

3: reconstructing childhood

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Of course there are reformers who would sweep away the fees, and reformers who would banish the name of religion from the schools. But then the system of primary education was not established to carry out any idea of charity, or to make children strangers to the faith of their fathers. The object was to place within the reach of all—the children of rich and poor alike—the soundest and best quality of primary education. (Henry Parkes 1892, pp.632–633)

During the 19th century there was increasing support for the notion that all children should attend formal schooling and, indeed, must do so if Australia was to remain economically and politically competitive. Henry Parkes, like other educational reformers of the time, had great faith in the power of public schooling to improve the citizenry. But, it is clear, when we look closely at the quote above and we examine the state systems of education which emerged in the late 19th century, they were not meant to be free, compulsory or secular at first and nor did compulsion impact on the lives and schooling experiences of children in a unified way. Although legislation to introduce *free, compulsory and secular* schooling was introduced in all Australian states from as early as 1872 (in Victoria) compulsory clauses were not enforced until well into the 20th century and religion continued to play a significant role in the curriculum and in the lives of children. So, if these educational reforms were not immediately enforced, why was the concept of mass schooling so important and why was legislation introduced, debated and finally passed in the various colonial parliaments by the 1880s? If reforms were slow to be implemented what were the broad aims of the reformer? What were the important social, economic, political and educational effects on childhood, the family and the community in these first decades? Was the impact of compulsory schooling the same for all children irrespective of race, class, gender or where they lived? How do we know? What evidence do we need to gather and how can we understand events that happened such a long time ago?

Firstly, we need to ask critical questions about the origins of mass schooling, the links this phenomenon had to events overseas, and the social, economic and political factors which underpinned it. Australian educational reform was linked closely to educational changes in Britain, the United States of America and Europe especially within the context of economic and political change where new ideas about the nation state and patriotism re-drew and re-shaped ideas of citizenship, culture and class in Western democracies as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The late 19th century was a historical period of great social, economic and political change and educational reform both drove and accompanied these momentous events as children's lives were altered to fit with the rhythms and regulations of the formal school day.

free compulsory and secular education

We do not question today that schooling is compulsory and we accept that children between certain ages must attend school. We send our children to preschool viewing this as a valuable precursor to primary school, preparing our children for the later more structured and formal school day. But, it was not always like this. It was the mid to late 19th century before the debates surrounding the introduction of mass schooling resulted in the passing of reform legislation in all Australian states. And, it was the 1920s in most states before compulsory clauses finally came into force. When the compulsory clauses were being legislated throughout Australian states most children were involved in some kind of work at home, on the farm or, increasingly from the 1870s, in a factory. Working class children were not at school in any organised way. Children generally took part in adult life and only a small number of middle and upper class boys were sent to school. These class and gender patterns in family life were widely accepted and well-entrenched and it would be surprising if they were not also taken up by the new schooling regimes. Given this complexity and the possibility of conflict between schools and the old family/work order why would social and educational reformers want to change the way children lived their lives? What did compulsion, as an aspect of schooling, introduce into the lives of children and families that was radically different to the past? Let us begin an examination of these questions about the rise of mass schooling by looking at the school, the family and then work.

reconstructing childhood through compulsory schooling

The rise of mass compulsory schooling introduced into children's lives a socialisation process conducted in a newly created formal institution—the state school. This was a very different childhood experience for children who previously would have been at home or at work. Previously, parents had been the most dominant influence on children and were the major architects of what went on in the daily regime of a child's day. With the rise of mass schooling a new expert came into the child's life—the teacher. In the twentieth century the rise of the 'professional experts' has been said to have led to the increasing influence of adults other than parents on children's lives, adults such as child welfare workers, nurses, medical personnel, counsellors, guidance officers, school attendance officers, baby health clinic workers and kindergarten advocates. This resulted in an increase in the level of policing of children's activities outside of school as well. One important effect of compulsory schooling in 20th century Australia has been the construction of a dependent childhood with children socialised into particular roles, including gender-specific roles along class/race lines. Within this *social construction* of dependent childhood, parents were no longer viewed as the most appropriate teachers and carers of their young. Mothers were urged to look to science for advice on child-rearing, child health, nutrition and child development. It was a science that reduced childcare to a set of rules and mother/child relationships to adherence to set formulas and exact timekeeping, something like that which now went on in the school (Reiger 1985; Davey 1987).

Teachers were now trained, and worked in a particular environment where they were expected to meet certain moral as well as academic standards. Strict regulations were constructed so that teachers devoted themselves to their daily tasks in a rigid, mechanistic way and the schedules of school attainment set out in a precise and detailed manner how pupils were able to proceed from one class to another. Thus, there was a

gradual loss of control by teachers over what went on in school and considerable expansion of the social space that was controlled, in theory, by the state. It is argued that teachers lost control of what went on in schools: the curriculum, the school organisation, teaching practice and aims and objectives of schooling (Miller 1986; Jones, McCulloch, Marshall, Hingangaroa Smith and Tuhiwai Smith 1990). Where once a small private school was largely autonomous with teachers developing their own curriculum usually within the dictates of local sites (e.g., parents, the church or community), the syllabus and curriculum were now controlled by the state.

It should be remembered however, not all children were included in the sweeping arm of mass compulsory schooling in a comparable manner. Differentiation by race, class and gender was transferred from colonial society to the new state school. Aboriginal children, for example, were explicitly excluded from mass schooling. Indigenous people had no economic worth in the minds of nineteenth century liberals and had no role in the development of national pride based on imperialist, British sentiment (Broome 1982, p.89). Nonetheless, Aboriginal children remained very much the clients of state schooling, and their childhood was considerably changed as the state intervened more directly into child life. Aboriginal children did share in the spread of rural state schooling when some Aboriginal children were given special permission to attend local state schools because they were white-skinned and/or acceptable to white parents (Fletcher 1989), but most remained on government reserves, missions or settlements. Here they were taught, usually by untrained managers, basic manual skills which neither fitted them for their own traditional lifestyle nor prepared them adequately for the competitive nature of Western society. Aboriginal children dispossessed of their land and largely excluded from universal state education, were thus placed on the outer fringes and the lower social levels of the already limited European schooling that a bush education then offered and their schooling was incorporated into the universal plan by different and more destructive means than that of non-Aboriginal children. Such explicit exclusion continued well into the 20th century locking Aboriginal children into an institutionalised, elementary, strictly regimented school space. Thus, formal, compulsory and universal state schooling played a significant role in the institutionalisation and continuation of racism in Australian schooling and society.

reconstructing family and child life

Some writers argue that family and child life underwent significant reconstruction because the state now had the legal right to intervene in childhood and the family and, as a first step, separated the child from parents (into schools) and also introduced the child to a range of learning and socialisation practices apart from, and often at odds with, the family and local community. Writers such as Musgrave (1966) and Vick (1990) suggest that the passage and ultimate acceptance of compulsory school attendance finally signaled the triumph of public over private influence as more appropriate in social life and individual development. In particular, the acceptance of compulsory education as a good thing for all children and for all aspects of society brought with it a recognition that the idea of the educative family was obsolete. It raised the prospect of the family in modern society as inadequate to manage child care and child training. More particularly, it meant that certain kinds of family were targeted by compulsory schooling and the social/child welfare movement and juvenile court system that went with it. Some families—namely Aboriginal families, working class families, poor families and

migrant families—were seen to be ‘deficient’ in their conduct of moral and vocational training, and children were removed, in the case of Aboriginal families, for no other reason than that they were Aboriginal.

Consequently, Miller (1986) argues there was a real assault on working class family life in South Australia with the passing of the compulsory clauses in 1875. And, she notes how, as soon as non-attendance at school was defined as *illegal* rather than merely *immoral*, many previously ‘immoral’ parents were now breaking the law. Working class parents found themselves in a real dilemma. Fees were not abolished immediately and either working class parents could cut down on necessities to find money for school fees or they had to suffer the indignity of declaring themselves destitute so that they could be exempt from the fees.

changes to the family economy and to child labour

Respectable working-class children were the main target group of compulsory schooling—they were, after all, the group of children who increasingly did not fit within the concept of the emotionally and financially dependent childhood now favoured by the state. It had been unquestioned for centuries in European-based cultures that children should work to support the family and the wider economy. Indeed, children were seen to be integral to each, in all but some upper-class environments. Yet, by 1914, it was illegal for children to be employed in most occupations. In Britain and Australia various Factory Acts, social and child welfare legislation and compulsory schooling prohibited the paid work of children under 13 or 14 years of age. Where once the economy relied on the inclusion of child labour, it could now be dispensed with (Miller 1986). There were clear protective and social justice elements in the removal of children from the workplace. Frequently, the work children performed in factories was hard and dangerous and the working conditions less than safe and healthy, particularly for young people who were generally smaller and weaker. There is no doubt social reformers placed considerable importance on the development of popular mass schooling as a source of liberation and equality for the humbler classes. At the same time, a shift from an agrarian to an industrial workplace required a trained citizenry and skilled workers, and schooling by the state was to be the major vehicle for this change to take place.

The introduction of mass schooling impacted on traditional forms of skill transmission and there was an institutionalisation of the production and dissemination of knowledge. School knowledge replaced the informal knowledge or family lore that the child would traditionally have been schooled in at home. The state school, as it emerged within the context of compulsory legislation, is therefore described as having many aspects in common with orphanages, juvenile reformatories, industrial schools and prisons which also emerged to ‘police’ children and youth. All these institutions, the school, the orphanage, the prison and the reformatory were devised to shape a particular kind of child—the ‘schooled child,’ (Humphries, Mack and Perks 1988; Jones et al. 1990; Cox 1996). Further, schools were said to have been the great ‘character factories’ of the 19th century and they aimed to churn out obedient and dutiful citizens for the new industrial age. In other words, they aimed to train working class youth for new industrial and technical workplaces.

perspectives on the rise of mass schooling

Liberal/traditional perspectives have dominated explanations about the rise of mass schooling until quite recently. It is a view where schooling and scientific learning were seen as replacing old practices underpinned by superstition and custom; these latter practices, of course, were more likely to be located within the family and a local environment. The liberal view argues that education is a means of improving the life chances of the individual, allowing for social mobility to occur. However, there is a tendency to see progress or the movement toward modern or recent times *uncritically* and to view anything in the past as worse than it is today. Vick (1990) and Symes and Preston (1997) critique the liberal view of education when they outline how working class and poorer parents did want schooling for their children and they tried desperately to be part of the political process as it developed. However, it was also the case that working class parents needed the labour of their children to survive and the compulsory clauses (and fees in some cases) caused great hardship and also tensions as working class parents struggled to maintain some control over the political process and their own children's lives.

Thus, the *revisionist* or *critical perspective* argues that the liberal/traditional approach pays too little attention to new social interests and organisations and, in particular, it leaves out analysis of and integration into the story of the lives of ordinary women, men and children. Furthermore, it does not convey the tensions, contradictions and complexities of child or adult life in the past. The earlier liberal accounts focused, for the most part, on institutions, administration, legislation, buildings, great men and politics (see for example, Barcan, 1980). Revisionists, on the other hand, have been keen to introduce arguments centred on class conflict, social control, age relations, gender and race. Revisionists have a commitment also to an explicit use of social theory and draw liberally on sociological theories (see, for example, Davey 1987, Vick 1990, Theobald 1990). Further, rather than concentrating only on issues such as church versus the state or the progress of legislation, the revisionists have turned also to the social and economic issues surrounding industrialisation and urbanisation which emerged in the latter decades of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century in the Western world, and the social theories associated with these in order to find causal explanations about the rise of mass schooling (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Since the 1980s there has also been a post-revisionist feminist challenge introducing more complexity into the arguments. Feminist historians have had an enormous impact on recent history of education with Theobald (1990) focusing on the complexity and the contradictions not just of women's position as teacher and learner but also the many contradictions of children's lives and the intersections of these with work, the family and the state.

conclusion

Mass compulsory education changed the schooling landscape. Sheer growth in pupil numbers, the establishment of more and more schools, the strengthening of compulsory clauses, the provisions of special schooling for particular groups, the establishment of the first state high schools and the provision of schooling for children in remote areas—all of these constituted for late 19th and early 20th century educators the means by which 'equality' and universal education would be achieved. It was also a re-ordering of the social and economic experience of Australian childhood, the family and work. Although the introduction of mass schooling in the 19th century changed children's

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lives it did not necessarily aim to produce equality and social justice as we know and understand these concepts today. Themes of racism, class, gender, exclusion, poverty and institutionalisation all need investigation and critical examination if we are to understand fully the rise of mass, compulsory schooling in Australia.

key words and phrases

- liberal/traditionalist perspective
- reconstructing childhood
- free, compulsory and secular
- revisionist/critical perspective
- social construction
- working class
- upper class
- mass schooling

tutorial and field activities

1. How different is Australian childhood today to what it was at the turn of the century? Interview a grandparent or other older relative about their schooling. Ask questions about the curriculum, how they travelled to school and the kinds of punishment practised. Ask questions about where learning took place; for example, did parents expect children to learn tasks/information at home at the same time. How did this change with schooling? Relate your findings to the article by Vick (1990) in Theobald and Selleck (Eds.) *Family, School and State in Australian History*.
2. If working class parents recognised some value in formal compulsory state schooling, why did they oppose it? Read Miller's book *Long Division*, Chapters 3 and 4. Gather historical information about a local school, visit the History Unit within the library of Education Queensland (Mary Street, Brisbane), and write an essay about the parents and/or the local community and their support for or opposition to the establishment of the local school by the state.
3. What benefits, if any, have Aboriginal women and girls gained from European schooling? How do you know? What evidence is there to answer this question? Read Ros Kidd's (1998) chapter 'Learning to labour' in her book *The Way We Civilize*. Write a story about how an Aboriginal girl's experiences of city life in the later 19th century.
4. How did the state intervene in child life in the 19th century? Visit a nursing home and ask to interview an elderly resident or interview an elderly relative and ask them about their working experiences as young adults. When did they leave school and why? Did they work in the home, on the farm, down the mines or in a factory? Was their income important to the family? Perhaps they had different experiences because of class/gender issues? Did they go to boarding school? Where? What kinds of learning took place? What kind of work/career or home life were they moving towards?

Note: A useful resource to devise questions for oral interviews is L. Douglas et al. (1988). *Oral History: A Handbook*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

further reading

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