

FORUM

“If John Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn’t Work Out”: 1970s Activists Use History to Explain the “Failure” of Public Schooling in Australia

Helen Proctor 

The University of Sydney, Australia
Email: helen.proctor@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

This essay considers the usefulness of history of education, first, through the history of Australian university-based teacher education and then through the history of how, in the postwar period of schooling expansion, the provision of public schooling was transformed discursively from a policy solution into a policy problem—with opposing viewpoints from “left” and “right” projected through the print media. With a particular focus on “conservative” critique, two contrasting snapshots are presented of public writing from the 1970s–1980s to illustrate how, by this period, the focus of public debate about education policy in Australia was no longer on the principles and logistics of widening access, but on questioning the trustworthiness of the schools themselves—what and how they were teaching the nation’s children. The essay concludes by proposing that history itself is constantly invoked in debates about schooling by people who are trying to explain what needs to be changed or preserved.

Keywords: history of education; education conservatives; 1970s–1980s; Australia; schools in the print media; education debates

Is the history of education *useful*, and if so, how? This question of usefulness has been addressed to the field over several decades. Its trajectory of interpreting the meaning of schools and schooling for an audience of prospective school teachers makes it distinct from other branches of academic history and has shaped its rich tradition of critical historiography.¹ In Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, the history of education became established as a core component of university- and college-based teacher preparation as

¹See, for example, Tanya Fitzgerald, ed., *Handbook of Historical Studies in Education: Debates, Tensions, and Directions* (Singapore: Springer, 2019); John L. Rury and Eileen H. Tamura, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Heather Ellis, Mark Freeman, and Stephanie Olsen, “Mapping the History of Education: Intersections and Regional Trends,” *History of Education* 52, no. 2–3 (2023), 145–46.

part of a suite of courses under the umbrella of the “Foundations of Education.”² These “foundations” included the philosophy and sociology of education and were intended to support the development of a cohort of teachers who would be equipped with the capacity to theorize their own work in relation to wider social and policy contexts—and in relation to changing times.³ This compulsory study and the associated appointment of specialist history of education academics to university teaching posts underwrote the growth of history of education research and scholarship. Signs of the mid- to late-twentieth-century health of the scholarly field in Australia included the inauguration of a dedicated professional association, the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society (ANZHES), and the establishment of a scholarly journal (now called *History of Education Review*) in the 1970s.⁴

The institutional ascendancy of history of education was short-lived, however. In 2002, two leading scholars subtitled a survey of the field, “The Possibility of Survival.”⁵ In the twenty-first century, the subject is no longer commonly taught in Australian universities. It has even been disparaged as irrelevant—as in a 2023 run of media commentary in Australia, when the chair of a national review of teacher education was quoted using “history and philosophy of education” as rhetorical shorthand for all that was impractical and time-wasting in existing teacher education degrees.⁶

There are many possible responses to the question posed by the editors of *History of Education Quarterly*, “How can the history of education continue to play a meaningful role in research, policy, and practice?” This short essay offers two snapshots from a current Australian research project to propose that one way in which the history of education can be useful is by tracing the history of present-day education debates.⁷ The particular focus here is on the history of anti-progressive “backlash” education politics—that is, a collection of views that represent contemporary schooling as beset by crises of standards, discipline, and morality. In the larger project, we identify the 1970s and 1980s as a key period in the making of such

²Craig Campbell, ed., “Whatever Happened to the Disciplines in Education?,” special issue, *Change: Transformations in Education* 5, no. 1 (May 2002), <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/4477/Vol5No1Editorial.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2014).

³Raewyn Connell, “Good Teachers on Dangerous Ground: Towards a New View of Teacher Quality and Professionalism,” *Critical Studies in Education* 50, no. 3 (2009), 213–29; Julie Matthews, “The Educational Imagination and the Sociology of Education in Australia,” *Australian Educational Researcher* 40, no. 2 (May 2013), 155–71.

⁴Tom O’Donoghue, “History of Education Research in Australia: Some Current Trends and Possible Directions for the Future,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 6 (2014), 805–12.

⁵Craig Campbell, and Geoffrey Sherington, “The History of Education: The Possibility of Survival,” *Change: Transformations in Education* 5, no. 1 (2002), 46–64.

⁶Remy Low, “Beyond Zero-Sum Thinking in Teacher Education: Cognitive Science, Educational Neuroscience, and the History of Education,” *History of Education Review* 52, no. 2-3 (2023), 132–43. See also Nicole Mockler, “Are We There Yet? 25 Years of Reform (and Reform, and Reform, and Reform) of Teacher Education in Australia,” *History of Education Review* 52, no. 2/3 (2023), 115–31.

⁷The snapshots come from material gathered with my co-investigators Jessica Gerrard and Susan Goodwin for the Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP200102378, “Community Organising in Australian Education Policy, 1970s–1980s.”

views as they were disseminated through a range of print media including periodical publications.⁸

Snapshot One

In the late 1970s, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* made a big impact in Australia.⁹ The authors were received as celebrities when they visited from the US in 1976, and the surplus funds from a conference organized to showcase their work were used to establish a socialist education journal, *The Radical Education Dossier (RED)*.¹⁰ Bowles and Gintis were important contributors to the "new sociology of education," an intellectual project that shaped a generation of education academics and radical schoolteachers within and beyond the Global North, including Australia.¹¹ The new sociology of education both influenced and drew upon new historical explanations of schooling inequality. Significantly for the field of history of education, Bowles and Gintis' revisionist account of the history of modern mass schooling constituted a major strand of their analysis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. The inequalities of twentieth-century education, they argued, in opposition to more buoyant narratives, were a direct result of the historical origins of mass schooling. Bowles was invited to write the headline article in the first issue of *RED*.¹² Its title was, "If John Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn't Work Out ..."; and in it, he argued that the record of mass schooling in capitalist nations was "a glowing success in turning out productive workers; a major failure in creating equality."¹³

Snapshot Two

The Australian literary and political magazine, *Quadrant*, was founded in 1956 as a voice for anti-communist intellectual debate in the context of Cold War politics and

⁸Jessica Gerrard, "Against 'Progressivism': Schooling and the Cohering of Conservative Interests in Australia, 1970s–1980s," *Journal of Australian Studies* 47, no. 4 (Aug. 2023), 766–80; Jessica Gerrard and Helen Proctor, "Activist Women, Schooling and the Rise of Grassroots Christian Conservatism," *Australian Educational Researcher* 49, no. 5 (Nov. 2022), 879–95; Jessica Gerrard, Susan Goodwin, and Helen Proctor, "Participatory Politics and Education Policy Reform: Publics and Histories," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* (2024), 1–13.

⁹Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

¹⁰Kevin Harris, "Praxis: The Making of Australia's Radical Education Dossier," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies (JCEPS)* 12, no. 1 (Feb. 2014), 101–16; Tom G. Griffiths and Jack Downey, "'What to Do about Schools?': The Australian Radical Education Group (RED G)," *History of Education Review* 44, no. 2 (2015), 170–85.

¹¹For example, see Julie McLeod, "The 'New Sociology of Education,' Then and Now: Looking Back to the 1970s and Ahead to Today," *Curriculum Perspectives* 43, no. 2 (Oct. 2023), 183–86; Raewyn Connell et al., *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 24–34.

¹²Sam Bowles, "If John Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn't Work Out ...," address presented at the Radical Education Conference, "What to Do About Schools," held in the NSW Teachers Federation Auditorium, June 1976, *Radical Education Dossier* 1 (October 1976), 4–10.

¹³Bowles, "If John Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn't Work Out," 5. The catchy title had been used at least once before: Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "If John Dewey Calls, Tell Him Things Didn't Work Out," *Journal of Open Education* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1974), 1–17.

Australia's postwar American defense alliance.¹⁴ The magazine was created for the purpose of shifting the balance of contemporary public debate, its founders contending that Australian university academics and other intellectuals were, as a group, dangerously attached to leftist ideologies.¹⁵ During the 1970s and 1980s, *Quadrant's* editors considered school education to be a significant ideological battleground, well within the bounds of the magazine's pro-conservative remit, and the magazine often published articles that were critical of contemporary education trends. Topics for commentary included the neglect of the literary canon, the rise of the social sciences curriculum, the sidelining of parents in sex education, the influence of teacher unions, and the falling academic and behavior standards of public (but not private) school students. One frequent contributor to *Quadrant's* coverage of school education was the historian of education Alan Barcan, who named the period of the late 1960 and early 1970s "the Cultural Collapse."¹⁶ This periodization was the means through which he intended the reader to understand a wide-ranging criticism of "neo-progressive" schooling reform. Barcan described himself a witness to the "decline of Western civilisation," and wrote that his role as an historian of education was "to explain what happened"—and to "[slow] the rot."¹⁷ Subtextually, he considered that the discipline of history should be essentially conservative, in the sense of holding true to "the standards set by the great epochs of the Western tradition."¹⁸ He dismissed the revisionist history of Bowles and Gintis and others as "over-simplistic and insensitive."¹⁹

Some scholarly and public interest has turned in recent years to the international resurgence of conservative or "right wing" voices in public discussions of school education.²⁰ While historical investigation of social phenomena does not often lead to a satisfactory excavation of cause and effect in the manner of a clue puzzle or detective novel, it can certainly help in understanding longer trajectories of contemporary shifts. The two pieces of writing presented here as snapshots illuminate a protracted post-Second World War change in Australian education policy debate, during which the mass provision of public schooling was transformed discursively from a public

¹⁴John Chiddick, "Quadrant: The Evolution of an Australian Conservative Journal," in *Campaigning Culture and the Global Cold War: The Journals of the Congress for Cultural Freedom*, ed. Giles Scott-Smith and Charlotte A. Berg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 303–20.

¹⁵Cassandra Pybus, "Quadrant Magazine and CIA Largess," *Overland* 155 (June 1999), 9–15.

¹⁶For example, see Alan Barcan, "Writing about Education 1950–1988: The Interplay of Personal Belief and Social Change," *Quadrant* 31 (December 1987), 24–32. Also see Gerrard, "Against 'Progressivism'"; Jessica Gerrard and Helen Proctor, "The New Sociology of Education and the 'New' Conservatives: The Battle over the School Social Sciences Curriculum," *Curriculum Perspectives* 43, no. 2 (Oct. 2023), 203–6.

¹⁷Barcan, "Writing about Education 1950–1988," 31, 29–30, 29.

¹⁸"Writing About Education 1950–1988," 31.

¹⁹"Writing About Education 1950–1988," 29.

²⁰For example, see Jessica Gerrard, "Nationhood, Sex and the Family: Neoconservatism and the Moral Dilemmas of Privatisation in Schooling," in *Privatisation and Commercialisation in Public Education: How the Public Nature of Schooling Is Changing*, ed. Anna Hogan and Greg Thompson (London: Routledge, 2021), 171–83; Saba Hussain and Reva Yunus, "Right-Wing Populism and Education: Introduction to the Special Section," *British Educational Research Journal* 47, no. 2 (April 2021), 247–63; Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School* (New York: The New Press, 2022); Laura Pappano, *School Moms: Parent Activism, Partisan Politics, and the Battle for Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2024).

policy solution into a public policy problem. Public policy focus was no longer on the principles and logistics of expanding access to schooling, but on what and how schools were teaching the nation's children. "What is happening in the schools" was discursively constituted as a topic for concern upon which a public commentator might be expected to have a well-developed set of views, and which might be of interest as much to a group of professional educators as to the readership of a national magazine such as *Quadrant*. Certain tropes gained currency in the process. In the two examples given here, the historical figure of John Dewey was associated with the failed promises of universal schooling, but from vastly different perspectives. For the new sociology of the 1970s, the great problem of postwar schooling was class inequality, which, it was sometimes proposed, Dewey-inspired experiments had done little to address. Conservative schooling critics often used Dewey as shorthand for a generalized laxness in standards.

There are many threads to pick up in the magazine *Quadrant*, from Alan Barcan and from others. One thread to note here is a persistent and repetitive identification of the inadequacies of 1970s–1980s schooling with one type of school, the public school. Public schools were represented as problematic almost by virtue of their publicness, and frequently depicted as captives of ideologically compromised bureaucrats and teachers. This denigration has particular resonance for Australia, which in the twenty-first century has one of the most highly privatized schooling systems in the world—the outcome of a shift beginning in the 1980s in which the enrollment share of private schools increased, relative to public schools.²¹ Another informative thread to follow is the defense of the Western curriculum, portrayed by Barcan here as a critical precondition for scholarly rigor. In settler-colonial Australia, this kind of discussion occurred in the context of a widespread and intense historical questioning that was part of the national celebrations and contestations of the 1988 bicentenary of British occupation—and the discussion has continued.²²

Returning to the question, "How can the history of education continue to play a meaningful role in research, policy, and practice?," one response might be: How could it not? Education is predicated on the idea of achieving change over time, and it is hard to think how it could be properly understood without historical tools. But as the two snapshots here are intended to illustrate, it is not only that we can better understand education matters by understanding their history, but also that education actors bring history to bear on the things they propose and do. History of education is not only a tool or an approach to be used; it is also itself part of the story, an object to

²¹For example, see Martin Forsey, Helen Proctor, and Meghan Stacey, "A Most Poisonous Debate: Legitimizing Support for Australian Private Schools," in *Private Schools and School Choice in Compulsory Education: Global Change and National Challenge*, ed. Thomas Koinzer, Rita Nikolai, and Florian Waldow (Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer, 2017), 49–66.

²²For example, see Anna Clark, "Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories: Australia," in *Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories in International Contexts*, ed. Terrie Epstein and Carla Peck (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81–94; Mati Keynes, Beth Marsden, and Archie Thomas, "Does Curriculum Fail Indigenous Political Aspirations? Sovereignty and Australian History and Social Studies Curriculum," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 10, no. 2 (2023), 59–83; Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra, Australia: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007); Anna Haebich and Steve Kinnane, "Indigenous Australia," in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 2, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 332–57.

be investigated historically. Whether or not history of education is underwritten by institutional investment in jobs, courses, or research funding, it will always be examined, imagined, remembered, and invoked by people who wish to shape the present and future. Bowles, Gintis, and Barcan were professional scholars writing from within the academy, but the debates they advanced spread well beyond the world of scholarly publication. It is worth understanding how, why, and to what effect.

Helen Proctor is a professor of education at the University of Sydney who uses historical methods and perspectives to examine the making of contemporary educational systems. Her publications include *A History of Australian Schooling* (2014), with Craig Campbell; a 2022 *Griffith Review* essay, “Climbing the Opportunity Ladder”; and the edited collection, with Kellie Burns, *The Curriculum of the Body and the School as Clinic* (2024).