

Note: This is a DRAFT paper written as background material for the Public Purposes ARC project.

### **LINK 3b: Public education and public purposes: A historical perspective.**

Public schooling in Australia has typically been associated with the principles of *'free, compulsory and secular'*. Although these principles have done much to shape the institutions of state education as we know them, they tell us little about public purposes of schooling. An examination of such documents as the Adelaide Declaration, state education acts and education department websites is not greatly revealing on this question. The documents are loquacious on the nature of the curriculum, and tell us something about the rights of students and parents, but do little to explain why government invests so heavily in education and for what public or common ends.

Public purposes essentially are historical expressions. Broadly there have been two broad historical movements that have shaped what has become public schooling in Australia. The first has been the gradual processes of government or state funding of education, which began in the Australian colonies at a relatively early stage, but which accelerated during the economic boom period initiated by the gold rushes of the 1850s. The second has been the processes of 'systematisation' of schooling. Systemisation normally followed and accelerated the processes of funding and brought regulations and other measures to standardise aspects of schooling, including its universalisation through compulsion.

The processes of systematisation began in most European and the Australasian countries in the 1870s. Some countries such as Australia advanced more quickly than others. However, the relative concurrence of the emergence of school systems suggests some common historical purposes.

There are different theories about the reasons for the emergence of school systems. They include correspondence theories that argue that schooling reflected the emergence of the new factory systems and the need for compliant labour with some basic skills. A more substantial set of the theories is based upon 'conflict' theory and argues that the growth of education systems was through the aspirations of competing social groups. Under these conditions of growth governments were forced to intervene in order to rationalise the demands upon them for funding and to address the poor quality and inefficiency of various types of private and church schools.

Another set of theories co-locates the formative processes of school systems within the formative processes of liberal democracies. So it has been argued that public school systems formed in order to provide a foundation of elementary knowledge and skills and a common set of values that was needed to underpin the new liberal democratic government systems. They had a key role in nation building.

These theories are complicated by the fact that countries have different forms of public education system. While most OECD countries include church schools the relationship between these schools and government owned schools vary. As well, the broad governance structure of school systems also varies across countries.

In Australia public education has been embodied in the state school systems, run by the central education departments and symbolised in the principles of 'free,

compulsory and secular'. The construct of public education, and the subsequent evolution of a publicly funded but unaccountable private sector, is unique amongst OECD countries. This raises the question of why Australia has developed these unique arrangements? Four sets of reasons are suggested.

First was the denominational issue. The symbolic principles of free, compulsory and secular education are historically associated with the education acts passed in the colonial parliaments in the 1870s. These acts to varying extents followed periods of relatively turbulent relationships between the colonial governments and the denominational schools. To a large extent the acts with their foundations of secular education represented a political solution to the denominational tensions that were prominent across Australian society and government at the time, and were to remain so until the post World War II era.

Effectively the acts represented a failure to reach a settlement with the Catholic sector. The Catholic community at the time was essentially Irish in its background and its institutions, and its sense of community was reinforced by its status as the core of the new industrial working class and its association with the Australian Labor Party. The interactions of politics, church and social class meant that there was little appetite on the part of government or the Church for the types of settlements that typically allowed church schools to be incorporated into the public systems across Europe and the UK. Thus the Catholic Church maintained and built its own school system.

A second is the characteristics of Australian nationalism. Despite its radical politics at the time the Australian colonies retained a highly dependant form of nationalism. Nationalism was essentially tied to Britain, economically, strategically and culturally. Thus the typical purpose of public school systems in passing on and strengthening a national culture was weak in Australia.

A third set of factors has been the characteristics of secondary education in Australia. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century secondary education was seen within the Australian polity as a private affair. This was accepted by most of the community and especially the middle classes in the large Australian capital cities. The major exception was New South Wales, and here a highly meritocratic form of public secondary education took root.

Finally there is centralism which has been a defining character of Australia public school systems. Centralism was inherited from the colonial era where the community developed an early dependence upon the state in the context of the harsh environment and the origins of the state administrations in the form of jails. Unlike the European countries the role of the central education authorities was not mediated by the demands and influences of a strong and well established civil society, and especially the incorporation of church schools within the public sector.

While most of these factors have weakened they all have been carried through into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, to some degree. Their influence upon the concept of public education also has been protected by federalism, which has diluted the impact of national issues and symbols upon the concept of public education and its public purposes.

Here there is a useful contrast with New Zealand (NZ) which shared some, although not all, of the historical factors that shaped public education in Australia. As a consequence the church schools also had not been incorporated in the public system

in NZ. In both countries into the 1970s the Catholic schools faced a crisis with the decline in their teaching orders and their low financial base limited their capacity to pay lay teachers.

In NZ the crisis precipitated a settlement that saw the partial incorporation of Catholic schools within the public system. The crisis for Catholic schools in Australia and was expressed in the effective strike of the Catholic schools in Goulbourn in NSW. It precipitated the Commonwealth funding regime through the 1974 Karmel Report and its needs based funding principle.

A settlement of the New Zealand type was not possible in Australia for two reasons. First the resistance within the government school sectors would have been substantial. The government school organisations held firmly to the institutional form of public education and would have resisted any attempt to incorporate church schools and more decentralised governance. Second, the Catholic Church would have resisted a full incorporation into the highly centralised state systems.

The consequences of the particular history of public education in Australia, and especially the failure of a settlement between the state and the church schools have been several and severe. First it has helped to define an institutional form of public education where the principles of 'free, compulsory and secular' fail to articulate any public purpose. Second the consequential vacuum has allowed the 'principle' of private purpose to substitute the public purpose within the Australian polity.

The symptoms of this are manifest. The most obvious is the political leverage of the most elite private schools and the political leverage the Prime Minister can gain by stating the government schools lack values. More subtle has been the capacity of the small number elite private schools to manipulate the public ideology and positioning of the non-government school sector in their favour. The image of choice and private gain is not representative of the principles and purpose of the large number of low fee church schools in Australia, which arguably should have more in common with the government schools.

The particular history of Australian education and the weakness of public educational purposes within the Australian polity first made the government school sector prone to managerialism. Subsequently, it has been vulnerable to market ideologies, and it is no accident that Australia has spawned some of the more sophisticated literature on the benefits of school autonomy and self governance of schools.

Through the 1990s, in particular, these arguments helped to underpin the ebbing of the principle of educational need and the associated funding regime. More recently there has been a spate of literature that denies the impact of students' background on educational outcomes and locates the quality of teaching as the dominant variable in students' outcomes. This is in the face of the observable tendency for Australian schooling to become more selective, which at the secondary level is being accelerated by some state governments.

The quest to locate and reach a broad national settlement on the public purposes of schooling, therefore, is important. Without some clarity and consensus there will be no platform upon which to build and protect the social ideals of public schooling in Australia.

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