

## *History of Education Research in Australia*

### *La investigación en historia de la educación en Australia*

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**Abstract:** History of education research has flourished in Australia since the 1960s. However, fewer university appointments in recent years suggest that a decline will soon occur. Nevertheless, research over the previous fifty years has produced much excellent work, following three significant historiographical trends. The first is the dominant Anglo-Empirical Whig tradition, which has concentrated on conflicts between church and state over schooling, and the founders and establishment of schools and public school systems. The second arose from social history, shifting the focus of research onto families, students and teachers. However, the concentration on the social class relations of schooling was eventually overtaken by substantial studies into gender relations. In more recent times, cultural studies and the influence of Foucault have been responsible for new research questions and research, marking a new historiographical trend.

A survey of topics for which more research is required concludes the editorial, not least of which is the history of Indigenous education.

**Keywords:** Historiography; Australian history of education; Research topics; Social history; Historians.

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It was not until the 1960s that educational historians were regularly appointed to schools, departments and faculties of education in Australian universities. In the last twenty years or so, such appointments are rare. This is having a negative impact on research although a thin stream of doctorates, articles and books continue to be produced. Such a story is not dissimilar from that of the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

In this editorial, I shall review some of the main patterns in the Australian historiography, and conclude with a discussion of those areas for which further research effort is required.

Study of the education of the indigenous peoples of Australia before the invasions and colonisations of the British from 1788 has mainly occurred as a result of the efforts of anthropologists rather than historians. Australian educational

history as a field in the discipline of history overwhelmingly concentrates on the colonial and post-colonial, the institutions, practices and efforts that built educational systems, indeed, the «educational state».

Interest in historiography as a self-conscious study of what is researched, and how that history is researched, interpreted and written, tends to peak in periods when there are attempts to go beyond «common sense» narratives and explanations. The traditional approach may be characterised as the pragmatic, or Anglo-empirical tradition. Normally it assumes that good historical analysis requires relative freedom from hypotheses arising from social theory and that clear evidence should underwrite the narratives and interpretation of historical phenomena. There is a belief that the «truth» of historical phenomena is discoverable given skilled research efforts. This tradition regards the utilisation of «theory» as likely to contaminate analysis, interfering with what evidence may have to tell the historian (Campbell & Sherington, 2002).

Arguably much of the writing arising from this tradition was simply blind to its own assumptions and theoretical foundations. This tradition is sometimes characterised as the Whig, liberal or progressive tradition. There is an assumption that some topics are more worthy of study than others and that some evidence is more legitimate than others – and that educational history is primarily a story of improvement or progress. This tradition has been responsible for a great number of works in the history of Australian education: it is the dominant tradition. It tends to privilege the biographies and contributions of the builders of institutions and school systems. These are usually male. It often traces the expansion of systems of public education as a force for the improvement of populations, economic development, educational opportunity and nation-building in general. Better examples of writing in this tradition include empathetic discussion of those who may have opposed «progress».

Most commissioned histories of schools and other educational institutions and systems, fall into this Whig tradition. Most lack critical focus as system or school leaders and builders are praised for their contributions.

This historiographical tradition has come under sustained criticism since the early 1970s (see, for example: Connell, 1987; Bessant, 1991; Blackmore, 1992; Theobald, 1998; Campbell, 1999). An early source of criticism was provided by those who felt that significant populations, such as working class, women, Indigenous, disabled, religious and ethnic or cultural minorities, were clearly ignored, misrepresented or misunderstood.

This is not to say that the dominant tradition has not added substantially to our knowledge and understanding of Australian educational history. An early formulation of the dominant tradition, that necessary and accessible public

education arose from an inefficient morass of religious denominational provision can be found as early as 1853 with the publication of George Rusden's polemic on the virtues of national education (Rusden, 1853). Most of the older studies that constituted the Australian historiography concentrate on the contests between churches and state in the building of systems of education, and then the building of the educational state (such works include Portus, 1937; Fogarty, 1959; Austin, 1961; Grundy, 1972). Further, the biographies of system-building leaders such as Peter Board, George Higginbotham, George Rusden, Frank Tate, William Wilkins and Harold Wyndham produced by historians of education provide essential knowledge about the origins and character of Australian educational institutions (Crane & Walker, 1957; Austin, 1958; Dow, 1964; Selleck, 1982; Turney, 1992).

Revisionism in educational history, arising from the rise of social history in the critical tradition from the 1960s, is a broad description for a range of challenges to the standard Whig or progressive historiography. Marxist and New Left social theory and historiography, especially from the United Kingdom, and a wave of «revisionist» histories challenging older interpretations of public education history in the United States, had a strong impact in Australia. There was usually an argument that disadvantaged populations were in part made so by schooling and that dominant knowledge systems and practices routinely advantaged wealthier and more powerful groups in the population. The focus of historical study shifted towards the experience of «ordinary» young people and teachers as much as the work of educational leaders and the founders of systems of education<sup>1</sup>.

Educational leaders and the systems they invented and managed often continued as subjects of study, but their efforts were much less likely to be uncritically celebrated. The different approaches of historians Clifford Turney and Barry Smith to William Wilkins, the heroic builder of New South Wales' public education system, or the histories of South Australia's public school system by Colin Thiele and Pavla Miller illustrate the sharp break in the historiography (Turney, 1992; Smith, 1990; Thiele, 1975; Miller, 1986).

Important works of the Australian moment in social history oriented revisionism were written by Bob Bessant, Ian Davey, Jean Ely, Pavla Miller and David McCallum<sup>2</sup>. In Adelaide there was the so-called Adelaide school of social and educational history. Its historians initially addressed the difficult relations between the working class and public schools, but went on to develop histories of childhood, youth and schooling that responded to developing social theory that

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<sup>1</sup> A late work in this tradition is Campbell & Proctor (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Works of significance from these historians include: Ely (1978); Bessant (1987); Miller & Davey (1988); Miller (1989); Teese (1989); McCallum (1990).

concerned gender relations (Campbell, 2014). In New South Wales historians Geoffrey Sherington and John Ramsland wrote significant works about children and youth (Ramsland, 1986; Sherington, 1990; Sherington & Jeffery, 1998). With work such as this the historical study of schooling was expanded into that of childhood and youth. The impact of schooling on populations became as important a question as how the educational state, more narrowly defined, developed.

A result of revisionism saw changes in the kinds of documents that were thought relevant to educational history. Collections such as those by A. G. Austin in the 1960s and 1970s had concentrated on the building of education systems and church and state relations. A later South Australian collection, *Learning and Other Things* focussed on documents that supported the writing of social histories of education (Austin, 1963; Hyams, Trethewey *et al.*, 1988).

Revisionist historiography encouraged non-traditional research methodologies. The development of comprehensive data-bases of young people enrolled in schools, or teachers' records allowed for «quantitative history». Hypotheses about what had happened to broad populations of teachers or young people caught up in education, or in transitions to the workforce could be supported by this kind of evidence. Alison Mackinnon and Craig Campbell wrote histories of secondary schools and their students based on extensive student databases collected from school records (Mackinnon, 1984; Campbell, 1999). Oral history was increasingly recognised as one of the few ways of recovering the voices of people who were usually silenced in the writing of mainstream history. The practice of oral history generated both historiographical and methodological debate (Holbrook, 1995).

The chapters by different authors collected in the book *Family, School and State in Australian History*, signified the high point of this engagement by educational historians with the social history of education (Theobald & Selleck, 1990).

As part the emergence of social history mainly women historians began to ask new questions about the experience of women in education. Jill Blackmore reviewed the developing historiography in 1992. Helen Jones and Noeline Kyle sought to rescue the historical role of women more generally (Jones, 1985; Kyle, 1986). Others were strongly influenced by second wave feminist theory. Historians such as Elizabeth Windschuttle, Marjorie Theobald, and Kay Whitehead sought to tell the histories of women who had resisted patriarchal power (Windschuttle, 1980; Theobald, 1991; Whitehead, 2003). Histories of women teachers and girls' schools predominated, although what constituted the «female curriculum» over time also received attention. There was a similar

movement among historians of Catholic education as the activity of female religious (nuns) was considered in the light of feminism (Trimingham, 2003; O'Brien, 2005). Marjorie Theobald's book on women and education in the nineteenth century was the most accomplished contribution to this sub-field (Theobald, 1996).

As the work of Michel Foucault became well known among Australian historians of education, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s, it initially promised a major influence on the historiography. Arguments about genealogies, power, subjectivities, confining institutions, and discipline and punishment for example, have had their influence. One issue of the *History of Education Review* (20/2, 1991), the main journal publishing historical research for Australia and New Zealand, engaged with the possibilities arising from Foucault. The new cross disciplinary field, cultural studies, produced the most significant Foucaultian studies that argued new ways of thinking about educational history. Ian Hunter critiqued the by now main-stream revisionist historiography in education from this perspective (Hunter, 1994). Australia's leading educational historian, R. J. Selleck regarded much of the work inspired by Foucault as useful and occasionally brilliant, but he also thought that the studies were often marred by an alienating language that mystified historical analysis<sup>3</sup>. One of the more successful Foucaultian inspired studies was David Kirk's much-needed history of the origins of physical education in Australia (Kirk, 1998).

From the 1990s, studies emerged that were inspired by topics emerging from cultural studies. Josephine May's history of the representations of Australian schools and children in film owed much to this field (May, 2013). Studies of texts and sometimes visual materials, and the discourses of education they encouraged, grew in number in the early twentieth-first century. Julie McLeod and Katie Wright provided a study of educational thinking in the 1920s and 1930s that fostered new social and personal knowledges that might transform self and society (McLeod & Wright, 2015). A concentration on issues such as changing identities and subjectivities, representations and signifying practices were often at the heart of this developing historiography. Older concerns, for example with the inequalities of access and opportunity in education, so important in social history and revisionism were not abandoned by all as the historiography responded to the different approaches<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Selleck (1991).

<sup>4</sup> For example see reasonably recent publications: Campbell (2005); Campbell, Proctor, *et al.* (2009); Teese (2014).

In the remainder of this editorial, I wish to survey the work required if satisfactory understandings of important phenomena in Australian educational history are to occur.

The existing historiography of Indigenous education is very limited. Jim Fletcher's work documented the variable access and exclusions of Aboriginal people from public education in New South Wales. Essays by Quentin Beresford provide valuable surveys (Fletcher, 1989; Beresford, & Partington, 2003). Nevertheless the historiography lacks substantial studies that develop the themes of surviving pedagogies, colonialism, racism, community resistance and agency. There is only one significant history of a school for Aboriginal children (Brook & Kohen, 1991). The voices of Indigenous peoples have yet to be published in substantial histories, though Gillian Weiss and collaborators made an excellent start (Weiss, 2000).

The Whig historiographical tradition usually interpreted the opposition of the Catholic Church in Australia to secular public education systems as contrary to reason and economy. The Roman Catholic Church did not reconcile to the passing of the acts of the colonial parliaments that established public school systems in the 1870s. The struggle to build an alternative Catholic school system inspired an historiography that shared the genre characteristics of heroic saga and hagiography. It is only quite recently that more critical writing has flowed, separate from the older hostile Whig narratives. Barry Coldrey provided an early exposure of systematic child abuse in Catholic institutions. I have already noted the work of feminist and women's historians in telling the often ignored stories of women, lay and religious, and girls, in Catholic schools. Tom O'Donoghue has directly addressed the Irish/authoritarian traditions of the church in education, and its difficult history of child abuse (O'Donoghue, 2001).

The Whig tradition did not address children and youth other than as passive subjects of the good intentions of school founders and leaders. It is the rise of social history and revisionism that allowed a different focus. Lesley Johnson and Jan Kociumbas provided significant studies, both influenced by revisionist and Foucaultian perspectives (Johnson, 1993; Kociumbas, 1997). Geoffrey Sherington and Chris Jeffery provided a judicious assessment of one of the British government's now vilified child migration schemes early in the twentieth century (Sherington & Jeffery, 1998).

Non-government schools, usually owned by churches, and responsible for the education of the children of much of Australia's more powerful and wealthy families received its first critical history in 1987 (Sherington, Petersen *et al.*, 1987). Girls' non-government schooling received some attention apart from the celebratory school histories. A rich literature surrounds the historical significance

of the founding of the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne, traditionally argued to be the first school for girls with a modern curriculum, apparently separated at last from female accomplishments (Theobald, 1989). Janet McCalman's book on how such schools «made» middle and ruling class family cultures, with Martin Crotty's work on the history of middle class masculinity, are two of the best histories of how schooling shaped individual identities and social class cultures (McCalman, 1993; Crotty, 2001).

There exist useful studies of individual universities and sometimes older colleges of advanced education. It is only very recently that studies are emerging that are both critical and comprehensive (Forsyth, 2014). There is a great need for studies that go beyond single institutions. Ursula Bygott, Ken Cable, Alison Mackinnon and Alan Barcan have written significant studies of university students (Bygott & Cable, 1985; Mackinnon, 1986, 1997; Barcan, 2002). Stuart MacIntyre's history of the social sciences is a rare example of a broad historical study of the disciplines of knowledge as they have been found in Australian universities (MacIntyre, 2010).

Broad, cohesive, critical historical studies of school curricula from colonial to more modern times barely exist. There are studies for individual school subjects, and curriculum for limited periods of time, but curriculum remains a field barely scratched. It is an important issue for the history of ideas, the sociology of knowledge and the historical role of curriculum in the educational development of Australia. Richard Teese has provided the most significant of such studies, though sociology as much as history informs the development of the argument (Teese, 2000).

How have teachers taught in Australia over time? There are no published monographs that address the history of teaching for substantial periods of time. This area sorely requires research attention. Pre-school and primary, infant and elementary levels of education attracted a lot of scholarly attention for the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, but then the studies dwindle. Comprehensive, coherent monographs are difficult to find. Exceptions in the early childhood area include work by Deborah Brennan. Larry Prochner has written an important comparative study of Australia and Canada (Brennan, 1994; Prochner, 2009).

There are a wealth of studies addressing the area of secondary schooling. They cover schools, school systems, and the social and cultural relations of schooling. Historians of this sector include Rupert Goodman, Bob Bessant, Craig Campbell, Geoffrey Sherington and Richard Teese<sup>5</sup>. A monograph by Campbell and co-

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<sup>5</sup> The works that follow address government schooling in particular: Goodman (1968); Bessant (1972); Campbell & Sherington (2013); Teese (2014).



authors in 1999 addressed the historiography as well as providing studies within the social history and revisionist tradition (Campbell, Hooper *et al.*, 1999).

Many of the more long-lasting teacher unions have had commissioned histories written. Andrew Spaul worked on the best of these as both labour and education historian (Spaul, 1985). For teachers more generally women through to the early twentieth century have received most attention. Works by Kay Whitehead and Marjorie Theobald have already been cited. B. K. Hyams wrote the only ambitious study of teacher education (Hyams, 1979). Kay Whitehead has added a further dimension to the historiography; much of her study of teachers and educational leaders occurs in the context of the making of transnational careers. Her work and forthcoming book on Lillian de Lissa, a pioneer of early childhood education in Australia and England, exemplifies this.

The 1870s Education Acts in the Australian colonies radically reduced the power of communities and parents over the schooling of their children. There has been a little attention given this topic for the nineteenth century by Malcolm Vick, but otherwise studies are sparse (Vick, 1994). Responding to neoliberal policy directions in more recent times, Australia's public education systems have reoriented towards more powerful parent and community involvements in schools, and administrative devolution. There has also been new growth for non-government schools. Many of the new schools belong to churches and minority ethno-cultural groups that flourished as a result of multicultural government policies from the 1970s. These developments are in need of historical explanation and interpretation.

Although the resources for writing histories of education, childhood and youth in Australia are much diminished, there remains an outstanding research agenda that may address old and new questions.

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