Australian Schooling — The Present Moment - Nineteen Ninety

By Jean Blackburn

Governments in Australia, as in most comparable countries, are now committed to the development of a better educated population and to new ways of managing public school systems. These new ways of managing combine strengthened central policy direction with devolved responsibility for the operation of schools. The commitment to a better educated population is for the most part economically motivated, resting on the assumption that this is a key element in raised productivity. It also, however, necessarily has a strong social justice component as it seeks to widen educational success beyond those social groups in which it traditionally has been high. Newly developing directions in the operation of public school systems clearly reflect pressures to ensure value for taxpayers' money. But they also have important educational justifications which cannot be overlooked.

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In these few remarks I shall comment briefly on each of these elements of the present moment in Australian schooling. The effective extension of universal schooling to levels higher than have ever been achieved in our history may be seen as the latest step in the long revolution towards a more equally educated population. Once, the opportunity of learning to read was rationed according to social origins. Then, for reasons involving social control and for economic reasons not unlike those presently operating, compulsory schooling established that as a universal right. As secondary schooling became universal after the 1939-45 war, the learning opportunities of the mass of students continued to be circumscribed. New ways of imposing limits on educability were found in tests purporting scientifically to measure each individual's capacity for success in school learning. These restricted opportunities to continue in school beyond the limits of compulsion. Test scores were relatively stable over time, so the capacities they claimed to measure were thought to be innate, or early determined. As the tests became discredited, they were largely replaced at primary level by notions of 'readiness' to engage with more advanced tasks with similar effects. Both approaches provided a basis for justifying widely divergent achievements over the compulsory years, progressively eliminating a higher proportion of students from the possibility of engaging successfully with the next level of learning.

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Efforts to ensure that the maximum possible number of students have real possibilities of engaging successfully with progressively more complex learning tasks over the compulsory years are major features of present developments. These efforts include the consolidation of access skills in literacy and mathematics over the full span of schooling and the identification of special help for students needing it if they are to continue successfully in learning. In other words, they seek at each compulsory stage, to reduce the acceptable range of achievement in essential learnings by reducing disqualifyingly low achievements, and to encourage teachers and schools to pursue this as a priority in their operations. Standardised testing is one way of directing attention along these lines. It is however, an imperfect and blunt instrument, particularly if used improperly to compare the performance of teachers and schools working in very different conditions and facing challenges of a qualitatively different order. *More sophisticated tests codifying teachers' experience in assessing learning and ranking tasks in order of difficulty are being developed.* These give a guide to teachers about progress being made and about where special effort is needed. They also give a context of achievement wider than their own student group with which they can compare performance without destructive public comparisons. While it is important to insist that readily measurable achievements are only one part of the complex tasks of schools, the added prominence being given to them is welcome to the degree that it assists more equal success in learning. Additionally, *the characteristics of effective schools are now reasonably well established giving further useful guides to improving learning in them.*

The children of lower income and less well educated parents have historically predominated among low achievers and early school leavers. Any serious commitment to a better educated population must give priority in funding and effort to schools where such students are most heavily concentrated. Gross social inequalities in outcomes from schooling persist, and their effects are becoming more serious. The proportion of students staying to complete full secondary schooling has doubled over the last decade, but such developments make the one third of a generation who do not do so the more vulnerable. Such students are overwhelmingly found in public and low fee private schools in identifiable localities. The Disadvantaged Schools Program was established in 1974 to improve such schools as communities and in

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terms of learning outcomes. Extra funds provided through it were initially small and have not increased on real terms since. The program is now, however, to be strengthened to support the development of academic literacy at junior secondary level. But it must be said that the scale of the effort it represents, even with this extension, is alarmingly small. This is clear when the unequal private resources supporting children's learning and public subsidies to high fee non-government schools are placed beside it. If social inequalities in learning outcomes are to be significantly reduced, much more is needed.

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Changes taking place in the upper secondary school depend for their success on how well continuing access to learning is consolidated over the preceding years. The overall Australian scene is too complex to describe here, but it may be said that present changes everywhere go beyond attempts to 'cope' with so-called 'non-academic' students previously excluded lower down the line. They do not yet fully accept that at post compulsory levels all education has a significant vocational element. But they do emphasise a wider variety of excellence than that further developed through higher education, and acknowledge the very wide range of opportunities now present there. They also assert that professional preparation is not the only justification for continuing to extend the cultural and intellectual development of students, and typically reduce highly specialised school preparation for particular university courses in favour of a broader education for students at this level. Certificates of graduation from secondary school have acquired broader significance in their own right and provide pathways into a wider range of post-school futures. In opposing an outcome which does not rank all students and all studies along a continuim convenient for university selection, some older universities are effectively resisting the development of a better educated population.

Other developments of note combine a more centralised patterning of school curricular content with a devolution of powers to public schools, usually but not universally, governed by representative councils. More extreme proposals in this regard follow arrangements now operating in N.Z. and the U.K. allocating budgets to schools and leaving their management to them within centrally prescribed guidelines. Such proposals have not as yet been implemented in any Australian State. While it is difficult to evaluate them in the absence of specifics, it is important to be aware of their possible implications in increasing inequalities among public schools; in fragmenting political pressures for improvement; and in a retreat from that common social citizenship which Australian public systems, with all their faults, continue to keep alive. The latter applies even in a situation where those assisted to leave them and financially able to do so are taking full advantage of the support which public policies give their 'choice'.

Putting these more extreme proposals aside as an arena of possible future contest, *there are good grounds for supporting both national and system level attempts to emphasise curricular commonalities across schools. This should occur without attempting to specify precise curricular content through which they should be pursued or more than general principles in the processes advancing them.* Because I believe that what happens in schools is legitimately the business of the whole society and not just the private business of those associated in particular schools, whether public or private, I can only welcome such moves. One can be (as I certainly am) critical of the limited participation which has accompanied their development in some states and at national level, while still being supportive in principle.

Jean Blackburn, April 1990