
The History of Education in Australia

Troy Heffernan, La Trobe University - Melbourne Campus

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1459>

Published online: 26 May 2021

Summary

Education in Australia's history stretches back tens of thousands of years, but only a small number of changes have altered its shape in that time. The first period of education lasted for thousands of years and was an Indigenous education as knowledge of religious beliefs, society, and laws was shared from one generation to the next. Knowledge of Australia's significant environmental diversity was also taught because possessing the skills to find appropriate shelter for the conditions, while developing methods of hunting, gathering, and fishing, was knowledge that needed to be taught to ensure survival.

Education changed when Europeans invaded Indigenous lands. Settlers who brought children as well as those who gave birth to children wanted their offspring to be part of an education system that mimicked England's. Ex-convicts and later members of the Church provided this service and began the tradition of non-Indigenous education in Australia. It was during the 19th century as cities and towns increased in size, and the population more generally, that the final two significant periods of Australian education began. The nation's wealthiest required religious and grammar schools that prepared children for secondary education and for university overseas, as well as in Australia as universities were established and slowly increased in number. When private education began, it was largely the only option for those seeking university degrees for their children, but this began a series of events in Australia that still sees approximately one-third of all school students attending private schools.

Public and compulsory education began in the late 19th century and gradually became more accessible. Public education, in some respects, began as governments saw the benefit in the social advantages of education, and economic incentives in creating educated laborers. However, even through the austerity of world wars and financial depression, successive generations of publicly educated individuals saw the need for increasingly continuing education beyond the compulsory school age. Public education subsequently increased in popularity through the 20th century as a growing number of students stayed beyond compulsory schooling age. Education in Australia is still seeing policies change to make schooling accessible and open to all members of society regardless of background. In the 21st century, secondary schooling is being completed by most demographic groups, and university has become accessible to a diverse group of students, many of whom may not have had access to such options only a few decades ago. This is not to suggest that systemic issues of racism and ostracism have been eradicated, but steps have been made to begin addressing these issues.

Keywords: Australia, education, Indigenous, settler, public education, Catholic education, grammar schools, university

Subjects: Educational History

Introduction

The history of education in Australia stretches back tens of thousands of years but has broadly been influenced by only a small number of major changes in that time. The Indigenous people had their own methods of passing on social expectations, laws, and environmental knowledge before Europeans brought with them an education system that reflected those primarily of England, Scotland, and Ireland. European education was originally led by ex-convicts or religious groups before this transitioned into the early incarnation of religious and private education that remains in Australia today. An additional change came as Australia's public education system slowly grew, through the late 18th and 19th centuries, to see increasing numbers of students through successive generations begin to remain in education beyond the compulsory years and increasingly take advantage of burgeoning higher education options as the 21st century approached. Within these groups and through these changes has been a system of education that at times has worked well, whereas during other periods it has attempted to adapt to various groups of society, with differing levels of success, as politics and policy has continued to shape Australia's educational landscape.

Indigenous Education

The idea of education being connected to schools and universities has only been part of Australia's history for not much longer than 200 years. Teaching and education in Australia stretches back tens of thousands of years as the Indigenous inhabitants have passed knowledge of hunting, the land, and traditions from one generation to the next (Bowler et al., 2003; Flood, 1984). Although discussion and analysis of these processes of transferring knowledge are examined in detail by Indigenous scholars, they are beyond the scope of this work; however, in an overview of the history of education in Australia, some major points can be made.

Indigenous communities have been estimated at more than 700 in the population's history, and many have their own languages and hierarchal systems, with some groups living in close proximity to one another while others were great distances apart. The size and variation of Australia's landscape, which ranges from extreme heat and deserts to freezing temperatures and snow, also means that these communities were, in some cases, living quite different lives and were in need of different skills. Yet even within these varied settings, the need for and purpose of education for tens of thousands of years before European invasion is evident because of the necessary skill sets required for members within each community (Allen, 2015).

Indigenous education was traditionally focused on two primary areas. The first was knowledge regarding the social systems, laws, and spiritual beliefs of the community and others with which they associated. The second regarded deep knowledge of the environment, which was necessary for prosperity, but also survival.

Understanding the characteristics of the community was necessary as it would be in any group setting in order to understand what behavior is and is not acceptable, but also what values and social beliefs were shared among, or deemed appropriate within, the community. In part this was because an Indigenous community could include several hundred members, and every member was a connected part of their community, so knowing the group's attitudes and expectations and obligations among its members was important (Andrews, 2010). This also included knowledge of their spiritual beliefs that had to be taught at a young age so members were aware of the animals, objects, and places that held significant spiritual meaning within the community. The spiritual knowledge also had close connections with the laws that guided the group's actions. This included the knowledge of the spiritual, but also knowing the community's history; the spiritual beliefs that contributed in their origin and history; and the events, songs, and dances that held significance to their religious belief (Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation, 2013).

The other area of education that existed for tens of thousands of years throughout Australia's history related to Indigenous survival within the environment. In this instance, what was being taught depended significantly on location, as environment, climate, and gathering and hunting techniques were dictated by the areas within which the group traveled. Thus, seeking out and creating the appropriate shelter for the climate, knowing how to gather food that was safe to eat, and knowing how to successfully hunt animals or fish were skills that differed according to environment and location. These skills were nonetheless still taught at an early age not only to allow children to participate within the community but also to ensure they had the knowledge of how to survive in sometimes very harsh environments (Pascoe, 2014).

Key aspects of Indigenous pedagogy have been explored by researchers, and current understandings of best practice in European education have regularly been found to have been part of Indigenous education for millennia. Price (2015) highlights that Indigenous elders studied young people to identify what skills and interests they possessed so they could be most effectively taught skills to benefit the community. This practice ensured Indigenous youth were not told what their role would be and did not have their life defined for them, factors only recognized in post-settlement education in recent years. The Indigenous system of working with children's skills and interests also has the added benefit of making sure that they can be paired with adults who can help foster and grow this knowledge (Hart, 1974).

Despite the clear pedagogies and processes evident in Indigenous education, for centuries settlers have refused to acknowledge or try to understand these methods. There are clear structures in Indigenous education that outline which children are taught what skills, and who passes on this knowledge. Lester (1975, p. 187) concluded that settlers never understood Indigenous education because the "classroom" was the world around the Indigenous people; they learned by the five senses; and "grannies were the examiners" and elders the "masters" of the educational world. Price (2015) summarized these findings by noting that it was not only that settlers did not understand or try to understand Indigenous education, but they also implemented their regulated system of schooling with no regard for Indigenous learning and

techniques. This prevented settler or European education benefitting from systems proven over thousands of years, and the methods they implemented interfered with Indigenous learning and demonized its methods by labeling students learning in their community as truant and judging their knowledge on a settler-based method of learning.

The result of how settlers failed to interpret or understand Indigenous education is that systematic approaches were taken that distorted Indigenous children learning in their own culture as they did before the European invasion. In addition, children were also taught skills that served the settlers' own purposes. For decades researchers have noted that this meant preparing children for unskilled labor occupations for government and using them as cheap labor for settler households (Levi-Strauss, 1956). Price (2015) also notes that these processes in part occurred because of the ethnocentric belief that Indigenous children were not capable of competing or succeeding in the settler-based school system.

Indigenous researchers are increasingly exploring all aspects of Indigenous education pre- and post-settlers (see "Further Reading"). What is apparent even in a brief summary of Indigenous education is that clear systems and pedagogies that considered changing environments, relevant skills, and personal interests and attributes have been in place for thousands of years. It is also evident that settlers made no attempt to understand this knowledge and instead ignored Indigenous learning and used education as one of the tools of systematic oppression for centuries. It is only now, as the mid-21st century approaches, that Australian education systems are beginning to take note of Indigenous pedagogies that have been successful for thousands of years.

History of Post-Settlement Education

The shift in education practices, mimicking what was happening in other current or former British settlements, began in the decades following the First Fleet's arrival (Austin, 1972).

On January 26, 1788, the First Fleet arrived in what is today often called Sydney Harbour by non-Indigenous people, but no formal "teacher" or "schoolmaster" was listed on board or present in any of the colonies until the mid-19th century. This circumstance is itself indicative of Australia's beginning as a place to deport convicts rather than a place where Britain attempted to establish a fully functioning Anglo society (Austin, 1972). During the first several decades post-settlement, Australia had an education system in place, but not in the professional sense. Instead, as convict settlements turned into growing and expanding colonies with agricultural and industrial interests, schooling and teaching were often led by convicts who had served their time; this was a scenario that increased in commonness as settlers moved to more rural and remote areas (Erickson, 1983). This system did work successfully, depending on the pre-convict history of the individual being tasked with providing education. Some convicts were well educated and subsequently had long careers in this informal education setting throughout the early 19th century. Others were viewed by parents as not having the education or temperament to successfully teach children, or parents were concerned about the moral implications of having former convicts teach children (Erickson, 1983).

The growth of Australia's education system and the success and concerns surrounding convicts becoming teachers was also shaped by personal and government finances. Leahy (1993) explored the tensions in wealthy farming areas where landowners were recruiting private tutors from England to teach their children, while governments saw advantages in paying lower wages to teachers who were ex-convicts and not professionals who would demand a higher salary. This scenario also led to class conflict, as it was the children of the laboring class who were taught by convict teachers rather than English professionals, and as Leahy (1993) argued, during this period the lower classes believed education was the best option to improve their children's prospects.

Despite the negativity surrounding convict teachers and education, the practice still grew throughout the early to mid-19th century because it was a cost-effective method of providing education, and it was also a system of schooling that could expand with Australia's spreading colonies. Staffing supply and choice may not have been such an issue in cities and urban areas, but in many smaller regions it was often a case of a convict teacher or no teacher at all (Leahy, 1993). Convict teachers may have been the only option for some, but as the 19th century progressed, the system faced continued difficulties. Some issues were clear: for example, some parents felt their children were getting a substandard education compared to what was being offered in the cities and to those who had the ability to employ private tutors. At the same time, the learning achievements of convict-led schools and classrooms fell into question, but not only because of convicts' lack of what could be viewed as professional skills or qualifications. It has also been argued that another reason for the lack of success of some convict-led schools was due to the realities of serving the working classes at a time when schooling was not compulsory. This could lead to low enrollment, even in areas with high numbers of school-aged children; irregular attendance because of seasonal work or family obligations; or truancy because education did not always hold a valuable place in the public's perception (Leahy, 1993). However, as the pressure grew to improve schooling options and performance, the mid-19th century saw governments begin the practice of importing missionaries from the British Isles to replace the convict teachers and bring an enhanced professionalism to the field.

The change from convict-led schools and classrooms to those led by teachers from a generally more educated and officially organized system was a step toward formalized state and federal governments overseeing education in the 21st century. Nonetheless, because this change occurred via the use of religious organizations, it began a school divide that is still present in Australia today. The shift to religious-led schools and classrooms may have placated the arguments against convict teachers and gone some way toward ensuring that students were gaining the benefits of a moral education that was believed to be instilled by the Church and to offer an alternative to private tutors for landowners (Molony, 2000). However, the fact that this system was at first led by the Anglican Church in conjunction with various colonial governments was an immediate cause of contention. On a wider political level, this education shift garnered some criticism with those connected to schooling because they questioned the growing relationship between the governing bodies and the Anglican Church, particularly in a large and growing field like education (Austin, 1972). The decision also caused religious conflict because the Catholic and Presbyterian churches questioned the Anglican Church's government alliance and official status in delivering and influencing education to the masses.

The Catholic and Presbyterian churches were in part concerned by their loss of influence on culture, but also by the potential loss of followers, as their traditional Irish and Scottish bases experienced strong connections to Anglicanism via schools (Potts, 1999).

The governors of the varying colonies could not ignore the Church's aspiration or concerns, nor could they ignore the differing views from within the community. The result was governors facing a largely never-ending negotiation process, as any shift in schooling influence toward a religious group or secular education movement resulted in praise from some and condemnation from others. While this delicate process was taking place, the governors regularly also faced questions from the colonies' elite. These questions pertained not only to what religious or secular subjects should be taught but also to whether schooling should be provided to the masses at all, a clear repercussion of the class system that settlers and first-generation settlers brought with them from the British Isles (Hyams & Bessant, 1972). Despite parties from religious, secular, and class backgrounds each having different views and arguments, and lobbying for outcomes to serve their own beliefs, the primarily Anglican (but more widely religious) control of schooling continued throughout the colonies for several decades during the mid-19th century. As with convict-led education before it, for the colonies' leaders, religious-led education had its critics. Nonetheless, it was a system that brought a sense of professionalism to education and that was financially prudent because of the Church's involvement, which in turn made expanding the system as the colonies grew possible. As the 19th century continued, Australia's growing population from various backgrounds and with differing beliefs eventually led to the need for governments to begin addressing the calls for secular education options (Meadmore, 2001).

Thus, after more than 70 years of Australian education being led by ex-convicts and the Church, in the 20 years between 1872 and 1895 the governments of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia passed acts to begin the process of making free and secular primary education available (Ely, 1978). From a 21st-century historical perspective, it is possible to see an evolution of post-settlement education moving from convicts to religious teachers, to governments advocating for free and secular education, with these changes being influenced by responses to parents, church groups, and community members. However, it also cannot be ignored that social and government factors impacted these changes; particularly the acts of the late 19th century.

Nation-building as a practice faces much criticism today for its connections to racism and its implications for Australia's Indigenous population (Butcher, 2008; Soutphommasane, 2009), but in the late 19th century it was nation-building and social order that had perceived benefits from formal schooling. Schooling provided one avenue by which to exercise control over the colonies, by indirectly teaching morals (as did the Church). It also provided instruction on how to be a "good" citizen who fit into Australia's growing society (Hyams & Bessant, 1972). At the same time, governments were drawing connections between education and the economy, and the knowledge that better education could improve one's potential to contribute to the economy in adulthood was a further incentive for governments to increase their control over education (Ely, 1978). But the limitations of these intensions must be recognized. There was indeed an objective to educate the masses in order to increase their economic contributions, but its purpose was to provide the education needed for a labor workforce; education for professional workforces largely remained the unchallenged domain of the wealthy (Leahy, 1993).

Free and secular primary education had become available throughout much of Australia by the end of the 19th century; however, as the 20th century began, several issues stood in the way of the prosperity of public education. The first was that the growth of public education from 1870–1900 had “trained” rather than “educated” students. This training, as opposed to education, prepared students to be educated laborers, not learners, and in many senses made higher education less attainable for those in public education (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Education at the turn of the 20th century was growing, but it was also impacted heavily by distance. Schools were being opened in rural and remote locations, but they were still more readily available in urban areas. Education at this time also catered almost primarily to settler or migrant students (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012). Indigenous students faced a significant set of prejudices and complexities in attaining education (which are far from rectified in the 21st century), and these issues continue to be analyzed by Indigenous scholars. Some of these issues were summarized in the section “Indigenous Education,” but the primary issues of note are that Indigenous communities had their own clear and effective pedagogies in place to facilitate learning (Hart, 1974; Lester, 1975). However, these pedagogies were ignored by settlers, who then vilified the Indigenous people for continuing their traditional learning, and used their racist ethnocentric beliefs to educate Indigenous children in ways that provided cheap labor for government projects and domestic duties in settler homes (Price, 2015).

It is also difficult to discuss this post-1901 period of public education in Australia because although 1901 represented the combining of self-governing British colonies to form the federal government of Australia, each state and territory nonetheless had ample power over their own education funds and policies, which meant different rules, priorities, methods, systems, and measures were used across the nation (Heffernan, 2018). Broad analysis of this period is nonetheless possible from a national viewpoint.

The first 30 years of the 20th century were primarily about rectifying the “training” rather than “educating” mentality of the late 19th century. The first step to changing the perceived purpose of public education was to increase the pre-primary school offerings that helped demonstrate the growing importance education was believed to hold for children. Nonetheless, because students remained in school longer, as well as because of burgeoning post-primary options as secondary schools (and universities in capital cities) grew in popularity, the shape of public education made great advances in Australia (Cormack, 2012). These were the steps that allowed the middle class to gain access to professional and management employment opportunities in business and the public sector that were traditionally only accessible to those who came from private education. This change was primarily open to the middle class, but although the shift took much longer, in the first decades of the 20th century the working class began to remain in education longer, with some having the capacity to use public education to work in fields that traditionally would have been closed off to them (Cormack, 2012). Also during this time were the first occurrences of women entering secondary school and higher education, although these were still extremely rare when compared to the number of men completing these qualifications (Darian-Smith & Waghorne, 2019).

The period leading up to the 1950s saw the earlier trends of education continue, but some negative consequences were associated with the number of people attaining higher education. As has been discussed, continuing beyond compulsory education was determined largely by (a) the schooling options available in the geographic area, and (b) whether families had the capacity to see their children continue beyond compulsory schooling rather than enter the labor force or provide assistance in the home (Cormack, 2012). Accordingly, post-compulsory, secondary, and higher education remained open to the wealthy, and opportunity decreased as family finances became tighter or accessing these options became geographically more difficult (McLean, 2016). Thus, national and global circumstances such as two world wars, and the Great Depression caused significant setbacks between 1900 and 1950. Families moved where work was available, and these movements rarely took into account educational opportunities when the need for shelter and food had become a priority. A move often meant relocating to less populated rural areas, where employment may have been on offer, but educational options were reduced (Crossley et al., 2015).

The 50-year upward trend of the first half of the 20th century nonetheless continued as secondary school numbers expanded; more university places became available; and these options were slowly able to be utilized by more members of society. One reason for this on a national level was the growing number of second- and third-generation students entering compulsory education whose parents and grandparents had also experienced compulsory schooling. However on a whole, barriers remained in place because although access to education was increasing and some people were taking advantage of it, education beyond the compulsory years remained heavily divided by class (Crossley et al., 2015).

During the 1950s–1980s, the next major step forward for public education occurred. As the postwar economy boomed, the need for children to enter the labor force as early as possible decreased, which meant improvements in post-compulsory schooling numbers. The 1960s and 1970s also saw a significant increase in the number of higher education institutions throughout the country. The elite system of higher education, in which one (or sometimes two) universities was located in each state, was joined by a growing number of new institutions. Higher education gained a mass market appeal beyond those leaving private schools and the wealthier public school graduates (Forsyth, 2015; Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018).

These successes all occurred in part because of the benefit of operating without the financial constraints of war and financial depression. They were also influenced by governments and the public gaining an interest in education to increase opportunities for children from a family perspective, but also because of the national importance governments saw education hold as the population expanded and Australia's need to be at the forefront of the global economy grew (Marginson, 1997).

During this period there was a continuing change in the expectation of education; although more students continued beyond compulsory education, the final years of secondary education were still largely seen as unessential unless a student intended to continue on to university. As can be seen throughout most education trends of the 20th century, the numbers changed as a desire for increased levels of education continued, but by the late 1970s, the number of students in public schools completing their secondary education was still low compared to numbers at religious and independent schools. Other factors were, of course, at play during this period and influenced the prosperity of public schooling.

Scholars have argued that the boom of education needs and expectations at this time was ahead of construction and training, which led to overcrowded schools and questions concerning the quality of teacher training that was provided. In addition to these less than ideal circumstances, an overabundance of employment opportunities that did not require high school completion presented a justifiable reason not to complete post-compulsory education (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Nonetheless, the increase in university places across a growing number of institutions in slowly diversifying areas meant that a small but growing number of publicly educated students were also transitioning into higher education, and this was true for many for whom this would have been very unlikely in the decades before.

Since the 1980s, public education in Australia has been peaking but is also increasingly impacted by government policy and funding. Education continued to be an important political and social issue, and federal and state governments made significant attempts to increase the availability of education to all members of society. At this time, public schools are educating approximately two-thirds of school students (Australian Government, 2020). On the one hand, this is a success, as completing a high school degree in the second decade of the 21st century was a widely held standard regardless of gender and location. This period saw teacher training become an academic pursuit as teaching colleges were phased out during the 1970s and 1980s, and attempts were made to increase the quality of education for those who did not fit within “standard” classrooms, including efforts to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, those from challenging backgrounds, and gifted students. However, the gaps in achievement that still exist cannot be ignored and are influenced by factors including but not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic status, location, and disability.

Another aspect of public education during this period was the purposeful amalgamation of state and territory education. Each area was traditionally in charge of its own policies, but the 1990s onward saw successive federal governments (regardless of political party) link federal funding to adhering to federal policies, which has largely extinguished much of the state’s and territory’s independence (Heffernan, 2018). The shift to state and territory similarity allowed the federal government to have a higher level of control of what each area was doing as it provided international rankings of education outcomes from the likes of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but governments were still dividing schools and sectors to increase parent choice in schooling via school transparency (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). This was primarily achieved through ACARA’s *MySchool* website <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/my-school-website>>, which enabled members of the public to access a variety of information relating to a specific school. This information included data relating to student and teacher numbers, but also results for the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, as well as information relating to the socioeconomic characteristics of the school (ACARA, 2010). After almost a decade of standardized tests and transparency relating to school choice, the result has been that the media and governments alike regularly use this information to create tables and rank schools, and research has indicated how this information often results in portrayals of private education as returning superior results to state education (Mockler, 2013).

The result of the focus on transparency and public availability of test results; attendance; suspensions; and student, parent, and teacher satisfaction is the increasing public perception that nongovernment schools are providing a higher “quality” of education (Bonner & Caro, 2012). At the same time, though it remains an ongoing political debate, many scholars argue that private and religious schools are continuing to be heavily funded by successive

governments at the cost of public education (Gillespie, 2014). On the surface, it may seem rather clear that private schools should be privately funded, as they were earlier in their history; however, an examination of how nongovernment education rose to prominence in Australia illustrates how this situation began and why it is arguably maintained in the current period.

Religious and Independent Schooling

The general country-wide shift toward free and public primary schooling for all children in the late 19th century can be viewed as a pivotal moment in Australia's education history. It was at this point, almost 150 years ago, when the major separation between state and religious or independent schooling began and has largely only increased since.

Because governments had been funding the Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches as a cost-effective labor system, to lead schools and staff classrooms until the late 19th century when the schooling acts were passed, the shift to free and public education had several consequences. The fact that government systems were secular meant, first, that the churches lost this funding, as these funds were used to initiate the free and secular schooling programs (Potts, 1999). The repercussions of the financial losses were different for each group.

The least affected group was perhaps the Catholic Church. Their immense growth throughout the 19th century ensured that, despite their financial losses from government policy shifts, their size was such that they had enough members of the church to lead and staff their schools. Thus, though Catholic schools charged fees, these were often minimal. The Anglican and Presbyterian schools did not have the size of the Catholic Church to rely on when staffing their schools, and accordingly charged higher fees. Anglican and Presbyterian school systems also grew faster than their churches did in Australia, and this also resulted in their already higher fees increasing at a faster rate than those of the Catholic schools (Potts, 1999). The fees associated with religious schooling also meant that, regardless of religious underpinnings, religious schooling became an inadvertent means of class separation. Public schools were available to all; Catholic (and to some extent Presbyterian) were an option only for the more financially sound, and Anglican schooling soon became an option of only the wealthy (Potts, 1999).

The stratified school system also had implications for secondary education, as the system grouped together wealthy students, who often had the ambition to attend university. Though Australia's first university, the University of Sydney, was founded in 1851, the country nonetheless experienced a slow growth in university numbers throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Wealthy people had been importing English tutors because no "suitable" schooling (in their view) was available during most of the 19th century, and the students from these families who were continuing to university often still traveled to England, as this was an individual family choice. Schools that charged high fees, however, drew together large groups of students with ambitions to attend university, which was a driving force in increasing tertiary education in Australia (Heffernan, 2017).

The increase in demands for secondary education for the purposes of university also led to the establishment of grammar schools. This started in the 1850s but increased heavily in the later 19th century in conjunction with the growth of religious schools charging higher fees, thus

only being available to some social classes. With universities expanding, grammar schools were another method, in this instance secular, to allow the middle class to prepare their children for university. Grammar schools nonetheless charged fees, and accordingly this imposed the same class restrictions experienced by the expensive religious schools, so these schools were only the option of professionals or families from wealthy agricultural, industrial, or merchant backgrounds (Ely, 1978). Schooling with fees attached, and particularly secondary schooling, may have been a consequence of governments defunding some groups to fund public primary (and some secondary) schooling, but it cannot be denied some saw the resulting class restrictions of these fees as a positive outcome. As Ely (1978) illustrated, some members of the wealthy classes viewed religious and grammar schools as a way of keeping their children away from the perceived undesirable traits of the poorer classes.

Regardless of whether they were for religious or grammar education, steadily increasing fees during the early 20th century, particularly for secondary schools, formed a sharp divide between public and paid education. Because the objective of public education was mainly to provide primary education in order to create a minimally educated labor workforce (Campbell & Proctor, 2014), the fees associated with private schools essentially acted as a gatekeeper, preventing the poorer classes from entering the education system that would lead to university and professional careers (Ely, 1978). This system of schooling continued until the mid-20th century; arguably World War I, the Depression era, and World War II led to some political issues drawing greater attention than education during these decades. One might nonetheless suggest that during this time, Australia's federal and state political leaders and social elite had little interest in education equity, as their societal class had the option of safely traveling through the private school system and onto university.

This notion of a distracted and preoccupied public not having time to dedicate to a campaign for a more equal education system gains some support from the fact that it was during the 1950s, after the Depression and war had come to an end, that demand for public education options increased heavily, and governments were forced to act. Subsequently, public secondary education expanded rapidly as expectations for students to complete 12 years of schooling similarly increased. This growth additionally led to the beginning of Australia's mass market higher education system and the addition of usually one or two universities in each state, and then, often, to multiple choices, sometimes stretching to five or more in Australia's most populous areas (Forsyth, 2015).

In examining private schooling in Australia's education history, it must, however, be noted that private schools played a role in how the nation's public secondary schooling system was deployed. In some areas, this meant political lobbying to ensure that newly constructed secondary schools were geographically distanced enough to lessen competition to existing private schools (Ely, 1978). This method can perhaps be viewed as a less than equitable move by those campaigning for private schools, but one might also concur that this potentially led to new public schools not being built in already wealthy areas, thus instead providing an impetus for public schools to be constructed in locations that did not already have high populations of school-attending children. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that a schooling system that had, for more than a century, been controlled by several religious groups, as well as the boards of trustees of grammar schools, had significant political influence and arguably

had often been the alma mater of the state and federal education leaders. This power resulted in concessions being made to the private school sector despite the fact that plans had been enacted to avoid this very scenario.

The process of private school concessions began with lobbying to essentially overrule the secular provisions (Section 116) of the Australian Constitution, which ensured that religious and private schools were entirely privately funded (Sherman, 1982). The first concessions to private and religious schools came in the form of tax advantages during the 1950s, but in 1962 the federal government was pressured into introducing further funding concessions by the Catholic Schools Commission, which had found providing education to be a more expensive pursuit in the mid-20th century than it had been several decades before (Canavan, 2018). However, it has been noted that these concessions in part occurred because of societal and school shifts that neither the Church nor the government had predicted.

By the 1960s, churches had seen a decline in parishioners that resulted in a decline in income from donations and other financial contributions. The decline of the church as a sector in Australia also resulted in numbers of men and women going into the church decreasing. At the same time, Catholic education was continuing to grow, but with fewer people entering the Church, this meant lay school staff were being employed at ever-increasing numbers, and they had to be paid full salaries. The conflict of funding in part occurred because, although private education was entirely privately funded, these schools and the students attending them were causing no financial burden on federal or state governments. However, in the case of Catholic schools, they were educating approximately 20% of Australian school children in the early 1960s (Canavan, 2018).

The issue of funding to Catholic schools became a national debate in 1962 after St. Brigid's primary school in Goulburn, New South Wales, lacked the available funds to carry out required maintenance. In response, the archdiocese closed the local Catholic schools, which forced approximately 1,000 children into the local state system without warning, an enrollment number the government schools were unable to accommodate. For one week the Catholic schools remained closed before this period of intense national debate prompted a funding shift of government money to Catholics schools (Warhurst, 2012). This funding shift continued in 1963 after then-prime minister Robert Menzies made state funding available to private schools for the construction of science facilities, before state and federal funding for Catholic schools was increased and sustained into the 21st century (Canavan, 2018; Warhurst, 2012).

The politics of private schooling continued to be driven by Catholic schools in the 1970s. As the 1972 federal election approached, the Labor Party led by Gough Whitlam determined the Catholic vote would be necessary if they hoped to defeat William McMahon's sitting Liberal Party. Labor subsequently proposed a "needs-based" funding model for all schools (whether public, religious, or private), and following their victory, an attempt was made to distribute state funding to government schools and financially burdened religious schools, primarily Catholic schools (Hocking, 2008).

Advocates of private schooling rejected the needs-based approach as it prevented wealthy religious and private schools from being able to access public funds. Those against the needs-based approach primarily targeted their argument against the Whitlam government's Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, which was appointed in December 1972

and chaired by Professor Peter Karmel, and more specifically against the resulting report that was published in May 1973: the *Schools in Australia* report (Hayes, 1999). The private schooling advocates targeted the Schools Commission and report on many fronts, but a primary basis was that funding to some private schools and not others impacted on a parent's right to choose schooling, which was a democratic principle (Tanner, 1983). Regardless of the private schooling advocates' success at their campaign, their aspirations were enhanced by the fact that the Labor government's policy still had to pass through the Liberal government-controlled Upper House. Thus, the funding legislation designed to bring some financial assistance to poorer religious schools was blocked until provisions were also made to essentially enable wealthy private and religious schools to access the same funding (Marginson, 1993).

It has been argued that it was since the decision to include wealthy private schools in the same scheme originally designed to aid financially struggling schools, that the private school landscape in Australia has not changed a significant amount. While public schools were conceived, funded, and expanded to prepare students for trades or further education, from the late 1970s onward, Labor and Liberal governments have secured the conservative vote by increasing funds to private schools at the cost of public education (Marginson, 1993). Despite the economic debate over how funds should be distributed, the social element of this process has been noted as essentially being viewed as framing public education as the system "inhabited only by families unable or unwilling to enter private schooling" (Marginson, 1993, p. 214). These discussions were also not limited to schools, as the privatization of public services was a debate that continued as education was subsequently made part of an argument that suggested the notion that public services were stagnant, inefficient, and wasteful while private services were efficient and continually shaped themselves to public and market demand (Connell et al., 1982).

Though significant debate is possible about the reasons for and legitimacy of private schools receiving public funding, the private school enrollments nonetheless increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with the trend only increasing as comparative studies and international competition became part of the wider political and public discussion. As Australia began falling in international assessments of performance and completion, that private schools fared better than public schools was a point of distinction but only furthered the notion that private schools offered a better education; but this argument regularly occurs without any analysis of why this might be the case (Williams & Carpenter, 1991). The shift of national and global education, and neoliberal and performative audits, consistently favor private schools, and governments have used this as a method to justify funding increases or indirectly promote private schooling. John Howard's Liberal government instigated elements of funding being tied to enrollments after decades of private school enrollments increasing year by year (Connell, 2009). This was followed by Kevin Rudd's Labor government (and later governments regardless of party) implementation of NAPLAN standardized tests and the *MySchool* school data website. These are reported as providing information for parents but nonetheless continue the dialogue that private education is a better method of schooling that deserves increased funding because of the results it receives (Mockler, 2013).

In the last decade, a significant shift in education (and its political connections) is also demonstrated through the *Review of Funding for Schooling* (Gonski et al., 2011), colloquially known as the "Gonski Report." In April 2010, Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education in the

Rudd Labor Government, selected David Gonski to be the chairman of a committee that would form the report and subsequently make recommendations regarding funding of education in Australia. The review was designed to investigate the inequity in education that had formed over the last several decades. As Vickers (2005) noted, Australia's education funding model had not been effective and had encouraged parents to send their children to private schools, and the subsequent increase in private school education led to further deficiencies in the funding model. Vickers was not alone in this evaluation, with Kenway (2013) concluding that the flawed funding model resulted in increased private school funding being drawn from public education funds, which left public schools in a disproportionate need of extra funds and resources.

As the Gonski report and recommendations came into effect, Julia Gillard had become prime minister and in late 2012 declared in a speech that the Gonski reforms were designed to create funding reforms that "put a child's needs at the heart of our funding decisions" (Gillard, 2012). Kenway (2013) argues that although the ways the Gonski reforms were enacted did not always match the purposes they were intended to serve, they were nonetheless aimed at solving the funding distortion Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, and the Labor Party had identified. Kenway's point is perhaps proven by the fact the report was removed from the federal government website after the Liberal Party's election win in 2013.

In 2017, Gonski chaired another review, the *Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Australia Government, 2018), often referred to as Gonski 2.0, and this review received much criticism from the media and critical scholars. The criticism largely centered around the Liberal government, using Gonski (who had chaired the Labor government's review) to make new recommendations that served the Liberal government's education aspirations. As Gannicott (2019) concluded, the result was that Gonski's name, which was linked to Labor's ideals of a more equitable funding system, was used to justify the new report's findings, which served to see funding increase to Catholic and independent schools at the cost of public education. What Labor and Liberal governments use of Gonski's reports makes clear is that both major political parties know a more equitable funding model is needed, but what equity looks like appears to differ depending on political perspective, which is the antithesis of how equity should be attained.

Conclusion

The history of education in Australia stretches back tens of thousands of years but has broadly been influenced by only a few major changes in that time. The first and longest period was of Indigenous education as knowledge of social expectations and laws, and religious beliefs shared from one generation to another, which ensured harmony within the community. At the same time, knowledge of Australia's significant environmental diversity was needed to find appropriate shelter for the conditions, and methods of hunting, gathering, and fishing was knowledge that needed to be taught to successive generations to aid in survival.

Education in Australia changed when Europeans invaded Indigenous lands. As children of settlers and the first generation of Australian-born children reached an educatable age, ex-convicts and members of the Church primarily led education and began the tradition of non-Indigenous Australian education reflecting English, Scottish, and Irish practices. As the

population grew along with cities and towns, it was during the 19th century that the final two significant periods of Australian education began. At a time when the Church controlled most education options, the nation's wealthiest required religious and grammar schools that prepared children for secondary education and university. The need of private education has subsided significantly in the 21st century, but the popularity of private education has not, with approximately one-third of students not attending public schools.

The final change to education came with the rise of public education. It started with a need for educated laborers, but through the austerity of world wars and financial depression, successive generations saw the need for increasingly continuing education beyond the compulsory school age. Public education progressed throughout the 20th century to the current day, where completing secondary education is now standard across most groups, while the increase in higher education options has made tertiary education an option to an increasingly high number and more diverse group of school leavers.

In 21st century, Australia's education system continues to strive forward and be more inclusive and accessible to wider members of the community regardless of location or circumstance, though areas in need of improvement still exist. Scholars, educators, and governments continue to contend with some long-standing and recent issues relating to some aspects, and in the future one might predict it is the ongoing debate around public and private school funding that will shape the future of how Australian education will look in the years to come.

Further Reading

Increasingly, Indigenous scholars are analyzing Indigenous education as the significance of this issue and the importance of these scholars' voices being heard is understood. A starting point for examining this research (by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars) includes the work of Nina Burridge, Rhonda Craven, Kevin Lowe, Jacinta Maxwell, Kaye Price, Karen Vaughan, and Frances Whalan. Works concerning convict education are rare because of the scarce details on this topic, and accordingly most accounts feature in historical works concerning the wider formation and development of European society, such as those by Manning Clark, Geoffrey Blainey, and Henry Reynolds. Analyses of the trajectory of education in Australia from convict schools to religious and grammar schools is discussed in works by Keith Moore, Thomas O'Donoghue, Andrew Vandenberg, and Mark Wilson. Finally, accounts of private and public education into the 21st century (including comparisons) are contained in works discussed in this article and include those by Chris Bonnor, Craig Campbell, Jane Caro, David Gillespie, Helen Proctor, and Tony Taylor. For works concerning the history and growth of higher education in Australia, see Hannah Forsyth, Troy Heffernan, and Simon Marginson. Because of the shift in thinking and understanding European history in Australia, some care must be taken when assessing the views of scholars assessing Australia's education history. Some understandings of society over the last 50 years, or conclusions drawn about such, may not reflect how educators and historians look upon these topics in the 21st century. The data these earlier investigations generated is nonetheless invaluable, as few scholars have assessed these areas of Australia's public and private schooling history.

References

Allen, H. (2015). The past in the present? Archaeological narratives and Aboriginal history. In A. McGrath & M. Webb (Eds.), *Long history, deep time* (pp. 171–202). ANU Press.

Andrews, M. (2010). *The seven sisters*. Spinifex Press.

Austin, A. (1972). *Australian education 1788-1900: Church, state and public education in colonial Australia*. Pitman Pacific Books.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority. (2010). *My school: Terms of use* <<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>>.

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2016). *National report on schooling in Australia 2011: National initiatives and achievements; 2.8 Strengthening accountability and transparency* <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-2011/national-initiatives-and-achievements/accountability-and-transparency>>.

Australian Government. (2018, April 30). *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools* <<https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/through-growth-achievement-report-review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-0>>. Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

Australian Government. (2020, November 5). How are schools funded in Australia? <<https://www.education.gov.au/how-are-schools-funded-australia>> Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

Bonner, C., & Caro, J. (2012). *What makes a good school?* UNSW Press.

Bowler, J., Johnston, H., Olley, J., Prescott, J., Roberts, R., Shawcross, W., & Spooner, N. (2003). New ages for human occupation and climatic change at Lake Mungo, Australia. *Nature*, 421(6925), 837-840.

Burridge, N., & Chodkiewicz, A. (2012). An historical overview of Aboriginal education policies in the Australian context. In N. Burridge, F. Whalan, & K. Vaughan (Eds.). *Indigenous education: Transgressions* (Cultural Studies and Education) (Vol. 86, pp. 9-21). Sense Publishers.

Butcher, J. (2008). *Australia under construction: Nation-building; past, present and future*. ANU E Press.

Campbell, C., & Proctor, H. (2014). *A history of Australian schooling*. Allen & Unwin.

Canavan, K. (2018). The development of a system of Catholic schools in Greater Sydney and the emergence of Catholic Education Offices. *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, 39, 129-145.

Connell, R. (2009). Good teachers on dangerous ground: Towards a new view of teacher quality and professionalism <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480902998421>>. *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(3), 213-229.

Connell, R., Kessler, S., Dowsett, G., & Ashenden, D. (1982). *Making the difference: Schools, families and social division*. Allen & Unwin.

Cormack, P. (2012). "Pupils differently circumstanced and with other aims": Governing the post-primary child in early twentieth-century Australia <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2012.713924>>. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(4), 295-316.

-
- Crossley, M., Hancock, G., & Sprague, T. (2015). *Education in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*. Bloomsbury.
- Darian-Smith, K., & Waghorne, J. (2019). *The First World War, the universities and the professions in Australia 1914-1939*. Melbourne University Press.
- Ely, J. (1978). *Reality and rhetoric: An alternative history of Australian education*. Alternative Publishing Cooperative in association with New South Wales Teachers' Federation.
- Erickson, R. (1983). *The brand on his coat: Biographies of some Western Australian convicts*. University of Western Australia Press.
- Flood, J. (1984). *Archaeology of the dreamtime: The story of prehistoric Australia and its people*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Forsyth, H. (2015). *A history of the modern Australian university*. University of New South Wales Press.
- Gannicott, K. (2019). Gonski 2.0: A controlled flight into terrain. *Australian Quarterly*, 90(1), 21-31.
- Gillard, J. (2012). A national plan for school improvement <<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-18776>>. National Press Club.
- Gillespie, D. (2014). *Free schools*. Macmillan.
- Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., & Tannock, P. (2011). *Review of funding for schooling: Final report* <<https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf>>.
- Hart, M. (1974). *Kulila: On Aboriginal education*. Australia and New Zealand Book Company.
- Hayes, D. (1999). The emergence of discourses of equitable provision in the 1970s: Progress or reconfiguration of power relations? In C. Campbell (Ed.), *End of a century: New work in the history of education* (pp. 127-139). University of Sydney.
- Heffernan, A. (2018). *The principal and school improvement: Theorising discourse, policy, and practice*. Springer.
- Heffernan, T. (2017). A fair slice of the pie? Problematising the dispersal of government funds to Australian universities <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2017.1377965>>. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(6), 658-673.
- Heffernan, T., & Heffernan, A. (2018). Language games: University responses to ranking metrics <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12139>>. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(1), 29-39.
- Hocking, J. (2008). *Gough Whitlam: A moment in history*. Melbourne University Press.
- Hyams, B., & Bessant, B. (1972). *Schools for the people? An introduction to the history of state education in Australia*. Longman.

-
- Kenway, J. (2013). Challenging inequality in Australian schools: Gonski and beyond <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.770254>>. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(2), 286–308.
- Leahy, S. M. (1993). *Convict teachers and the children of Western Australia, 1850–1890* <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1461>.
- Lester, E. (1975). Education by Aborigines for Aborigines. In D. Edgar (Ed.), *Sociology of Australian education: A book of readings* (pp. 186–94). McGraw-Hill Book.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1956). *Race and history*. UNESCO
- Marginson, S. (1993). *Education and public policy in Australia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marginson, S. (1997). *Educating Australia: Government, economy and citizen since 1960*. Cambridge University Press.
- McLean, W. (2016). *Why Australia prospered: The shifting sources of economic growth*. Princeton University Press.
- Meadmore, P. (2001). “Free, compulsory and secular?” The re-invention of Australian public education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(2), 113–25.
- Mockler, N. (2013). Reporting the “education revolution”: MySchool.edu.au in the print media <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2012.698860>>. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(1), 1–16.
- Molony, J. (2000). *The native-born: The first White Australians*. Melbourne University Press.
- Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Women’s Council Aboriginal Corporation. (2013). *Traditional healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari*. Magabala Books.
- Pascoe, B. (2014). *Dark emu: Black weeds; agriculture or accident?* Magabala Books.
- Potts, A. (1999). Public and private schooling in Australia: Some historical and contemporary considerations. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81(3), 242–45.
- Price, K. (2015). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An Introduction for the Teaching Profession* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Sherman, J. (1982). Government finance of private education in Australia: Implications for American policy <<https://doi.org/10.1086/446319>>. *Comparative Education Review*, 26(3), 391–405.
- Soutphommasane, T. (2009). *Reclaiming patriotism: Nation-building for Australian progressives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tanner, T. (1983). The policy formulation process of an Australian political party in opposition: A case study of the Australian Labor party’s schools commission proposal. *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 25(1), 44–75.

Vickers, M. (2005). In the common good: The need for a new approach to funding Australia's schools <<https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410504900304>>. *Australian Journal of Education*, 49(3), 264-277.

Warhurst, J. (2012). Fifty years since the "Goulburn Strike": Catholics and education politics. *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, 33, 72-82.

Williams, T., & Carpenter, P. (1991). Private schooling and public achievement in Australia <[https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355\(91\)90022-K](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355(91)90022-K)>. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 15(5), 411-431.

Related Articles

History and Development of Education in Africa

History of Curriculum Development in Schools

Learning in History