

COMPULSORY SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA

*Perspectives from Students,
Parents, and Educators*

CAROL REID &
KATHERINE WATSON



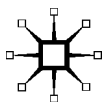
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CAROL REID

ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADHD	attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
BOS	New South Wales Board of Studies
CA	Careers Advisor
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
CM	Curriculum Manager
CoAG	Coalition of Australian Governments
DEC	New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (previously Department of Education and Training [DET])
DEEWR	Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations
DOCS	Department Of Community Services
DP	Deputy Principal
ESL	English as a Second Language
HS	High School
HSC	Higher School Certificate
HSIE	Human Society and Its Environment
HSLO	Home-School Liaison Officer
ICT	information and communication technology
IEC	Intensive English Centre
IM	mild intellectual disability
IPT	information processes and technology
IT	information technology
LBOTE	Language Backgrounds Other Than English
LSESSNP	Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities National Partnership
NAB	National Australia Bank
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NESB	non-English-speaking background

XII / ABBREVIATIONS

NIDA	National Institute of Dramatic Art
NSLA	new school leaving age
NSW	New South Wales
NSWDET	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P&C	Parents' and Citizens' Association
PASP	Priority Action Schools Program
PDHPE	Personal Development, Health, and Physical Education
PE	physical education
PFSP	Priority Funded Schools Program
SEIFA	socio-economic indices for areas
SES	socio-economic status
SWS	South-Western Sydney
TAFE	New South Wales Technical and Further Education Commission
TTC	Trade Training Centre
TVET	TAFE-delivered Vocational Education and Training
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VET	vocational education and training
WSROC	Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils Ltd

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: COMPELLING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS?

Raewyn Connell, an eminent Australian sociologist, has worked for more than four decades to unravel the forces shaping society and education, with a particular eye on inequities. In her most recent work her focus has shifted to knowledge itself; she poses two fundamental questions which we apply, in this book, to the issue of young people being forced to stay in school longer:

What does this *add* to what we already know?

What does this *ask us to do* that we are not now doing, as knowledge workers?¹

Any question about compulsory schooling seems a no-brainer. More schooling is better for school students. It will increase their level of human capital, make them more employable, more likely to have a more optimistic, rewarding, and fulfilling employment career. But what if it leads to a more precarious future for young people? This suggestion is of course a heresy, a contradiction of the perceived wisdom that the more years of schooling you get, the better off you will be. Yet the research reported in this book suggests that many young people in schools in South-Western Sydney (SWS) have been adversely affected by the imposition of the unchallenged and unanimous decision to get them to stay at school longer. Why is this the case? The answer to this question—discussed in complex detail in the following chapters—sheds new light on schooling in the age of neoliberal globalization.

This book is about compulsory schooling and students, teachers, and parents in a location that is often understood vicariously, a place “out there,” “troubled by youth gangs,” crime, violence, “future terrorists,” and so on. The people living in this place do not get to speak for and about themselves

very often, being removed from the powerful center, even though they live in the most populous, most ethnically and linguistically diverse part of the largest area of the largest city in Australia. Yet it is important to listen to the voices of people in the southwestern region of Sydney because they are pulses for understanding the impact of contemporary economic and social change and therefore for understanding how well education is tracking in responding to these conditions. In this book, we explore the dynamics and dimensions of one aspect of these changes—the increase in the age until which young people must remain in education in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. We do this in ways not done before by examining the intersection of gendered, ethnicized, and classed social relations as they play out across different spaces, because this dynamic region is no longer just “white” working class as it was in the 1950s and 1960s. In SWS there are pockets of wealth, densely multicultural areas, and largely Anglo-Celtic areas. These differences all intersect, making for a complex educational terrain not discussed in generalizations about youth, schooling, and society. Even those analyses that use the lens of “race” or gender or class, in a simplistic way, privilege one social relation over another and miss many of the subtleties and nuances of the lives of young people in global cities like Sydney today. As a result, the dynamic relationship of young people to schooling, the economy, and contemporary society is misunderstood. When “ability” is added into educational discourses, some of these social relations are amplified or muted. This book aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the impact of extending the age of compulsory schooling of students in SWS.

This book adds knowledge to a number of international studies where contemporary social issues and conditions have been taken up by critical education theorists who have examined the marketization of education under the contemporary forces of neoliberalism.² There is a general sense that life is much more precarious now,³ to the extent that a whole new class is in formation. Guy Standing, an economist and Professor of Development Studies at the University of London has called this “the precariat,”⁴ which is different from the old proletariat class because of the dismantling of social solidarity systems, the unbundling of occupational communities, and a massive increase in labor supply. Standing warns us that the precariat can become a dangerous class who will disrupt and challenge society if there is no future for them. Young Australians are feeling the frustration and anxiety of a social order that increasingly seems to be becoming unnavigable. As a consequence they find it difficult to articulate a narrative for their future.⁵ Recent policy shifts pertaining to youth transitions to work, access to benefits, and work for the dole, as well as intensification of discourses around a “youth contract” and “earn or learn,” accompany the new compulsory schooling age.

Nilan, an Australian youth sociologist, argues that we need to see these dynamics as global because it is not just in Australia that the future is increasingly hard to see, let alone imagine.⁶ Increasing the years of schooling is part of a global push to have young people stay at school longer due to the connection made between more years in education and better outcomes, such as health and income, later in life. Keeping young people at school longer also conceals the moribund state of the youth labor market. Youth unemployment rates in Australia are three to five times higher than the average rate, with SWS having one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. It could also be argued that in young people staying on at school for longer and longer we are witnessing a contradiction—increased years of schooling but decreased employment possibilities. We are witnessing the agency of young people being overrun by therapeutic approaches aimed at increasing employability, despite fewer and fewer jobs being available. Some young people are taught to get out of bed early, as if they were going to work, thus developing behavior appropriate to workplaces, despite the fact that in some areas, more than 20 percent of youth have no prospect of work.⁷ Zipin and Dumenden, educational sociologists from Melbourne, Australia have called this a “cruel optimism.”⁸ It all contributes to the increasingly precarious employment future for many young people, particularly those who live in Western Sydney and SWS.

What might we learn from young people, their parents, and teachers about the contradictions of living in these times? That, it is the young people in SWS who leave school, many of whom leave school early or with poor results, who might be expected to be at the vanguard of the increasingly dangerous precariat, if Guy Standing’s analysis is correct and holds for Australia, as he argues it does in other Western countries. What is the evidence that disaffected young Australians—the ones made to do extra schooling rather than leave school when they want to—are so disillusioned with and alienated from Australian society that they will be part of the new, dangerous precariat in Australia? In attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to draw on a range of sociological insights including the changing nature of the family⁹; the impact on education and teachers of neoliberalism¹⁰; and the ways in which young people are increasingly subjected to symbolic violence, alienation, and marginalization.¹¹ Importantly, to get a sense of the general “structure of feelings” or moments of sociocultural transition,¹² in this epoch, we need an analysis of the intersecting social relations of gender, class, ethnicity, and “race” as they play out as a consequence of the new compulsory schooling age policy. Focusing on these social relations illuminates insights into the multilayered subjective dimensions of living with these wider dynamics and the relationship they have with education.

In considering these social relations, it is important to see them as emergent: developing and changing. Therefore, the ways in which gender emerges is considered through processes of gendering and de-gendering, so that it is possible to see how gender can be constituted as a problem or not a problem in different contexts.¹³ This same approach is applied to ethnicity drawing on the seminal work of British academic Robert Miles,¹⁴ who considered it important to move beyond a “race relations” paradigm to focus on how race emerges through processes of racialization. Taking this approach means that race and ethnicity are not read off the bodies of young people, their teachers, and parents; instead race and ethnicity come into focus when they gain “authority.” This means taking an interest in when race and ethnicity matter and when they do not or when these social relations have explanatory power and when they do not. The purpose of this approach is to more readily locate the key tensions, the eliding of inequalities, and the harnessing of populist discourses so readily promulgated by our less than reflexive political leaders.

Standing’s thesis that the precariat is a new class in formation continues the construction of class as a social relation, rather than a step on a ladder, but in new times.¹⁵ These new times are characterized by globalization, neoliberalism, and increasing inequality. For example, we now find that upward credentialing, as argued by Nilan,¹⁶ may not guarantee a job, with more university students finding it hard to gain work while at the same time coping with increasing debt for their education.¹⁷ In this sense they face a precarious future, something they share with those who may never find lasting work if any work at all. This does not mean that they are the same, but the dynamics shaping their lives are having similar affects. When we add “ability”—also constructed in various ways—there is evidence to support Standing’s emerging “dangerous class.” Many of these young people do not want to be in school, do not want to be subjected to therapeutic alternatives, and often do not want to do the same work as their parents, if indeed they could. They are offered many alternatives but little appeals, and they often go nowhere anyway.

SWS is a very diverse place. The majority of Sydney’s migrants live there. It is the home to people from all corners of the globe. It is characterized by linguistic, religious, cultural, and class diversity. It is a product of the global interaction between Sydney and the world. The “global” becomes the “local” in SWS. Thus, SWS has been transformed by globalization and neoliberalism: immigration, reduced tariff protection, deregulation of finance, privatization of industry including education and increased mobilities. In addition to these social relations, the spatial dynamics of SWS are intrinsic to the opportunities made available. In this book we introduce the concept of “scales of opportunity” and examine the ways in which they are related

to local industry, social networks, transport, government policy, politics, gender, ethnicity, “race,” and parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling. Here we see how power operates in the contested urban and peri-urban terrain of this area where resource allocation conceals racialized privilege.¹⁸

Chapter 2 documents the major tensions created by the introduction of the new compulsory schooling age policy in NSW, exploring a “policy disjuncture.”¹⁹ Drawing on Ball’s network policy analysis,²⁰ the chapter reveals the impact of neoliberalism and globalization on schooling, in particular how a long-term policy of school choice has produced residualized schools. The chapter maps the field nationally and internationally, and outlines key theoretical frameworks used in the study, particularly Standing’s precariat thesis,²¹ exploring precarity and social change, and the ways in which young people are constructed in the context of declining youth labor markets. Key theoretical frameworks used in the research described in the book are established, and the Australian context described, so as to set the stage for understanding the complex social relations of gender, ethnicity, class, and race. Accordingly, the chapter places the book in the field as it draws sociological insights into the macro-, meso-, and micro-dynamics and dimensions shaping education today.

Chapter 3 begins with the spatial dynamics of SWS and introduces the 21 high schools that took part in the research that informs this book. The method of the research undertaken is also outlined. The new compulsory schooling age, promising a diversified curriculum and new opportunities, has in fact closed off opportunities for many young people who attend these 21 high schools. It has placed a strain on a range of services and support personnel who operate in conjunction with schools and has created layers of inequality in terms of resourcing, which in turn creates unequal “scales of opportunity.”

Chapter 4 draws on parents’ voices as they explain how they largely agree with extending the years of schooling. Yet despite this general consensus, there are cracks in the expressed hopes of parents because it is not working out well for some of their children. Many parents are also becoming market negotiators²² and are more deeply implicated in finding education and employment opportunities for their children. The array of alternatives is confusing for many parents, and their stories of weaving through the options, of poor communication between home and school and of the relentless drive to manage their children’s lives, are profound.

Chapter 5 explores the students’ narratives with regard to their struggles to make sense of their schooling, their futures, and their desires and disappointments. We reveal the gendered dimensions to these narratives as well as the ways in which ethnicity and race are hidden, but shape their experiences. Opportunities for young people are closely related to where

they live, who they know (their social capital or social networks), and their social class. One impact of the extension of compulsory schooling is that it has been implemented at the same time as “earn or learn” policies have been introduced federally. However, while many young people would leave school to take up opportunities in the informal sector—drawing on social networks—these opportunities are now closed off to them. On-the-job training must now be in authorized workplaces. Young people now cannot “earn *and* learn” in the informal economy. But at the same time, these young people or their parents do not have the social networks to get them employment or training in the formal sector of the economy. They have been shut out. Experiences of schooling reveal how the limitations are impacting on students despite the best efforts of teachers. Those students who rail against the system as being unjust are highly aware of how they can resist and “make it hard” for teachers. The seemingly arbitrary nature of decision making about the curriculum is central to students’ concerns, as in their perception it means a loss of rights to determine their own lives.

Chapter 6 looks at the increase in compulsory schooling age through the eyes of teachers. The chapter illuminates the increasing intensification and diversification of teachers’ work and the ways in which the new compulsory schooling age has changed upper secondary schooling. The chapter discusses how government policies of school choice and standardized testing affect teachers’ work amid a narrowing curriculum and reduced subject choice.

Chapter 7 reveals scales of opportunities among spatially diverse schools. Inclusion and exclusion are explored in relation to marginalized students, course content, and academic and vocational pathways; all ruled by hierarchies governing subject choice (pitting knowledge against skills), qualifications recognition, and the politics of reputation. The chapter revisits the policy disjuncture created by choice, in a neoliberal context of underfunding, privatization, and devaluation of Technical and Further Education institutions.

In conclusion, chapter 8 revisits the experiences of the students, parents, and teachers in these 21 schools in SWS, with regard to the increased compulsory school-leaving age. The chapter concludes that there is strong evidence exposing the myth that more schooling makes students better off, and supporting the heretical view that it is not so for many young people. This educational contradiction does not occur in isolation. It is one of a number of contradictions in education that characterize schooling in Australia in the age of globalization and neoliberalism.²³ Nevertheless, the chapter provides an example of cultural change in one school that challenges the contradictions wrought by policy disjuncture. In doing so, the “*what do we*

do now?" asked by Connell in the quote at the start of this chapter begins to be addressed.

Despite finding evidence of increasing pessimism among the more marginalized young people in SWS and their parents, the book does not support the pessimistic conclusion of Guy Standing that young people in SWS are emerging as a dangerous social class bent on undermining and destroying Australian society. Despite the evidence of increasingly precarious futures, the young people are surprisingly optimistic about life in Australia. Unlike the United Kingdom, multicultural neighborhoods in SWS are not ethnic ghettos where young people from different ethnic groups or religions live separate lives. The Australian precariat is developing as a life of interethnic solidarity and not as an interethnic rivalry. This study found no evidence in schools in this study of interethnic tension as a consequence of increasing compulsory schooling. The enemy is not other young people from different ethnic backgrounds in SWS suburbs, but the system—the politicians, the institutions—that has let them down. The implication is important. Policies and procedures that are sympathetic to the problems facing increasingly precarious youth in Australia can help minimize their alienation and prevent their isolation and disaffection with mainstream Australian society. Here schools and education policy can play a leading role.

CHAPTER TWO

MAPPING THE FIELD

The new compulsory schooling age promises so much in terms of health, income, and more equitable futures, in general; however, in this chapter we reveal how many studies have shown that the tensions created by globalization, a declining youth labor market, and neoliberal individualism have created an environment that is less than conducive to the ideal opportunities that could be made available through more education. The chapter maps the literature in the field nationally and internationally, drawing on sociological insights into the macro-, meso-, and micro-dynamics and dimensions shaping education today. In particular, the chapter is interested in the notion that “precarity” accompanies social change. We explore Standing’s thesis that we are witnessing a new class in formation in order to capture what this really means and whether or not this thesis has a universalizing tendency. We ask to what extent this thesis might be useful in the Australian context and elsewhere; what it reveals and what it elides; in particular, the totalizing ways in which young people are constructed, without reference to processes related to ethnicity, gender, place, and “race,” something with which this book is very much concerned.

This chapter also discusses theoretical and contextual dynamics in depth to foreground the major tensions created by the introduction of the new compulsory schooling age policy in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. It explores neoliberalism and the policy disjuncture revealed in the reported research, drawing on Ball’s network policy analysis.

Compulsory Education: The International Context

Compulsory education has a long history across multiple cultures and societies. In some societies it was for everyone and egalitarian, while in others it was reserved for the wealthy classes. It has been argued that the Aztecs were the first to institute universal compulsory schooling in the fifteenth century.¹ Among the last to mandate compulsory education were the United Kingdom and Wales. Struggles over control of access to education, religious

differences, the content of the curriculum, and the desire for nations to develop human capital have accompanied compulsory schooling. At the start of the twenty-first century most countries insist on compulsory education but differ over the number of years and where it is carried out.

The generally accepted definition of compulsory schooling is “the span of years during which every normal child must be receiving a formal education.”² A range of global and international factors influence related policies, including social and institutional considerations,³ the impact of technological development,⁴ trade, and governmental limits: “the more open a country, the higher compulsory years of schooling.”⁵ Completion of secondary schooling or further training is a priority for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁶

There are a number of arguments canvassed for increasing the years of compulsory schooling. They broadly encompass the personal benefits through to community cohesion and national competitiveness. Raising the minimum school-leaving age to increase school retention has arguably, for example, successfully addressed issues around minority education and social disadvantage in the United States of America. This is not so straightforward in Australia as we have a highly selective immigration program in which immigrants have very good outcomes, although this is not uniform across ethnic, religious, or social classes.⁷ As well as having health benefits,⁸ personal income levels have been found to increase by 6 to 10 percent per extra year of schooling,⁹ and this figure may even be as high as 15 percent.¹⁰ Increased mandatory schooling has also had positive effects on income distribution,¹¹ and, according to some studies, citizenship.¹² International research of this kind is actively invoked in policy documents explaining the increase in compulsory schooling in NSW.

Compulsory Education in Australia: The *Compact with Young Australians*

Historically, six states (NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, and Western Australia) and two territories (Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory) of Australia have had different ages for compulsory participation in education because each is responsible for their own public and, to some extent, private schooling systems. As of the start of 2010, however, all young people under 17 years of age must be enrolled in approved education or training, engaged in full-time work, or some combination of these. Although the details of state and territory legislation vary, Federal Government policy is that all young people should complete Year 10 (average age is 16) and then continue in either education, training, or employment until the age of 17.¹³ The policy is part of the *Compact*

with Young Australians agreed by the Coalition of Australian Governments (CoAG) in 2009, which also states that young people aged between 15 and 24 are entitled to a place in education or training, and that

young people under 17 must be in school (or an approved equivalent) until they have completed Year 10. On completion of Year 10, these young people must then participate in full-time (defined as at least 25 hours a week) education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17.¹⁴

This agenda dovetails with wider changes to social welfare programs in Australia, targeting the long-term unemployed and those on disability pensions with the aim of breaking the cycle of intergenerational welfare dependence.¹⁵ The changes to federal policy on compulsory education are focused not just on increasing educational outcomes, but in the flow-on effects expected to result. Further education and training, the *Compact* asserts, will give young people “access to employment, help them participate in the community and realize their potential,”¹⁶ in line with the benefits found in international research. Moreover, addressing the need for an increasingly skilled workforce in a globalized world, the *Compact with Young Australians* was designed to provide “protection from the anticipated tighter labor market...ensuring they would have the qualifications to take up jobs as the economy recovered.”¹⁷ Although it is not named specifically, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) is the backdrop for this statement. Moreover, the OECD has argued that vocational education and training (VET) “plays a key role in determining competitiveness. Since OECD countries cannot compete with less developed countries on labor costs, they will need to compete in terms of the quality of goods and services they provide,” and this means a skilled workforce is needed.¹⁸ Thus, the *Compact with Young Australians* is clearly structured by aspects of neoliberal discourse advocated by the OECD because it invokes the need for increased education levels within a framework of a globalized economy.

The CoAG agreement had varied implications for the different states and territories and their education systems, as some had already changed their compulsory schooling and education requirements: Queensland did so in 2006,¹⁹ Tasmania and Western Australia in 2008,²⁰ and South Australia followed from January 1, 2009.²¹ All other states and territories (NSW, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, and the Northern Territory) commenced this type of regulation from the beginning of 2010.²² In NSW, the school-leaving age had been 15 years since 1943.²³

Documents produced by the NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSWDEC), previously known as NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET), draw upon the same neoliberal

discourse utilized by the Federal government. For example, a “frequently asked questions” website states that the school-leaving age has been raised because “compelling Australian and international research . . . demonstrates that people with higher levels of schooling are more likely to make a successful transition to further education, training, or work.”²⁴ Here, there is a clear gesture toward the global OECD discourses including research results that show early school-leavers tend to have lower incomes and are more at risk of unemployment. Facts for parents and students do the same.²⁵ Further information for parents, on a website linked to that mentioned above, frames these statements within the dynamics of globalization and international education policy:

Technology has changed the nature of work and twenty-first century teenagers now compete for jobs and study opportunities in a globalized environment, against other young people in other countries . . . When the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom raised their school leaving age by one year, they found that young people earned 10 to 14 percent more, they got better jobs, and their health improved.²⁶

Yet the full picture regarding technological change and the associated ramifications for the job market is more complex than this feel-good statement reveals. According to Professor Phil Lewis, director of the Centre for Labour Market Research at the University of Canberra:

What’s happened is that—one there’s been a huge shift in the economy away from what we call the industrial jobs like manufacturing, for instance. Manufacturing jobs are now less than half of what they were 25 years ago; a lot of the public sector organizations have been privatized or they’ve become what we call more rational, and so they don’t regard themselves as a place of last resort, you know—they have to actually justify; and the big growth has been in the *service* sector where most of the jobs are going to be part time and those don’t suit people that are going to leave school at 15 and want to make a career—you don’t make a career in a supermarket.²⁷

Jan Owen, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Young Australians, described the situation faced by young people and their families, and the importance of actually being able to gain work experience:

I think there’s a couple of issues there that are really interesting, so one is obviously that I guess the labor market has changed—there are obviously not as many jobs and so the entry level job is a very very different job, and also we’re in a highly casualized labor market now and young people particularly are effected by that. Also post-GFC the pall of the GFC is sort of still with us with young people and that’s why we’re seeing, you know, today, those