



RESTRUCTURING SECONDARY EDUCATION: PATHWAYS IN WA

Secondary schooling in Australia is at the crossroads. With the onset of the worldwide recession in the mid 1970s and the Australian Labor Government's preoccupation with deregulation, restructuring, privatisation and internationalisation, a renewed debate on the relationship between education and the economy has dominated the political agenda about education.

One of the most worrying aspects of the rise of economic rationalism is the way in which secondary schooling is blamed for our lack of economic international competitiveness. Following this argument, if Australia is to solve its current economic crisis, secondary schooling must play its part in the process of economic restructuring. This means linking secondary schooling more closely with the ideology of economic rationalism and its associated corporate management techniques of coercion, control and regulation. Economic rationalists believe that if secondary schooling

The Pathways Program was launched in Western Australia in 1991 with the stated aim of building a future workforce to suit the requirements of a technological economy. However, Barry Down argues, this really means creating workers with a narrow skill base and lowered expectations for an increasingly deskilled society.

can produce a more flexible and multi-skilled labour force Australia's economic problems will somehow magically disappear.

Historically, the arguments for state involvement in secondary education refer to the themes of international survival, national efficiency and the need for a trained workforce. After the Second World War, the instrumental logic of human capital theory drove the expansion of state secondary schooling. But as Australia's economic crisis deepened and youth unemployment increased so did the right wing attacks on the failure of the education system to deliver the goods. The 'back to basics movement' effectively articulated the commonsense view that the role of secondary schooling is to prepare students for jobs. In response to employer concerns, secondary schools are placing greater stress on vocational education, careers guidance, work experience pro-

grams, links with TAFE, curricula differentiation, and closer industry and school contact.

To claim, as the human capital approach does, that the education system develops the necessary skills and knowledge for economic growth is misleading. Certainly, secondary schooling does have a role to play in giving students a standard of literacy and numeracy which will enable them to survive in a complex technological society. However, the often repeated argument that the education system is to blame for the present economic crisis because it fails to teach the appropriate skills to enable students to find a job is wrong.

The simple fact is that the process of re-structuring and de-skilling of the labour force is resulting in more, not less, unskilled, repetitive, boring and poorly paid jobs. And, if this is the case, it seems that the major function of secondary schooling has more to do with the 'socialisation' of children into a hierarchical labour market than preparing a more sophisticated and skilled population.

Over the past decade a host of Federal Government documents including *Schooling for 15 and 16 Year-Olds* (1980), *Quality of Education in Australia* (1985), *In the National Interest: Secondary Education and Youth Policy in Australia* (1987), *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (1988), *A Changing Workforce* (1988), *Young People's Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training* (Finn Report, 1991), and *Employment-Related Key Competencies* (Mayer Report, 1992) plus the *Western Australian Beazley Report* (1984) and *Better Schools Report* (1987) have articulated the dominant ideology that secondary schooling must do a better job in helping students to negotiate the world of work. In achieving a more desirable fit between schooling and the world of work these reports recommended that secondary schooling should develop the skills and knowledge that will qualify students for paid employment, further education and an appreciation of the 'real' world.

Conscious of the barrage of criticism from employer and industry groups; the impact of the sharp economic downturn; and the changing composition of upper school retention rates; educational authorities are moving to ensure that secondary schooling produces appropriate educational outcomes in a post-industrial economy. In tackling the widespread criticism that education must 'correspond' more closely to the requirements of the economy, *In the National Interest* (1987) sought to develop a 'reciprocal' relationship between education and the economy. According to the Mayer Report (1992) this means providing 'young people with better preparation for initial employment and a foundation for their continuing vocational education and training...'

In developing a closer link between education and the economy *In the National Interest* (1987) claimed that the role of schools is 'to create the cultural pre-conditions favourable to economic and technological development'. This means that schools must 'establish relationships with and create expectations of their students which are similar to those required in the workplace'. In establishing the correct 'productive cultural

climate', the report argued that schools should establish acceptable standards (competencies), a sense of responsibility for work done, and limit interactions in the classroom to those relevant to the task at hand. In this way, schools function to encourage those behaviours deemed suitable to the workplace rather than the informal setting of family or social life.

Educational credentials are another significant dimension to the education/economy relationship. In the *National Interest* argued that education credentials are 'important regulators of the work of secondary schools'. Historically, public examinations acted as a gateway to employment opportunities and further education with the undesirable effect of exerting a disproportionate influence on the content, balance and diversity of secondary education. Today, school qualifications operate most often as a pre-selection device to screen potential candidates seeking employment. This means that students who fail to get satisfactory examination results are immediately assigned to the scrap heap because they don't have the necessary academic qualifications. As a consequence, credentials become a significant 'social currency'.

While he was Minister of Education John Dawkins was a strong advocate of the technocratic view of education. He believed that employment, education and training policies had a crucial part to play in fostering the skilled and flexible labour force needed to facilitate the process of structural adjustment. Specifically, he claimed that schools should provide 'the foundation upon which development of a more highly skilled, adaptable and productive labour force depends'. In forging closer links between education and the economy, Dawkins argued that the curriculum should instil 'positive habits of learning, and attitudes and values such as initiative and responsibility, the pursuit of excellence, teamwork, and competitiveness'.

In Western Australia the Beazley Report (1984) recommended increasing retention rates; improving the standards of literacy and numeracy; reducing the excessive influence of the Tertiary Admissions Examination; developing stronger and more formalised links between secondary schooling and TAFE; emphasising computer education and technology; developing an appropriate credentialing system to help the student gain employment and to help employers make accurate judgements about suitability for employment; and making teachers more accountable for the product of the education system.

In searching for a solution to the inherently irreconcilable functions of reproducing a differentiated labour force and at the same time pursuing the policy of secondary schooling for all, the Western Australian Ministry of Education launched its Pathways program in 1991. The Pathways program aims to achieve a more efficient allocation of students to their future vocation. A Pathway is the equivalent of a two-year (Years 11/12) study program comprised entirely of Secondary Education Authority (SEA) accredited subjects leading to sec-

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ondary graduation and offering a direct link to Universities, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) traineeships and employment. The aim is to 'provide greater vocational direction and post school opportunities'.

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he former State Labor government education policy stated that by 1996 'all schools will organise their upper secondary curriculum around the centrally developed and vocationally relevant pathways of study'.

Under the Pathways plan students are required to focus on one major area of study to provide 'vocational direction' (streaming) and broad competencies related to that field. Students must choose six subjects, one from the English group, one mathematics, and three or four from the selected Pathway. For instance, the different Pathways offered at North Lake Senior High School include: applied science; business studies; food, hospitality and tourism; art and design; community services; and technology and design. Those students who find themselves in the food, hospitality and tourism Pathway will learn a range of competencies relevant to career options in the hospitality industry including chef, catering manager, travel consultant, hotel manager and so on. For them, relevant subject selections would include accounting, home economics, word processing, senior science, work stud-



ies, computing, applied computing and law.

In structuring the school curriculum into Pathways, students are cajoled and eventually coerced into career paths that will give them a narrow skill base suited to their proper station in society. In another era, the Greek philosopher Plato believed that each individual possessed inborn qualities that determined not only their occupational status in society, but the type of education they should receive. In Plato's scheme, therefore, the ruling class (philosophers) and the working class (artisans) received distinct sorts of education. It was his opinion that each class of citizen should receive an education appropriate to their social status. This meant that the philosophers or the governing elite should receive a lengthy education in matters



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relevant to creating the ‘good’ society, while the artisans learnt about practical matters more suited to labouring work. Today, by distributing different sorts of school knowledge to different classes of students, secondary schools also play a major role in

differentiating students between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’.

Essentially, the purpose of the Pathways scheme is to construct a highly stratified education system that will better match the short term interests of the labour market. In practice, alternative courses will continue to assign working class kids, Aborigines and girls to their proper place in the social order. Meanwhile, the elite private secondary schools maintain their hegemony over the prestigious competitive academic

curriculum.

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