

EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA AND OCEANIA

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Australia
 - 2.1. The Context
 - 2.1.1. The Social Context
 - 2.1.2. Governance
 - 2.1.3. Participation in Education
 - 2.2. Schools: The Compulsory Years
 - 2.2.1. Three Schools
 - 2.2.2. School Structures
 - 2.2.3. School Governance
 - 2.2.4. Resources and Teachers
 - 2.2.5. Educational Goals and Curriculum Directions
 - 2.3. Preschools
 - 2.4. Schools: The Post-Compulsory Years
 - 2.5. Vocational Education
 - 2.6. Universities
 3. Aotearoa/New Zealand
 - 3.1. The Context
 - 3.1.1. The Social Context
 - 3.1.2. Participation in Education
 - 3.2. Schools: The Compulsory Years
 - 3.2.1. School Structures
 - 3.2.2. School Governance
 - 3.2.3. Resources and Teachers
 - 3.2.4. Educational Goals and Curriculum Directions
 - 3.3. Preschools
 - 3.4. Post-Compulsory Education: The National Qualifications Framework
 - 3.5. Universities
- Acknowledgements
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Case studies of Australia and New Zealand show some of the similarities and differences that have driven educational change in the two countries and continue to

drive it. Australia and New Zealand have much in common, arising from their histories as British colonies, their proximity to each other, their distance from Europe and America, and their closeness to Asia and the Pacific Islands. Since the mid 1970s, they have had to embark on major social and economic reforms, shifting their economic bases, cultural, and economic ties to nations in the region. Part of this change has seen increasing immigration from Asia, and the emergence of new national identities, all in the context of economic restructure and the global economy.

In education, at all levels, Australia and New Zealand have developed their own approaches to outcomes-based education, devolved management, and accountability. In schools these changes have been made in the context of long experience with and commitment to school-based curriculum development, and the trust of teachers and schools implicit in that approach. The two nations offer models of school-level outcomes-based education that are different from those in North America, the United Kingdom, and Asian nations such as Singapore. The reforms of vocational and tertiary education, in both countries, are arguably even more profound than the changes in schools, linked as they are to the new needs of national economic development, efficiency, increased participation, and limits of resources in small nations.

1. Introduction

Oceania as a region embraces Australia, New Zealand, and many of the Pacific Islands—Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, New Guinea, Tahiti, Vanuatu, and others. These nations have different histories, cultures, economies, and education. Rather than survey education in the region, this article, as a case study, focuses on Australia and New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand are interesting in many ways. For example, they both have long histories of school-based curriculum development (with the trust in teachers and schools that this involves). They both initiated major changes in education as part of dramatic changes in their economies and foreign policies during the 1970s and 1980s. The case of Australia is treated here in detail, and used as a springboard for discussion of New Zealand. This emphasis should not be taken to mean that New Zealand has followed Australia. On the contrary, both countries have long been innovative in education and have borrowed widely from each other, as well as from other countries.

2. Australia

2.1. The Context

2.1.1. The Social Context

Since European settlement in 1788, Australia's social and economic development has been dominated by European culture and aspirations. The Aboriginal peoples were no match for the white settlers' guns, diseases, and social systems, and either retreated from the coast and white settlements, or hung on the fringes. They have had little impact on Australian culture generally, or the design and functioning of schooling in particular. The first European settlers in fact were convicts and their jailers, sent by the English to the opposite end of the earth. They were mostly poor people, "battlers," commonly from

inner-city London or Ireland. The nature of these settlers, the physical demands of the land, and its remoteness to England were important in shaping the Australian character. Sixty years later, gold rushes brought an enormous influx of immigrants, from many countries. They changed the nation especially through their work, as they generated wealth to build cities and towns, farms and industries. (Many of the significant public buildings in the two largest modern cities, Melbourne and Sydney, for example, were built during that time.)

Australia's economy for the next 100 years prospered from mining and agriculture. Australia was part of the British Empire/Commonwealth, and Britain was a major trading partner. Britain entered the European Common Market in the 1970s and its links to Australia changed. Declining prices for agricultural and mining products, worldwide, called for new attention to manufacture and value-added production, where Australia had a sad record. The situation reached a crisis by the early 1980s. The nation sought to transform its economy and establish itself as part of Southeast Asia—through trade, education, and cultural links. These changes had a major impact on education at all levels.

Australia has never known a civil war, and has only barely tasted war within its shores. But it participated in the two World Wars, and civil wars in Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the wake of World War II, it initiated major immigration programs, largely from Western and Central Europe. The new groups, especially the large numbers of Greeks, Italians, and Dutch, strongly influenced Australia's view of itself. They paved the way for the country to see itself as "multicultural" and broaden its immigration policies.

By 1996, Australia had a population of some 18.5 million. Of these, 3.9 million people were born overseas in one of over 200 countries. For a further 3.8 million, one or both parents were born overseas. Thus over 40% of people in Australia in 1996 were born overseas or had parents born overseas. The 1996 Census classified 92 religious denominations. Some 2.6 million people spoke a language other than English at home, offering 282 major languages, including 170 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Even so, 39% of Australia's immigrants in 1997 were from English-speaking countries (especially U.K., Ireland, and New Zealand), with less than half as many from Asia (most often Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders numbered 0.3 million.

Most of Australia's population is concentrated in two widely separated coastal regions. By far the largest of these, in area and population, stretches along the east and southeast coast from Adelaide through Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane. The smaller region is in the southwest of the continent, around Perth. In both regions the population is concentrated into urban centers, particularly the capital cities. In effect, half the total area of the continent (the inland region) contains only 0.3% of the population, and 1% of the total area contains 84% of the population. Only 14% of the population is classified as rural.

An extensive system of social services (including medicine, transport, and subsidized housing), pensions, and unemployment benefits provides support for the poor, children, old people, and the sick. However, there is a wide range of incomes. Earners in the top

20% of incomes take home almost half of the national wage bill, while the bottom 20% of earners take home about 4%. These variations in income create their own kinds of “multiculturalism” and are important in education.

2.1.2. Governance

Australia is a federation of states. Constitutional responsibility for school education (compulsory and post-compulsory schooling) rests with the states and territories, but is funded essentially through taxation collected by the federal government. The states guard their control of education carefully. They have developed their own systems, policies, and priorities—argued on the basis of local control to suit local needs—and award their own certificates. The federal government influences education mainly through its funding of special projects (e.g. for equipment or curriculum materials) and targeted programs (such as literacy development, or redress of disadvantage). The states and territories are responsible also for preschool education, with administration usually separate from school education, and often a joint responsibility of ministries of education and ministries of health. Post-school, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) operates according to national frameworks, but has separate state administrations with funding predominantly from the states. The emphasis in TAFE is vocational education in trades, crafts, and professions, industrial training, and adult education. Universities are funded by the federal government and accountable to it.

The complexities of politics and administration in Australia’s federal system are intriguing in any of preschool, school, TAFE, and university education. For example, in school education until the late 1980s, there was little formal attempt at coordination or sharing resources across the states and territories. National meetings of ministers of education (as the Australian Education Council) provided a mechanism for sharing ideas; the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) produced tests and research findings that were widely used. The Australian Schools Commission and the Curriculum Development Centre, formed in the 1970s, enabled national projects. In the late 1980s, a number of pressures combined to increase national cooperation. The main pressures were the financial constraints on state budgets, and widespread restructuring of industry (including the public service). Cooperation and sharing across the states and territories made economic sense. A national perspective seemed sensible also in terms of the vast improvements in communication, the mobility of the population, and the overall homogeneity (in regional terms) of Australian culture. Cooperation was facilitated politically by the fact that the Australian Labor Party was in government at the national level and in most states. A direction for change was also in the offing, through “national curricula” that were already in development in the U.K. and New Zealand, with their emphases on learning outcomes for students and accountability for schools and teachers.

Between 1989 and 1993, cooperation between states, territories and the federal government produced:

- A set of “Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia,” including the specification of eight key learning areas (KLA).

- A “mapping” of existing curriculum policies, content, and approach across all states and territories, in each of the eight KLA. These maps were to facilitate sharing of resources (including developmental projects), improve coherence in curriculum design, and reduce duplication of effort across the states and territories.
- A particular approach to outcomes-based education, aimed to produce for every student a “profile” of learning achievement in the learning areas. The Australian approach derived from the U.K. national curriculum and some pioneering Australian projects in English, mathematics, and languages other than English.
- Sets of outcomes and achievement levels in the eight learning areas.
- “Statements” to guide curriculum development and classroom processes in each of the learning areas.
- A national center for curriculum development, the Curriculum Corporation. Curriculum Corporation is owned by all of the states and territories, and directed by a board representative of the states and territories, the federal government, and private schooling.
- In-service education, as part of consultation, development, and implementation of profiles and statements.

However, in 1993, largely due to changes in government in many of the states, the states and territories drew back from national cooperation and reasserted their independence. They avowed the right to adopt, adapt, or discard the nationally developed frameworks. Subsequently, in fact, all states and territories either adopted or adapted them. The small states, short of resources, generally adopted them and added their own support services. The large states (especially Victoria and New South Wales) revised them, but held on to the basic approach and produced versions clearly similar to the originals. The Curriculum Corporation continues to produce innovative materials and support, which find their place in all states and territories.

The example shows how the politics of federation can cut across educational debates. Interstate cooperation is unlikely to reach the levels of 1989–1993 again for quite some time.

2.1.3. Participation in Education

Schooling in Australia is measured in year levels, with 12 years of schooling after a preparatory year. Attendance is compulsory between the ages of six and 15. Most children start school (into a preparatory year) at about age five. Retention from Year 10 (normally the last of the compulsory years) to Year 11 in 1997 was 84% and to Year 12, 72%. Retention of indigenous students from Year 10 to Year 11, though rising, is less than three-quarters that for non-indigenous students and falls more rapidly from Year 11 to Year 12.

By 19 years of age, almost all young adults have left school, but not formal education. Approximately 60% of students who completed Year 12 in 1996 went on to further education, in either universities or TAFE colleges. About 60% of adults aged 15–64 have Year 12 or higher. For 20–24 year olds, the percentage is 75% because of increases in participation in higher education over recent decades.

2.2. Schools: The Compulsory Years

2.2.1. Three Schools

Notwithstanding the differences in state administrations referred to above, variations between schools in Australia are probably more dependent on the schools themselves than the states or regions they are in. The sketches of three schools below provide some insight into these similarities and differences. These three schools could be in almost any state.

Glen Secondary College has some 1800 students, ranging from Year 7 to Year 12. The school is in the midst of a “middle class” suburb. Its students generally want to learn and get good support from home. Its teachers see themselves as expanding professionals and enjoy the opportunities the school offers them. The principal and the senior teachers provide clear leadership and creative management. The school council, representing the community and teachers, operates with a high level of commitment and expertise. It is able to draw additional funding from parents, industry, and proposals to the Education Department and other groups. It has used its funding to extend buildings, install sophisticated computer-based technologies, and broaden the curriculum (for the school designs its own curriculum, according to the government-defined outcomes). The community is proud of its school. On a recent “open house” evening, hundreds of parents and friends came to see what the school was doing.

For students, the school day is from 0830 until 1530. They work in classes of 25 to 30, according to a timetable of 50-minute periods. Increasingly, the college uses “double periods,” to provide more freedom and flexibility in teaching and learning methods. The combination of outcomes-based education and computer technologies promoted a swing to “learning through work”: group projects and assignments, conducted in class, enable different students to work in different ways and at different paces. Today, in the science room, one group of students is working with CD-ROM resources, another with equipment, a third with books. A fourth group has gone into the grounds to check some monitoring equipment in a weather station. The teacher moves among the groups, helping. In an adjacent room, students work in pairs on computer-aided design as part of the subject technology. Up the hall, a mathematics class is working in more traditional ways, with textbooks and worksheets.

Teachers usually arrive around 0800 to get their planning in order. After school, on every day except Friday, almost all teachers are involved in meetings until after 1700, often 1800. Some of the meetings are for management and curriculum planning (at the team/department level, in special committees, or whole school meetings); some are for professional development (perhaps within the school, perhaps within local networks or clusters). Teachers can attend conferences and other professional development activities, at which times their classes are covered by other teachers, or replacement teachers (for which the state provides a budget). The normal teaching load is about 16 hours a week, so teachers have free time to use for curriculum design, preparation, and correction. Even so, the demands of committee work and meetings, as well as teaching, mean teachers often complete preparation at home. Much of this is done on laptop computers, which the school council helped teachers to buy.

West Primary School is not far away from Glen Secondary College, but in a different setting. The neighborhood is a working class, industrial area, with a large immigrant population. The school has only about 300 students—to preserve the concept of the neighborhood school. In the front foyer, a bar graph announces that students come from 40 different ethnic groups and speak 18 different languages. The school council at West Primary cannot draw high levels of resources, but it has developed its own school policy, and takes responsibility for many aspects of the school's operation: appointment of senior staff, development of facilities and resources, curriculum planning. The community is positive about the school, trusting it, but most of the parents are not very involved. Money for excursions is often hard to come by (though, as is usual in Australia, students provide their own books and stationery, alongside school resources). The government provides additional funding to West Primary, because of the characteristics of its population.

Even simple things like newsletters for home are complicated by language. The school responds by celebrating its diversity, but classwork is often a struggle. The language of instruction, at a formal level, is English, but students use other languages as well. Teachers employ groupwork a lot—sometimes putting together students who speak the same language, sometimes pairing students who don't speak English very well with others who do. Teachers have to allow time for translations, code switching, working things out. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that students tend to come and go in the area, as their parents find employment (or better employment) in other places.

Classes at West Primary run from 0900 to 1530, with about 30 students in a class. Unlike the secondary school, the pattern here is that every teacher teaches all subjects to their own class. There are some variations—sometimes team-teaching, or specialist teaching in music and physical education. Taking advantage of an outcomes-based approach, teachers design their own curriculum, using a range of resources and structures. (Students do not use textbooks at all.) There are no fixed timetables in West Primary, except for out-of-class breaks. Depending on the teachers' plans, this morning's program might integrate a number of learning areas, this afternoon's might focus on one. Students might work on a technology project all day tomorrow, knowing that they won't have technology again for a few weeks, as they shift focus to other subjects. The emphasis is on outcomes, not time spent.

As with Glen Secondary College, there are heavy demands on teachers for after-school meetings and professional development activities. Many teachers are still in the school at 1700. However, not so much time is required for formal meetings here—probably because the school is small, and management decisions can often be made casually, in the tearoom or the corridor. In the same way, parents chat with the teachers and each other, as they collect their children. For children whose parent(s) work late, the school runs an after-classes program, but it is staffed and managed by a community group, not the teachers.

Kurrajong School is on the edge of the desert. It has 30 students, ranging from Year 1 to Year 10. (Students who wish to proceed with post-compulsory schooling either go away from the district to a boarding school, or enroll in distance education programs.) There is one teacher. He uses a variety of groupings and structures in his work with the

students. Sometimes students work together on a school project, such as producing a newspaper, designing a technological solution to a problem, putting together a concert, working on environment protection. Often students work in small groups, perhaps with students who are at similar levels of achievement (regardless of their age), perhaps in cross-age tutoring situations. Sometimes students work individually with textbooks, references, computers, and worksheets. The teacher maintains a fairly easy classroom climate, characterized by sharing, helping, and taking responsibility. He enjoys the students, and they enjoy him. He is supported through the Education Department by regular programs of interactive television in the “School of the Air,” and by visiting teachers/advisors who drop in to help with planning, assist with reviews, share in the teaching and provide the students with additional variety. He gets considerable help too from the local community, black and white, who are happy to assist with equipment, expertise, and stories. Kurrajong School has a school council, but the demands on it are not great. Neither are the demands of after-school teacher meetings.

These three schools are simply illustrative. They are unique in some ways, and yet have much in common. Most Australian schools are in the middle ground between these three, but the pattern is similar. The technology of schooling, and even the content, is remarkably uniform around the nation.

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Biographical Sketch

Cliff Malcolm of Australia is professor of science education and director of the Centre for Educational Research, Evaluation and Policy at the University of Durban Westville, South Africa. He has particular expertise in learner-centered education, curriculum design, and outcomes-based education (OBE), and has been active in South Africa as a researcher, author, and workshop leader in these areas. Professor Malcolm has been for many years a leader in science education in Australia. He was the major author of the Australian OBE framework for science, and published curriculum materials for students at all levels from preschool to university. His international experience includes projects in Botswana, USA, Korea, Thailand, Nepal, and Malaysia. His Ph.D. is in nuclear physics. He is an associate of the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia.