

Undemocratic Schooling

A book by Richard Teese and John Polesel

Synopsis

Undemocratic Schooling is a study of how mass secondary in Australia fails the tests of equity and quality. Today most young people complete school, but they do so under terms and conditions laid down in the past. The demographic revolution in Australian secondary education has been arrested by the inherited structures of an academic curriculum—designed to select an elite—and selective schools, built to train the elite. *Undemocratic Schooling* shows how the curriculum—the centrepiece of mass secondary education—works as a machine of social selection. Kept in place by the power of traditional universities, it provides the framework for the most well-educated families to exploit their economic and cultural resources to excel over newer populations. As economic dependence on secondary school has widened, the discriminating power of the academic curriculum has grown more important and access to selective schools more crucial. Maintaining the conservative intellectual nature of the curriculum is a deeply embedded political objective as is the accumulation of resources in selective schools to control access to the curriculum.

Despite more demanding standards and growing inequalities in provision, mass secondary schooling has succeeded in broadening participation in some areas of the curriculum. Contrary to popular belief, mathematics and the sciences have a bigger place in the cultural lives of young people than ever before. The social sciences, on the other hand, have been casualties of mass secondary education, again contrary to popular belief. Today only a small minority of young people in the final year of school study economic, social and political institutions. Moreover those who do tend to be drawn from better-off families. Their intellectual training in schools looks forward to future roles as leaders, while the vocational training received by young people from poorer backgrounds anticipates dependent and vulnerable roles as workers. The study of history has been another casualty of mass secondary schooling. Shrinking enrolments have only tended to sharpen academic and social divisions in what history is studied. High achievers, who come mainly from professional and managerial families, take European or ancient histories, leaving Australian history to the low-achieving plebs.

From considering the curriculum as a translator of social power, *Undemocratic Schooling* turns to the results of school. Though retention is very high, many young people drop out of school. There are regions in Australia in which nearly every second boy leaves school without any recognized qualification. Who are the drop-outs and why do they quit? Why is there a social pattern in early leaving and what happens to drop-outs? Finishing school has become an economic imperative. This is not because it means better jobs than those that early leavers get. In fact many graduates of secondary school are over-qualified for the unskilled and often part-time work that they find. Today the senior certificate is not a passport to the office jobs, career structures and employment security that it was once was. Its economic importance lies in its being a bridge to tertiary education. But who manages to cross this bridge? Again it is the curriculum and relative achievement in it that determine who crosses over into university or TAFE. Though we have a mass secondary school system,

we have neither a mass nor a democratic system of higher education. Only young people from socially advantaged families enter university in a majority of cases. University continues to be foreign to most young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, despite the fact that they study a curriculum largely defined as preparation for university and that the majority actually aspire to higher education. TAFE, for its part, is rejected by most young people. This is despite the valuable employment and career outcomes it provides. Why is TAFE a sector of second-choice when it could shield so many young people from the economic and cultural impact of low achievement?

Undemocratic Schooling considers major lines of reform in the final section of the book. Can we improve the way mass secondary schooling works through more effective management of individual schools and greater autonomy? Does the solution to inequality lie in enlarging the curriculum, for example through more vocational studies? Both these approaches are viewed as only partial and inadequate responses to the essential issue—how to build equity on the basis of quality. Making the curriculum more accessible is the first requirement. This calls for greater transparency in design, teaching and assessment—a continuous cycle of monitoring, evaluation and professional development in which the quality of learning and teaching at the most vulnerable sites in the school system becomes central. A return to the principle of positive discrimination and needs-based funding is also essential. Reforming the curriculum without greatly improving the conditions under which it is delivered in disadvantaged communities is pointless. Tackling inequality on these two fronts needs support through other reforms as well. The vertical pressure exerted by universities on the school curriculum to make it work as an instrument of selection can be relieved if universities reform their archaic mass teaching practices—if they rely less on recruiting students adapted to exams and more on good quality teaching for a mass of students. Pedagogically stronger, they could afford to be more democratic in their intakes. They could build their prestige, not on selecting the best students to endure the worst teaching, but choosing the weakest students for the best teaching.

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"Undemocratic Schooling" is available from Melbourne University Publishing or Readings. Richard Teese's last book, 'Academic Success and Scholastic Power', is also available.