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STAYING ON AT SCHOOL

Some of the changes in education, their effects on young people and the challenges posed for those who see education as more than job training are examined in this article by a member of the editorial board of ALR.

THERE WAS A TIME not so long ago when the vast majority of children of working people left school at 14 or 15. With rare exceptions only the wealthy stayed on at school and experienced tertiary education. Divisions between young people were largely confined to the type of work they took up and these divisions tended to be the same as those that existed generally in the working class — between the skilled tradesman on the one hand and the unskilled and semi-skilled on the other.

Bright young lads aspired to an apprenticeship. The early years of low wages and night time study were compensated for in greater job security and in the future rewards and status that came from being a tradesman. Yet the divisions were not clear-cut since the non-apprenticed lad and the apprentice worked together throughout the working day. In the high peak year of apprenticeship the number recorded represented 30.1% of all 15-year-old males in Australia. That was 1956. Ten years later the number of recorded apprenticeships remained fairly constant, but the high school scene had changed dramatically.

Of the 98,951 boys who entered secondary school in 1960 more than 31,000 were still at school in 1965. Thus 31.3% had taken the full secondary course. While the majority still leave school by the age of 16, the minority in the high schools continues to expand. By the end of this decade about 40% of boys and 30% of girls will complete the full secondary course. Of those leaving school earlier a high proportion take up apprenticeship or work in the service industries. Given the changing needs of production none of this is surprising. In a narrow sense production increasingly requires technically trained experts as it once needed tradesmen. The fact that increasing numbers stay on at school while the number of apprenticeships on offer does not decline suggests that relatively few young people take
up unskilled or semi-skilled work. This does not mean that unskilled and semi-skilled work has been wiped out. Even a cursory investigation will show that these fields of work, also expanding, are mainly taken up by immigrant workers and married women.

Although the high school population has increased dramatically the number of young Australians attaining higher levels of education is still far below that attained in most comparable countries. Yet the change is big enough to have brought new influences, problems and challenges.

The differences between young people leaving school early, even those taking up apprenticeships, and those remaining at school, is far greater than any division between the skilled and the unskilled workers of the past.

While systems of education vary from State to State within the Commonwealth in all cases the main high school education is geared to the top grouping who will complete the full high school course.

Whatever the problems in those schools catering for the full high school course, and they are not without problems, they have better staff and facilities than the junior secondary schools. Yet by the end of primary school most children are passed to schools where only a miracle would project them towards a full high school course.

The minority streamed off into selective high schools begin to take on the appearance that once characterised the children who went to private, sometimes quaintly called, *public*, schools. Even in the comprehensive high schools the children in the higher streams are soon removed in most important ways from those who will opt for early school leaving.

Those who stay on at school see widening horizons for employment; work that will bring security, good pay, status, even a measure of fulfilment. In practice some will find that the widening horizons are more myth than reality, but they do have a sufficiently practical basis to meet many expectations.

And so lines of communication begin to break down. Children who stay at school do develop a cultural basis, no matter in how rudimentary a form, but this, far from helping them communicate with those who are working, cuts them off further. Culture becomes a part of the status symbol. Those who work pity those at school for their lack of income, and the freedom that comes with it, but there is envy too and the accusation of *snobs*. 

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The new needs of production do not require that every child should have a complete secondary education. But one very good reason for socialists to insist on universal secondary education is that this would expand the level of communication between human beings no matter what type of work they then undertake. This is not to ignore the human right of all children to attain high cultural levels or to dismiss the current wastage of talent at all levels of the education system.

If the present educational divisions are perpetuated it well may be that the divisions between the more highly educated workers and the majority will run far deeper than any division now existing between tradesmen and unskilled workers.

Prior to World War II the percentage of young people able to take up a trade was far less than the percentage after the war. Industrial expansion fostered in the war years made it necessary for more skilled workers to be trained. Given the continued development and application of technology more young people will be encouraged to complete secondary school and undertake tertiary education. Significant numbers of children from the industrial working class will be in this group. Parents who place a high value on job security will make sacrifices to keep their children at school in the same way that parents in the past were prepared to subsidise the low rates of apprenticeship pay to enable their children to have a trade.

But there is overwhelming evidence to show that the educational level of parents, home environment and other social influences outside the school weigh the scales for or against higher education*. It is not simply money, or the lack of it, but perceived levels of attainment and the stimulation to study. Generally speaking a home where parents left school early is more likely to be without the facilities to encourage basic study skills. Some young people will move up the scale but many more who could attain higher education will be deprived of it or diverted from it. Even when considerable changes are taking place in the structure of the work force the majority in each group tend to repeat themselves in the next generation. It will not be surprising if the needs of production prevail in moulding the education system, that the children of the unskilled immigrant workers will become the

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The Australian Council for Educational Research has studied the representation of children entering tertiary education with different parental occupational backgrounds. In this study thirty-three per cent of fathers of male school-leavers were in the category "unskilled or semi-skilled" but only 1.5 per cent of these school-leavers entered university. In contrast only 2% of the fathers of male school-leavers were classified as "university professional" but 35.9 per cent of their sons entered university.
least skilled in the work force while the children of today’s skilled workforce will, in the main, be educated only to the level that will enable them to fulfil the needs of expanding technology.

Amongst those staying on at school there is a strong belief that higher education ensures a rising status and provides the intellectual basis for greater participation in the running of society. The controllers of society should not be surprised when high school pupils and the products of the high schools act upon these beliefs.

While there is partial truth in the view that educational training of young people today is only different in degree from the vocational training of apprentices, and in the view that changes in educational standards are simply a response to the needs of production, these over-simplifications ignore the powerful influences that education brings in its own right.

Young people completing the six-year high school, or with the expectation of completing it, are subjected to numerous influences.

For the earliest years they are projected into an educational rat race. They are under pressure to work long and hard. The goal may be a chance at a highly paid job. The threat may be that if they don’t study they will have to become ordinary workers (perish the thought). Meantime study is real and earnest. Even when they do well they are under pressure to do better, from Mums and Dads who didn’t have your chance, from teachers who need high pass rates for inspectors and from the fact that places in tertiary institutes are by no means guaranteed, even to those with quite high passes.

In such circumstances many older high school students have learnt levels of discipline that even the bundy clock fails to instill into workers. They show some sympathy and appreciation for the status of teachers. In several recent instances high school students have taken strike action to support teacher demands for higher salaries and improved conditions.

Although high school education is too often subjected to the pressures of university requirements so that all-sided study is replaced by specialisation, the range of studies and the world in which the student grows up assist him to be knowledgable. The age at which he is assimilating so many ideas helps him to be relatively free of prejudice.

When once the high school boy read Champion or Triumph with their stories of individual, mostly clever, romantic heroes, today he is more likely to read Mad. Parents may find Mad
destructive and cynical, but its targets include most low brow TV, President Johnson, the Vietnam war and all the main forms of hypocrisy practised in society.

The study of contemporary history has moved well past World War I to take in events as late as 1965. Some curriculums now include the study of Australian trade unions, the political parties and current events. While much of this is superficial and not always objective, it opens doors previously nailed down in cold war prejudice. Since stress is placed on self study and researching for facts, indispensable attributes of successful researchers and flexible workers at a later stage, some self study and researching leads in interesting directions even when the basic curriculum leaves something to be desired. High school students have been in the last few years, the biggest single grouping seeking information about the Communist Party. Some want material for assignments, some say they are seeking the facts to help them understand communism. In several cases a few young people have read themselves through more of the writings of Marx than many active socialists would be familiar with.

None of this is to suggest that the ideas of socialism are main topics of conversations in the high schools or that socialist ideas are winning a major adherence. It does suggest that socialists and, indeed, all in the labor movement committed to a humanist set of values should concern themselves with the content of courses undertaken in the high schools.

Till now the concentration of effort by those who value education has been on the obvious essentials — on the school building program, teacher training, teacher qualifications, size of classes and the provision of equipment. Efforts need to be undertaken more widely to counter the growing tendencies to distort education. When the distortion arises from the pressure of universities, an all-sided education for the majority is sacrificed for the minority who will eventually attend university. The syllabus becomes a preparation for university entrance. To the extent that this is successful the need to provide a full secondary education for all children is obscured.

Even when the pressure of universities is only partially successful, the effect on those who are only remaining in school until the age of 16 is apparent. They become indifferent when taught subjects which are of no use to them, which they cannot understand or see the point of.

When the distortion arises from the pressure of industry's needs there tends to be an overweighting on the side of science at the expense of the humanities. This pressure begins in the schools
and extends into the tertiary institutions so that it becomes possible in theory to train people to point missiles in the direction required without concerning them with the political, social, economic and moral issues involved in pointing missiles anywhere.

At the same time trade unions, political parties and the leaders of social movements should not be content to leave the presentation of their position entirely in the hands of the education authorities.

Trade unions are in an excellent position to concern themselves with the content of studies undertaken about the unions. They could offer material and speakers.

The 'white collar' unions, notably the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations, could share with high school students the studies they have made on the effects of technological change. This would be a far-sighted approach since most high school students will eventually work in fields covered by ACSPA.

In a small way the Communist Party has provided materials on request, but until now no material has been especially prepared for high school students. When communists have accepted invitations to speak in schools the questions have been as one might expect — about Hungary, the Berlin Wall, the Peking-Moscow dispute, Vietnam, about democratic practice and the rights of individuals in socialist societies and whether communists organise strikes and industrial unrest. The open-mindedness and the response to honest attempts to answer such complex, even difficult, questions would do credit to older audiences.

Factual, documented material on Vietnam, including Malcolm Salmon's eyewitness account of North Vietnam, are sought. It was no accident that a major target for the distribution of government pamphlets on Vietnam has been the high schools. No reliable survey exists to show the extent of opposition to the Vietnam war in the high schools, but evidence of anti-war values extends from the widespread popularity of the badge which proclaims: 'Make Love Not War' to teach-ins, student participation in demonstrations, evidence of resistance to cadet training, a student strike at one Victorian school and considerable support for the NSW teacher, Bill White, when he refused to be conscripted. As yet those who oppose the Australian commitment in Vietnam have not made more than sporadic efforts to develop into an effective movement the disquiet amongst students towards the Vietnam war and conscription.
For many years the trade unions and other sections of the labor movement have sought to protect apprentices from excessive exploitation, from poor training and outdated study courses. When so many young people now prepare for life and work in the high schools it is imperative that they too be protected from excessive exploitation arising out of the needs of industry or the tertiary institutions, from poor training arising out of the lack of money for education and the consequent shortage of school buildings and qualified teachers and from outdated study courses which allow facts to be presented one-sidedly or ignored altogether.

Since high school students are not apprentices, helping them towards the best conditions of study and towards self-expression on issues that concern them cannot be developed in the same way as are the needs of apprentices. Parents working with each other and in co-operation with teachers have already done much and will do more, but the needs of education require greater community involvement if secondary education is to become the right of every child. Student self-expression will develop as the community recognises the value of the search for truth, no matter where it leads. Then teachers will encourage it without fear of departmental crack downs.

Young people at work as apprentices or in other occupations may be able to help bridge the gap between themselves and the high school students. While the gap is real there are common problems for all young people, notably those associated with Vietnam and conscription. If those concerned with such issues seek alliances with those in high school some of the gap may be narrowed and this will have important results when all are eventually at work regardless of the colour of the collars they will wear.