

THE LOST DREAM OF EQUALITY

EDUCATIONAL FUTURES  
*RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE*  
Volume 5

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# The Lost Dream of Equality

*Critical Essays on Education and Social Class*

*Edited by*

Alan Scott and John Freeman-Moir  
*University of Canterbury, New Zealand*



SENSE PUBLISHERS  
ROTTERDAM / TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 90-8790-021-x (paperback)

ISBN 90-8790-022-8 (hardback)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858, 3001 AW Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
<http://www.sensepublishers.com>

*Printed on acid-free paper*

Artwork, Michael Reed

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ALAN SCOTT AND JOHN FREEMAN-MOIR

## INTRODUCTION

We first brought together the chapters in this book in 2003. Our aim was to provide a forum for exploring the differences between the dream and the reality of equality in relation to the impact of social class on the structure and outcomes of education. Put out by a small publisher, this collection of essays did not achieve as wide an international readership as was hoped. A number of colleagues around the world requested that the essays be published in a way that would make them more readily accessible to academics and students everywhere who are interested in one of the most vital and fundamental questions raised by social science throughout the 20th century.

This question was fundamental because it reached to the core of what it means to develop democratic societies in which citizens can participate and what it would also mean for schooling systems to educate young people for these modern industrial social orders. We are pleased that Sense Publishers have given our authors the opportunity to bring their essays to a wider audience, for these questions remain central to sociological and educational debate at the beginning of the 21st century.

This connection between social class and education has been a source of interest and debate for 50 years. During the post-World War 2 boom, the underlying moral and social principle that guided education in the Western democracies was that of 'equality of opportunity'. It was through a sincere application of this principle that the meritocratic society, distinguished by an easy social mobility among its citizens, was to be achieved.

This was no mere abstract principle of educational and political philosophy. Nor was it a bureaucratic strategy finding its various applications in a range of societies. In fact, it was the culmination of a long sequence of events and struggles in Western history that found its voice most famously in the slogan of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' but more elegantly in the opening sentences of the American Declaration of Independence (1776): 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.' These famous formulae found their national and local resonances in the many statements of and prefaces to educational and welfare policies in the advanced capitalist world.

In New Zealand, to take one example, the educational version of the Declaration of Independence was expressed by the Minister of Education of the reforming Labour Government in the 1930s in the following way:

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers ... the present Government was the first to recognise explicitly that continued education is no longer a special privilege of the well-to-do or the academically able, but a right to be claimed by all who want it to the fullest extent that the State can provide.

Liberals, as much as socialists and social democrats, were impelled by a utopian vision of a socially just world where the application of fairness and opportunity would be an unquestioned fact of everyday life. By utopian, we do not mean something that is dreamy or unrealistic, but rather a project of actual advancement and achievement in the lives of citizens. As Oscar Wilde remarked, 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.' The essays in this book contribute, from various perspectives, to an assessment of whether the rhetoric and reality of this dream have come together; of whether the ideals of a progressive educational liberalism have borne ripe or bitter fruit.

The essays in the first part of the book focus on a number of countries by way of providing the reader with a set of concrete contexts within which equality of opportunity has been embodied in educational policy. Put more directly, the question is asked whether, 50 years down the track, working-class children have any better chance at school than they ever did. Some of the essays take a longer historical view of this question while others make an assessment within a more contemporary framework. In the second part of the book, the essays deal with some of the key understandings we have about social class and education. It is now commonly accepted that, while class is fundamental in the constitution of social structure, it is nevertheless mediated by cultural diversity, race and gender. Within this wider context of debate, the authors were variously asked to raise questions for the reader that now bear on the project of educational opportunity. These chapters deal with how we are to understand class in the postmodern world, what is the relationship between race and class and gender and class, and the degree that it makes sense to use class at all, and in what ways. For ourselves, growing up in England and New Zealand, countries at antipodean distance from each other, we were taught to value education, and we came to understand a working-class view on life. In ways differently nuanced—by national culture, local life, and family circumstance—the threads of class, education and work were woven together in experience. Our lives, ordinary lives, were ordered by perceptible opportunity and by economies that provided jobs.

Our generation, we were told, had avenues open to it that were shut for our parents. Our task was to appreciate this fact. We did. Looking back, with a sense of loss and fading anger, our parents saw the realization of what their generation

missed. They knew well the obstacles that stopped them and handed out instead a free lashing of unemployment, war, work in the factory, and domestic labor. Scrounging for work and fighting a war were the two main courses offered to our parents in what they ironically called ‘the university of life’. We, by comparison, had the freedom to ‘leave life’, attend university and read books that ‘taught’ us how to ‘analyze’ human behavior and ‘observe’ society—on the dole heap, at war, in the classroom and factory; wherever.

During these years, our commonplace experience registered the promises of education opened to millions of young people by the long boom of capitalism after World War 2. It needs to be remembered that the Depression of the 1930s, which gave rise to war and unparalleled misery, in turn led to a period of unprecedented growth where productivity, trade and consumption outstripped any other period in human history, including the extraordinary material advancement that accompanied the Industrial Revolution and European colonialism.

This is not to say that education after World War 2 was anything like equally available or that class and ideology were at an end, as some social commentators announced. But many believed something like this or at least hoped it might be true; especially those of us who had gained a measure of upward mobility. The sense of class struggle was mostly unconscious during these years, confined to the flow of feeling and gesture rather than openly voiced in large movements of public conflict. And sociologists seemed to confirm all of this with their statistically confident findings of disappearing class-consciousness. Workers were left with only the residues of alienation; but even these were assumed to be ameliorating. Mature capitalism was dispensing redemption on a scale undreamt of by even the most optimistic of theologies.

During the 1950s and into the 1960s and beyond, a small body of critical literature, drawing on older traditions of social theory, attempted to cut through the illusions to the realities lying beneath modern civilization. But this literature, mostly unread by conformist academics, was not taught or, when taught, was watered down. Marxian analysis and the critical sociology of C. Wright Mills, for example, were shoved to the margins of the curriculum, there to be ignored, trivialized or just plainly misunderstood. In those days, the deeper strains of pessimism and potential critique in Weber were easily dismissed as exaggerated European stuff. Bland interpretations of bureaucratization and the rationality of modern life sufficed. Freud’s critique of bourgeois emotion was scoffed at as silly and unscientific. Confidence, optimism and social amnesia limited what was taught and what was learned, even as we boasted of how objective social science had dispelled the mysteries of the world. Indoctrination was something that only occurred elsewhere.

The talk of equal opportunity and free public education during these post-war years was over-inflated. Nevertheless, such notions did become common working-class opinion. By contrast, at the beginning of the socialist tradition, these same notions were revolutionary demands, slogans shouted by a militant class movement wanting to find ways to wrest power away from the bourgeoisie. Readers may recall the tenth measure of *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘free education for all

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children in public schools'. Despite the vast systems of schooling that now prop up the labor and skill requirements of the capitalist economy internationally, we are still far from realizing the simple goal of free education for all children. Goals like this, ever more necessary for fulfilling the modern hope of human development, are, at the same time, unattainable in the capitalist version of modern life.

Under the most favorable possible conditions, during the long boom, even the most liberal of capitalist societies still operated with education systems that restricted access and achievement for working-class children in myriad ways, and for girls, minorities and migrants in particular ways. In the period of international capitalist restructuring, which has continued for nearly three decades since the mid-1970s, many of the modest gains of the boom have been clawed back in the name of running efficient economies.

We hope that this collection of essays will continue the tradition of concerned academics shedding light on what are continuing contradictions of capitalist society and capitalist education systems. So long as these contradictions remain, so long will it be necessary for educational theorists, like those represented in this book, to sustain analysis and criticism.

*Alan Scott*  
*National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art*  
*Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, New Zealand.*

*John Freeman-Moir*  
*College of Education*  
*University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand*

KELVIN McQUEEN AND SCOTT POYNTING

## WHAT DREAMS MAY COME?

*Class Struggle and the Supplanting of the Ideology of Equality of Opportunity in Australian Education*

### INTRODUCTION

If, as E. P. Thompson suggested, class is best understood in terms of class struggle, then social class in Australia has been entrenched with a vengeance. Class struggle, largely 'from above', is radically altering not just education policy, but the entire relationship between government and citizen. An increasingly authoritarian State has formulated new sedition laws (Maher, 2006; Williams, 2006); legislated drag-net definitions of terrorism and terrorist activities (Nette, 2005, 2006); used anti-asylum-seeker laws to suspend habeas corpus and permit indefinite detention; doubled the budget of Australia's spy agencies and empowered them to operate as a secret-police force; militarized police forces and extended Federal police powers to intervene in state-level conflicts; enacted a 'shoot to kill' law allowing military engagement in domestic 'emergencies' (McCulloch, 2005/06); and had Australian troops intervene concurrently in an unprecedented four overseas conflicts.

The increased militarization and the constraints on the exercise of citizen rights have come at the same time as the conservative Federal Liberal-National Party government has implemented the most radical industrial relations changes in the last 100 years. At one legislative stroke in mid-2006, they swept away most of the Australian labor-capital compromise known as the 'Federation settlement'. This change meant abandoning unfair dismissal laws; punitively constraining union representation and industrial action; severely reducing workers' conditions and entitlements; establishing a construction industry 'police force'; and exhorting employers to offer individual contracts and utilize lock-outs. This has all been done to lower wages to make the Australian workforce more 'internationally competitive'. The accompanying rhetoric even considers measures formerly glossed as 'welfare' to be nothing more than a component of national 'productivity' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation News Online, 2006).

Interestingly, the government's new industrial relations regime was first applied to universities in late 2005. Conditions were attached to government funding to 'encourage' employers to offer individual contracts to all staff; remove limits on casual and contract employment; strip back entitlements; remove unions from negotiating agreements and grievances; and ban union representatives from university committees (McAlpine, 2005). University student unions in effect were banned at the same time, and government regulations were promulgated for establishing private universities and a parallel array of private providers for

technical and further education. Government funding of private schools proceeded apace,<sup>1</sup> and the opposition Labor Party's schools' policy reverted to a commitment to continue funding the wealthiest private schools ('Editorial', 2006).

It was in these circumstances that the official ideology of equality of opportunity in education became a dead letter. Competitiveness, excellence, cost-benefit, privatization and public-private-partnerships became the not-so-new notions used to align educational ideology with the greater centralized direction of education by government.

This chapter explores the origins of the ideology of equality of opportunity in education with the understanding that it was a hegemonic compromise reflecting the interests of the State, of business, and of sections of the workers' movement during a certain phase of Australian capitalism (Seddon, 1993). This compromise has now given way to another hegemonic 'compromise' more attuned to the harsher climate of the competitive international 'market'. We suggest that this hegemonic reconstruction was possible because of economic circumstances and, just as importantly, because of the corrosive effects of the operation of an anti-working-class education system. That system had produced at least partly in most people a consciousness amenable to the individualism and opportunism associated with the new compromise. Lastly, we survey the current policy developments in schools and universities as a type of class struggle in Australian education.

#### THE GENESIS OF THE IDEOLOGY OF EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

Historically, the ideology of equality of opportunity in education was part of a hegemonic compromise. The phrase both represented and misrepresented popular disquiet about unequal access to quality education and openly discriminatory institutional practices. The phrase suggested the possibility of 'class' mobility by equalizing people's opportunities to become unequal. In either case, inequality was a given. Consequently, it became the axiomatic expression for the State's practical resolve to provide mass schooling based on standardized resource levels and a standardized, but meritocratic, curriculum. Later, the meaning of this notion expanded to respond to disquiet about the failure of many students to gain access to higher education under this very same 'assimilationist' and meritocratic academic curriculum (Connell, 2001/02, p. 10). Thus, in some tension, extension and standardization of mass meritocratic provision, curricular flexibility and compensatory programs all fell within the meaning of 'equality of opportunity'.

The initial triumph of a common, mass and publicly funded education system in Australia, emphasizing access and opportunity, came towards the latter part of the 19th century when government funding of private schools in all states ceased and 'free, secular and compulsory' public schools<sup>2</sup> were created. These steps formed the basis for an ideology of equality of opportunity. Simon Marginson points out that a type of aspiration for equality of opportunity through education had been propagated since the time of Alfred Marshall in the late 19th century. Marshall held that the talents of those few working-class children with high natural abilities

should not be squandered for want of opportunity. The corollary was that investment in 'our' schools and in scholarships would lead rapidly to our 'increase in material wealth' (Marshall, 1890, cited in Marginson, 1997, p. 37). Such thinking supported the expansion of mass public education to junior secondary level in Australia in the earlier part of the 20th century.

In the atmosphere of the massive economic slump of the 1930s, there was some retreat from opportunity for all. The 1930s saw the beginnings of an industry of educational psychological measures lodged within Australian education bureaucracies, with a zealous eugenics intent on identifying the 'intelligent' and nurturing their superior 'natural' talents (McCallum, 1990). The then vice-chancellor of the prestigious University of Melbourne referred to this scientific justification of the 'common sense' that some people are less intelligent than others, arguing that the education system ought to be arranged along the lines of these differences (McCallum, 1979, cited in Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982, p. 24). The strengthened, exclusionary meritocracy implicit in this reasoning dovetailed well with social élitism, the natural currency of the private schools, and meant that their existence became acknowledged as a social necessity, so that in the 1930s state governments were providing taxation exemptions and ad hoc grants to those schools.

This situation was a conjuncture of the interests of the State and some employers in privileging the 'academic' curriculum while limiting resources for its implementation. Competitive 'streaming and creaming' would eliminate the 'slow' and consequently expensive candidates. 'The ideology of merit and competition was the product of the allocation of resources, but the underlying dynamic was maintenance of the academic curriculum' (Fearnley-Sander, 1999, p. 100). To the extent that both the academic and technical curricula of the day were directed towards employer and State needs, that is, the production of skilled or professional or administrative workers, then the system as a whole acted in the main to divide and divert the working class.

Also, from the first, calls for equality of opportunity in education went hand in glove with human capital arguments. A society investing in education for all, not just the wealthy, would reap the returns. This always presupposed that the social returns of education were commodifiable, convertible into a form measurable by exchange value. Not surprisingly, these 'returns' proved difficult to count, even if still currently attempted by august bodies like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005, p. 26): 'The estimated long-term effect on economic output of one additional year of education in the OECD area generally falls between 3 and 6%. Analyses of human capital across 14 OECD economies—based on literacy scores—also suggest significant positive effects on growth within countries.' (For the direct transference of this rhetoric into school planning, see the New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSW DET], 2005, p. 6.) More problematic still was the conceptual slippage between social investment and return, and individual investment and return. Given the entrenched nature of competitive individualism in capitalist ideology, the individual form of human capital theory eventually came to prevail (Marginson,

1993, pp. 31–54). An investment in the education of an individual renders enhanced earning power to that individual. It is but a short step to the assertion that individuals reaping returns from education should be obliged to pay for it. This was an argument that especially appealed to the ‘user pays’ proponents of the New Right in the 1980s.

Both egalitarian (in the form of mass, common schooling) and élitist (in the severe meritocracy) moments, then, were present from the beginning in the ideology of equality of educational opportunity in Australia. The appeal to spare the human and social wastage of the potential of the few ‘deserving poor’ who held superior ‘natural’ talents actually depended on the assumption of this very superiority and its naturalness, as well as on it being a property of individuals. In other words, equality of opportunity was no more than a re-badging and a generalizing to education of bourgeois ideology. It justified the production of a certain ‘type’ of employee—one accepting of the ‘naturalness’ of inequality and committed to individualism, careerism and opportunism.

The push for equality of opportunity in education really gained momentum in Australia in the expansionary period following World War 2, at the same time as human capital arguments took full sway. Class memories of the Depression and the optimism of post-war reconstruction lent popular support to the expansion of State provision for health, education and welfare; ideas adopted by both the Labor Party and the conservative Liberal-Country Party coalition, and fuelled by economic boom, industrial development and the world’s second-largest (per capita, after Israel’s) immigration program (Connell et al., 1982, p. 19). Labor introduced means-tested university science scholarships when in office during the war, thereby increasing the participation of working-class students. The coalition under Prime Minister Menzies from 1949 allocated scholarships on ‘merit’ and targeted middle-income earners (Marginson, 1997, p. 41). Human capital rhetoric pervaded both. By the early 1960s, Australian intellectuals and bureaucrats were articulating the human capital arguments current in the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the OECD (Marginson, 1993, pp. 41–43). In 1962, Peter Karmel, a professor of economics at the University of Adelaide, told the Australian College of Education that the main reason for extending educational provision was political, to enhance equality of opportunity and produce more knowledgeable citizens. However, he noted, such expansion more than pays for itself, for ‘investment in education ... can be expected to yield handsome dividends’ (Karmel, 1962, cited in Marginson, 1993, p. 42).

In a period of economic boom such as Australia experienced from 1950 to 1974, human capital arguments could work as a generalizable ideology to fund all education sectors so that no ‘talent’ was wasted. This meant that funding could be stretched to include private schools where, as the matriculation process recognized, the most ‘able’ students resided. Initial Federal funding for private schools was in the form of capital grants for science (1964) and, later, library (1968) facilities. This was blanket funding in so far as similar facilities were also provided for government schools, but private schools benefited disproportionately (Marginson, 1997, p. 51, note to table). The most significant intervention by the Federal

government in private school funding was the 1969 decision by the McMahon coalition government to give recurrent per capita funding to private schools. This measure immediately increased Federal spending on schools by \$AU51.7 million, a 15 percent increase solely accounted for by grants to private schools (Marginson, 1997, p. 51, table).

It was not until 1972 that the Federal government provided recurrent funding to government schools. The Whitlam Labor government (1972–1975) spent massively on all education sectors; school funding rose from \$364 million to \$1,091 million (Marginson, 1997, p. 46). In 1975–76, public expenditure (both state and Commonwealth) on education in Australia was 5.9 percent of GDP, having almost doubled from 3.2 percent in the 10 years since 1965–66. Government dollar expenditure on all education sectors nearly trebled over the same decade (at constant 1984–85 prices) (Marginson, 1997, p. 4).

In the post-war decades, then, the Australian schooling system underwent a huge expansion and transformation. Prior to that, most working-class boys went, after primary school, to technical ('vocational') junior high schools (variously designated in the different states), where studies included subjects such as woodwork and metalwork. Most working-class girls attended domestic science junior high schools, with an emphasis on the practicalities of cooking, needlework and the like. These schools terminated in the third year of secondary school with an 'intermediate certificate' (again variously named around the states), but many working-class students left school at the minimum legal age without the certificate. Only the select few 'bright' ones were identified for admission from primary school to academic matriculation high schools, which provided five years of secondary schooling, leading to a 'leaving certificate' or similar, which served as the matriculation requirement for university or teachers' college.

The shift to comprehensive secondary schools took place in Australia concomitantly with the move to extend educational provision generally, along with the expansion of the system to cope with the progeny of the post-war 'baby boom'. This transformation occurred in most 'Western' countries over the same period: some earlier, some later (Sharp, 1986). In Australia, there were minor differences from state to state. Most states, like New South Wales, added a sixth year of secondary schooling. Victoria retained its technical high schools, as a separate and supposedly equal stream alongside the comprehensives. The New South Wales comprehensives were designed to have all of the curricular offerings, both 'vocational' and 'academic', in the same school. Any student, in theory, depending on the capacities they manifested, could undertake the academic subjects and progress, according to merit, to matriculation with the Higher School Certificate (HSC) (or similar) after (usually) six years. After primary school, all public school students living within a particular geographic area would attend their local 'zoned' comprehensive school. A move towards co-education in public schools accompanied comprehensivisation in Australia, although a minority of single-sex schools remained.

In practice, there were several caveats. Firstly, there remained a small rump of the old selective high schools to which entrance was competitive: a concession to

élitist demands and to the power of their former students, who tended, not surprisingly, to remain their staunch defenders. Their curriculum mirrored that of the élite private schools. Secondly, the comprehensives in the well-heeled neighborhoods had a rather different curricular make-up from the old working-class junior vocational schools, many of which simply changed their name and added on rooms. Thirdly, ‘depending on merit’ and ‘depending on capacities’ meant more or less what they always had before the advent of comprehensive high schools, and ‘going on’ beyond the new School Certificate (or equivalent) in the fourth year of secondary school to the end of secondary school did not come easily to working-class students, and was undertaken by relatively few. Fourthly, the competitive final year examination was heavily weighted towards the ‘academic’ curriculum, which dominated the last years of high school.

#### THE IDEOLOGY AND THE REALITY: UNEQUAL OUTCOMES AND THE ‘COMMON’ CURRICULUM

After nearly 30 years of these developments in education policy falling under the rubric of ‘equality of opportunity’, the promised equality had not been delivered: ‘schools were still being criticized as giving working-class youth a separate and inferior education, and much less than equal opportunity’ (Connell et al., 1982, pp. 15–18). And, from the late 1970s, as the effects of successive international recessions hit, governments wanted to know if the prioritizing of education had paid off.

Surveys such as those by the Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1978), the Schools Commission and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1979), Martin and Meade (1979) (all cited in Connell et al., 1982, pp. 15–18), and the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1985, p. 199) produced figures showing that while access to education had grown for all students, retention and matriculation rates were skewed heavily towards students from wealthier professional and managerial backgrounds and those who attended élite private schools. While the proportion of students of low socioeconomic status (SES) reaching final year completion increased to 61 percent in 1992 from 37 percent in 1984, the proportion of students of high-SES reaching completion grew over this period from 57 percent to 80 percent (Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training, and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 1995, cited in Mukherjee, Brown, & Wellmore, 1999, p. 27). To use a slightly different measure: ‘The percentage of students remaining to the final year of schooling rose from 35 per cent in 1980 to just over 73 per cent in 2001 (following a peak of 77 per cent in 1992) ... [but] the gap between independent [i.e., élite private] and government schools is 14 percentage points’ (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley, & Hillman, 2003, p. 1). There was still, in 2003, a 16 percent Year 12 completion differential between low-SES and high-SES students (NSW DET, 2004, p. 290, Table 3.24).

Academic outcomes revealed a division just as great as retention or completion rates. Richard Teese’s research covering 40 years of matriculation results shows

that ‘locations in the school system typically occupied by different social groups yield advantages that are large, persistent and predictable’ (Teese, 2000, p. 195). Over 30 percent of working-class girls failed at the lowest level of senior mathematics in the 1990s as did 40 percent of working-class boys, while only 8 percent of upper-SES girls and 12 percent of such boys failed in higher-level matriculation mathematics. Teese (2000, p. 2) comments that the differentials in broad averages ‘are mild compared with the depth of failure recorded at individual schools’ with a low-SES profile. More recently, in keeping with the perennial research results noted above, and using the large database of the LSAY project, Rothman and McMillan (2003, p. 2) found a ‘strong link between SES and student achievement in both literacy and numeracy, consistent with other research in LSAY and other studies. The link was found to influence differences in achievement levels between students and differences in achievement levels between schools.’

The demographic correlation with educational achievement was most stark for Indigenous students:

- In NSW, an average literacy and numeracy ‘gap’ of 17 percent between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on standardized basic skills tests, rising to an average 25 percent ‘gap’ for achieving the highest ‘skills band’;
- Nationally, in 2004, Indigenous students were half as likely to continue to Year 12 as non-Indigenous students (40 percent against 77 percent);
- Nationally, the proportion of Indigenous continuing students who attained a Year 12 certificate in 2002 was 54.9 percent compared with 82.3 percent for non-Indigenous students;
- Nationally, Indigenous people were 1.8 times less likely to attend a university than were non-Indigenous. In contrast, Indigenous people were more likely to attend a TAFE institution, technical college, business college or industry skills centre;
- University enrolments of non-Indigenous Australians rose slightly between 2000 and 2003, but enrolments of Indigenous Australians declined slightly over the same period from the high-point of 1999;
- In 2002, 42 percent of Indigenous people 18 to 24 years of age were not employed and not studying, compared with 12.6 percent of non-Indigenous people in the same age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005; NSW DET, 2004, p. 25; NSW Government, 2005, p. 37, Table 6; Productivity Commission, 2005, p. xxv, sects. 3.20, 3.24, 7.36; Wright, 2005).

For some students, the academic–technical divide in schooling apparently never went away, and the ‘opportunity’ for academic success was negligible. As a true measure of commitment to providing equality of opportunity, in 2003 only 11 percent of Commonwealth schools’ funding was allocated to equity programs for the estimated 20 percent of disadvantaged children (Byrne & Durbridge, 2003, pp. 5–6, 15), while some other programs targeting low-SES students, such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program, had been formally abandoned by this time. The post-war expansion of secondary education and its extension for working-class

students clearly had not led to anything like equity in terms of retention or outcomes. What went wrong?

The chimerical status of the ideology of equality of educational opportunity lay partly in the hegemony of what Bob Connell and his colleagues call in *Making the Difference* (1982) the 'Competitive Academic Curriculum' (CAC) and partly in the reality that common schooling with a common curriculum had never really been tried and perhaps could never be implemented. Teese (2000, p. 55) comments on the basis of his exhaustive study of SES and matriculation results that 'From one side, the ... curriculum brought all students together. From the other side, in the schools they attended, they were drawn apart' (see also, Lamb, Hogan, & Johnson, 2001).

The origins of the competitive academic curriculum go some way towards explaining its foreignness for working-class students. The élite private school Cranbrook that educated Australia's richest person, Kerry Packer, and his son and now inheritor, James, had a curriculum in 1918 that included divinity, English, Latin, Classical Greek, modern languages, history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and commercial courses. By 2005, its curriculum, drawn from the 'common' curriculum for all schools in NSW, included studies of religion, English, Latin, Classical Greek, modern languages, history, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, earth sciences, business studies, economics, and legal studies. For the ruling class and their schools, the knowledge and skills forming the technocratic curriculum that fostered managers, administrators and professionals had not changed in almost 100 years and, indeed, had become the curriculum for all schools and students.

Much of the discussion of the CAC stimulated by *Making the Difference* throughout the 1980s, particularly among teachers, their professional associations and their trade unions, emphasized the dominance of 'academic' knowledge in schooling. As Connell (1993) was to write a decade later, the equality of opportunity push for the working class to have the same *access* to and the same *amount* of formal education as the ruling class missed questions of the *accessibility* and *real usefulness* of the knowledge. That is, is school knowledge 'really useful knowledge' in the sense used by Richard Johnson (1979) when writing about radical 19th-century working-class critiques of bourgeois education, or does it serve to disorganize the class and their understandings of the social world? The equal opportunity objectives

... raise scarcely any questions about what *kind* of education is being provided. That is taken for granted. The issue they address is who gets how much of the familiar product.

The underlying weakness of this approach to educational justice is its indifference to the nature of education itself. For education is a social process in which the 'how much' cannot be separated from the 'what'. (Connell, 1993, p. 18, emphasis original)

The ‘how much’ is certainly important, as the discussion below of inequitable funding clearly demonstrates. Yet the 30-years-plus record of equality of opportunity politics outlined earlier indicates that more of the same was not enough.

It is true that ‘academic’ knowledge is rendered dry and unappealing to working-class students. In a very powerful sense that is what it is *for*, that is *why* knowledge is taught that way in schools; it is a useful tool to ‘sort and sift’ working-class kids *out*. (It also has its training uses for the ruling class and their deputies.) No amount of repugnance for ‘reproduction theory’ or gibes about it being a ‘piece of heavy machinery’ (Connell et al., 1982) can refute the explanatory power of this understanding. Indeed, Teese (2000, p. 194) reveals in his detailed statistical history of curricular ‘reform and counter-reform’ that ‘even major changes in systems of subjects, thorough revision of content and varied assessment methodologies produce little discernible impact on social patterns of results.’

In other words, the ‘how much’ and the ‘what’ need to be understood in relation to the ‘how’. Pedagogy is crucial. It takes a very peculiar method to render knowledge boring to beings as knowledge-oriented as humans. Examinations are invaluable in this process. That is to say, the *competitive* aspect of the CAC is as worthy of attention as the academic. Teese (2000, p. 51) shows that, while theoretically centralized,

exams did not present the same advantages [‘to upper-status students’] ... as extended projects marked by teachers[,] such students were much better prepared over the long term to manage a more culturally rich task through their language training, early reading habits, the greater rhetorical emphasis of the schools they attended, and their developed disposition to use language as a form of personal discrimination and style.

Nevertheless, disquiet about continuing limitations on working-class ‘opportunity’ meant that in schools by the mid-1980s to early-1990s both streaming and non-streaming coexisted, local curriculum development sat side by side with a centrally determined ‘common core’, school-based assessment localized some aspects of meritocracy, and special needs programs expanded (Sturman, 1997). However, these were overshadowed by the increasingly competitive matriculation examination, while public selective schools and private schools continued to corral matriculation success. The ideology of equality of opportunity had made some progress on the institutional forms of privilege and exclusion, but also sat easily within meritocracy and selection as the fundamental principles of the mass system. As Teese (2000, p. 51) discovered, even at the high point of curriculum reform in terms of diversity of assessment requirements, the ‘newly integrated curriculum [in Victoria] in the early 1990s produced [matriculation] results that scarcely deviated from patterns under the old syllabus, the regularity of which was the hallmark of social engineering conducted over the long term.’

Just as individually competitive assessment and pedagogy interact, so also do competitive assessment and curriculum—notably in the process of streaming. The ‘bright’ and the ‘dumb’ are identified and then students are provided with differential curricula depending on their supposed capacities. As this involves knowledge highly valued by schools compared to knowledge devalored by schools, the marks that measure this value are unequal. For example, in the 2001 NSW HSC, the highest scaled matriculation subjects included Classical Greek, Latin and Classical Hebrew; available as timetabled subjects in only a few élite private schools and a couple of selective public schools (Noonan, 2002, p. 1; for Victorian data correlated with SES, see Teese, 2000, p. 198, graph). And the marks can be cashed in for a more or less valuable credential that has a large influence on future occupations, livelihoods and (given the earlier evidence) the educational inequalities in the following generation.

The point we are making here is that arranging the acquisition of school knowledge around competitive individualism is a class-disorganizing process for the working class. This is the stuff of ruling-class culture: for them competitive individualism is organic to their class. For the working class, it is alienating: it runs counter to their collective practices and the interests that these embody. To the extent that it can be learned and practiced, it breaks down solidarity. On top of this, ruling-class schools (and their epigones) dominate the curriculum to the extent that they dictate how its mastery will be assessed. Teese’s (2000) data on the relationship between SES and private school curricular offerings and matriculation success are incontrovertible on this point (see pp. 205–212, graphs). Just as a culturally selective curriculum and school selection of clientele systematically skews academic results, so concern about measuring and ranking individuals in competition with one another becomes a form of fetishism that not only entails boring pedagogy and increased surveillance of students and staff, but also diverts attention from generating an understanding of powerful contextual forces.

The reassertion of the CAC in recent education ‘reform’ has simply reinforced this culturally selective and politically disorganizing meritocratic process. All states and territories now run centralized examinations in at least six of the 13 years of compulsory and post-compulsory schooling, including monocultural ‘basic skills tests’, ICT skills tests (that immediately disadvantage those without a home computer), and increasingly ‘civics and citizenship’ tests (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Education, Science, and Training [DEST], 2005, p. 200, Table 1; NSW DET, 2005, p. 5). The state and Federal governments collect and collate these data and are gradually moving towards issuing ‘league tables’ of ‘winner’ and ‘loser’ schools and school systems.

The Federal government’s micro-managing has extended to using its minor fiscal contribution to states-based education to insist report cards be issued to parents ranking each student in ‘quartiles’ (A–E) from kindergarten onwards. The states accepted this imposition after only superficial dissent (O’Halloran, 2006, p. 1). This practice is less the provision of ‘market information’ to allow parents ‘choice’ than it is, in practice, an intensified surveillance of teachers and state school systems, occasionally accompanied with threats from the Commonwealth to

penalize ‘failing’ schools (Down, 2001, p. 1; Commonwealth of Australia Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1998, ch. 5, p. 11). The eventual publishing of such rankings will no doubt be used to stigmatize some individuals, teachers, schools, communities and states and will raise ‘grade’ fetishism to the level of reification so that the ‘power’ of the grade obscures the power of the grader (Hardin, 1999).

Within the government systems, a resurgence of the numbers of public selective schools, selective streams and school specializations has also exacerbated the differential outcomes between schools. These schools also offer the most favorably weighted matriculation subjects, such as Latin and high-level mathematics and science, while a significant push has been made at state and Federal levels to increase the vocational subjects in working-class schools (Teese, 2000). Connell, White and Johnston (1990, p. 32) rather presciently summarized this development, envisioning that where ‘mechanisms such as dezoning, competitive individual testing, selective schools, and entrepreneurial management by principals ... [exist] within public systems, a further stratification will develop, especially at the secondary level. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that ... Australian school systems will ... return to the level of social segregation they had at the end of the 1940s.’

#### THE PRIVATISATION OF EDUCATION

##### *Schools for Sale*

The reining-in of the rate of increase of government spending on education has had the effect of governments seeking alternative sources of education funding (McCollow, 2006, p. 2, Table 2). While the proportion of GDP spent on education has returned recently to its historically higher level of 5.9 percent, this was achieved, nevertheless, by a 1.4 percent of GDP reduction in government contributions being replaced by private expenditure (SourceOECD, 2005). This was the fiscal imperative underpinning the move to privatize education funding.

Privatizing educational provision would unload costs from governments to ‘customers’. At the same time, governments hoped that the overall costs of education could be reduced by allowing private providers to abrogate wage-rates and working conditions that had been set by the strong unions in the government education systems and historically had flowed into private provider cost structures. Finally, private providers could relieve governments, even when governments underwrote most of the costs, from direct accountability for the quality of services. However, while governments ultimately hoped that wages and working conditions would be deregulated, they also hoped that the quality of educational provision could be maintained by intrusive and punitive regulations (at least for the public sector) (for a summary of these regulations, see Commonwealth of Australia DEST, 2005, pp. 11–12).

This economic imperative of lower costs was reflected in a reordering of educational priorities from (expensive) compensatory programs that had been a late

development of the equality of opportunity movement to installing (cheaper) restandardized and heavily tested 'excellence'. The use of this 'aerosol' word and its stable-mate 'choice' acted to narrow the terms of debate in the wider society. Of course, terms such as 'excellence' and 'choice' are largely incompatible with the common-sense understanding of equality of opportunity. This reshuffling of hegemonic terminology was a political attack that left educational equality of opportunity a marginalized ideology. The privatization of education necessitated a reversal of the previous hegemonic 'common-sense' to divert attention from the micro-level reassertion of State control, government cost cutting, and public gifts to the private sector.

One of the benefits for governments in using privatization as a weapon in the class struggle was that the private school sector in Australia has little concern with popular access, social equity or democratic accountability. It is a pre-existing authoritarian and conservative force within the body-politic. Private schools

are not open, as are state schools, to all suitably aged members of the public in their area. They are exclusive, that is, selecting 'clients' on academic, religious and other criteria. They do not, therefore, have to cater for all, including those with learning difficulties, those who present discipline problems, and so on, who create extra demands on the resources of a school. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are able to deliver higher credentials to those whom they do accept. (Cope & Poynting, 1989, p. 219)

The private school lobby has increased its political sway, with campaigns for increased funding uniting the elite schools (serving the very wealthy), the Catholic systemic schools (largely serving the working class), and the newer, and fastest expanding 'Christian' schools. This cross-class lobby satisfies governments' electoral- and class-disorganizing interests.

The history of government funding of private schools has moved through four phases: (i) the cessation of this funding in the late 19th century; (ii) state-level ad hoc grants and tax exemptions commencing in the 1910s; (iii) Federal government funding for capital works commencing in the 1960s, followed by the states soon after; and (iv) Federal government provision of recurrent funding from 1970, becoming increasingly lavish decade by decade and also followed, in train, by state governments. (For a fuller history, see Poynting & McQueen, 2003; see also Marginson, 1997.)

The election of the Howard coalition government in 1996 radically accelerated this historical development with the government's unashamed favoring of the 30 percent of students (now 32 percent) attending private schools across Australia. So much so that the Federal minister could declare that government schools were most correctly the responsibility of the states, while the Federal government, which collects 70 percent of all tax revenue (Kohler, 2006), would secure private schools. In 1996, expenditure on all schools rose 5.9 percent, but Federal expenditure on government schools rose by only 1 percent (MCEETYA, 1996, p. 22, table). In 1996, 43 percent of Commonwealth outlays on schools was allocated to the 70 percent of students attending public schools. By 2004, this had fallen to

34 percent and by 2008 is projected to fall to 26 percent of outlays. In other words, over the period 1996–2008, for a 6 percent or so increase in student numbers in private schools, 17 percent of Federal school education spending will have been shifted from public to private schools (Commonwealth of Australia Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business, and Education Legislation Committee, 2000, sects. 3.8, 3.9, table; Gavrielatos, 2006, p. 4; McCollow, 2006).

As well as securing private schools in general, the coalition government made sure it secured ruling class schools in particular. In 2000, the Commonwealth's new SES Index system of funding private schools immediately gave \$57 million more per annum to Australia's 61 wealthiest elite private schools, that is, those charging tuition fees over \$10,000 a year, with just 12 sharing an extra \$27 million. Catholic systemic schools received on average an additional \$40,000 each (Commonwealth of Australia Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business, and Education Legislation Committee, 2000, sects. 1.25, p. 22). Edsall (2001) estimated that this Federal funding, when added to state funding of private schools, meant that Catholic systemic schools were receiving from governments 98 percent of the per capita cost of educating the average public school student, in addition to their charging fees averaging \$2,000. This calculation does not include additional government funding for capital works, textbooks (in some states), loan interest and transport (Edsall, 2001, p. 1; MCEETYA, 2003, Appendix 1, p. 27, Table 23). In this sense, a government-funded voucher system exists between the more 'disadvantaged' private schools and the average public school.

The Vinson report found that in NSW between 1996 and 2001, after taking into account enrolment changes, Federal and state governments gave private schools a 45 percent funding increase compared with a 27 percent increase for public schools (Vinson, Johnston, & Esson, 2002; see also O'Halloran, 2004, p. 16). Across Australia, a considerable proportion of private schools were operating with resources almost double those of public schools (Watson, 2004). Such a resourcing differential, although unevenly spread throughout the private school sector, was expected to create real educational differences between systems to encourage students into private schools and to promote the much-vaunted 'choice' that supposedly underpinned government changes to education.

The future of school education in Australia is a reflection of the centralizing and controlling zeal governments have displayed in other portfolio areas. The Federal government's plans include standardizing the curriculum and implementing 'common national tests' based on 'national goals' linked to performance targets; publishing comprehensive test-based information about government schools; establishing a common national school starting age and student attendance targets; increasing state education systems' focus on English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship, and ICT education with accompanying tests; implementing nationally standardized report cards; prodding students into two hours daily of physical activity; and ensuring that schools fly the Australian flag (Commonwealth of Australia DEST, 2005, pp. 11–12).

Unsurprisingly in terms of the thrust of the State's agenda in education, these micro-level regulations of schools and systems are accompanied by deregulatory 'regulations' devolving to school principals responsibilities for school management and employment of school staff (Commonwealth of Australia DEST, 2005, pp. 11–12). The latter is actually the most radical departure from precedent. It means making tenure in public schools as potentially insecure as it is in private schools. Indeed, when the Federal government announced its broader industrial relations changes, the elite private boys' school, Newington College, in Sydney, proposed that all its senior staff would have to reapply for their jobs and were told that their new contracts would require holiday work ('School Job Plan Axed', 2006, p. 4), while a Catholic school suspended its principal for refusing a papal annulment of his divorce (Caro & Connors, 2006, p. 15), and the Catholic Education Office threatened to ban union representatives from its schools (Hiatt, 2006, p. 13).

Connell (2001/02, p. 9) presented at least three effects of this privatization process on the school education system: (i) a reduction of curricular and cultural diversity; (ii) corporate methods of system management relying on measurable outcomes and financial techniques of control; and (iii) schools and teachers individualized and set in competition against one another. For most schools in the public system, this meant an impoverished curricular and pedagogical climate, more authoritarian management and a fragmented and demoralized workforce (Smyth, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000, pp. 11–12). This is the perennial strategy of class struggle: to divide, disorganize, divert and control the class enemy. In these circumstances, equality of opportunity as a hegemonic ideology had disappeared from every government pronouncement.

### *The Bonfire of the Universities*

The current Federal government seems to have a particular animus towards the 'class enemy' found in universities. While governments made some attempt to open universities to the more disadvantaged of the working class by abolishing tuition fees in the 1970s and rapidly expanding enrolments then and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, politicians have never held up the university sector as a shining example of equality of opportunity. The Labor Government's reintroduction of tuition fees in the late 1980s and the plateauing of university enrolments across the late 1990s and early 2000s have seen the rhetoric of equality of opportunity vacate the field (for a fuller history, see Poynting & McQueen, 2003).

The battle for governments has been to bring university staff, their unions and university management to heel. Through stagnant funding and imposing a myriad of controls, governments have attempted to remove whatever autonomy universities had historically from the State and from business. Recent legislation has acted to remove staff and student representatives from university boards of management, leaving university managers and selected local business and community 'representatives' to operate as line-managers for the Commonwealth of

Australia Department of Education, Science and Training. As Manne (2000, p. 17) observes, 'Universities no longer pretend to have an autonomy from government, even though, paradoxically, governments now provide them with a smaller proportion of their funds than in the days when autonomy was more real.'

Governments now supply, at 41 percent, the lowest proportion of university funding for 100 years, and reliance on 'user pays' has ballooned. Higher education's funding as a proportion of GDP is set to stagnate at 0.5 percent for the foreseeable future (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee [AVCC], 2005, p. 15, Table A.6). As a proportion of the Federal education budget, university funding is expected to decline from 2.5 to 2.3 percent by 2010 (McCollow, 2006, p. 2, Table 2), with a growing reliance, currently at 40 percent of income, on student debt and fees and charges (AVCC, 2005, p. 11, Table A.2). Between 2001 and 2008, total student debt is expected to double from \$7,184 million to \$15,395 million (AVCC, 2005, p. 12, Table A.3). User pays and reliance on corporate funding in higher education have a political dimension: 'It is now harder than ever for students to organise around defending public education: the availability of student income support has decreased rapidly, the amount of paid work students must complete to survive has increased, competition has forced the erosion of student communities, and corporate intervention has eroded academic integrity' (Davison, 2001/02, p. 53). Further to this, by virtue of their indebtedness, students leave university practically 'indentured', while servicing this debt was made more difficult as graduates' starting salaries fell 4 percent against average weekly earnings between 2001 and 2004 (AVCC, 2005, p. 20, Table B.4). This aspect shows the potential for using economic hard times and government austerity to disorganize and control citizens.

The strategic direction of the Federal government's activities in higher education becomes apparent when the major source of the shortfall in university funding is revealed. According to Allport (2001, p. 17), 'the biggest single contributor to the funding shortfall in universities is unfunded enterprise bargaining. There is a \$150 million annual gap between the costs of salary increases across the sector and indexation provided for this purpose by government: a shortfall that cannot be plugged by private funding without a fundamental transformation of the role of universities.' By starving universities of funds, the government achieves the desired result of labor market 'flexibility'. Wells (2001/02, p. 41) comments that such under-funding can make 'more radical deregulation ... seem to be the only answer.' The 'process has not been [to improve] educational standards or access but has been for the sole purpose of opening the education system to the force and will of profit' (Davison, 2001/02, p. 53; see also Allport, 2001, p. 17).

The government, using its own force and will, resolved its long-standing industrial relations issues with university unions in 2005 with the draconian Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements. Conditions that staff unions had struggled against for years were simply imposed: removal of automatic union representation of members during bargaining; removal of ceilings on numbers of casual, part-time and contract staff; removal of grievance procedures and processes

of ‘natural justice’ from agreements; and removal of union representatives from university committees (McCulloch, 2006, p. 3). This imposition shows the use of increased centralized and authoritarian control to marginalize and thereby disorganize opposition to raising the rate of exploitation of university workers; the latter achieved by deregulating the field of operation of the direct employers—in this case, university managers.

Within universities, ‘the structure of university governance has altered drastically in recent years, more and more coming to resemble the structures found in business firms ... the CEO delegating his or her near-absolute powers through a chain of hierarchs’ (Roberts, 2000, p. 11). These powers include ‘continuous performance assessment [of staff] and careful surveillance of anything critical that they might say about their executive employers’. And cost cutting has led to ‘intra-faculty conflict ... with the management of the affected faculties saying that if we don’t cut, the “university” will step in to cut us even more savagely’ (James, 2000, pp. 7, 8). Such management resembles the authoritarianism of the business world, but the devolution of cost-cutting responsibility produces the added bonus of dividing staff amongst themselves. Once more, governments have used that interesting mix of regulation and deregulation to empower the State and employers and to disempower a workforce. At least it can be said that Federal ministers of education have not sought to characterize any of this obsession with smashing university unions, including student unions, as contributing to equality of opportunity in education!

SLEEPERS WAKE: CLASS STRUGGLE FROM ABOVE,  
EDUCATION AND HEGEMONY

The ideology of equality of opportunity reached its hegemonic zenith in Australia in the mid-1980s. Well-funded mass educational institutions provided programs to mitigate the most obvious discriminations of the competitive academic curriculum: offering more and multiple-level courses and compensatory and special needs education. These developments led to a contingent acceptance by the working class of both mass standardized meritocratic provision and a slightly de-standardized curriculum, especially as access to further and higher education expanded rapidly from the mid-1970s.

By the mid-1990s, this hegemonic compromise had been supplanted by notions of ‘user pays’ (individualized costs and benefits), ‘diversity’ and ‘choice’ (the localization, fragmentation and privatization of provision), and ‘excellence’ (élitism). Under this ideological onslaught, concerns about equal access to quality education and equality of outcomes became second-order. In other words, governments promoted a new hegemonic ideology based on a ‘common-sense’ appreciation of the efficacy and ‘fairness’ of unequal provision by and distribution through ‘markets’. This ideology marginalized the ‘politically correct’ and ‘totalitarian’ ideology of equality of opportunity that had supported previous broad-scale State intervention in education and the centralizing of responsibility. Paradoxically, by the new century, governments had shed the accompanying

window-dressing of ‘decentralization’ and ‘devolution’ of educational services to generate ‘consumer markets’ for a reassertion of decisive centralization on the State of significant areas of management attended by micro-regulation of policies and curricula (see Nelson, 2005).

As calls for equality of opportunity in education became muted, as funding of equity programs was de-prioritized, and as ministers of education and media ideologues doggedly exposed the ‘failure’ of working-class comprehensive public schools and the ‘unresponsiveness’ of universities, participants came to suspect, in a common-sense way, that within these conditions of ‘scarcity’ of opportunity in education, they could only succeed at the expense of others. Inequality, far from being a social blight, came to be seen as a virtue. One ‘safe abstract civic ideal’ was replaced with another, perhaps ‘civic’ but less civil: the freedom of the market (McLaren & Torres, 1999, p. 51).

This hegemonic shift by the State drew on one side of a common-sense appraisal by workers of their experiences in suffering the costs of the restructuring of the Australian economy during the bust and boom cycles after 1974. The consequent society of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, adverse social and labor market conditions and fiscal restraint meant that, as a hegemonic ideology, educational equality of opportunity had to be cast aside in favor of an ideology reflecting the reality of the times: the priority of imbuing the habitus of (labour) market discipline to enhance individuals’ competitiveness for scarce rewards or, to put it another way, seeking opportunity not equally but at any price, including by using any pre-existing advantage. In hard times, with ‘opportunity’ shrinking, the notion of reward for effort by the ‘free market’ could be connected with a popular sense of Australian egalitarianism even better than it could with the idea of government-manipulated ‘equality of opportunity’, where some seemed to be rewarded for little effort.

What all this one-sided common sense missed, whether hegemonized as ‘equality of opportunity’ or ‘market discipline’, was that the State’s mass-educational provision had never been committed to thoroughgoing equality of opportunity and that the new educational reality was simply a more naked reassertion of the historical logic of the system: the production of a work-disciplined, socially stratified and historically amnesiac workforce. Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett (1982, p. 197), over 20 years ago and at the height of the equality of opportunity push in education, uncovered this logic and described it succinctly:

The organization of mass education as individual competition is a mechanism of hegemony in class relations: it divides the working class, undermines its self-confidence, attaches a part of its energy and talent to a process of competition. ... No longer did economic inequality stem obviously from an unequal pattern of ownership. Now it appeared to follow from an unequal distribution of talent, duly measured and certified by the [State].

In a similar vein, Michael Apple (1993, p. 3) makes the point that ‘the conservative restoration is based on a de-integrative strategy that has as one of its

results the creation of a “divided and amoral political community”. Today, that organizing logic has been reasserted tenaciously and has meant a closer conjuncture between rhetoric and reality: educational provision had always been unequal and discriminatory, so why now should governments pretend otherwise? However, since an assertion so bold could point to the State’s complicity in deliberately constructing an unequal and anti-working-class education system, then ascription of the motivating force for educational restructuring was reversed: governments sought to liberate both individual initiative (and then measure it through tests) and enshrine the citizen’s ‘right’ to choose the ‘best’ education (at a price) (McQueen, 2005).

All this pointed to class struggle from above succeeding in part because of the success of the mass education system in producing just that individualized and misplaced working-class consciousness to which Connell et al. (1982) had alluded. The practical fragmentation and stratification of working-class commonality, pursued by the State, not least through the education system, produced a petit-bourgeois consciousness marked by individualism, careerism, opportunism and anti-intellectualism. This meshed well with the consciousness required of contract workers to make an ‘enterprise’ of themselves. In fact, its functionality arose from nothing more than the closer alignment of educational selection processes with labor market selection processes following the de-funding of equality of opportunity programs that had permitted some buffering. The system now did little to hide the imperative of ‘job readiness’, that is, the complete subsumption of the individual to the vicissitudes of employers demanding a steady reduction in labor costs with the corollary of intensified labor discipline. The softening and masking of discrimination that characterized equality of opportunity programs were removed steadily. At the same time, a more monolithic and monocultural testing regime drove the curriculum further towards producing a socially and historically (that is, morally) amnesiac labor force. Underpinning this harsher ‘education’ were the material circumstances of growing insecurity.

Part of the ease with which the ideology of equality of opportunity was supplanted was the tension between the continuing unequal educational outcomes and the prevailing myth of Australia as a classless society. Following from this, if the educational policy of equality of opportunity had failed so demonstrably, then perhaps it was the cause, rather than an amelioration, of inequality. Perhaps the market could work better at doling out proper rewards for effort, since this is what schools had always done. In more solidaristic times, the myth of egalitarianism could act as a coordinating ideology for working-class organizations, generating some degree of compromise by the State with united demands for improved educational access and equity. Equality of opportunity was a safe, if relatively more expensive, channeling by the State of egalitarian sentiment into discreet institutional practices.

The ideology of equality of opportunity was vital for justifying the very class structure that it obscured and for disparaging class struggle. Subsequently, the reassertion of the cults of individualism and ‘market freedom’, aided by the marginalizing of working-class industrial organizations and collective agreements,

meant that, in the hegemonic reconstruction, the pre-positive ‘equality’ could be shed, leaving ‘opportunity’ in education to mean a type of ‘freedom from class constraints’, rather than solidaristic and egalitarian classlessness and united struggle. The idea of freedom from class had always lain within ‘equality of opportunity’, as had freedom from class struggle and the substitution of individual ‘merit’. Ultimately, equality of opportunity had always meant the State providing opportunities in education for people to succeed at becoming unequal in the labor market. The ‘meritocracy’ of the labor market, determined by employers of course, was not to be challenged—and certainly not to be exposed in school curricula.

The headlong rush to privatize education in the 1990s was a type of government-promoted ‘dissent’ for hopeful or successful participants. It allowed, at a price, a reaffirmation for the ‘aspirational’ section of the working class of personal merit and social worth gained in defiance of disordered working-class communities and an insecure labor market or a degraded public education apparatus. It combined an assertion of the new ‘civic ideal’ of social diversity with the resurgent demand for the pursuit of ‘excellence’. Diversity within educational institutions was replaced by the glorification of difference between institutions. That ‘difference’ really boiled down to increased educational opportunity for the wealthy. It was nothing more than a reassertion of social exclusion and élitism. This ideological collage underpinned developments in school education around Australia, such as ‘dezoning’ (open enrolment), specialization and selectivity in public schools, and the increased funding of elite private schools. In higher education, the ‘sandstones’ (elite universities) attempted to differentiate themselves from the less worthy institutions, and vocationalism crept into rationales for the merit of university courses and as a panacea for disaffected working-class school students.

Meritocracy for the ‘aspirational’ had become as much about avoiding failing educational sites as about pursuing educational quality. The upward-looking ‘class envy’ (a favorite, and deeply ironic, pejorative phrase used by Liberal Party spokespeople) of equality of opportunity has been replaced by a downward denigrating class exclusivity. The élitism inherent in meritocracy from the start left equality of opportunity, when the funds dried up, prey to those of the ‘Newer Right’, like David Kemp (Liberal Party Minister for Education 1996–2001), whose public pronouncements oscillated between naked élitism and lauding the efficacy of ‘market forces’. Fundamentally, his cynical populist rhetoric, including attacks on unions, ‘trendies’, academics, etcetera, pandered to the worst petit-bourgeois anti-intellectualism in Australian culture (often masquerading as ‘egalitarianism’). In a climate of working-class insecurity, Kemp took a type of perverted egalitarian sentiment to assert that the education policy ‘élites’ (usually in reference to teacher unions and liberal academics) were actually disadvantaging students’ opportunities in the labor market. Then, in pursuit of ‘excellence’, Kemp directed funding to private providers (McQueen, 2005). A similar process was used against universities. However, given they presented a more recalcitrant case, total funding had to be progressively reduced to force them to bow to business and State interests. The reassertion of the competitive curriculum in schools, the

encouragement of competition among education providers for students, and the competition for funding between and within universities had the political effect of creating an antagonistic climate in educational provision that fragmented, diverted and disorganized opposition to the State's agenda of restructuring education and the economy.

The whole agenda was as much about a reassertion of State control as anything else: 'the state has simply "used the language of deregulation, flexibility and markets as a means of shifting power from public sector workers to the state and private capital, not away from the state to the market"' (Robertson, 1997, cited in Reid, 1998, p. 61). Such control was necessary in unstable economic conditions, when the results of international competition were the exacerbation of social dislocation and poverty amidst plutocratic wealth, and where the only solution to economic stagnation was the progressive lowering of workers' wages and deregulation of employment conditions. This solution could not be effected in the face of an organized working class. This is where education institutions became central to the class struggle: a more thoroughgoing disorganization of the working class was necessary (and a co-optation of the teaching workforce, if possible) by a reassertion of the individualizing of success and of failure through meritocracy.

In 2002, the Liberal Party's Federal Minister of Education, Brendan Nelson (2002, p. 20), seemed even to reject the mass education ideal of the 19th century when he stated, 'There are many young people who have felt they are being pressured, forced to stay in the education system, sometimes beyond their natural abilities, studying things that in their hearts they don't want to be doing'. In December 2005, a month before being elevated to Minister of Defence to oversee the government's imperial ambitions, Nelson used the following analogy to express his reforming rationale, showing that his Social Darwinism had become more pointed and more brutal: 'when the sun comes up in Africa, a gazelle has to outrun the fastest lion if it wants to live, and the lion has to outrun the slowest gazelle if it's not to starve. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up you've got to be running. In terms of reform that's what it's about' (quoted in Snow, 2005, p. 15). Unfortunately, Nelson's government overrode such forces of nature with their legislative intervention to constrain trade unions: with the stroke of a pen, the lion of united labor became the gazelle of contract workers. University unions are reeling, if not crushed, while some of Australia's school-teacher unions have managed to hold their own, with state Labor governments shielding their teacher workforces from the worst effects of the Federal industrial relations requirements.

The new Federal Minister of Education, Julie Bishop, a former corporate lawyer with Clayton Utz, seems quite ready to follow the program prepared by Kemp and Nelson. This program is to re-impose piecemeal but unconditionally all the worst features of the pre-compensatory, pre-equality-of-opportunity education system.

The unstated moral of this whole story is to those who have will be given, and the devil take the hindmost. This is the furthest hegemonic transformation possible from the dream of equality of opportunity and is the consequence of class struggle from above.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Private schools' and 'non-government schools' are interchangeable terms. Private schools cater for about 32 percent of all students. These schools include the Catholic systemic schools (accounting for about 65 percent of private school enrolments), the Protestant and Catholic Independent schools (the elite private schools), and the smaller 'Christian', Muslim, 'ethnic' and non-denominational schools. Many private schools are single-sex schools and some of the elite schools are boarding schools. While receiving considerable amounts of funding from both Federal and state grants, they have a much greater degree of autonomy in most areas of their operation than public schools.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Public schools', 'government schools' and 'State schools' are interchangeable terms. Public schools include primary, secondary and special needs schools that may be either comprehensive or, much less commonly, selective (including some single-sex schools). They cater for about 68 per cent of all students. State governments bear the main responsibility for funding and managing their public schools.

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*Kelvin McQueen*  
*School of Education*  
*University of New England*  
*Australia*

*Scott Poynting*  
*School of Humanities and Languages*  
*University of Western Sydney*  
*Australia*