

Australian Schools: Social Purposes, Social Justice and Social Cohesion

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The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind. (Dewey, 1915/1966)

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Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Acknowledgement of Authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this Thesis is the result of original research, the greater part of which was completed subsequent to admission to candidature for the degree.

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Dedication

To the educated and democratic empowerment of disempowered people, and to the educated and democratic repair of our pillaged and polluted planet.

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Abstract

In this dissertation, the author, Van Davy, makes a case for a cohesive system of schools which can serve the public—both the national interest and individual interests—while directly addressing the current system’s major failures to engender schooling success for low SES and Aboriginal students.

Davy’s analysis ranges across a number of disciplines, fusing together a number of viewpoints: historical, political theory, educational performance, and educational theory. It searches Australia’s schooling outcomes, identifies low SES and Aboriginal outcomes as major areas of failure, and challenges a number of widely accepted schooling practices. In the process, Davy discovers OECD and ACER data, but little official interest or analysis, concerning widespread boredom amongst Australia’s students. He argues that, in respect of both low SES students and student boredom, system responsibilities such as the nature of Australia’s curriculum, could be just as implicated as concerns for “teacher quality.”

Davy’s interest extends beyond the purely educational. He examines the purposes that public and non-public school authorities articulate, as well as reasons parents give for enrolling their children in schools. From this research Davy identifies several issues and suggests that very considerable “choice” in schooling could be found in a different curriculum paradigm, and that both public and non-public schools are deficient when measured against widely-accepted concerns for religious freedom, social cohesion, and fundamental democratic principles.

For Davy, a major political issue confronting Australia is the national imperative of “social cohesion.” He searches Australia’s schooling history for evidence of any social agreement around the social purposes of schooling, including more recent attempts to formulate “essential” and “new basics” and “national” curriculum. He concludes that while many educators, and the OECD, refer to the need for a pre-requisite set of social purposes that outline a preferred future society, the politics of schooling has not permitted this to eventuate and, given the absence of this management fundamental, “it is not surprising that schooling systems are shaped by internal logics (ideologies, religions, personalities, internal politics, quest for advantage and/or privilege) rather than wider concerns for the shape of the globe’s and nation’s future, and the advancement of the twins: Common Good and Individual Good.”

With these three problems laid bare—low SES and Aboriginal outcomes, student boredom, and social cohesion—Davy addresses all three simultaneously.

He draws confidence from contemporary political theorists proposing political processes which engage the public in a “deliberative democracy.” He constructs a surrogate “foundation of agreed principles” which, he deduces, the processes of deliberative democracy might lead the Australian people to construct, then outlines a step-by-step means by which these principles can generate an essential curriculum for all Australian children from the earliest to the latest years of schooling. Paralleling this “essential” stream Davy proposes another, elective stream, providing a full range of choice through subject disciplines and sectarian studies. With the dual-stream curriculum paradigm addressing major educational weaknesses apparent in the current system, providing unprecedented subject choice and religious freedom through all grades, while attending to socially-agreed themes concerning the national and Common Good, a new political context is anticipated.

This new, less adversarial and more trusting political context is seen to be fertile ground for the replacement of Australia’s fractured schooling system with a cohesive schooling system for the Australian public—an Australian schooling system—to be managed nationally.