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The Sociology of Education in Australia: A Political and Intellectual Trajectory

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The Sociology of Education in Australia: A Political and Intellectual Trajectory

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Abstract

The sociology of education is fundamentally concerned with the role of education in social reproduction and change. In Australia such a focus informs fields like gender and education, vocational education and lifelong learning, policy sociology in education, cultural sociology of education, literacy, social justice and education, globalisation and education. This article examines the political and intellectual trajectory of Australian sociology of education. It points to the productivity of educational research in areas such as gender, literacy, and policy and to the failure of sociology of education to address the reproduction of Indigenous and ethnic disadvantage. The paper argues that the theoretical and methodological innovations that characterise sociology are a disciplinary strength, but that it is necessary for the sociology of education in Australia to fully grapple with issues of Indigenous and minority education and more recently issues of environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Australian sociology of education; Australian educational research

La Sociología de la Educación en Australia: Una Trayectoria Política e Intelectual

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Resumen

La sociología de la educación se refiere fundamentalmente al papel de la educación en la reproducción social y el cambio. En Australia, tal enfoque abarca campos como el género y la educación, la formación profesional y el aprendizaje permanente, la sociología política en la educación, la sociología de la cultura en la educación, la alfabetización, la justicia social y la educación, globalización y educación. Este artículo examina la trayectoria política e intelectual trayectoria de la sociología de la educación en Australia. Se centra en la productividad de la investigación educativa en áreas tales como el género, la alfabetización, y la política y el fracaso de la sociología de la educación a la hora de abordar la reproducción de las desventajas indígenas y étnicas. El documento sostiene que las innovaciones teóricas y metodológicas que caracterizan la sociología son una fuerza disciplinaria, pero que es necesario para la sociología de la educación en Australia lidiar completamente con cuestiones indígenas y educación de minorías y más recientemente con temas de sostenibilidad ambiental.

Palabras clave: sociología de la educación australiana, investigación educativa australiana

Émile Durkheim, founder of the sociology of education understood education to be the process by which societies replicate the conditions of their social existence. Education serves to develop in individuals the physical, intellectual and moral states demanded by particular societies and particular social locations (Durkheim 1956). Unfortunately, often occluded in functionalist readings of Durkheim's work are the dynamic aspects of his reasoning and his critical project. Durkheim gave weekly one-hour lectures to primary school teachers for fifteen years; his fundamental concern was raising their critical awareness of 'pedagogic' so that they would be able to interrupt the repetition and reproduction of the system of education they had experienced (Collins 1997, xxi).

Durkheim stressed that societies 'determine the ideal that education realizes' (Durkheim 1956, 70) and that it is not individuals, but societies that drive the prevailing forms and features guiding education. Although educators cannot create, destroy or transform education at will, they can act on it if they come to understand its nature and conditions. By understanding past and present educational systems and making historical comparisons education can learn how it came to do what it does. Only by grasping what education was in the past can educators understand how they contribute to its interruption or reproduction. The purpose of this article is to examine how education has been understood in Australia, by tracking its political and intellectual trajectory in the sociology of education. The article underlines the robust productivity and innovation undertaken in the field of education in Australia. In emphasising the point that 'education is an eminently social thing' (Durkheim 1956, 28) my aim is to resist the prevailing trends that reduce the study of education to individual matters of teaching, learning and training and the importance of the discipline to the initiation of transformative educational projects and pedagogy.

In Australian higher education the sociology of education can be found in fields of study such as gender and education, vocational education and lifelong learning, policy sociology in education, cultural sociology of education, literacy, social justice and education, globalisation and education. Courses are mainly located in faculties and schools of education, rather than in sociology departments. For the most part, sociological orientations to education are embedded in a broad

range of foundation courses in various education programs. This situation is partly due to the distinctive political development of the sociology and education in Australia, and partly due to the enlargement of its intellectual trajectory since the establishment of sociology in Australia in the 1970s.

The sociology of education in Australia has expanded its initial focus from an interest in the nature and role of schooling as a system and school education as an institution, to include a broad range of educational processes and practices. The fundamental concern of the sociology of education with questions of schooling, meritocracy and inequality, have expanded beyond the realm of schools and teachers to address wide-ranging issues such as cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, family relations, gender and sexuality, globalisation, internationalisation, knowledge and epistemology, leadership, learning communities and networks, lifelong and workplace learning, literacy, curriculum and pedagogy, teachers work and popular culture. A key issue for the sociology of education in Australia is how to advance interdisciplinary work across this extensive education research agenda.

A glaring absence in both Australian sociology and the sociology of education is the failure to fully address Indigenous and ethnic disadvantage. Notable exceptions are found in the ground-breaking work of Tsolidis (1986) on the education of non-English speaking girls, McConaghy (2000) on Indigenous education and colonialism, and Kalantiz (1985) and Rizvi (1985: 1990) on multiculturalism and racism. However, apart from Kalantiz (1986; 1988) Matthews (2002) and Tsolidis (1996) studies rarely address the persistent impact of multiple educational disadvantage to do with Indigeneity and/or race and/or ethnicity and/or gender and/or sexuality.

In the 1970s, concern with how societies transmitted cultural beliefs and values located the sociology of education at the very core of sociology (Goodman 1972). The ability of the sociology of education to address both theory and practice gave it the capacity to stimulate theoretical and methodological innovation. This is why it became: 'the most vibrant and respected area of sociological research' (Karabel 1978 cited in Saha and Keeves 1990, 91). Educational research in Australia remains vigorous. In tracking the distinctive political and theoretical trajectory of Australian sociology of education, this article highlights

the distinctive contribution of research into education gender, literacy and policy to sociology. In addition, it points to the growing importance of methodological developments and at work researching the relationship of education to sustainability and environmental issues.

Education is fundamentally interested in the transmission of culture, values, beliefs, knowledge and skills. These may be directed towards the achievement of knowledgeable individuals, rational thinkers, sustainable communities, and/or individual and national economic advancement (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). The moral, social, political or economic purpose of education, and practices directed towards the achievement of its goals are neither self-evident nor automatically given. Education research is concerned with understanding and investigating the contestations, decisions, deliberations and impositions that constitute the purpose and practice of education. In contemporary Australia this requires comprehension of the dynamic and ongoing restructuring of educational institutions and systems at all levels, as well as the massive expansion of educational practices into all spheres of life (Ferguson and Seddon 2007; Lingard and Gale 2010).

Below I provide a brief account of the development of the sociology of education in Australia. Details of courses taught in the field are based on a desktop survey of higher education courses and programs in the sociology of education. The account presented here is based on the discipline as officially and institutionally established in university courses and professional associations, it should be acknowledged that sociology of education research also occurs in many other locations and disciplines (Lawrence Saha personal communication, 1 Aug 2011).

Development of the sociology of education in Australia

The sociology of education came to prominence in Australia in the 1960s, several decades after the establishment of education as a disciplinary field. In fact, both education and sociology emerged as major social sciences in the 1970s during the rapid expansion of schooling, and in the wake of major social and technological changes (Goodman 1972).

Sociology developed unevenly in Australia and was not established as a distinct discipline until the 1950s. The first undergraduate department of sociology was established in 1959 at The University of New South Wales, and at Monash University in Melbourne in 1966 where programs were dominated by functionalism and positivism (Marshall et al. 2009). The growth of other undergraduate programs coincided with the expansion of tertiary education, which virtually doubled in 1970 from 163, 377 to 327,000 (Musgrave 1982).

Today sociology has low visibility in a higher education sector increasingly directed towards narrow vocational preparation. It usually appears as a major or minor offering within a school or faculty of social science and /or arts. Currently the dominant focus of sociological courses include: Methodology; Health, Medicine and the Body; Deviance, Social Control and Criminology; and Feminism, Gender and Sexuality (Marshall et al. 2009). The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) is the main professional association for sociology but there is no nationally funded network - similar to the UK's Curriculum, Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP) - which supports disciplinary sociology teaching and learning. In 2009, thirty-five of thirty-seven Australian public universities offered undergraduate sociology and twenty-one offered it as an Honours specialisation. Although seventy-seven TASA members listed education as a special interest in 2009, only six education courses were offered in sociology programs (Marshall et al. 2009).

Since the early 1970s most teaching and research in the sociology of education has been undertaken in schools of education rather than Australian sociology departments (Goodman 1972). Early research was more interested in the practical problems of teaching, educational psychology and the history of education than the social consequences of education (Barcan 1992). The global financial crisis of the 1930s, and challenges to the future of democracy posed by the rise of communism in Russia, and fascism in Germany, stimulated interest in the relationship between education and social change. This in turn generated concern about the role of schools in social replication, reform and change (Barcan 1992). The importance of educational research at this time was recognised in the establishment of the Australian Council

of Educational Research (ACER) in 1930 by the Carnegie Foundation. It engaged in a substantial program of educational testing to develop normative understandings of individual intelligence. It also developed curriculum materials and researched educational structures and processes (Saha and Keesee 1990).

By 1967, almost all of the sixteen faculties of education in Australia and New Zealand universities offered sociology of education or course in the social foundations of education. The sociology of education in Australia reached its zenith in the 1970s and 1980s when it was compulsory in teacher education programs and paved the way for research that stood in contrast to widely taught educational administration subjects derived from social psychology. The 1970s saw the growth of the Australian school system and conflict between teacher unions and State Education Departments. Government reports at this time were mostly in the 'political arithmetic tradition':

that is couched in terms of descriptive statistics and overtly atheoretical, though covertly broadly structural functionalist. Much of this work was contained in mimeographed reports from State Education Department Research Branches and it was also largely upon such work that the Karmel report relied (Musgrove 1982, 209).

According to Musgrove (1982), the Karmel Report hit a 'raw cultural nerve' because it drew attention to the fact that education did not give all Australians a 'fair go'. It highlighted unequal educational provision for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants, Aborigines and girls, and called for compensatory mechanisms, decentralisation and community participation. A pivotal debate at this time concerned the source of educational inequity, the effect of class and its relationship to capitalism. Critical accounts of education focused attention on the role of schooling in the replication of social inequality and capitalist relations of production. In the UK, (Bernstein 1977) showed how the pedagogical communications in the family and schools advantaged middle-class children. The social reproduction thesis, following (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and (Bowles and Gintis 1976) reinforced Bernstein's work to highlight the correspondence between education reform and the labour force needs of capitalism (Connell 2004). Schools

were regarded as reinforcing and transmitting the linguistic and symbolic capital of the middle class. The cultural dissonance between working class families and middle class schooling resulted in social inequality while at the same time reinforcing class divisions and replicating capitalist modes of production. However, missing from this account was an understanding of the complex and contradictory role of class and gender in students' responses to schooling (Arnot 2002). The focus on school / economic relations of many critical scholars in Australia at this time accorded family and gender relations little significance.

The publication of *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (Connell, Ashenden and Kessler 1982) offered important insights into the relationship between schools and society. Theorising family, school, class and gender relations the study described life in schools:

It was equally a study of families and their strategies, of the life histories of teachers and pupils, and of the ways family practices and personal trajectories intersected with the institutional arrangements of education systems to produce class inequalities in education. These dynamics only came into view because . . . we were studying the working class and the ruling class at the same time (Connell 2004, 17).

Class and gender relations occur within family, school, and workplace relations. While they have different and sometimes related histories, they are interdependent spheres, which interact to:

create dilemmas (some soluble) provide resources (or deny them) and suggest solutions (some of which don't work): to which the family and the school must respond in its collective practice (Connell, Ashenden and Kessler 1982, 73)

Although *Making the Difference* included descriptions of school life it was not a school ethnography in the same sense as those generated in the UK which were mainly derived from sociology students 'applying relatively simple sociological conceptual frameworks to historical data' (Musgrove 1982, 211). In Australia innovative quasi- anthropological studies investigated school/community relationships; sexism and

promotion; education of Aborigines, migrants, ethnic groups and curricula developments (Musgrave 1982).

The 'new sociology of education' stimulated by *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education* (Young 1971) had a big impact in UK and USA. Although (Branson 1980) and (Musgrave 1980) claim it made few waves in Australia, it found its way into introductory sociology courses of the late 1970s. Informed by phenomenological perspectives, Young's edited collection interrogated the organisation of knowledge; its social definitions and management particularly in relation to the curriculum. Its muted impact in Australia was to some extent due to the pragmatic and somewhat uncritical approach of curricula and educational interventions derived from a tradition of measurement and social arithmetic. In addition, teaching and research informed by the history of education had a longer and stronger grounding than sociological approaches. Importantly, the control of Australian education by State bureaucracies left little opportunity for curriculum research by teachers and educationalists, indeed such work was regarded as problematically progressive and radical (Davies 2004). Concern about the effects of inequality was limited to local studies of classroom interactions and curricula, and often neglected theorisations of the ways social structures connected to, and shaped daily lives (Branson 1980).

Since the late 19th century, the Australian education system has been based on the provision of free, compulsory and secular school education. Each of the six colonies, later to become States of Australia, introduced state education acts outlining their legislative responsibilities for public education. State governments continue to hold responsibility for the provision of educational services in Australia. However, the Commonwealth Government decides eligibility requirements for higher education funding, research and allocation of student places; in addition it has assumed increasing responsibility for funding private (non-government) schools. This funding anomaly has left state governments with greater responsibility for public (government) schools, which cater disproportionately to disadvantaged students. The cornerstones of free public education in Australia have been substantially eroded by neo-liberal policies concerned with stimulating market values such as school choice, competition and accountability measures (Meadmore 2001).

Tension between the Commonwealth government and the States remains a defining characteristic of Australian education. Since 2009 the Australian Government has funded state and territory governments provided they commit to national school performance and reporting requirements involving national testing, national reporting, reporting to parents, publishing performance information and information for school-level reporting (Matthews 2011).

The States have legislative and regulatory responsibility for the registration and accreditation of teachers and teacher training and provide most teacher education funding in universities however a range of national agreements and Commonwealth financial conditions impinge on the regulatory capacity of the States (Matthews 2011). The Australasian Forum of Teacher Registration and Accreditation Authorities (AFTRAA) was recognised in 2006. Its Framework for the National Recognition of Approved Pre-Service Teacher Education Programs (AFTRAA, 2006) set out the broad requirements that each authority in the Australian States and Territories must include in their program approval process. It requires teachers to know, understand and take account of the disciplines they teach, learning philosophy, teaching and learning theories and diverse social cultural and special learning needs. Faculties of education have traditionally responded to the need for teachers to be able to understand social political and ethical dimensions of teaching by providing courses in: the philosophy of education; the history of education; comparative education; and the sociology of education.

During the 1980s, State restructuring in Australia sought to achieve greater productivity and competitiveness through a proliferating mesh of accountability regimes. Education became the effect of a reconstituted relationship between the Commonwealth government and the States in the creation of a national economic infrastructure, which subsumed social and cultural agendas. Key aspects of educational restructuring involved corporate managerialism, devolution and marketisation (Taylor et al. 1997). Corporate managerialism sought efficiency and effectiveness by measuring outcomes and performance through the application of performance indicators tied to strategic mission statements. At the same time as it centralised performance priorities, devolution decentralised decisions about how centrally determined

priorities would be achieved. Finally, marketisation brought the logic, purpose, language and practices of the market to education. Reconceptualised as a quasi-market, schools were regarded as producing educational outcomes in a competitive environment, where consumer choice facilitated the success or failure of its 'products' (Marginson 1997; Taylor et al. 1997).

The National Goals of Schooling (1997) linked funding to testing in an effort to achieve equity through the measurement of student outcomes. A decade later accountability mechanisms moved into the classroom in the form of national literacy and numeracy tests. The first Australian National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was initiated in 2008 to test students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Teachers and researchers challenged standardised tests for narrowing the curriculum and causing schools to teach to the tests. The publication of NAPLAN data on the My School website in 2010 confirmed fears that NAPLAN information would be used to identify 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' schools. Policy initiatives, such as the proposed payment of teacher bonuses based on test results, demonstrate government misunderstanding of how schools and classrooms work. Moreover, aggregated test results tell teachers and educationalists what they know already – 'that results largely reflect the student demographic' (Reid 2010, 21) and that simplistic measures of success and failure in literacy and numeracy do not take into account complex and deep seated social, cultural and educational factors.

The fraught relationship between educational institutions and government is based on a longstanding expectation that education research should simply inform and legitimate state policy (Singh 1994). Government funding priorities reinforce State prescriptions, as well as research paradigms that avoid complexity by privileging empirical, quantitative approaches such as computer modelling and psychometrics. Concealment of State interests in managing educational issues is not necessarily deliberate, but as Yates (1993, 177) observes occurs because: 'contested meaning, contested lines of exclusion and inclusion, contested vision, are excluded in the terms of its own discourse'. Reports informing educational policy rarely indicate authorship and are often based on specially prepared consultancies using specially prepared social statistics; processes of policy formation and sociological research

are assumed to be irrelevant (Singh 1994). Policy proliferation in education over the last three decades has increasingly sought to manage and control teacher's work by auditing the minutiae of educational practice in all sectors and every level. In response, Australian education research since the 1980s has increasingly directed attention to exposing the way policy restricts the meritocratic and social justice capacity of education, while at the same time directing education towards transmitting a particular kind of culture (Connell 1998).

Mapping the field

In the 1970s a major factor in the spread of the 'sociological perspective' in Australia and New Zealand tertiary institutions was teaching sociology to students of education (Bates 1973). Today it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which a sociological perspective is addressed in the twenty-six universities offering teacher-training programs because the titles of many courses course content difficult to assess. A desktop survey of teacher training programs identified foundational courses arrayed under the following titles:

- Education and Society
- Social Justice and Education
- Education: Social and Historical Contexts
- Education Theories and Practices
- Education Change and Society
- Education Culture and Diversity
- Schools and Societies
- Social Perspectives on Education
- Global Perspectives in Education
- Philosophical and Social Contexts of Education
- Cultural Politics of Education

As stated earlier, the provision of courses in philosophy, history, comparative education and the sociology of education is common in faculties of education, although the professional orientation of many universities has diminished the visibility of its disciplinary work (Terri Seddon personal communication, Aug 1 2011). Indeed, a good deal of teacher training focuses on the technical aspects of educational practice, rather than the provision of sociological perspectives able to assist

teachers to understand and address the social and political aspects of education.

Australian educational research has a strong tradition of research expertise in gender, sexuality, ethnicity and multiculturalism stemming from feminist and Indigenous critiques of the failure of mainstream educational research to address and represent the experiences of marginalised and minority groups. In the early 1990s groundbreaking research investigated gender equity policy in education and the formation of gendered subjects (Henry and Taylor 1993; Yates 1993b). Much of this work was funded by federal gender equity curriculum reform projects interested in the complex dimensions of gender disadvantage and their intersection with ethnicity, poverty, rurality and sexuality. A focus on non-sexist education and equality of opportunity in the 1970s and 1980s gave way in the 1990s to mainstreaming and a focus on different dimensions of inequality. This in turn paved the way for approaches to Indigenous education. Importantly the alliance of activists and ‘femocrats’ in Commonwealth bureaucracies facilitated the landmark National Policy for the Education of Girls in 1987 (Gilbert 1998). According to Gilbert (1998), little mention was made of sexuality in the report, however it did recognise ethnic and Indigenous diversity, and the impact of racism and school structures. The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997 addressed gender relations, naturalised sexualised practices and the social construction of femininity and masculinity. It also inadvertently paved the way for equity matters concerning girls and education to be subsumed by ‘stories about the boys’, which drew on ‘biological inheritances’ (Gilbert 1998, 19). Naturalised discourses of gender were challenged by researchers who reiterated the relevance of social and embodied constructions of masculinity and their impact on literacy and schooling (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998).

The adoption of multiculturalism in Commonwealth policy in the 1970s established Australia as a world leader in multicultural education. Pedagogical and curricular innovations at this time included: English as a Second Language provision; first language maintenance; community language teaching; culturally inclusive curricula; parent participation and antiracism. However, in the 1990s multicultural education was charged with inconsistent implementation and lack of focus.. More

recently, it has been downgraded in the Australian national curriculum (Lo Bianco 2010). Parallel but separate developments facilitated the centralisation of Aboriginal policy and the inclusion of Indigenous languages and perspectives in school curricula (Lo Bianco 2010). Since the 1960s the ongoing and profound educational disadvantage of Indigenous Australians has remained the focus of government reports and policy. The failure of government interventions in Indigenous education is due to the complexity of a problem that involves intergenerational disadvantage and trauma, ongoing socio-economic disadvantage, lack of sustainability of school reform and embedded racism, as well as top down policy governance models (Gray and Beresford 2008).

Concern with educational inequality have generated an abundance of research that describes neo-liberal reforms in education and the impact of these on social justice. Policy sociology in education examines the ideological and discursive production of policy at national and global levels from Bourdieuan perspectives (Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor 2005) and the application of critical discourse analysis to track social justice and equity goals (Taylor 2004).

Sociological analysis of literacy reforms has given rise to a rich vein of critical studies of literacy and literacy education (Luke 1989). Fundamental to this work is the idea that literacy is socially and politically constructed and 'in and of itself, can neither enslave, emancipate, cognitively enable or preclude' all that has been claimed for its practice (Luke 1989, 11). The absence of a historical and sociological understanding of literacy enables a great many problematic assumptions to go unchallenged. These include: a) manufactured moral panics periodically generated about the crisis of literacy and declining literacy standards, b) the assumption that literacy simply involves the technicist application of best practice pedagogies and is devoid of 'ideological concerns and political agendas' (Luke 1989, 2), and c) the idea that literacy has the capacity to drive economic, political, social and personal development and emancipation. A 'multifaceted literacy myth' has dominated 20th century educational discourse and asserts that:

for a given society literacy is a prime engine of economic, cultural and social development; that for the individual – that entity invented in the Enlightenment – literacy is a necessary and sufficient cause for cognitive development and social participation; that institutional transition – literacy via schooling – is a viable means for achieving the above; and that pedagogical science . . . can deliver the goods (Luke 1989, 2).

Awareness of the impact of economic and cultural conditions of communications conducted through new media and technology gave rise to the multiliteracies approach developed by The New London Group (Group 1996). Multiliteracies was a response to the increasing diversity of both students and texts in schools. To counter increasing pressure on teachers to devise ever more precise scientific quantitative mean-ends directed basic skills, The New Basics Project (DET, 2004) and Productive Pedagogies Projects (Heyes et al. 2003; Lingard et al. 2006) sought to initiate radical changes that would enable students to ‘read’ the multiple and conflicting textual, visual, audio and gestural communication mediums of the 21st century. The maxim of multiliteracies is that new times demand new approaches and which engage with ‘blended forms of textual and symbolic practice’ (Luke and Luke 2001, 96).

Tasks and priorities

Forty years ago Goodman observed that studies of educational inequality made disadvantaged groups the ‘objects’ of research and relied too heavily on ‘descriptive empirical research supported by statistical data’ (Goodman 1972, 121). Sociological approaches were needed to grasp the connection between education and economic, political, social and cultural aspects of society. While we may have moved into an ‘age of uncertainty’ brimming with new and competing post-traditional ‘theories of the contemporary’ (Kenway and Bullen 2000, 266), approaches to research drawing on quantitative statistical data are still privileged in Australian education policy. A major task for the sociology of education is research able to address continuing patterns of inequality. This means going beyond qualitative/quantitative research binaries or attempts translate the ‘facts’ of quantitative science

into actions and generating instead broad and rich multidisciplinary data comprising equally rich interpretations and analysis (Luke, 2007; 2010). Indeed, a strength of today's sociology of education is its capacity for methodological and theoretical innovation derived from 'descriptive and interpretive, quantitative and qualitative, empirical and hermeneutic approaches that draw from varied theoretical models of education and schooling, knowledge and culture, the learner and society' (Luke, Green and Kelly 2010, viii).

Despite research achievements in the areas of gender, literacy, and policy detailed above, low achievement persists among students from remote, low socio-economic, and non-English language backgrounds. Indeed Australia has the 'worst Indigenous educational outcomes of any comparable Western settler society' (Gray and Beresford 2008, 204). A major priority for the sociology of education is work that addresses the replication of social educational inequality and the on going effects of settler colonialism and racism (Grey and Beresford 2008). The reproduction of educational inequality is also of concern in the education of newly arrived refugee students in Australia (Matthews 2008). Apart from finding methodological balance and a means to address the replication of Indigenous and ethnic disadvantage, a final priority for the sociology of education is the importance of understanding and addressing climate change and unsustainability. There is growing awareness of the fundamental connection between social and environmental justice and the relevance of education to the achievement of environmental sustainability (Matthews 2009: Fien and Tilbury 2002).

In detailing the political and intellectual trajectory of the sociology of education in Australia I have highlighted its expansive research agenda, the cutting edge work undertaken in studies of gender, literacy and neo-liberal education policy, and the missed opportunity to expand critical studies into research examining Indigenous and ethnic underachievement. I have also pointed to the urgent need for the sociology of education to address pressing issues of environmental sustainability. My intention in this article has been simply to demonstrate the continued relevance of the sociology of education to understanding the relationship between education, social change and social transformation.

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