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THEORISING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE:  
THE RE-FORMATION OF EDUCATION IN THE 1930s

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## Introduction

In the late 1920s schooling in New South Wales (NSW) was organised as a liberal meritocratic system. It was liberal because it was focused on individuals and presented schooling as a means of enhancing individual development. It was meritocratic because merit, individual's pre-social talent or intelligence, rather than their birth, class or wealth, was taken to be a crucial determinant of educational opportunity and success. Gender was accepted as a justification for differentiated schooling.

The liberal meritocratic schooling which had been established by the late 1920s was a universal system of educational provision in which all students were required to stay at school until they were 14 years old and in which public and private educational provision was regulated by the state. Within this universal system, differentiated educational routes for academic and non-academic students were constructed through schools of different types offering different academic and prevocational curricula. These routes led to different destinations in the paid and unpaid workforce. Students, in both public and private schools, who passed the necessary examinations and who could be maintained at school were able to climb the educational ladder to the university which gave access to the professions and better public service employment. Those students who did not pass the necessary exams, who chose pre-vocational rather than academic courses or who lacked the support to stay on eventually left school from whatever level in the system they had reached. Many left directly from primary school in this ability graded system.

By the late 1930s there was still a universal system of schooling which required student attendance until the age of 14 and which was differentiated for academic and non-academic students. The academic and non-academic educational routes still led to different destinations in the labour market and the state still orchestrated educational provision. But in a number of respects the pattern of educational provision had shifted in important ways.

The state was now widely seen to be responsible not only for primary but also for secondary education. While formal compulsory attendance requirements had not changed, there had been a de facto increase in the school leaving age. The structure of schooling had been simplified. Instead of a dualist structure of academic and non-academic schools which streamed young people to different labour market destinations, there was a trend toward common schools within which the streaming of academic and non-academic students was effected through curriculum provision and assessment. Age grading became more

significant. Students moved between primary and secondary schools and between grade levels on the basis of age. Selection on ability only remained important in relation to the allocation of students to different academic and non-academic courses. Even here the importance of IQ was de-emphasised in favour of teacher assessment, counselling, guidance and records. Selection and assessment became more explicitly culturally based. The increased range of curriculum offerings within schools was further extended by an increased use of technology in teaching (films, radio and libraries). The effect of this diversity in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment was to enhance student subject choices.

In ten years, over a period of deep depression, the pattern of educational provision in NSW showed some striking discontinuities, but also significant continuities, with the

past. How can this pattern of continuity and discontinuity be explained? How can it be conceptualised? Does the shift in educational provision indicate change? Or is it a continuity? If it is change, is it a policy change, for my research does not indicate to what extent the shifts in provision affected lives in schools and classrooms? Is it an educational change, even though the state and the parameters it established for the provision of schooling seem to be the most significant dimensions of change? Is a study of such change case study in policy sociology or a case study in the sociology of education? What, in other words, is the best problematic for the analysis of education and change?

As these questions suggest this paper tackles the history and theory of educational change. Its primary purpose is to begin to explain why the shifting pattern of educational provision through the 1930s occurred. In presenting this historical analysis, I offer some comments on the conceptualisation of change in education which I want to extend in more detail in another paper. My aim in discussing these conceptual issues is to address the debate about an appropriate problematic for the analysis of educational change which has been drawn to the fore in recent research in policy sociology (Ozga, 1990; Ball, 1990; Bowe, Ball with Gold, 1992; Dale, 1992a; Lingard, 1993).

The current paper is organised in three sections. In the first part of the paper I outline different approaches to theorising educational change and indicate the parameters of my preferred conceptual framework. In the body of the paper, I summarise the findings of a more detailed analysis of education in New South Wales in the 1930s depression (Seddon, 1993) with particular attention to the processes which gave rise to the

trends in educational provision outlined above. Finally, I draw conclusions concerning a problematic for research on educational change from the case study.

#### Theorising educational change

Research on educational change is surprisingly sparse. As Roger Dale (1992b) suggests, education is usually seen as a significant means of individual and collective improvement and this understanding has become a central normative guideline in education and educational research. The assumption has been that education is good, more is better and change contributes to social improvement. Educationists, including critical sociologists of education, have accepted the possibility of 'the project of social redemption/emancipation through universal provision ... and concentrated ... on identifying the obstacles to the attainment of that unproblematic and unexamined goal' (Dale, 1992b: 203-4). The consequence of this orientation in educational research has been the burgeoning of bodies of literature which tackle the problem of how to improve education and overcome the obstacles which hinder that improvement.

Broadly speaking, two distinct approaches to this problem of improving education are evident. Firstly, there is a technical approach to educational change which takes a managerial, means-ends perspective to the question of changing education. This work identifies practitioners as its primary audience offering practical insights into how to effect educational change (eg. Fullan, 1982). Its early emphasis on rational processes of policy formulation and implementation (eg. Tyler, 1950) has been disturbed by the substantial empirical evidence that the implementation of policy is rarely faithful to original policy specifications. These findings have undermined the assumption of both fidelity and rationality in the policy formulation - implementation process. Attention has therefore turned to

consider the obstacles to rational planning and the faithful implementation of policy, and how they might be overcome. Increasingly, work in this tradition is appropriating insights from psychological, political (Ball, 1987), social (Papagiannis, Kleese and Bickel, 1982) and cultural (Angus, 1993) theories in order to explain the failures in educational management.

The second approach to the analysis of education draws explicitly on intellectual traditions in the social sciences and humanities to explore the limits of education and processes of educational change. Early research in the political arithmetic tradition showed that schooling was not a universal good but provided different opportunities for students of different social class, gender and race. This research problematised the liberal

assumptions of equality of opportunity and the notion that schooling was a good thing in any simple sense. As in the technical approach, as simple assumptions about the possibility of social improvement through education were undermined, attention shifted to consider the obstacles to educational improvement.

Over the last twenty years the social analysis of obstacles to, and strategies for unlocking, the real potential of education has been the focus of wide-ranging debates in education. The trajectory of these debates have paralleled theoretical developments in social theory more generally (Jamos, 1986; McLellan, 1989). In early work, the capitalist system, schools, school knowledge and teachers were all targeted as part of the problem because of their implication in processes of social and cultural reproduction. But such understandings have been tempered as structural analysis took on the problem of agency; as theory encountered ethnography and as the intellectual project of developing a science of history was overtaken by renewed interest in the problems of social integration and disintegration, and the analysis of routinisation and rationalisation. Alongside this theoretical ferment there have been significant shifts in the substantive focus of research, notably an attempt to develop meso-level analyses which might provide a connection between society-centred and classroom and school-centred research. As in sociology, one approach entailed 'Bringing the state back in' (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, 1985).

The trend to analyse the state and education has opened up two kinds of theorising which contribute to an understanding of educational change. Firstly, there is an important tradition of social history/historical sociology research which aims to explain the formation of particular patterns of educational provision. The origins of mass public education and its relationship to industrialisation had been a major debate in this tradition but, more recently, attention has turned to explaining the dynamics of educational change and processes of state, and educational state, formation (eg. Archer, 1979; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1981; Curtis, 1988; Miller and Davey, 1989; Green, 1990).

The second tradition which has bloomed in tandem with renewed social scientific interest in the state and education has focused on policy. Ozga (1987) captured this emerging focus in social approaches to the study of education policy, arguing that 'the time is ripe for the development of policy sociology, rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (Ozga, 1987: 144).

It is hardly surprising that interest in the state and education has grown through the 1980s, given the way governments

have intervened to radically restructure educational provision in so many countries. What is, in some ways, more curious is the way so much research on the state and education has come to focus on policy and shows a tendency to restore the policy formulation - implementation problematic as its basic organising principle (Dale, 1992b). It is curious because this privileging of policy and framing of research, offers only a limited basis for theorising, as opposed to presuming, educational change.

Recent work in policy sociology draws attention to some of the limits of treating policy as a simple topic of research. Ozga (1990), for example, queries research that simply treats policy on an experiential basis and does not link personal experience to broader structures of power in society. Unless the theoretical assumptions which inform analyses of current educational developments are made explicit and debated, she argues, policy comes to be understood in this commonsense approach as simply ad hoc and pluralistic, rather than specifically patterned in particular social conditions. Yet there is good evidence to show that policy is patterned and this patterning is shaped because of its source and formation within particular social organisation and debates (Gewirtz and Ozga, 1990). McPherson and Raab (1988) and Lingard (1993) confirm the specific patterning of education policy by focusing on the particular structures and relationships which constitute states and how these institutional arrangements, and the agency which is enabled within them, shapes policy formulation. Dale (1992a) notes the way policy formulation and implementation is effected by different national contexts. He describes how New Zealand accounts of Rogernomics are presumed to have shaped educational provision but suggests that there has been little detailed investigation of the processes by which the effects of Rogernomics are realised in education, nor why similarly economic rationalist policies in other nation-states have played out with different outcomes.

The first point these critics are making is that an analysis of the state is a necessary part of any study of education policy or educational change. However, I would want to add that the predominant axis of the education - state relation in most policy sociology, that is between the state and schools, is far too limiting a basis for analysis and encourages both commonsense analyses and the slide toward the policy formulation - implementation problematic that, respectively, Ozga (1989) and Dale (1992a) warn of. What counts as 'education' must also be questioned and theorised, and not simply be accepted on a

commonsense basis which, for historical reasons, privileges school education over other institutionalised and non-institutionalised educational practices (Seddon, 1993).

However, while the analysis of the state and education is necessary, it is not a sufficient basis for understanding education policy or educational change. As Dale (1992a) stresses the state and education must be better 'located'. They cannot be divorced from broader, but historically specific, social, discursive and institutional settings (McLennan, 1989). Education and the state are distinct social institutions which need to be studied in their specificity and in their social context. The study of education and the state as institutions (eg. Marsh and Olsen, 1984; Cammack, 1992, Cerny, 1990) provides a way of analysing the distinctive organisation, politics and culture, that is their particular institutional inheritances, which structure agency to give a specific social patterning of practice. The study of the social context entails a consideration of not simply the nation state, but the nation state as a particular relation of state and civil society and in

relation with other nation states in a world system (Wallerstein, 1979; Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1993). Such contextualisation provides a basis for understanding the character and significance of education, the state and education policy relative, and in relation, to other social institutions.

Finally, as Dale (1992b) argues, the slide in policy sociology toward the policy formulation - implementation problematic is inadequate. This is because it encourages either the presumption of fidelity in implementation or an effort to generate more complex theories of implementation which still assume a functional separation and causal relation between policy development and implementation but better account for the failure of faithful implementation. The difficulty is that this framing of policy research presumes a differentiation of functions, the separation of conception and execution, which a wide body of research already shows is not empirically supported. The analysis of education policy therefore needs to be reframed. Dale does not elaborate substantially on the kind of reframing necessary to overcome the constraints of the policy formulation - implementation problematic. However, he suggests a more multidimensional and located view of education and the state which attends to the way enabling and disabling conditions are established within schooling, and the way these conditions intersect with different modes of social regulation based in some combination of hierarchies, markets and networks, to both shape and enforce particular patterns of practice.

The significance of these critiques of policy sociology lie less in the range of topics which are highlighted as requiring research and more in the theoretical and epistemological framing of the study of education policy. Like Ozga (1990), Dale is arguing for an approach to policy sociology which is akin to the redefinition of sociology proposed by Dorothy Smith. Rather than taking education policy as a commonsense phenomena, the nature and effects of which can be investigated, the aim is to treat this 'everyday world as problematic' (Smith, 1987).

This orientation to research does not involve treating the everyday world as a object of study, for this divorces the world of experience from broader social and economic relations. Rather, it involves approaching the everyday world as a source of questions which are investigated by analysing the social organisation and determinations which constitute the everyday world and its questions in particular ways. Fundamental to this way of seeing is the assumption that the phenomena of lived experience are neither transparent nor obvious. As Smith notes:

The everyday world, the world where people are located as they live ... is generated in its varieties by an organization of social relations that originate 'elsewhere'. It is like a dance in which the subject participates or in which she is placed. The 'shapes' taken by the dance and the part she plays in it bring into being the dance as an actual organization of social relations through time. Whether she chooses to play a part or not, or the particular movements she elects in relation to the dance, its emerging and developing forms are those that give shape to what she does. The dance, however, extends beyond the boundaries of her sight. She cannot from where she is recover its form or assess its character or movement. She picks it up as she moves its patterns into her scope of action, and she must be moved by or move with them. The conditions of our action and experience are organized by relations and processes outside them and beyond our power of control. (Smith, 1987:91-2)

Policy, then, is approached as a source of issues, dilemmas

or questions which require investigation within a framework with four distinctive features. Firstly, the world of lived experience is understood to be a social product, something which is formed through social processes and which can be re-formed. Experientially known phenomena are not approached as things which are given and enduring, but as more or less ephemeral social forms which show distinctive patterns of continuity and change over time and which therefore have a particular historical range.

Secondly, the phenomena which make up the world of lived

experience are understood as bearing a structured relationship with one another. Policy, therefore, cannot be adequately understood if it is abstracted from other phenomena because while such abstracted research can give insights into policy as a phenomena, it provides no basis for understanding the significance policy which is given by its particular structuring in relation to other phenomena. The significance of policy today, for instance, arises because of changes in the world economy and state steering capacity in a context which shows a breakdown in a social democratic consensus.

Thirdly, the phenomena of lived experience and their structured interrelationships are understood to be social products whose formation is shaped by a balance of social forces which is both historically specific and changing. This is not to reaffirm a simple economic determinism whereby social relations are reduced to economic relations and reified as a base to a superstructure. Rather, it is to recognise that the forms of social life are produced in the interplay of structural conditions and agency through which praxis is constituted, shaped and constrained by social relations. The formation of particular social forms, such as policy, education, state or economy, are therefore constructed through social processes which are based in both the general and the institutionally specific balance of forces.

Finally, this reframing presumes ontological depth (Bhaskar, 1979), the assumption that the world of lived experience rests upon particular patternings of social relations or generative mechanisms which are not immediately accessible to sense perception but which can be known through their effects. This assumption shifts the onus of investigation away from simply the work of documenting and accounting for the character and effect of particular phenomena, like policy. As well as this, the task of research is to explain the social processes which create particular lived experience and which construct continuity and change in historically specific, structured, social arrangements.

The upshot of these critiques are to press policy sociology away from the study of policy as an end in itself and make it an aspect of a more general analysis of educational continuity and change. This shifts research on policy and the state toward an historical sociology of education and change. The framework for theorising educational change should therefore treat the everyday world of education as problematic, analysing what counts as education in terms of actual educational practices and they way they are selected, organised and distributed in different social and historical settings (Williams, 1965). It should consider the social relations and processes which constitute specific relationships of education, state and society (both national and

global). In such an analysis the practices of policy formulation and implementation would register as one form of the practical politics of education formation and re-formation. Finally, to assess the possibilities for continuity or change, there should be a consideration of the general conditions for education as well as the particular enabling and disabling conditions which

exist and determine practice within education as an institution (ie. the particular institutional inheritances which give rise to a specific institutional organisation, culture and politics), and an assessment of how these general and particular patternings of structure and agency change over time.

This kind of conceptual reframing needs to be elaborated in more detail, however, it provides a preliminary structure for organising the historical case study of continuity and change in the 1930s depression which I present in the next part of the paper.

#### Education in depression: continuity and change, 1929-33

##### The structures of liberal meritocracy

By the late 1920s what counted as 'education' in NSW was a particular selection, organisation and distribution of educational practice which had been established in a liberal and meritocratic institutional and discursive setting. This context, with its particular pattern of enabling and disabling conditions, and the practice which was constituted and constrained by those conditions made up NSW schooling. It was a product of complex social and historical dynamics which were also shaping social life in NSW more generally.

The distinctive features of this system of schooling can be identified by abstracting from more detailed historical data. At this more abstract level of analysis 'liberal meritocratic education' appears as a universal structure which obscured social divisions of wealth, class and race. Gender was, in the main, accepted as a legitimate social division and principle of social organisation. In this system of schooling all children would have access to an educational ladder leading from kindergarten to the university and could enter the race for educational and social success. But this universality existed because a sectional view of what counted as valid and worthwhile education was imposed as the definition appropriate for all. It was possible for clever children from any social background to enter professions which required a university training, but there was a differentiation of schooling for boys and girls and there were heavy odds against upward social mobility. When it occurred it was heralded as evidence of the system's democracy. Social immobility or downward mobility was the lot of most children,

presented not as a consequence of the system, but of individual inability or failure.

The boundaries of 'education' were defined in terms of the educational ladder. It provided a route from the lowliest family environment to the university, that is, an academic route. Children had to participate in this route through the compulsory years of schooling but were free to continue or depart as they wished after primary schooling. The liberal meritocratic system was, therefore, not really concerned with any post-school destination except the university. Schooling was about 'education' defined as academic preparation, not 'training' which was seen to be tied to the short term demands of non-professional employment.

Schooling appeared as an enclave for children, separated from their families and communities, work and welfare. Schools took children from their families and communities, by law, and subjected them to experiences defined and controlled by middle class educational experts, most commonly located in, or working through, State educational bureaucracies. The children entered 'education' as 'individuals', that is decontextualized juvenile units of differentiated ability, ostensibly divorced from the social inequalities beyond. Individuals who consented to run the

academic race, and who were shown to be sufficiently meritorious on measures defined by educational experts, continued their schooling to the university. These were the 'academic' students. All the rest were 'non-academic'; those who did not consent, were without sufficient merit, or those squeezed out by economic or social pressures. In the broad structure of the system, the post-school destination of these students was not an issue. They left school.

Schooling therefore appeared to be an objective process, revealing individual's ability, their 'natural' talent and capacity for hard work. Where local circumstances obstructed this process, the state provided some additional support to facilitate equal opportunity to participate in the race for educational success. Such a commitment to equality of opportunity was a key organising principle. It meant enabling all students' participation in 'education', the climb up the educational ladder. But the hegemony of all things 'academic' shaped the view of learners, educational circumstances and the selection and distribution of knowledge so that the practice of schooling remained in all ways, dualist (Collins, 1992b). The high status 'academic' defined low status opposites -- schools, students, teachers, and curricula -- and in the postcompulsory years the 'academic' reigned supreme. The overwhelming

preoccupation with 'individuals' as 'naturally' differentiated, which was intensified and legitimated by the growth of psychology, deflected attention from the social patterning of this academic non-academic dualism. Individual successes and failures obscured systematic social discrimination on lines of class, gender, race and religion; that 'successful' students were seen primarily as products of private schools, while 'failures' were associated with public schools.

The institutionalisation of liberal meritocratic schooling meant that childrens' growing understanding and increasing capacity for action, and their submission to self and social discipline, were shaped as particular ways of knowing and acting. Alternative ways of knowing and acting were lost from sight, being relegated to other sites of educational practice and understood as informal learning, natural capacities or insignificant leisure activities. The exceptions to this occurred where communities had sufficient power to insert their educational practices within the public system or get them recognized as an alternative acceptable to and legitimated by the State. Private and Catholic systemic schools were able to maintain the culture and traditions of their communities alongside and strategically integrated with the mass system of public education. This ensured that the children of those ruling class and Catholic communities retained their own social opportunities but were also not denied the opportunities accruing to State school students. By contrast, the educational practices of less powerful groups were remaindered and delegitimized. The effect of this pattern of institutionalisation over the years has been to systematically enhance the advantage of whites, Anglo-Saxons, Protestants and boys relative to their counterparts: Aborigines, working class and non-English speaking background children, and girls.

By the late 1920s liberal meritocratic schooling was well established with a particular institutional structure of enabling and disabling conditions but, in 1930, student enrolments exploded. Public funding was reduced and patterns of teacher employment shifted in favour of men. The 1920s liberal meritocratic educational formation was put under intense strain as conditions changed with the depression.

#### The depression

In the late 1920s Australia was subject to a flood of low cost manufactured imports and high levels of investment capital, while the profitability of agriculture and manufacturing decreased. Australia was caught in a 'scissors' of declining export income and increasing foreign debt. In 1925-28, Australia was receiving

43 per cent of British overseas investment, mainly as government securities. In 1907-10 it had been 9 per cent (Cochrane, 1980: 27). Interest repayments and dividends represented 28 per cent of exports (Schedvin, 1970: 72). In 1929 a boom in financial speculation drew capital to the USA. Then the boom collapsed.

The Wall Street crash did not produce the depression. Economic, social and political trends developing through the flat 1920s became the 'depression', a time of widely but unevenly experienced crisis (Brownlee, Gerrard and Trahair, 1976). It was different in degree but not in kind from longer term social dislocations which had been evident since 1907. The expansion of federal tariffs had increased direct investment and productivity increases had encouraged the growth of manufacturing, decreasing unit costs and increasing output per person employed (Hunter, 1963; Forster, 1964). But increased output only aggravated overproduction in a world market glutted with commodities and intensified the problems of realising profits. The crisis of profitability, linked to mechanisation of urban and rural industries, and subsequent over-capacity, led to the displacement of labour, deskilling, short time and intermittent employment (Gollan, 1963; Broomhill, 1978). Through the twenties, unemployment never fell below 7 per cent.

The disruption of unemployment, changing working conditions and the consequent dislocation of family life was compounded by the ascent of conservative political forces which had organised in the face of a perceived threat to power and property underpinned by the Bolshevik revolution (1917) in Russia and the growth of 'Socialism' (Cochrane, 1980). The conservative restoration shifted the balance of political forces in Australia, leading to institutional restructuring and the expansion of autocratic and bureaucratic social regulation. As Fitzpatrick (1969) notes, the twenties was a time of 'democratic decay' and institutional restructuring which enhanced opportunities for some and curtailed them for others.

By 1929 key sectors of Australian industry were in serious crisis. In 1931-32 the value of exports in pastoralism stood at 1913 levels, with mining and quarrying, fisheries and forestry at about half 1913 levels (Commonwealth Statistician, 1928-1939). Manufacturing was also in decline. These patterns of economic slowdown were paralleled by reductions in sectoral employment. Manufacturing showed both the most drastic collapse in employment and the most rapid recovery. In other sectors depressed conditions persisted through the thirties.

With the cessation of public borrowing in 1929, public works stopped and public sector employment collapsed. In 1929 there were 373,400 public sector employees, 14.5 per cent of the total

civilian workforce. By 1932 the figure had dropped by over 60,000 to 11.95 per cent of the workforce (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, 1982: 35). General unemployment increased from 11.1 per cent in 1929 to 19.7 per cent in 1930 and peaked in the second quarter of 1932 at 30 per cent (Commonwealth Statistician, 1939: 74). The 1933 census showed that nine per cent of the unemployed had been out of work for four years or more and 55 per cent for one year or more (Commonwealth Statistician, 1940: 314-5). The rise in unemployment was accompanied by declining union membership, while escalating demands for support seriously taxed

union resources (Louis, 1968). Industrial disputes were defensive and generally failed to prevent reductions in wage rates or changes in conditions (Fitzpatrick, 1969). Above average wage earners also suffered unemployment and the number of bankruptcies in 1928-29 was three times that in 1927 and doubled again in 1930-31. The suicide rate also increased, peaking in 1930 with 55 per cent of male suicides listed as having occupations in commerce and industry (Commonwealth Statistician, 1928-1933)

Social dislocation was aggravated by political activism within and outside parliament. There was electoral change at both federal and State levels. Labor was in conflict; the anti-labour Nationalists were in disarray. Some middle class organisations moved toward formal political organisation. Others, such as the protofascist New Guard, organised as an extra-parliamentary force for the defence of law and order (McQueen, 1984). A wide variety of grass-roots movements also developed over, for example, evictions, work for the dole and food shortages and a range of philanthropic campaigns (Lowenstein, 1978; Wheatly, 1981; Sekules, 1978). Manufacturers argued for tariff reform; primary producers contested it. Financiers insisted on honouring debts and credit worthiness; others saw this as simply selling out the people to the real power holders: bankers and the British (Love, 1984). Some supported industrial arbitration, others attacked it. But most demanded law and order, small government and balanced budgets, seeing the state's deficit budgeting and 'extravagant borrowing' as major causes of crisis.

A variety of solutions were proposed but the most popular was the replacement of sectional politics with a coalition all-party or national non-party government, governing in the national interest, promoting a conservative deflationary policy which could begin to restore conditions for profitability in Australia (Matthews, 1970; Loveday, 1981).

Conservative pressure for deflation mounted and, by 1931,

Labor proposals for reflation or debt repudiation had been defeated. The Arbitration Court reduced all federal awards by 10 per cent and, in the name of 'equality of sacrifice', the federal Labor government accepted the deflationary Premiers' Plan. This cut all adjustable government expenditure by 20 per cent, except pensions which were cut by 12.5 per cent, and increased income and sales tax and primage duty. Australia came off the gold standard, centralising power in the Commonwealth Bank, and there was a sliding deflation against the British pound giving increased currency returns on export earnings and indirect protection for manufacturers (Schedvin, 1970; Cochrane, 1980).

Resistance to deflation persisted most visibly in NSW where Jack Lang, the State Premier, continued to argue for the repudiation of debts. In 1931 the NSW Labor Party withdrew support from the federal Labor government. Federal Labor lost a no confidence motion and the ensuing election, returning an anti-labour coalition government formed by the United Australia Party and the Country Party. In NSW Lang defaulted, but the new coalition federal government did not cover the default. Instead, federal legislation was passed to allow the collection of money from a defaulting state. Lang (1970: 145) notes that widows pensions, child endowment and even the pocket money of students at the agricultural high school, banked by their parents in the name of the Education Department, was seized. In response, Lang slashed public servant salaries, arranged for payment of taxes through the purchase of stamps, and paid salaries in cash from the barricaded doors of the Treasury. As fears of social

disorder mounted in NSW, the New Guard presented themselves as the guardians of law and order and counter to the activities of 'Communists, agitators and disruptors' (Sydney Morning Herald, 22 July 1931). But the crisis was resolved constitutionally when, in May 1932, the representative of the British Crown in NSW, Governor Sir Phillip Game, dismissed Lang for unconstitutional behaviour. Despite fears of disturbances, Lang stepped down and in the election which followed was not returned to office (Robertson, 1980).

In the second quarter of 1932 employment bottomed. A £12.4 million conversion loan was issued in London. In 45 minutes it closed with over-subscriptions of almost £35 million. Employment in textiles increased by 16.5 per cent with small expansions of employment in building and construction, and chemicals. In early 1932 the output of iron and steel increased. The reduction of costs of production, the average 17 per cent decline in wages and falling costs of raw materials, together with the increase in direct and indirect protection, allowed the expansion of manufacturing. 'Recovery' was in the air and manufacturing was

its driving force (Schedvin, 1970).

### Schooling in depression

Schooling was not insulated from these social dynamics. The liberal meritocratic organisation of educational practice came under intense pressure between 1929 and 1932. Cuts in funding and expanding student numbers challenged the existing structures and practices of liberal meritocratic education, creating contradictions in educational provision and generating powerful dynamics for educational change.

The restrictions on loan moneys forced the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to curtail costs. The budget for building activities collapsed from just over L1 million in 1928 to L190, 000 in 1932. Recurrent funding was also reduced by cutting teachers' salaries and by retrenching temporary teachers, predominantly women, and later, married women teachers (Mackinolty, 1979). From 1931 to 1939 teacher numbers, which had grown steadily through the 1920s, plateaued, and the proportion of men to women shifted from 42.7 to 50.8 per cent.

But the declining funds for education were contradicted by growing numbers of students who stayed on at school. The DPI was caught in its own 'scissors' of increased demands and decreasing resources. The Minister's Report (MR) for 1930 paints the picture:

In the year under review the economic depression created particularly difficult problems for the administration. On the one hand rigid economy had, perforce, to be exercised; money commensurate with natural development was not available. On the other hand, lack of employment caused a larger number of pupils to remain at school than has hitherto been the case. Pupil enrolment increased by nearly 10,000; expenditure on accommodation decreased by ú143,000. The position was resolutely faced and every avenue explored to provide additional accommodation without increasing expenditure. Trades Schools were utilised for primary school purposes, and assembly rooms, school residences and weather-sheds were pressed into service as classrooms. (MR, 1931: 1)

The pattern of retention was not uniform across the student population. Public and private school enrolments increased but with particularly large increases in over-14 year old (i.e. postcompulsory) public schooling. Increases in boys retention outstripped that of girls and, overall, retention in the academic

educational route was greater than in the non-academic route, as Figure 1 shows.

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Post-primary enrolments had grown through the interwar years, but the understanding that academic secondary schools offered greater social benefits led to disproportionate demand in comparison to higher elementary schools. Between 1928 and 1931 there was a 45 per cent growth in candidates for the high school entrance examination (from 15409 to 22415 students). The pass rate over the same period was erratic, falling from 74 per cent in 1927 to 51 per cent in 1929, climbing to 71 per cent in 1930 and dropping back to the mid 60 per cent range in 1932 and 1933. But the increased demand for academic schooling did not flow on substantially as increases in Leaving Certificate candidates and university entrants. While the number of students sitting for Leaving Certificate grew steadily to a peak in 1932, there were, in 1931, only 2726 passes (given a pass rate of 69 per cent) with 124 boys and 44 girls entering Sydney University. That is to say, leaving certificate passes only represented 12 per cent, and total university entrants only 0.007 per cent, of the students sitting for high school entrance (MR, various years). Despite the growth in academic secondary school enrolments, the exclusivity of the academic educational route through Leaving Certificate to the University was maintained. Retention, bottled up in post-primary schooling, was released disproportionately to sub-professional clerical and technical training.

The deepening labour market crises of 1929-1932 intensified the challenges to the structures of liberal meritocracy. Increased post-primary retention led to a de facto increase in the school leaving age and significant unmet demand for the academic educational route through high schools. This pattern of seemingly spontaneous retention was encouraged by the NSW government to counter the destabilising effects of youth unemployment. Budget priorities shifted to favour post-primary schooling. Emergency classes were established and arrangements for waiving fees for students facing hardship were instituted in the technical colleges. What counted as 'education' grew and became a less clearly defined enclave of educational practice as the State government extended its work in vocational guidance and counselling and an array of sporting and cultural activities beyond school or school hours.

The over-demand for secondary education and the growing percentage of secondary leavers who did not complete the academic course and take up professional work problematized the character of secondary education; its difference from higher elementary

schooling and, therefore, the distinction between the academic and non-academic educational route through schools of different types. Furthermore, equality of opportunity was compromised when highly performing boys and girls could not enter high school because there was no space and when subsidies and allowances, earmarked to support able students from poor circumstances, were slashed while opportunities for fee paying students in private schools, private business colleges and even the public Teachers' College increased. The pattern of losers were clearly girls, women, the poor and the less able, those students who failed to perform highly in examinations which favoured those with the cultural capital of the test-setters. The winners were the able, those who could pay or could position themselves advantageously in order to gain relative advantage in the race for educational

opportunity and employment.

This shifting pattern of educational provision, with its distinctive structural pattern of winners and losers, was accompanied by growing concern about 'leavers', above all that category of boys who entered academic schooling but failed to complete the full secondary course. Official DPI and other educationists' discourse presented the 'leaver', within an individualist liberal framework, as a problem which could be solved through the reform of educational provision oriented to the presumed needs of students. Conservative counterinterviews of the problem of the 'leaver' were articulated forcefully particularly in 1930 and 1931 (Seddon, 1990). That 'leavers' were a problem was a common assumption but the problem was framed in different terms and debates raged about the appropriate solution. The former stressed curriculum and assessment reform; the latter argued for the retrenchment of free public secondary education through the reimposition of fees. What underpinned this debate was further assumptions about the best means of coordinating social life, through state planning or markets, and the legitimate actors within the public sphere.

Where conservative and liberal views converged, restructuring educational provision was expedited. So, commonly held beliefs about the nature of women's work and their place and life experience contributed to the disproportionate burden of cuts born by women and girls and encouraged an increased emphasis on girl's domestic education. But where conservative and liberal views diverged understandings of the problem and the framing of solutions remained contested, change was less likely and official views retained their legitimacy. For instance, while conservatives pressed for enhanced regulation of schooling through market mechanisms, official discourse simply did not countenance this option. The Minister's Report constantly

affirmed that the DPI was doing a good job under difficult conditions and, indeed, from 1931, that efficiency was increasing.

The timing of this emphasis on efficiency and the excellent work of DPI personnel is, I think, significant. Through 1931 and early 1932 the public debate over education shifted away from questions of educational provision which would solve the problem of the 'leaver' toward an increasingly political attack on teachers. In 1931, a speech by Professor John Anderson from Sydney University, which questioned the shibboleths on which educational provision was based, and the formation of the Educational Workers League which criticised schooling as a form of class oppression, fuelled fears of teacher disloyalty. Given the coincidence of these developments and Premier Lang's resistance to the deflationary Premiers Plan, the wave of hysteria over the breakdown of social order in NSW became focused, in part, on teachers. Very quickly the assumption that some actions by some individual teachers were uneducational, disloyal and dangerous, was generalised to all teachers. These popular fears were publically contested by the Minister for Education and the teachers' union. The Minister's Reports, with their explicit affirmation of support and gratitude to the work being done by education public servants in schools and the bureaucracy, seems to be a further contribution to containing the wave of hysteria.

The sacking of Lang resolved the political crisis in NSW and NSW education. In the second half of 1932 the public debate about education shifted again. On the one hand the debate re-emphasised the question of education reform but in new holistic terms. The social purposes of education began to be explored and

questions about what 'an education for today' should be like were posed. On the other hand, the issue of limited resources for education was readdressed. The Nationalist government which replaced Lang's Labor government in NSW reopened the debate about economy measures but this time offset the strategy of reimposing secondary school fees against a strategy of further reducing recurrent expenditure. Their preferred solution was, from 1932, to retrench married women teachers, a preference which was, perhaps, shaped by the growing popular debate about education reform.

The cumulative effect of these depression challenges to the structures of liberal meritocracy, and the discursive framing of retrenchment and renewal, gave an impetus to educational change. In the years of deep depression, particularly in 1931 and 1932, the pattern of change gave rise to an illiberal meritocracy which

compounded social and educational inequalities rather than supporting equality of opportunity, made schooling increasingly exclusive on the basis of class and gender, and enhanced the social regulatory role of schooling by consolidating the structures for policing students, teachers and the community. This illiberality was not just a consequence of the unequal effects of cuts, discriminatory reforms and a massively intensified competitive race for educational advantage. Its illiberal character also appears to have been driven by positive fears of political disorder and social breakdown which were underpinned by the Lang crisis. The 'leaver' and the 'teacher' were the images of unease and these representations of dangerous forces also framed reforms which seemed to be actively oriented to the containment of those apparent threats. While the maintenance of social order has long been a function of State institutions and personnel, and a function which has received community support, in the depression years, such social regulation slid beyond the conventional levels toward illiberal measures including restrictions on public debate and freedom to speak and criticize.

In this period of deep depression, education in NSW can be seen as being at a crossroads. The structural and discursive challenges to the existing social organisation of educational practice problematized what counted as 'education'. The traditional separation of education from social life was eroded. What constituted legitimate educational activity, and even a legitimate teacher, became debateable and fundamental questions were posed about the social purposes and appropriate practices of schooling. Yet, by the mid-1930s, the education reform movement was fuelling not a transformation, but a modernized, social democratic restoration of liberal meritocracy which affirmed official liberal notions of educational provision oriented to students' individual needs.

It was as if the illiberal pattern of educational provision which had emerged in the years of deep depression had transgressed some kind of moral limit, mobilising a range of people -- educationists, parents and teachers -- in the practical politics of reform. The questioning of existing education was radical in the sense that it drew on a range of radical critiques of schooling, including the themes that Anderson had raised in 1931, and consolidated relationships between radical and more mainstream, in many cases highly respected, liberal educators. But the questioning was framed by conventional liberal assumptions about the individual, democracy and meritocracy. These assumptions were consistent with the existing structures of liberal meritocratic education. So while the problems of a modern education were restated in new and radical terms, the proposed solutions to these new problems were framed by old

conceptions. Radical proposals, to roll back state-provided education in favour of user-pays secondary schooling or to reduce curriculum bias and encourage a more active political education through the schools, were sidelined or gutted in reforms which extended access and enhanced choice and diversity within common schools organised on the basis of age and cultural capital. This pattern of continuity and discontinuity modified the practice, but not the fundamental structures, of liberal meritocratic education.

#### Theorising educational change

The historical data presented in the case study provides a basis for a number of more abstract conclusions to be drawn about the processes of educational change. These insights offer a tentative framework for a systematic theory of education which, I would suggest, are not tied specifically to the conditions of the 1930s in NSW but, within limits, can be generalized across historical and social settings.

The first conclusion from the case study is that education is not an unchanging, durable phenomena or a simple, commonsense thing which is knowable simply on a here and now experiential basis. Instead, education appears ephemeral. It changes over times and in socially patterned ways. These historical data underline the limits and reductionism of empiricist conceptions of education which accept the world of lived experience in a taken-for-granted way.

An adequate understanding of education therefore involves examining what counts as 'education' at particular historical moments and understanding the social processes which effect its formation and reformation. This view entails the recognition that, firstly, education is a social product. It is a specific social organisation and management of educational practice -- that is, the practices of teaching and learning and the practices which enable and disable those processes of teachers' and students' work. Secondly, education as a social product is made and remade over time in particular social, historical and geographical conditions through practices which are patterned by social relations of class, gender and race. Thirdly, the concept of 'education' is also a social product which is made and remade through distinct and socially embedded practices of representation. Commonsense conceptions of education are not unproblematic, authentic representations of particular social organisations of educational practice. Rather they are constructed representations which actively present a particular and delimited region of social practice as 'education' and which have distinctive social effects. Education, in its concrete

organisation and in its abstract representation, is, therefore, socially patterned, being constituted, shaped and constrained by social relations rooted in the economic and political structure of the society.

As the historical analysis suggests, the construction of education takes place in historically specific social conditions which are constituted by broad social structures and institutional and discursive settings. These conditions embody contradictions and generate conflict, both structural antagonisms and more overt, voluntaristic, struggles and debates. The mobilisations which develop out of these social conditions and conflicts provide a dynamic for change. Change, therefore, rests ultimately on human agency materialized as both specifically constituted and changing social conditions, and as explicit human practice. The formation of 'education' as a historically specific socially organized region of educational practice occurs in the interplay of structure and agency, between structural

conditions and social processes. The analysis of continuity and change therefore requires the study of education in a broad context -- which needs to address both changing forms and character of the state and civil society within nation states, and within the world system of states and societies.

But this analysis of the social context cannot be seen as a simple one-way influence of extra-educational dynamics on the practices of education. Education, like the state, economy, civil society and family, are social institutions which are formed in particular ways. These institutions have distinctive structures, or institutional inheritances, which enable and disable practice. Extra-educational dynamics are not simply imposed in education but are mediated through the structures of education and other social institutions, being replayed and patterned by institutionally situated political processes which are shaped by specifically located structural and discursive institutional inheritances.

'Change' is another complicated notion which, all too often, is understood reductively in simple commonsense terms on an experiential basis. In the case study, by contrast, 'change', like its opposite 'continuity', appears as a social product which is actively made and remade over time. The analysis of change, therefore, requires attention to the social conditions and processes which create change, as well as careful investigation of what counts as 'change' in terms of the continuities and discontinuities in social organisation and practice. The dynamic for change does not appear as something which is individually authored. Rather it arises out of social contradictions and

conflict and is realized, within the limits of structural and discursive determinants, both within education and the society at large. These determinants do not simply constrain individual agency. Rather, they constitute the social conditions and processes which give rise to and structure the dynamic for change and its agents in particular ways, and, through this constitutive process, they generate possibilities for, and real limits on, change. The extent of change is therefore linked to both the structural and discursive framing and the extent to which this can be overturned at any moment.

As the case study shows, liberal meritocracy is challenged by economic and social crisis of the kind we see in the late 1920s. In this period, young peoples' unemployment makes the transition from school to work less straight forward than in more affluent times and schools provide a solution for both the young and for governments. The result is a challenge of retention which arises because more young people choose to return to school as an alternative to unemployment and because governments use schools in a population management strategy, keeping youth off the streets and preparing them for post-school life. But the challenge of retention can be accommodated within the dualist academic non-academic organisation of liberal meritocracy. It leads to a restructuring of school content and organisation, but it does not fundamentally change liberal meritocracy itself.

What does seem to challenge liberal meritocracy more fundamentally is the kind of compounded economic, social and political crisis which occurred in the depression, in which the lived experience of schooling was problematized because the rhetoric and principles of liberal meritocracy clearly did not match its practice. Schooling was restructured as a consequence of the conscious and unconscious mobilisations and politics which arose as that social institution was buffeted by external and internal pressures and demands, and as people struggled to understand the obviously sectional practices of a purportedly

ameliorative education system and an ostensibly neutral state. The 'environment' became a key to reconciling these contradictions because it was widely recognized as a significant influence on educational practice and student performance. The notion of 'environmental determination' became an accepted explanation in accounting for educational and institutional outcomes. It was a central theme in much liberal educational discourse but it seemed radical because it questioned the meritocratic conception of innate talent and converged with socialist notions of social or class determination. In the depression then, institutions behaved contrary to expectations, the 'environment' impinged and, experiencing those dynamics,

people developed a sensitivity to practices and dynamics beyond the usual frames of action. This awareness of environmental pressures, this contextualism, was a way of seeing the world which recognized that beyond each institution and practice there were other regions of influence. It contributed to the education reform dynamic because it encouraged people to question and modify their social and educational understandings and practices. This conceptual and practical overturning appeared as a radicalisation of teachers, an intensification of educational debate and the mobilisation of a reform movement. But, ultimately, what emerged from this social dynamic for change was not a transformation of liberal meritocracy which revolutionized its fundamental structures, but a modernising restoration which effected change within the structures of liberal meritocratic education. Three dynamics appear to facilitate this outcome.

Firstly, what lay at the heart of these challenges to liberal meritocracy were fundamental questions about the purposes and parameters of education as a distinct region of practice, its internal social relationships, and its links and separations from other realms of social practice. Yet the resolution of these debates never comes. Instead, the answers to these fundamental questions were largely assumed on a commonsense experiential basis which was framed by the practice of liberal meritocracy itself. The debate then centred on how to organize educational practice: how to create curricular routes, how to assess according to different student's individual needs and abilities, how to manage students' existence within and between distinct social institutions of family, school, work and welfare. What was not questioned, except by marginalized radical critics, were the liberal meritocratic assumptions and conceptions upon which these 'how' questions were premised; that, for example, individualism, notions of unilinear ability and intelligence (albeit environmentally influenced), the understanding of needs in terms of prevocational preparation and interpersonal support, and the separation of an abstracted idealized education from other aspects of social life, may not be adequate premises for educational reform. What was debated was the rationality of means not the rationality of ends.

Secondly, not questioning the assumptions and categories of experience-based commonsense depends upon a particular way of knowing and acting in the world which assumes that experience is an acceptable and unproblematic basis for understanding. Practice therefore rests upon experience, rather than building upon experience which is subjected to intellectual work (i.e., theory). The flaw lies in opposing theory and practice, rather than recognising that theory (i.e., intellectually processed experience) is opposed to experience (i.e., unprocessed commonsense thinking) because the best informed practice depends

not on unreflective commonsense, but on an understanding of how commonsense is constituted (Nemitz, 1988). Professor John Anderson was quite clear about these issues. He argued that education should enable people to critique commonsense as a basis

for action in a democratic society. But for this he was branded a heretic. Commonsense in the 1930s was given by liberal meritocracy, and ideologies which presented balancing budgets and credit worthiness as the business of responsible government, not by their critique. Questioning was therefore limited to how to deal with the problems thrown up by social change and how to explain the misbehaviour of liberal meritocracy. Recognising the influence of the environment was a major step. In any case, as John Anderson found, questioning was dangerous.

Finally, the sheer political limits on questioning militates against substantial change. These limits are partly epistemological but they are also empirically and affectively based in both the regulation and disciplining of questioners, and the insecurity of the times and fears of the unknown. Those who did question lived experience, commonsense categories of understanding, and ways of seeing were attacked as aliens. The substance of their case was less significant than the simple act of questioning for this marked disloyalty, a threat. The suppression of public debate meant that questions were not aired, commonsense was not problematized as a basis for reform. While the broader context of schooling, the 'external realm' of the labour market, economy and polity, was seen to be significant, the institutional and discursive context of liberal meritocracy itself was not questioned. The result was a modernising restoration, a reorganisation of liberal meritocracy in line with the external demands of modern times, instead of being based upon an encompassing re-formation of both social and educational organisation and practice which extends beyond institutional realities to effect a reconstruction of meaning, understanding and culture.

#### Notes

1. There were differences in the regulation of publically-funded public schooling and privately-funded private schooling. Control of public schools was much more extensive. The regulation of private schools was effected through school registration and indirectly through state syllabuses and public examinations.
2. From 1932 high respected and respectable educators like Alexander Mackie, the Principal of Sydney Teachers College, and James Darling, the Principal of Geelong Grammar, took a high public profile in the debate about education reform (eg. Gronn, \*\*\*). The standing of these men meant that their comments were

quickly picked up by the press.

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