

# Differentiated schooling

## Australia and New Zealand, 1840-2000

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Different schools and different courses of instruction for different groups of students have existed throughout the history of schooling. It is only in relatively recent times, mainly from the mid-nineteenth century that common schools with a common curriculum developed, usually in public school systems.

In this entry, recent approaches to 'differentiated teaching' are not considered to any great degree. Here the emphasis is on school and student organisation rather than pedagogy.

## Modern forms of differentiation

The term *differentiation* helps describe the student groupings, the processes that select and sort, and the general development of grouping technologies that were most widespread in schools in the twentieth century. They have a direct connection with the application of new social sciences, especially educational psychology, to the education of young people. The beginnings of intelligence testing and its use in *vocational guidance*, *streaming*, *tracking* and *setting* [see Glossary] saw new life for differentiated schooling. These technologies that attempted to manage student populations were considered modern, in that they departed from the older justifications for differentiated schooling that included separate schooling and curricula based on students' social class or caste, race and ethnicity, religion and gender. Modern differentiation promised a truer child-centred, and socially efficient education for young people. The promise was that natural intelligence, aptitudes and capacities could be identified and students would receive an appropriate, differentiated education as a result.

From this there also seemed to be the promise of a broader social efficiency. Young people's talents and interests, once identified, could lead to an education that matched their potentials and their efficient preparation for appropriate jobs and careers.

In Australia and New Zealand, in the government departments of education early in the twentieth century at least, there was great receptivity to these ideas. As a result, especially at the secondary levels, there were new schools established that included domestic science, junior technical, central as well as academic high schools, and the streaming of students. In primary schools 'opportunity' or 'special' classes for 'bright', or 'dull' students were also established.

In Australia and New Zealand the New York-based Carnegie Corporation encouraged differentiating reforms with study grants to influential educators, and by assisting in the establishment, in both Australia and New Zealand, of permanent educational research organisations that developed intelligence, reading and other tests, and promoted modernising educational reform. These organisations were the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (**NZCER**), and the Australian Council for Educational Research (**ACER**). Leaders of these institutions, the most noteworthy being **Clarence Beeby** (New Zealand), **Kenneth Cunningham** and **William Radford** (Australia), had a great influence on twentieth century school reform.

In the late twentieth century criticisms of differentiated schooling became increasingly common. By then, separate schools for different school populations and multilateral schools had given way to **comprehensive schools**. Intelligence testing, it was discovered, was responsive to family and community cultures, and associated language use. Streaming, tracking and setting sometimes had the effect of consolidating social disadvantage. Vocational guidance, especially in a workforce that was itself riven by hierarchies determined by class, race and gender, similarly could consolidate social disadvantage. Substantial works in educational sociology, usually from Britain but widely read in Australia and New Zealand, in the second half of the twentieth century revealed how this occurred. The title of one work indicated emerging criticism: *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs* (Willis, 1977). This work was different from others by Simon (1971) or the earlier Banks (1955) because Willis showed how working class boys used differentiating schooling to positively shape their desired working class identities.

As a result, in Australia and New Zealand there were pressures towards common schooling of various kinds. At the secondary level, the government comprehensive high school was advocated. It was based on the idea that all young people living in a neighbourhood, regardless of their various social origins and characteristics, might attend a single school with a common or core curriculum, especially in the early years. In primary schools there had been a common curriculum for much longer. Even in the places where public policy mandated common schooling and curricula it was rarely achieved. Exceptions were most frequently made for student populations that had 'special needs'. Students were thought to require special programs recognising for example intellectual and physical impairment, or exceptional 'gifts and talents'. Towards the end of the twentieth century, as part of the de-institutionalisation movements that were popular at the time, 'mainstreaming' of students with certain disabilities occurred. Students with special needs might work in the same classrooms, and be offered the same curriculum experienced by most or 'normal' students. Nevertheless, mainstreaming was a patchy affair. Arguments about *equity* [see Glossary] in schooling usually insisted that some students, in order to reach roughly equivalent schooling outcomes or 'success', required different treatment. It was an argument for differentiation to a degree, although not perhaps to the same degree as had been common early in the twentieth century.

## Older forms of differentiation

By concentrating on the modern ideas, ideals and practices defining differentiated schooling, neglect occurs of older and traditional means of providing different child and youth populations with different schools and curricula. These never faded away completely although there was adaptation over time.

Differentiated schooling in Australia and New Zealand since European settlement has been justified on many grounds. The individual force of any particular argument for differentiation varies with the prevailing ideas about the characteristics, capacities and destinies of different groups within the population in different historical periods. Often the idea occurred that different population groups *naturally* require different kinds of schooling. Historically the idea that girls and boys, indigenous and white/pakeha, Protestant and Catholic, working and middle class, and so on, might all participate in the same undifferentiated common schools is a relatively recent, and perhaps revolutionary concept.

## Arguments justifying differentiation

There are at least three broad grounds that have been used to justify differentiated schooling:

### (i) Physiologically-based characteristics based on:

1. gender
2. age
3. 'race'
4. physical 'normality' or otherwise

### (ii) Social and socially-based characteristics

1. social class
2. cultural and national community origins
3. religious affiliations
4. other community-forming affiliations

### (iii) Individual and psychologically-based characteristics

1. intelligence
2. aptitude and capacity for work
3. merit and achievement
4. ability and disability
5. vocation and likely destiny in the labour market.

There are three important qualifications that need to be made in introducing these sets of grounds. The first is that each of them, or at least their social consequences, are not necessarily natural or pre-determined. There are social

relations of consequence in most of these categories. An example is the category 'race'. At the beginning of the twentieth century science generally insisted on physiological and intelligence based racial differences and hierarchies. By the end of the same century the scientific argument for such differences had been demolished. The second qualification is that it is rare for these characteristics to stand alone as reasons for differentiated schooling. Class, gender and ethno/cultural origins, let alone the additional impact of elements from the third group, often formed combinations that appeared to demand differentiated schooling.

A third qualification relates to the bureaucratic and social administration of apparent difference, and the ways in which some groups choose and advocate differentiated schooling for themselves. In some periods controllers of schools impose differentiated schooling on groups, 'for their own good'. For example in various Australian colonies and states many Aboriginal children were systematically excluded from public schools. Late in the twentieth century as part of self-determination strategies many Aboriginal communities sought to establish schools for their own children.

## **Differentiation then and now**

There are different historical phases in the history of differentiated schooling. For Australia and New Zealand, the following phases are suggested:

1. Early colonial, when class and caste, gender, religion and race, tended to suggest different schools and curricula for children (where children were schooled at all)
2. Late colonial, when early colonial differentiations persisted, but a new layer of common or public, government-provided common schooling was added
3. Early twentieth century, when new social science based reform suggested the importance of inborn intelligence as a new basis for managing different child populations through different kinds of schools, or different courses of instruction within schools
4. Mid to late twentieth century when common and comprehensive schools were reinforced or established, often on the grounds of 'equality of opportunity'. Older forms of differentiation based on class, gender, religious, and other community differences appeared to retreat. Intelligence testing and its result, streaming, were also in retreat.
5. Very late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, when school choice, devolution, equity and other policies were critical of common and comprehensive schooling. In some cases schools developed to serve particular curriculum and social objectives although how this occurred differed in Australia and New Zealand. The rise of neoliberal influenced education policies are associated with this increase in differentiated schooling and hierarchies of schools.

The issue of differentiation is highly significant in the history of schooling. Used as a tool of analysis it may help with an understanding of why different kinds of schools emerged for different populations, why hierarchies of schools emerge and how issues associated with equality, equity, access and exclusion play out over time.

## Glossary

**Equity** emerged as a key word in education policy as some of the implied problems with *equal opportunity* as a policy goal were identified. Equity as a policy ideal requires fair treatment of all, but appeared less insistent on equal treatment or common institutions to achieve acceptable educational outcomes. An OECD report from 2012 discussed the issue in these terms: “The highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. They give all children opportunities for a good quality education”(p. 3) and “Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)” (p. 9). OECD (2012), *Equity and quality in education: Supporting disadvantaged students and schools*, OECD. On-line: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/50293148.pdf>

**Multilateral schools** are organised around different courses, so that under the one roof or in the same campus, there will be students doing the different courses, often leading to different credentials. Commonly in the twentieth century the courses were general (academic), commercial, technical, agricultural and home science.

**Setting**, its definition varies from one educational system to another. It often refers to the sorting of students into different levels within a school subject based on past and predicted performance. Mathematics may be taught at ‘basic’, ‘standard’ or ‘advanced’ levels for example within a same-age school cohort. Another definition is ‘ability grouping’ or ‘The practice of placing students with others with comparable skills or needs, as in classes or in groups within a class.’ (*The Free Dictionary*)

**Streaming**, is a method of separating students, usually on the basis of intelligence and other tests of academic achievement. An academically demanding curriculum may be provided for the A stream, while a more ‘practical’ curriculum may be provided for the D stream. It differs from *setting* because setting tends to be based within particular subjects of study. Streaming tends to be intelligence based, determining separate courses of study for groups of students with comparable intelligence.

**Tracking**, its definition varies from one educational system to another. Generally it was seen as an advance on streaming, by introducing the issue of providing courses of instruction and study appropriate to the vocational aims and general characteristics of individual students. Tracks might include university entrance or pre-apprenticeship. A less specific definition is: “The placing of students in any of several courses of study according to ability, achievement, or needs.” (*The Free Dictionary*). The use of the word ‘needs’ in this definition separates it from *streaming* as a technology for student management.

**Vocational guidance** emerged in Australia and New Zealand from the 1920s. Information on individual students and their families was to be collected systematically by the school. This was to include evidence of vocational goals, academic performance, intelligence quotient, extra-curricular activities, personal interests, school behaviour and more. On the

basis of this information students would be guided towards sensible choices concerning their post-school futures. More efficient students, schools and adaptations to the labour market were expected as a result.

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