

**Education Heresies**  
**Systems Failure. Social Inclusion as Remedy**  
**Or**  
**Why Global Policies Fail Disengaged Young People at the Local Level**

Susan Groundwater-Smith  
Honorary Professor  
Faculty of Education and Social Work

October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011

*The Heresies:*

1. *That global policies regarding school retention fail disengaged young people at the local level; and*
2. *That for some young, disengaged and marginalised students schools are not the solution, but may be the problem.*

School retention rates appear to have an iconic status in the global world. This presentation will discuss the failure of global educational governance as an economic remedy specifically in relation to the raising of the school leaving age in Australia. It will argue that global policy-making for economic competitiveness not only “Sidelines the social purposes of education” (Ball, 2001) and is designed to exercise control over the education process but also fails to recognise the particularity of the local. To make the case two threads will be pursued, the first that the research on the returns for schooling per se, argued for by organisations such as the OECD is dogged by methodological and data problems that mean that robust results that can reliably inform education policy are unlikely to identify a common return to schooling; the second thread will draw attention to the need to identify heterogeneity in returns, particularly with reference to those young people who are currently disengaged and reluctant learners. It will draw attention to the work of Dockery (2005) who has found compulsion is adverse for non-academically able children and if it is the national desire to provide an inclusive schooling for all, up to the age of 17 years, then pathways and pedagogical practices for those young people who are expressing resistance and alienation will need to both change and be appropriately resourced.

**Economic Returns from Schooling – a flawed narrative**

There is a narrative abroad that keeping young people in school or in work related training for longer periods of time will contribute both to their own economic benefit as well as that of the nation. It is a narrative that finds its principal author in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). On its homepage the OECD describes its formation and function thus:

The OECD vocation has been to build strong economies in its member countries,

improve efficiency, hone market systems, expand free trade and contribute to development in industrialised as well as developing countries.

After more than four decades, the OECD is moving beyond a focus on its own countries and is setting its analytical sights on those countries - today nearly the whole world - that embrace the market economy. The Organisation is, for example, putting the benefit of its accumulated experience to the service of emerging market economies, particularly in the countries that are making their transition from centrally-planned to capitalist systems. And it is engaging in increasingly detailed policy dialogue with dynamic economies in Asia and Latin America.

But its scope is changing in other ways too. The matrix is moving from consideration of each policy area within each member country to analysis of how various policy areas interact with each other, across countries and even beyond the OECD area. How social policy affects the way economies operate, for example. Or how globalisation will change the world's economies by opening new perspectives for growth, or perhaps trigger resistance manifested in protectionism.

As it opens to many new contacts around the world, the OECD will broaden its scope, looking ahead to a post-industrial age in which it aims to tightly weave OECD economies into a yet more prosperous and increasingly knowledge-based world economy.

Its mission, then, is to promote policies and practices that will contribute to a globalised world economy, including education policies, as espoused through its Directorate for Education. As the Secretary General put it "education is a priority for OECD Member countries and the OECD is playing an increasingly important role in this field. Society's most important investment is in the education of its people". A major strategic direction has been in relation to developing procedures that will allow for international comparative testing, namely the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Less discussed is the organisation's advocacy for student retention within school systems. It has argued that keeping young people at school longer will be a means of developing and enhancing their core skills but fails to acknowledge that for some young people, for whom school may be an anathema, this retention may in fact delay their opportunity to engage in skill acquisition. In its report *Jobs for Youth* (OECD 2009) it was argued

The economic downturn (in Australia) may also represent an opportunity to address one of the country's long-run challenges: improving human capital attainment, particularly at the lower end of the educational distribution. Australia is indeed characterised by a relatively low retention rate in education beyond age 16, as compared with many other OECD countries. Hence, too many youths still lack the basic skills needed to embark on a successful long-term career in the labour market. But one side-effect of the current economic slowdown is that it will probably result in more young people being *a priori* inclined to stay longer in education or undertake advanced studies rather than look for work.

Rizvi & Lingard (2010)<sup>1</sup> draw upon Bourdieu's thesis that policy makes a claim to the universal (the privilege of the state and the bureaucratic field) whereas the classroom is always specific, contingent and idiosyncratic, thus creating a significant epistemological gap between policy and practice. They remind us that policy proposals circulated by the OECD are largely couched in neo-liberal imaginary and that they:

reduce the policy autonomy that nation-states possess to set their own policy priorities... While conventions are supposedly entered into voluntarily, there is often a great deal of pressure on countries to conform to particular ideologies. In recent years, almost all conventions have been framed in ways that make them consistent with market principles located within the social imaginary of neoliberalism. (p.39)

Neoliberalism with its emphasis upon efficiency and international competitiveness is a force perceived to contribute to the economic health of the nation. It leads, inexorably, to state control of the ways in which educational enterprises may function, presumably to the benefit of the state. It is seen that what is good for the state is good for the state's citizens. Marginson (2006:207) has argued that:

Neoliberalism has little warmth or generosity about it; it is considerably less attractive than the notion of equality of educational opportunity. Still, it has secured a blanketing presence in government and media discourse, and it has a superficial discursive fit with the desires for commodified consumption now central to daily life. It seems to cut off the potential for political and social alternatives at every turn.

Paradoxically, it can be claimed that a driver for neoliberalism in the field of education is towards small decentralized government and individual choice while simultaneously reinscribing new forms of regulation and control. "In short such reforms (as raising the school leaving age) herald new problematics for government and pose new agendas for management that ultimately require extensive forms of governing practices" (Hodgson 2011:117).

It is then this particular neoliberal discourse that has informed the narrative that there are positive economic returns to be had from ensuring that young people stay in school through the mechanism of introducing a higher school leaving age<sup>2</sup>. A narrative that when challenged reveals itself to be seriously flawed.

For what are the actual returns and whom do they benefit? Trostel, Walker & Woolley (2002) in their examination of economic returns to schooling across 28

---

<sup>1</sup> This section draws upon both the publication and also personal correspondence with Bob Lingard.

<sup>2</sup> Albeit voiced by the NSW Government as "From January 2010 this (raising the school leaving age from 15 to 17) means that all students in the state have to finish Year 10 and then continue in education and training, be in full time work, or a combination of education/training and employment until the age of 17". The policy is similarly described in WA (see Hodgson, 2011:116)

countries found that the average rate of return is 5%, suggesting that education is a good investment and that there is a positive relationship between the education of a working individual and his or her subsequent earnings and productivity – a seductive argument. But should these returns to schooling be attributable to the years spent in school or to the abilities of those being measured and do they sufficiently account for heterogeneity in the school population and thus a corresponding heterogeneity in returns? And do they take account of local contexts and conditions?

Dockery's compelling report (Dockery, 2005) seeks to assess the benefits of additional years of schooling for those Australian young people who may not be well suited to further education. He argues that policies around increased retention are based upon the superior outcomes for those completing schooling relative to those who leave early. Among his findings he suggested that the expected return to additional years of schooling is not constant but increases with the ability or academic inclination of the individual. "It seems dangerous to paint all young people with the same brush and surely there are some young people who are simply not well suited to the schooling environment, either in terms of their individual preferences or in terms of the benefits that they can expect to gain" (p.39). He questions from a policy perspective:

that there is sufficient empirical evidence to support mandated increases in the level of schooling ...Heterogeneity in the returns to schooling exist because individuals are heterogeneous. The objective of policy should be to ensure that there are *alternative pathways and institutional arrangements available to meet the varying needs, abilities and preferences of young people and to make available the information that they require to make informed decisions on what is optimal for them*<sup>3</sup>. (p.42)

Dockery's findings are symptomatic of the difficulties and challenges that dog the literature on returns from schooling *per se* and the fact that if everyone completes the full complement of school years then it will lose its positional good. Seemingly, policies that suggest that it is possible to find international, global solutions may be chimerical. Using average results based upon returns to compulsory schooling infers that similar returns will apply to students who would otherwise have left early. In their historical study Chib & Jacobi (2011) found this manifestly not to be so. Indeed, it may be argued that there are many other factors as well as ability contributing to good returns from further years of schooling such as: socio-economic status; parental expectations; sound material conditions for living (family employment, housing, freedom from drugs and alcohol); students' perceptions of self-worth ... without investment in these factors compulsion may not provide the economic outcomes that have been desired.

However, economic outcomes are not the only ones that we would wish for from

---

<sup>3</sup> My emphasis.

schooling.

### **Social Returns from Schooling**

In his critique of policy making for the economic purposes of schooling Ball (2001) argues that there has been a “sidelining” of the social purposes of education. He sees that:

The sense of what education is and is for, the nature of the social relationships of schooling, teacher-student, teacher-parent and student-student relationships, are all changed by the forces and micro-practices of the market and their realisation in specific localities and institutional settings. (xxxv)

The spaces for seriously attending to the social returns from schooling are progressively closed down; that is, unless the community decides to reactivate them and take cognisance of the local over the global; the social along with the economic; and inclusion and participation as a right for young people, in particular those who are disengaged and often marginalised.

#### *Why are Young People Disengaged?*

Vickers (2007:61) reports that the most common reason that students gave for early leaving, prior to the raising of the school leaving age, was directly related to their negative experiences of school often arising from poor relations with their teachers and their peers. Add to these students, those who failed to thrive and regularly failed in their attainments, and she finds that approximately one in three early leavers did not find school a happy or satisfying place:

According to these findings, young people will not stay at school if they are having a miserable time, or failing academically or are in trouble with teachers. These students will leave school even if they are not able to find work, or do not have other education and training opportunities to go to.

So, now that they are compelled to stay at school for a longer period of time have these reasons changed and how are systems seeking to make schools a more satisfying place for students to be?

If we look, first of all, at the ways over past years in which systems have viewed young people not worthy of engaging with the senior years of schooling and specifically with the competitive academic curriculum, that is seen as the dominant force for those years, we could be tempted in response to that question to answer ‘no’. Kitty te Riele (2006) notes that designating those young people who are unlikely to complete secondary education as being ‘at risk’ draws attention to what is wrong with them, rather than with their relationship with schooling. Aside from her insight (p.132) that such young people, often unemployed, are characterised as unfit for employment (the ‘supply’ side of labour), rather than the problem being the lack of jobs (the ‘demand’ side of

labour), she draws attention to the ways in which they are blamed for their own school failure. te Riele (2006:135) reminds us of the fact that there are often “profoundly negative relationships (such) students can experience with some or most of their teachers” and lists these as passive learning, little choice in what they may study, how to study, not being listened to, an uninspiring and irrelevant curriculum, lack of flexibility and a paucity of services that are tailored to their needs. She makes the case for better targeting school systems and societal factors rather than the students themselves.

This view is echoed by Taylor (2002). Although writing of the years prior to the raising of the school leaving age, her discussion of the completion of schooling still stands. She makes the point that many young people see themselves as “not good at school”, perhaps better explained as ‘not good at doing school as defined by the school itself’. Furthermore, she found that those leaving school before the final years were contesting the stereotype of vulnerable young people expressed as:

... being marginalised as those who are too deviant or too inept to be able to see either the intrinsic worth or the instrumental value of completing secondary school, who are confining themselves to ongoing labour market understatus and vocational risk, as as those who lack maturity, commitment and motivation. (p.525)

Instead, they saw themselves as having agency in terms of abandoning what they saw to be the barren wasteland of the school.

### *Social inclusion – a challenge for systems*

As it has been argued the narrative associated with young people in the context of compelling them to remain at school revolves around the notion that it is the young people who need to be “fixed”. As Hodgson (2011:127) notes “A focus on the culture, organisation, curriculum and pedagogy of schools is marginal and in most cases missing from the official accounts about the policy, and yet there is an impressive literature that already examines this problem as entailing much more than the proclivities of the individual student and their family.”

Furthermore, the development of the policy takes little account of the varying sites of schooling. It is as Dryzek (2002:32) notes a technocratic approach, based in means-ends instrumental rationality that fails to capture “the subtle influences such as material forces, discourses and ideologies that act as to condition the content of policy”. Monolithic education systems, such as that found in New South Wales are greatly challenged by the variations and subtleties of social geography. Going to school in Bourke or Moree is not the same as going to school in St Ives. Being an adolescent in Temora is not greatly similar to being an adolescent in Granville.

Kemmis (2011)<sup>4</sup> notes:

The 'site' – e.g., a classroom in a school in its community – is always the existential and ontological given in education. It is the place where things happen – where people meet and engage with one another in practice. The site of practice is the phenomenological reality that always and necessarily escapes standardisation in curricula, standards, assessments and policies.

Similarly, the social formation of those teachers who will manage the learning of these young people will vary by dint of their own histories and experiences. As Kemmis & Grootenboer (2008:47- 48) have argued actions, and this includes pedagogic, curriculum and assessment practices, are socially shaped and formed.

Every action, and especially every interaction that involves others, involves *social connections* and *relationships* that spread out around the actor towards previous or present social orders and arrangements. It involves relationships of *belonging* or *not belonging*, *inclusion* or *exclusion*, *solidarity* or *opposition/resistance*, *harmony* or *conflict*, *social integration* or *fragmentation*. It involves acting within or outside established or accepted *social orders*, it strengthens or erodes *solidarities*, it happens in accordance with, or against accepted and legitimate *social norms*.<sup>5</sup>

Kemmis & Grootenboer embed their case within a framework of practice architectures that acknowledge that practice settings in schools are shaped by meta-practices are generated by systems and that they regulate, constrain or enable the work in those schools. Most poignantly they point out that the meta-practices of the policy makers can “fail in the responsibility to students and the good for humankind ... We need informed and enlightened policy makers, administrators, curriculum developers and teacher educators not just ones who want to produce particular outcomes and effects that seem important at any historical moment” (p.60).

School retention is the policy of this historical moment. It is argued for as an economic solution to current workforce conditions, not only in Australia, but globally. But, alternatively and importantly, the policy can be reconstructed as one of inclusion and social justice; one that has a regard for young people who are marginalised and disenchanted with schooling for one reason or another. McGregor, Mills & Thomson (2011) make a case for turning to the practices of the small number of alternative schools that cater for such young people and find ways of engaging them in the mainstream, such as having greater flexibility, supportive social environments and a pedagogy that is engaging and meaningful. They argue that a mainstream system that successfully re-engages the marginalised should have as its objective “putting alternative schools out of

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Kemmis, personal correspondence

<sup>5</sup> The emphases are those of the authors.

existence". As it stands, many current mainstream practices do not offer solutions for these young people, but can actually contribute to and exacerbate the problems and challenges that they face.

There can be no question, however, that bringing about major systemic change that is designed to re-engage marginalised young people in schooling as a social rather than economic measure is a significant challenge. Taking account of Kemmis & Grootenboer's argument that the policy makers themselves are captives of their own histories of practice and Reimann's (2011) compelling iceberg metaphor that demonstrates why conceptual change is so hard i.e. that the experiences, values and epistemologies in the form of beliefs carry more weight than knowledge in the form of answers, problems and solutions, it is clear that systems are currently failing to develop adequate or appropriate responses. Clearly, young people for whom the system has already failed are unlikely to be re-engaged if little has changed and little will change unless there is both a will and the resources required to bring about a major conceptualisation of the senior years of schooling that is inclusive and honours all who participate.

Gert Biesta in an interview with Philip Winter (2011:4) reminded us that "we do not produce our students; we are there to teach them – just as we do not make our children they are born to us". Yes, we are there to teach them; to teach them not only the skills needed for the economy, but to enable them to lead decent, dignified and satisfying lives within a community that recognises and respects them.

A colleague from the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) many years ago observed that the policy mandarins have an unfortunate habit of transforming sound practices into lemons. If we do not wish to be endowed with a bitter legacy of young people, entrapped in schools against their will, disengaged and resentful, there is no question that policies governing the senior years will need to change and to change quickly with teachers, pedagogies and curricula that are adaptive and satisfying for all.

Ball, S. (2001) Global policies and vernacular politics in education. *Curriculo sem Fronteiras*, 1 (2) pp. 27 – 43 [www.curriculosemfronteiras.org](http://www.curriculosemfronteiras.org) Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2011.

Chib, S. & Jacobi, L. (2011) Returns to compulsory schooling in Britain. IZA Discussion Paper No. 5564 Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1790675> Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2011.

- Dockery, A. (2005) Assessing the value of additional years of schooling for the non academically inclined. *LSAY Research Reports*. Longitudinal surveys of Australian youth research report #38. ACEReSearch.
- Kemmis, S. & Grootenboer, P. (2008) Situating praxis in practice: Practice architectures and cultural, social and material conditions for practice. In S. Kemmis & T. Smith (Eds) *Enabling Praxis: Challenges for Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 37 – 64.
- Hodgson, D. (2011) Policy rationalities and policy technologies: a programme for analysing the raised school-leaving age in Western Australia
- McGregor, G., Mills, M. & Thomson, P. (2011) Educating in the margins, lessons for the mainstream. In T. Wrigley, P. Thomson & B. Lingard (Eds.) *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 47 – 60.
- OECD (2002) *International Mobility of the Highly Skilled*. Paris: OECD
- OECD (2009) *Jobs for Youth: Australia*. Paris: OECD.
- Rizvi, F. and Lingard, B. (2010) *Globalizing Education Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, A. (2002) I honestly can't see the point: Young negotiation of the ideology of school completion. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17 (5) pp. 511 - 529
- te Riele, K. (2006) Youth 'at risk': further marginalising the marginalised? *Journal of Education Policy*, 21 (2) 129 – 145.
- Trostel, P., Walker, I. & Woolley, P. (2002) Estimates of the economic returns to schooling for 28 countries. *Labour Economics*, 9 (1) pp. 1 – 16.
- Vickers, M. (2007) Youth transition. In R. Connell et al *Education, Change and Society*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 51- 69
- Winter, P. (2011) Coming into the world. Uniqueness and the beautiful risk of education. An interview with Gert Biesta. *Studies in Philosophy of Education* Published online: 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2011