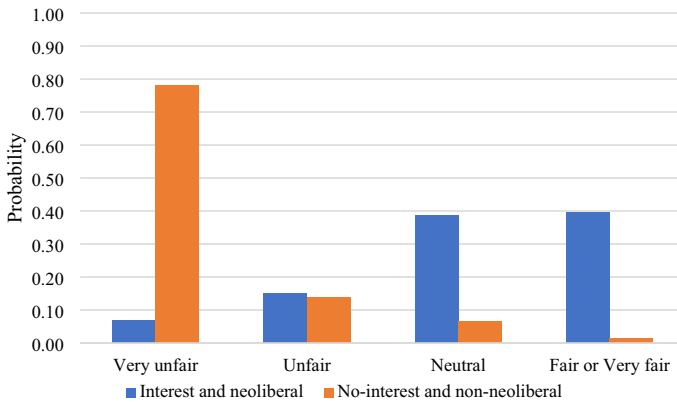
Fig. 3 Average adjusted prediction of fairness perceptions of the scenario by self-interest and neoliberal orientations. Interest refers to 'younger children' and 'financially comfortable'. No-interest refers to 'no children' and 'financial difficulty'. Neoliberal refers to high student responsibility, low collective responsibility, high school competition, and high performance-based school funding. Non-neoliberal refers to low student responsibility, high collective responsibility, low school competition, and low performance-based school funding. Low = mean − 1 standard deviation; high = mean + 1 standard deviation

self-interest and non-neoliberal orientations. Conversely, holding other variables constant, the probability of choosing fair or very fair was 40% among the respondents with self-interest and neoliberal orientations but was 1% among respondents with no self-interest and non-neoliberal orientations.

Implications

Although fairness perceptions of educational inequality were diverse, most respondents perceived the scenario as unfair or very unfair. This contrasts with the current reality of the Australian school system, which features considerable inequality in access to educational provision through the public subsidisation of fee-charging private schools. Despite the supposed adoption of needs-based school funding under the Gonski model, some public schools still struggle to meet the stated level of need (Cobbold, 2019), while some private schools flaunt extravagant facilities (Baker, 2022). Yet, Australia's current market-based, choice-oriented school system is rarely questioned (Stacey, 2022). This may be due to a normalisation of the idea of school choice (Stacey, 2022) and, indeed, a 'discourse of choice' more broadly (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014).

The idea of choice can be difficult to argue with and may appear to many as an inherent good in which parents have enhanced autonomy and involvement in their children's education. While in practice, such choice is largely illusory—the basis on which to 'choose' is a 'myth of an equal playing field' (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014, p. 1580), people may understand choice of school as simply a parental right rather than a mechanism of social reproduction. As such, the results of this study are encouraging. While people's opinions about the fairness of inequality in school resources were evenly divided, most respondents perceived inequality in education quality and teacher quality as unfair, particularly when achievement gaps were clearly linked to unequal

educational experiences. The Australian public might not fully comprehend or appreciate a clear pattern of segregation along socioeconomic lines and the subsequent achievement gaps brought by school choice, partly due to the success of the discourse of school choice in obscuring its role in social reproduction. This suggests that if the inequitable effects of school choice in the Australian school system were more widely known and understood, then support for system change may be easier to garner.

In addition, the findings of this study imply that in an era largely dominated by neoliberalism, in which public goods and services are reconceptualised as private commodities, it is crucial to reinforce the idea of education as a public good. Whether education is a public good or commodity has broad implications for how education is organised, administered, and funded (Grace, 1989). If education is solely a private commodity to be traded, there are limited rationales for state interventions and public funding (Grace, 1989), and education is likely to function as a mechanism that keeps marginalised families in an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. According to Kaul and Mendoza (2003), repeated effort is required to firmly establish a good as private or public. Therefore, under the onslaught of neoliberalism, the idea of education as a public good would need to be actively advocated and defended.

Limitations and future directions

Limitations of this study relate to sampling technique, social desirability bias, measures, and geographical location. First, we used a quota sampling technique to ensure that the study sample adequately reflected the NSW population. Future studies with representative samples would bring a more robust understanding of the public's fairness perceptions about educational inequality. Second, social desirability bias cannot be excluded. For example, it is possible that some respondents felt uncomfortable saying the scenario was fair even when they thought so. Future studies could explicitly measure social desirability bias or employ strategies to reduce the risk (e.g., by asking what their neighbours might think). Third, measures used in this study are limited and require further development. Due to the scarcity of literature on public opinion about educational equity, we developed our survey questions by modifying questions from relevant literature and utilising the findings of a qualitative survey. Future studies are needed to further develop and validate survey questions designed to capture public opinion about the fairness of educational inequality. Relatedly, although the present study included variables representing important characteristics of neoliberal educational policies, future studies could include other measures of neoliberal orientations. For example, studies may explicitly ask whether education is a commodity, what the goal of education is, or whether education should be left to the market. Finally, we note that the present study is based on a survey of adults in the most populous state in Australia. As fairness perceptions differ by culture (Schäfer et al., 2015), international comparison studies could gain a more sophisticated understanding of fairness perceptions of educational inequality across cultures. Furthermore, future studies comparing fairness perceptions in different policy contexts could provide even more policy-relevant findings.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that despite the normalisation of the market-based, choice-oriented school system in Australia and its inequitable effects (Thomson, 2021), many Australians consider educational inequality based on parental financial capacity unfair, particularly when clear links between unequal educational experiences and achievement gaps are presented. However, people's fairness perceptions depended on self-interest and neoliberal orientations. Self-interest and neoliberal orientations appeared to be linked to a consumer approach to education that considers education a private commodity. From the consumer perspective, educational inequality is not a problem but an outcome of fair trade. For education to function as a social equaliser, a view of education as a public good would need to be firmly established and actively promoted.

The unfairness of educational inequality is often used as a rationale for developing policy measures to reduce educational inequity. However, there has been limited knowledge about the public's perceptions of the fairness of educational inequality. Although many factors influence policy decisions, public support is needed for politically feasible policymaking. People's fairness perceptions of inequality are associated with their preferences for policy measures designed to reduce inequality. Therefore, it is important to understand further the fairness perceptions of educational inequality to generate public support for equity-oriented educational policy. The present study offers valuable insights into people's perceptions of the fairness of socioeconomic educational inequality and suggests that unmasking the consequences of inequitable education systems and promoting education as a public good may inspire considerable public support for change to education systems.

Appendix

See Table 6.

Table 6 Model comparisons

Fairness perception variables	Partial proportional	Multinomial	Stereotype
Inequality in school resources			
Log-likelihood	– 2387.4	– 2395.9	– 2463.6
AIC	4812.7	4857.9	4957.1
BIC	4918.9	5042.2	5040.9
Inequality in education quality			
Log-likelihood	– 2341.8	– 2343.2	– 2424.4
AIC	4737.6	4752.5	4878.8
BIC	4888.4	4936.8	4962.5
Scenario			
Log-likelihood	– 2284.7	– 2287.2	– 2336.0
AIC	4615.3	4640.3	4702.0
BIC	4743.8	4824.6	4785.8

AIC Akaike's information criterion, *BIC* Bayesian information criterion

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