

TRENDS IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION - EXPLORATION OF A THESIS

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The personal and social usefulness of education has justified the investment of considerable effort in extending understanding of its functioning. However, while that effort has generated many useful findings, commonly offered interpretations in terms of generalised and depersonalised concepts such as society, the state, the economy, or the system remain unsatisfactory. In particular, in incidentally ascribing to people essentially passive roles in educational processes, such interpretations neglect personal motivations and actions that may be crucial influences on social activity, and of which it is important to take account both in the development of understanding and in taking responsive action. Accordingly, this study explores a thesis that accepts people as active in the pursuance of personal and social concerns, or interests as I shall identify them here, and also as differing in the power they employ and in the sense of justice with which they pursue those interests. In emphasising the dynamic, interactive and interpretative character of people, and their interest in identity and personal and group development, and in status, wealth, power and other forms of aggrandisement, the position accepts that groups and organisations, rationalisations and ideologies, and other social phenomena are social arrangements or constructions, and that they are perceived and experienced differently by people according to circumstances - as instruments or mechanisms by the more powerful or as forms of social reality to be accommodated to by the less powerful, and as operated more or less justly. Moreover, in linking my more specific expectations about the functioning of institutions with basic assumptions about the nature of reality, including people and their relationships, this study concurrently explores several dimensions of a comprehensive thesis. That, however, is not a novel step; any novelty is in acknowledging the range and interrelatedness of the set of assumptions being made and implicitly or explicitly being tested in a particular study.

The thesis is explored through a study of recent developments in Australian education. This period has been selected because, as one of slowing economic growth,<sup>1</sup> it offers a prospect of observing more powerful people, and the groups and organisations they manage, handle a declining rate of growth in the general circumstances, and particularly economic bases, from which they operate. The general expectation is that such people, in particular, give considerable effort to maintaining the rates in improvement of circumstances to which they have become accustomed, even if to do so is at the expense of less powerful people. That is, while all may benefit, invariably differentially, in a time of growth from an expanding 'economic cake', in a time of stability or decline the burden of decline will be borne disproportionately by the less powerful. A modification to this would occur where the more powerful are moved by a sense of justice for the well-being of the less powerful. While obviously the general thesis can be explored in many areas of social activity apart from education, and some work has been done that is in accord with the assumptions made here, education is a very likely place in which to see relevant processes in operation. Education is a very convenient mechanism for regulating access to opportunities

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1. The changes are extensively documented in productions of the Australian Bureau of Statistics; for interpretive and policy oriented comments see Scotton and Ferber (eds), 1978, 1980; Walsh, 1979; Crough, Wheelwright and Wilshire (eds), 1980; Hughes, 1980; Kasper and others, 1980; and Sheehan, 1980.

and achievement: whereas in time of economic growth it can facilitate access, as has been widely witnessed during the more prosperous 1950s, '60s and early '70s, in times of stability and relative decline it is a readily available mechanism for lowering expectations and aspirations, and for excluding people from opportunities and rewards. Hence, a primary point of interest is in establishing whether a major thrust in programs has been to direct educational institutions to perform such functions. In this paper attention is directed to actions at the national level, and particularly by government.

As introduction and background to the main discussion, I have drawn briefly on data on the general Australian situation to suggest some major characteristics of that situation, and to indicate the context in which educational developments are occurring. For example, broad trends in income distribution are evident in data provided in reports of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and drawn upon in Table 1. Thus, for males, the maximum income of the bottom 20 per cent of income earners has declined from 36.9 per cent in 1968-69 to 27.8 per cent in 1978-79 of the lowest income of the top 20 per

Table 1: Trends in Income Distribution

Level of Income	Male			Female		
	1968-69	1974-74	1978-79	1968-69	1973-74	1978-79
Maximum income of bottom 20% (\$)	1670	2580	4020	150	190	930
Maximum income of bottom 40% (\$)	2680	4750	8300	620	1160	2710
Mean income (\$)	3390	5710	10170	1170	2160	4720
Minimum income of top 20% (\$)	4530	7910	14440	1970	3860	8220
Maximum income of bottom 20% as a percentage of minimum income of top 20%	36.9	32.6	27.8	7.6	4.9	11.3
Maximum income of bottom 40% as a percentage of minimum income of top 20%	59.2	60.1	57.5	31.5	30.1	33.0
Mean income as a percentage of minimum income of top 20%	74.8	72.2	70.4	59.4	56.0	57.4

1. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Reports

No. 17.17 Income Distribution, 1968-69, Consolidated and revised ed'n. Canberra, 24.10. 1975.

No. 17.8 Income Distribution, 1973-74, Part 1, Canberra, 5.5. 1976.

No. 6501.0 Income Distribution, Australia, 1978-79, Individuals (Preliminary), Canberra, 15.10. 1980.

cent. A similar although lesser trend is evident for mean income earners. The experience of those drawing upon the maximum income of the bottom 40 per cent has varied in that their percentage of the bottom income of the top 20 per cent improved from 1968-69 to 1973-74 and then declined. Although the experience of women has been different, especially at lower levels of income, the more remarkable feature of their earnings has been the much lower level of income relative to males.

These data are relatively crude and do not enable us to monitor income movements for particular groups. Nor are these latter well analysed in discussions of trends in economic circumstances. Walsh (1979: 183-8) presents data on medical practitioners that indicate they improved their incomes substantially better than the rate of inflation. He also contends (p. 188) that their efforts to reduce their taxation payments gave the initial impetus to the tax avoidance industry. Scotton (1980a:195-6) is more qualified, contending that medical fees rose faster than average weekly earnings and the consumer price index between 1974 and 1976, but thereafter at a slower rate. Sheehan (1980: 63-5) argues that entrepreneurs in business and operators in financial and property markets, together with some members of key professional groups in medicine, law and dentistry have done best in society. People on wages or salaries, and subject to the determinations of an arbitration system, together with some degree of complementary bargaining, experienced a relative increase in their share of the economic cake in 1974 but a subsequent decline until 1980, when increases again moved ahead of inflation (The Age, 24.3.1981). Those most at a disadvantage include people on fixed or relatively fixed incomes such as annuities, together with younger, older, minority group and female members of the workforce who experienced greater degrees of un- or under-employment (Sheehan, 1980: 69-74). Among the worst hit have been unemployed 16 and 17 year olds; their unemployment allowance has stayed at \$36 per week since 1975!

Analyses of income touch only the 'tip of the iceberg' however. To achieve a more complete understanding it is necessary to take account of many other elements that serve as means or areas of aggrandisement. In addition to explicit income, for example, are fringe benefits such as the use of a car or payment of telephone accounts, club membership dues, school fees, entertainment allowances, or other perquisites. Again, when income tax is considered, the burden has been heavier on wage and salary earners who pay as they earn, and are less able than people in business or in private professional practice to minimise or avoid tax. Still again, those with property have seen their wealth increase as the market upvalued their holdings, while those with only monetary assets saw those assets steadily (and sometimes dramatically) lose value. And beyond income and wealth are other dimensions; for example, Walsh (1979: 191-92) argued that the legal profession led the way in 'sheer growth of power and influence' as leading members accepted commissions to advise on such diverse matters as 'the running of the nation's security system and the setting of parliamentary salaries'. At the same time, those without employment and depending on unemployment allowances suffered cruelly through attacks that designated them as 'dole bludgers' and denigrated their status as citizens.

Perhaps the most interesting, significant and concerning aspect of this issue of differential achievement is the paucity of data on high achievers. Considerable effort has gone into ascertaining the incomes of high achievers (e.g., Head, 1980) and often only inferential data are available.<sup>2</sup> And beyond incomes, as has been noted, are other dimensions of aggrandisement where trends are even more difficult to establish.<sup>3</sup> So while the general thesis cannot be tested satisfactorily, it remains a challenging one to pursue. In any case, the prospect appears a little more promising, from a research perspective, in respect of education.

2. For an interesting example of such an attempt, see an article by newspaper columnist K. Davidson, 'Doctors either avoiding tax or mismanaging costs' (The Age, 7.9.1981), and an AMA response, 'Doctors' incomes and the AMA' (The Age, 11.9.1981).
3. Some interesting work has been done from probate data (e.g., Raskall, 1978). However, with the phasing out of probate duties, this source becomes unavailable.

Trends in Australian Education: Before focussing on trends in Australian education during the late '70s when economic growth slowed, it is useful to briefly review longer term developments. This has been done comprehensively in the Williams Report (1979; chs 1 and 2) and a selection of data from it is adequate to show a consistent growth in educational activity. That children stayed longer at school is indicated in an increase in the attendance of 16 year olds from approximately 22 per cent in 1957 to nearly 60 per cent in 1977, and a rise in the retention rate from first to final form of secondary schooling from 22.7 per cent in 1967 to 35.3 per cent in 1977. At the tertiary or post-secondary level, undergraduate enrolments rose from 4.7 per cent of the 17 to 22 year age group in 1957 to 9.5 per cent in 1977 in universities, while enrolments in colleges of advanced education or their earlier equivalents rose from 3.0 to 9.6 per cent. Concurrently, resources allocated to education rose from 2.1 per cent of GDP in 1956-57 to 5.8 per cent in 1976-77. That much of that increase was due to increased Commonwealth spending on education is evidenced by the increase from 2.6 per cent of all government spending on education in 1957 to 42.1 per cent in 1977.

Not surprisingly, this growth in educational activity was linked to a steadily growing economy. Statistics published by the Reserve Bank of Australia (1980: 109) show that GDP rose by 19.1 per cent between 1954-55 and 1959-60, by 23.5 per cent between 1964-65 and 1969-70 and by 17.7 per cent between 1969-70 and 1974-75. However, although the period of the 1950s and '60s may be seen as the golden age of education, clearly the mid-1970s were even more golden than elsewhere. From a position where educational expenditure constituted 3.9 per cent of GDP in 1969-70 and rose to 4.6 per cent in 1972-73, it was taken by a Labor government to 6.2 per cent<sup>4</sup> by 1975-76 (ABS Cat. No. 4101.0, 1980: 110). And although the increased expenditure was spread over all sectors of the educational enterprise, special attention was given to the needs of such groups as children of Aborigines, migrants and parents in poverty. So while overall the growth in educational activity reflected the influence of factors associated with economic growth, such as greater capacity to support children at school and greater resources with which to supply schooling, it also reflected differences in ideological commitments to the education of a population.

This difference is a primary one among the many that are evident in the programs of the Labor Government of 1972-75 and the Liberal-National Country Party coalition governments up to 1972 and since 1975. The thrusts in education under the Labor government have been summarised by Ferber (1978) and discussed by Davey (1978), and will not be considered in detail here. However, it is relevant to note that a salient thrust in Labor's educational policies was to increase the availability of schooling to people. In settling upon an emphasis on needs, rather than say per capita grants, in making special grants for children of Aborigines, migrants, and people in poverty and other disadvantaged categories, in extending studentships for poorer students at the senior secondary and tertiary levels, in abolishing tertiary education fees, and the extension of tertiary institutions, and in proposing the children's commission, it developed expansionary or inclusionary policies at every level of schooling. To make these points is not to imply that such a consideration overrode all others, or that the efforts were competently and effectively undertaken; it is simply to assert a central concern with extending opportunity that is evident throughout many activities.

4. Presumably a correction has been made to the figure given in the Williams Report and quoted above.

In turning to focus on more recent trends in education, it is useful to distinguish between two influences on participation in schooling. Given greater difficulties in obtaining employment, we can expect some decline in enthusiasm for schooling and so a trend for youth to leave schooling earlier. However, the thesis being explored here also suggests that policies will be developed to discourage continued participation, or at least change its character, particularly at certain crucial points. Given the general ladder-like system of schooling in Australia, we would expect the upper levels to be restricted, allowing relatively fewer people through to the more attractive opportunities. At the same time, the process of exclusion can be influenced by measures as early as primary and even pre-schooling that discourage or lower aspirations and expectations and prospects of achieving highly in schooling. First, the more visible reactions. Table 2, produced from data reported by the ABS, shows several indications of reactions in participation. The proportion of 16 year olds at school appears to have peaked in 1978. The retention rate to final year of secondary schooling may have peaked a year earlier;

Table 2: Recent Trends in Educational Participation

Level or sector of participation		Year						
		1969	1972 <sup>a</sup>	1975	1977	1978	1979	1980 <sup>b</sup>
Per cent of 16 year olds attending secondary schooling (p.81)	M	54.6	57.8	56.7	58.0	58.3	57.8	56.1
	F	46.3	50.9	55.0	59.2	60.8	59.7	59.4
	T	50.5	54.5	55.9	58.6	59.3	58.7	57.7
Apparent Retention Rate, First to Final Year of Secondary Schooling (p.83)	M	31.1	35.7	34.6	34.0	33.1	32.4	31.9
	F	23.7	28.9	33.6	36.6	37.3	37.2	37.3
	T	27.5	32.4	34.1	35.3	35.1	34.7	34.5
University students 17 to 22 years as a percentage of the population of the same age and sex (p.87)	M	7.4		7.6	7.4	7.0	6.7	
	F	3.6		4.9	5.0	4.8	4.7	
	T	5.6		6.2	6.2	5.9	5.7	
Advanced education students 17 to 22 years as a percentage of the population of the same age and sex (p.91)	M			5.1	5.1	5.0	4.9	
	F			5.5	6.0	5.9	5.7	
	T			5.3	5.5	5.5	5.3	
Technical and further education students 17 to 22 years, as a percentage of the population of the same age and sex (p.94)	M						19.0	
	F						7.6	
	T						13.4	
Higher degree students as a percentage of total students <sup>c</sup>	M							
	F							
	T	9.7	10.3	11.3	11.6	12.0	12.4	12.6

Major source: No. 4101.0, Social Indicators, No. 3, Canberra: ABS, 1980.

Associated Sources:

- No. 13.5, Schools, 1976, Canberra: ABS, 8.6, 1977, pp.5 and 22.
- No. 4202.0, Schools Australia, 1980, Canberra: ABS, 28.8, 1981, pp.6 and 7.
- Tertiary Education Commission, Report for 1982-84 Triennium, Canberra: AGPS, 1981, Vol.1, pt. II, p.20.

there is a decline since 1977. Similarly the proportion of 17 to 22 year olds attending university has come down slightly since 1977 and at colleges of advanced education since 1978. Comparable data on technical and further education has only recently been collected and does not reveal trends.

Within that trend is an interesting variation between the sexes and there could be further differences by ethnic and socio-economic background, but the data do not cover those aspects. In respect of the sexes, the data show an earlier peaking of boys participation rates through to the final year of

secondary schooling, to university and possibly to colleges of advanced education. One explanation of this is that girls have had more difficulty than boys in finding employment and so stayed on at school. It is also possible that more able male performers have left earlier as jobs were obtained and that the level of performance at final year of schooling may have declined. However, explanations of attendance have been extensively canvassed by others (Burke, 1980; Karmel, 1980) and will not be discussed further here. Instead I propose to turn to government actions and ascertain whether there have been efforts to influence participation at crucial points.

A major expression of a government's commitments and priorities is in its expenditure programs, although certain features of these need to be well understood. For example, commitments develop over time, and are difficult to change in the short term. Consequently, key indicators may be more evident in changes in relativities, in 'fine tuning' adjustments, or in small scale innovations or in the selection of or modifications to programs. In addition, Commonwealth activity is characterised by an illuminating interaction between the government and its education commissions, particularly the Schools Commission. Established by the former Labor government to identify needs of schools and differentiate between them in recommending support, that preoccupation has clashed with a conservative government's predisposition to support by per capita grants that ignore differing circumstances of families and schools and so favour the more affluent. In consequence, the government has not only closely directed its working through the issuance of guidelines but also made important changes to its membership.

Most recent trends can be ascertained from data provided in reports of the Commonwealth education commissions and in the statement of guidelines to those commissions. Table 3 includes data for the years 1976 and 1979 drawn from a special report of the Schools Commission (1979: 173) and a Tertiary Education

Table 3: Recent Trends in Commonwealth Expenditure on Education

Program	1976	1979	1982
<u>Government schools</u>			
Recurrent general support	31.7	28.5	26.8
migrant education	3.2	3.0	4.3
disadvantaged schools	2.9	2.7	2.5
special schools	1.8	1.8	1.8
Capital	22.1	20.4	12.4
<u>Non-government schools</u>			
Recurrent general support	27.4	32.5	41.3
migrant education	1.2	1.2	1.6
disadvantaged schools	0.5	0.4	0.4
special schools	0.6	0.5	0.5
short term emergency assistance	0.0	0.1	0.1
Capital	4.5	4.8	4.5
<u>Joint Programs</u>	4.2	4.1	3.9
<b>Total on schools</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(Table 3 continued over page)

Table 3: (Cont'd)

Program	1976	1979	1982
Universities	54.4	54.1)	88.9
Colleges	38.8	36.6)	
TAFE	6.8	9.3	11.1

Sources:

Schools, 1976 and 1979: Australian students and their schools, Canberra: Schools Commission, 1979.

Universities and Colleges, 1976 and 1979: Tertiary Education Commission, Report for 1982-84 Triennium, Vol.1, pt. 1, Canberra: AGPS, 1981, p. 261.

1982 proposed allocations: Statement on Commonwealth Education Policy and Financial Guidelines to the Commonwealth Education Commissions, Canberra: Ministerial Statement, 4.6.1981.

Commission report (1981: 261), and proposed spending for 1982 drawn from the statement of Guidelines (1981). The major school reductions, proportionately, are in recurrent general support and capital funding for government schools, while the major increase is in the recurrent general support for non-government schools. These trends become more significant, however, when more specific changes are considered. One is a growing emphasis on transition programs, justified as necessary to prepare youth for employment, which is financed partly by switching funds from general to specific grants, thus reducing options available to state education departments. A second shift is in the rearrangement of support between different categories of non-government schools; whereas the Karmel Report (1973: 87) recommended eight categories of schools for funding purposes and the phasing out of grants for the more affluent schools by 1976, subsequent Commonwealth actions have reduced the categories to three, and the top group is assured of grants at the rate of 20 per cent of average government school costs. Moreover, the schools with least resources are to receive only twice the amount granted to wealthier schools by 1983. Further, in that payments are made relative to student enrolments they ignore the different circumstances of parents and, reflecting differential attendance, favour schools that attract students with greater staying power. This tendency to favour the more affluent is no chance event; it was recognised as early in the present government's actions as between 1976 and 1978 by Scotton (1980b: 12-3) but also characterises the thrust of successive Commonwealth Liberal-National Country Party coalition government policies for schools since the early 1960s.

In the post-secondary sector, the data show a steady reduction in relative support for universities and colleges, and modest growth for TAFE. In addition, other measures, such as the introduction of fees for post-graduate students, the prospective rather than retrospective budgeting for increased costs, the development of centres of excellence by redistributing general university resources, thereby reducing the resources available to unselected sectors of universities, further constrain and even direct institutional functioning.

Taking these programs together, we can postulate a pattern to which the educational system as a whole is being directed. At the level of schooling, publicly operated schools and the particular groups of children who attend them are being given a lesser priority and a more vocational orientation.

Concurrently, more generous funding of privately operated schools, particularly those serving the more affluent sectors of the population, enables them to provide better services and compete more effectively for tertiary entrance and so for access to higher level professional and executive positions and opportunities. Beyond schooling, limitation of university and college activity, and particularly the former, limits the proportion of the population that can qualify for attractive opportunities and statuses, and gain other advantages of education, while concurrent expansion of TAFE at a lower level serves partly at least as a mechanism for lowering aspirations and expectations of large proportions of students, and for deflecting them into sub-professional and other lower level occupations and positions. Incidentally, the imposition of fees for graduate students, or even for all levels of tertiary education would not constitute a major difficulty for children of the already affluent; on the contrary, fees may work to exclude some potential, less affluent rivals.

It is not suggested that the patterns of funding reflect an ingenious, even Machiavellian master plan, although such a plan should not be hastily ruled out as a possibility. Rather, they are interpreted to derive from interaction between people with elitist and conservative, essentially capitalist presuppositions and specific situations, influenced by the efforts of particular interest groups. To explore this possibility, further work is being undertaken on public discussion of issues relating to schooling during the late '70s. A major element of the period has been, of course, the Williams inquiry and report, including events leading up to and following from it. But current work on press reportings, as a segment of the media coverage, confirms recollections of a substantial thrust to shape people's attitudes, and particularly their aspirations and expectations for their children.

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