INTRODUCTION

This is the third edition of *Making Sense of Mass Education*. It continues the process of covering more issues than the preceding versions of the book, it updates aspects of the data, it discusses more recent research, it offers more nuanced assessment of specific problems, and it also does all this within a parallel digital environment – one which provides additional ideas, activities, and ways of seeing and understanding. While all these elements are significant, they do not really constitute the most important reason for writing a third edition of the book.

The central reason is actually that education is generally *a rapidly and continually changing field* – after all, this is not a book about classical philosophy or human biology, wherein significant changes in knowledge tend to be measured over decades, or even centuries. Education policy and practice can change very quickly, and the issues we need to talk about and understand therefore change equally quickly. Currently, these issues include debates over Gonski and school funding equity, worries over NAPLAN and school ranking tables, arguments over the Australian curriculum, the rise in interest in alternative forms of education, global concerns over the ethics of big data use, public disagreements over the most effective reading strategies – to name but a few. This edition offers a contemporary assessment of all these topics.

Everyone has opinions about mass education. Not only did we all go to school – so we know what it's like from the inside – but we also hear about educational issues and concerns in the news every day. These might include questions such as: Should we go back to basics when teaching literacy? Should we reduce funding to state schools that do poorly on NAPLAN? Should we teach more about the environment? Our opinions on these specific matters, assuming we have any, tend to be shaped by our more general beliefs about education – schools aren't educating our children properly; our education system seems pretty fair; the modern curriculum is full of trendy rubbish. The problem here is that many of these things we think we know about our system of mass education don't stand up to any kind of close scrutiny; they are often myths, and this book will address the most important of these myths.

This demythologising approach is unusual, but by no means unheard of, within social analysis. One of the greatest of all writers in the field, Peter Berger, suggests in his seminal text *Invitation to Sociology* (1963, 51) that 'debunking' is one of the most crucial elements of the discipline, and that there is 'a logical imperative to unmask the pretentions and the propaganda' by which people cloak their actions with each other. To put it another way, he proposes our social world is full of stories we tell ourselves, and it is a sociologist's job to see which ones hold (at least some) water, and which ones don't.

However, not only is debunking/demythologising one of the central responsibilities of the social analyst, it is also an excellent pedagogic approach to the discipline. LeMoyne and Davis (2011) contend that the most effective way of coming to grips with complex

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social problems is to begin by examining important taken-for-granted cultural beliefs, and from there these beliefs can be systematically questioned – by illustrating the ways in which those beliefs evolved, by unpacking their theoretical domain assumptions, by providing concrete evidence that speaks to these beliefs, and by providing a vocabulary of other ways of seeing the same issues.

This final element is of particular importance. The intention of this approach is not to simply point at a particular social myth and state: '*This is wrong; the following is correct'*. As will be discussed in this book, truth doesn't work that way. Instead, the intention is simple: to point out the flaws, biases and shortcomings in some of our dominant ways of understanding familiar educational issues, and then to propose a range of alternatives that might be a little more convincing, and a little less vulnerable to easy criticism. To paraphrase the logic of the philosopher Karl Popper (1963), *there's no such thing as being absolutely and unequivocally right, but there's a million ways to be completely wrong.*

MAKING SENSE OF MASS EDUCATION

One of the many exasperating things about our education system is that it keeps changing: how we think it works, what we think it seeks to accomplish, and what we think its consequences are. It certainly isn't like the study of human anatomy, where a book from the 1920s will still give a pretty accurate account of how the human body works, and what goes where. A book on education from the same era is unlikely to make any mention of many of the issues we now consider to be of importance. Take for example Sechrist's (1920) *Education and the General Welfare.* With chapters on 'School attendance' and 'Why Children are dull', the focus was firmly on the pragmatics of how to make a school function effectively.

By the 1950s, however, new ways of thinking about schools had emerged. Concerns did not necessarily begin and end with educational efficiency, but also sought to address the relationship between schools and society. The influential theorist Parsons, in his book *The Social System* (1951), regarded education as a vital component within a complex machine, and this was a machine that needed 'dull children' to do dull work. This wasn't seen as a problem; this was part of the design. Society was a finely tuned instrument, and education helped its cogs turn.

The average book on education soon changed its focus again. Henry et al.'s (1988) *Understanding Schooling* was far more interested in the relationship between education and social power – as in the myth of our 'meritocratic' education system, and in the way class, gender and race directly correlated with schooling success – than it was in society as a 'finely tuned instrument'. Finely tuned for whom? There was nothing in this book about 'why children are dull'; rather the emphasis was on why our system seems to confuse 'dull' with 'disadvantaged'.

What about today? Do any of these approaches to education still have currency? After all, some children probably *are* dull; society *is* complex; and the notion of a genuine 'meritocracy' *is* rather dubious. What kind of approach ought we to take, and what issues should be covered? In the second decade of the 21st century, what should a general book on education look like? Hopefully, it should look rather like this one.

CHANGING CONTEXTS OF EDUCATION

The world serviced by our contemporary education system is very different from the one written about by Sechrist in 1920; consequently, the anxieties we now have about how our schools work – and who gets to benefit – are also very different. Certainly, we are no longer concerned about education for racial or national efficiency, or for the glory of the British Empire, as we were a hundred years ago. We now have a variety of other concerns, as evidenced by a series of debates about the state and direction of Australian education. There are now debates over levels of funding for public education, and the ongoing flight of the middle classes into the private school system. There are concerns over standardisation, and the relentless imperative to collect data and rank schools. Some newspapers continually tell us that our schools have lost their way, and that we should return to traditional educational techniques and philosophies, ones based upon tried and trusted truths of yesterday. There are also worries about the levels of difference – physical, intellectual and even cultural – that schools should be required to accommodate. Should we return to the logic of the 'special school'?

These debates raise a number of questions, but one is particularly important: How do we approach such dilemmas conceptually? Or to put it another way: Is there a single theoretical model that can help us make sense of these problems, or do we have to address them on an issue-by-issue, case-by-case basis? This question has wider implications, not just about understanding specific changes and tensions within the institutions of mass schooling, such as the ones outlined above, but also about how to make sense of contemporary education in the broadest of ways.

Arguably, almost every general work dealing with the sociology and philosophy of education has attempted to answer this question, and this book will add to that tradition. However, this is not intended as just an updated repetition of previous approaches, which have tended to take one of three forms: first, some have taken a single approach, for example critical theory as in Henry et al.'s book. This is fine if that approach is stated explicitly, right upfront (which it was). Otherwise, the book is in danger of passing off a particular perspective as the singular, unequivocal and uncontested truth of the matter – which isn't very honest. Second, some books have appeared to take no specific approach at all, in which case they are either kidding themselves, or their readers. All sociological analyses – and for that matter, all histories and all philosophies, in fact, probably all forms of knowledge – come from a particular perspective; the trick is to know what it is, and again, to be honest about it. Finally, others still employ a mishmash of theories, either because they don't realise it, because they hope no one will notice it, or because they are trying to be all things for everyone.

This book adopts none of these forms, instead presenting a number of different approaches, which are placed in relation to each other, and which are shown to offer specific kinds of advantages (and disadvantages), to answer questions in particular kinds of ways, and to be useful in addressing given kinds of problems. As such, the intention has not been simply to produce an updated version of previous books on Australian education, it has been to offer something new altogether, and, hopefully, to keep moving the analysis onwards.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH MODERNIST SOCIOLOGIES

But what exactly is *onwards*? One of the wonderful things about modernism was that we used to be able to answer that question without hesitation; now it's nowhere near as straightforward. If anyone needs reminding, modernity is generally regarded as beginning in the final years of the 18th century, at the end of the Enlightenment. Lasting some two hundred years, this was to be an era characterised by the underpinning belief that through the use of reason, it would be possible to solve humanity's problems. With its mantra of truth, objectivity and progress, and under the banner of its greatest exemplar – science – society now was to be free of the superstitions and dogmas that had previously decided our fates; humanity had come of age.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the 20th century an increasing number of voices pointed to some significant problems with this optimistic narrative. It was suggested that the modernist project had failed, and that we had entered a new era, the era after modernity: that of postmodernity. By rejecting the grand narratives of modernism, postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1993) sought to describe a world characterised not by truth and progress, but by many different truths, and by the belief that history is not synonymous with progress, such that all we could really make claim to was 'change'. Other writers, most notably Giddens (1990, 1991), while reluctant to call time on modernity altogether, argued instead that we have simply entered a period of late modernity (an era still largely modernist, but now characterised by continual crisis, and a greater scepticism toward the power of reason). These writers still seek to question the belief that we are making 'progress' in any manageable way.

And therein lies part of the problem with the notion of onwards. Though we aren't necessarily convinced that we are making theoretical progress, in any real sense, certainly approaches to education have largely mirrored the broader move from modernism to postmodernism. Therefore, if 'moving the analysis onwards' means anything, in the context of this book, it means precisely that.

Most books on education revolve around explanatory features characteristic of modernist sociologies – most notably class, gender and race. The idea here is that these three elements represent objective 'facts' about how our society is structured, and its populations ranked and organised. This logic suggests that when we understand how these three social axes work, we will be able to account for their effects and solve the problem. This book will take a somewhat different approach.

BEYOND MODERNIST SOCIOLOGIES OF EDUCATION

This book will begin by addressing these three familiar conceptual axes, but then extend the analysis into a more postmodern interpretation of each of the same generalised notions. For example, when discussing issues of the relationship between schooling and gender, modernist accounts have stressed the role played by patriarchy – the global system of male domination – in the ongoing educational subordination of women. Such second-wave feminist accounts have now been replaced by more nuanced, less deterministic explanations of the same generalised area, and those will be discussed here.

This is not the only way of altering the focus on education, of moving the analysis onwards. There is an alternative tradition of analysis that largely avoids the modern/postmodern dichotomy, one based around Foucault's work on governance. Rather than concentrating on issues of power and inequality, this paradigm focuses instead on the techniques and practices by which we are shaped as particular types of individuals, and by which we have our conduct regulated. From the early 19th century onwards, the school has had a central role to play in producing a disciplined and docile population, in producing the categories of difference necessary to permit effective, targeted social management, and latterly, even providing the primary site for the governance of students' subjective experience.

This book will not only address the broadest issues within education, it will also attempt to understand education's place within a complex and changing society, and supply the conceptual tools for providing non-reductionist accounts of a number of contemporary cultural forms. Whether addressing the effects of the news media, or of popular culture, or how digital technologies are reshaping both the classroom and the capacities of the people in them, arguably many previous attempts to describe the relationship between these issues and our education system have relied upon modernist binaries to provide their foundation. This book will not do so.

The overall intention here is to provide the best possible tools for making sense of mass education, however the tools available within sociology and cultural studies are not the only ones on offer. If we are to understand the ideas that have animated education over the last 2500 years – or more importantly, if we are to recognise which of these ideas still have currency within contemporary mass education, and how those ideas are operationalised – then the discipline of philosophy is required. Arguably, philosophy's utility also extends beyond these issues, into assessments of schooling, ethics and the law, as well as understanding the educational legacy of Australia's status as a former British colony.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is organised in a somewhat unusual way, both in the way the chapters are located within four distinct parts (each with a different focus and theoretical alignment), and in terms of the structure of the chapters. All 15 chapters of the book are organised in the same way: they are based around a number of familiar myths common to popular discourses on the topic in question. For example, Chapter 1 on social class is based around three myths: 'Australia is a society characterised by equality', 'Schooling success is only about individual ability' and 'Social class is all about money'. In the process of debunking these statements, it is also possible to ascertain what each different approach to understanding mass education can offer us.

Part 1 'Re-assessing the three pillars: Modern and postmodern sociologies of education' sets out the dominant framework for the study of mass education. The familiar axes of class, race and gender, and the resulting forms of disadvantage that emerge from them, are assessed and, in many ways, found wanting in the light of the broader changes associated with contemporary educational thought. The challenge then becomes to determine how these categories and concerns can now best be utilised.
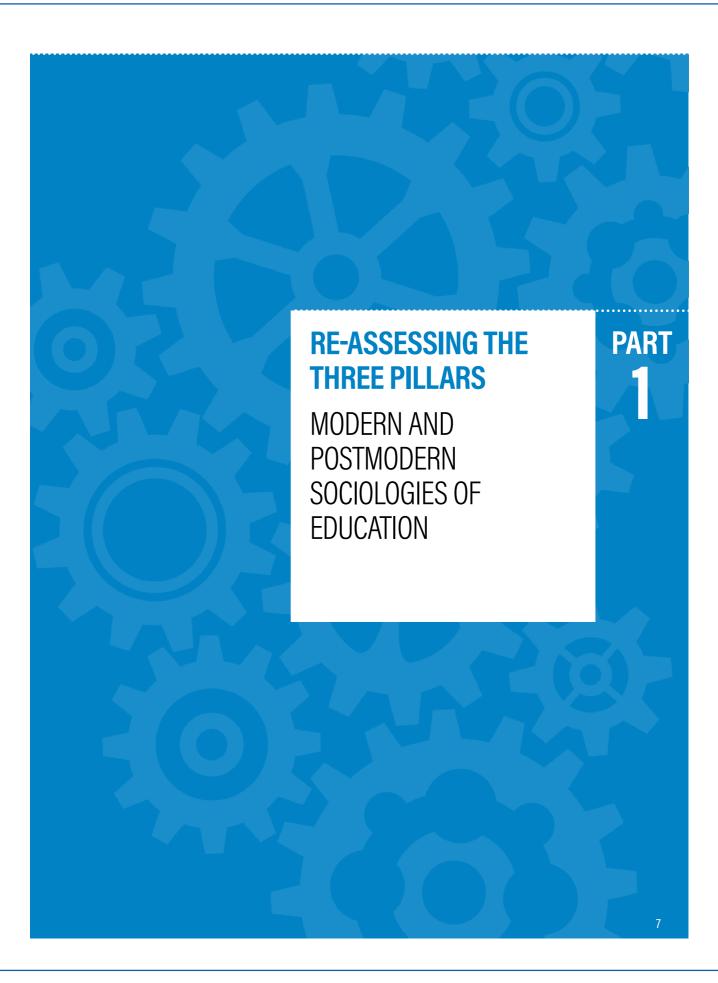
Part 2 is called 'The foundations of an alternative approach: Education and governance'. This part outlines the possibility of an alternative approach to the social analysis of education – based around the work of writers such as Foucault, Hunter and Rose – which can augment, or arguably even replace, the more sophisticated application of modernist sociology outlined in Part 1.

Part 3 is called 'Cultural contexts of contemporary education'. Theoretical foundations and interpretations of education aside, it is important to locate modern mass schooling within some important cultural, political and technical contexts. This part will raise questions about the relationship between school knowledge and popular culture, the effects of public discourse on educational debates, the rise and rise of digital technologies within the classroom, and the effects of globalisation on Australian education.

Part 4 'Philosophy and mass education' examines some of the many ways that philosophy can help us better understand our schooling system. That is, philosophy is not just some abstract university knowledge system doomed to fail the most basic tests of utility. The mass school is a site of great ethical and epistemological complexity, and philosophy can help us make sense of it in ways that other disciplines can't.

In summary, and in keeping with all good social analysis, this book will attempt to address the central myths and domain assumptions surrounding the institutions of mass education. After all, the meritocratic belief that schooling is a fair race – there to be won by the best and brightest – is as prevalent now as it was at the beginning of the last century. This book will also provide a contemporary assessment of some of the ideas that have traditionally dominated education research, asking: to what extent do notions such as 'social class', 'childhood' and 'hegemonic masculinity' still have purchase within current debates, and do any viable conceptual alternatives exist? Finally, this book will seek to blur some of the disciplinary boundaries within the field of education. It will draw not only upon traditional sociology, but also cultural studies, history, philosophy, ethics and jurisprudence – and hopefully, the resulting analyses will be all the stronger, more comprehensive and more convincing as a result.

RE-ASSESSING THE THREE PILLARS

MODERN AND POSTMODERN SOCIOLOGIES OF EDUCATION

PART 1

Open any book on sociology, whether it is about education or not, and you can almost guarantee that there will be chapters on social class, gender and race. There are also likely to be other common themes – the family, ageing, deviance, and so on – but none of them are regarded to be quite as foundational as the three familiar pillars of social structure. That is, not everyone has a family, or is old, or deviant, but everyone is deemed to have a social class, a gender and a race/ethnicity, and more often than not, where you stand in relation to these categories correlates fairly directly with access to power, resources … and education. This part will examine these three social axes and draw some conclusions about how they structure our society, and how they affect the probability of success within our schools.

Though these conclusions may still be interesting and informative, sociological analysis has moved on somewhat from the belief that there are three straightforward categories that shape the structure of our society, categories that have an objective reality that we can come to know – i.e. the singular 'truth' of social class, gender and race/ethnicity. While this modernist understanding has had some interesting things to tell us, it has largely been superseded by more postmodern approaches to the same issues. These approaches attempt to avoid the sweeping generalisations, and the either/or logic of previous work in the area. As such – while staying on the same terrain as social class, gender and race/ethnicity – this section will also examine how these three solidly 19th- and 20th-century concepts can be best understood in the more nuanced sociological environment of the 21st century.

Chapter 1 'Social class' examines the relationship between the first of the three pillars and our education system. It begins by questioning the common assertion that Australia is an extraordinarily equal society; it also questions the belief that how well we do in school is determined by our intellect, and not our social backgrounds; and finally, it challenges the assumption that social class is determined solely by how rich you are.

Chapter 2 'Gender' investigates the second of the three pillars and its relationship to mass education. It questions the common views that gender is simply a function of sex; that while gender differences certainly exist, schools play no part in their construction; that for all the fuss about girls, it's actually boys who are on the receiving end of social injustice; and that during the schooling years, issues of sexuality are best just left alone.

Chapter 3 'Race/ethnicity' addresses the final pillar of social structure and our education system. It questions the beliefs that race has any validity as a concept at all; that racial discrimination has all but disappeared in Australia; that race/ethnicity has virtually no role to play in determining how well we do in school; and that there is a serious and intractable 'Indigenous problem' within Australian education.

There is a temptation to look at modernist sociologies of education and dismiss them out of hand: 'They gloss over important intersectional differences', 'They are overly deterministic' and 'They create structures where none actually exist'. There is then a temptation to disparage everything they have told us about important aspects of how our society works. Although these criticisms have significant merit, the answers you get to questions are only ever as good as the questions you ask. We started out by asking some simple questions about our society (and in the context of this book, about our education system), from within a relatively simple modernist conceptual framework, and we got some simple answers. We are now asking some more complex questions, from within a more nuanced and flexible postmodern conceptual framework, and the answers we are getting reflect this shift.

VIDEO
ESSAY QUESTIONS
TUTORIAL MATERIALS

[CHAPTER 1]
SOCIAL CLASS

This chapter argues that even though we all have a pretty good idea what is meant by the term 'social class', it is far from being a straightforward matter. After all, there is only tenuous agreement about exactly what it is, how prevalent it is, how it organises the life opportunities of our citizens, and how best to study it. To make it more difficult still, this is a subject that many feel uncomfortable discussing, let alone applying to themselves or anyone else.

In attempting to better understand the relationship between social class and education in Australia, this chapter will ask questions about just how equal Australian society actually is, how schooling success might be more likely for some than others, and why money isn't everything. In doing so, it will trace important changes in the way that the social sciences have tried to explain this phenomenon. Most notably, these changes involve a shift away from a focus on economic and structural aspects of social class, to a greater emphasis on issues of cultural practice.

Myth #1 Australia is a society characterised by equality

'It is often suggested that Australia isn't beset with the social or economic distinctions that characterise many other countries.'

Success in Australia is deemed to be based on merit. However, contrary to this belief, the evidence suggests that there is an inequitable distribution of wealth in Australia, one that is no different to other industrialised countries. Furthermore, this inequality extends to gaining access to well-resourced schools.

Myth #2 Schooling success is only about individual ability

'Given we all sit the same exams, it seems perfectly appropriate to claim that education is a fair race, and that hence the winners deserve their victory.'

Research into schooling success presents a more complex picture. The dominant model – that of critical theory – points to the vital role that schooling plays in the processes of social reproduction. According to this reasoning, wealth buys educational success, that success guarantees more wealth, which then buys the next generation's educational success. Individual ability is only one small part of this cycle.

Myth #3 Social class is all about money

'Many supposedly working-class people earn very good wages, therefore claims about middle-class advantage must be false.'

More contemporary theoretical approaches to social class point to a variety of forms of capital, not just economic. It is these forms of capital – cultural, social, symbolic – which help shape how people live, how they organise their relations with one another, and how much access they have to resources. It is these factors that most likely constitute our best understandings of social class.

INTRODUCTION

The trouble with social class

Most of us are probably of the opinion that the existence of *social class* – the ranking of social position according to wealth, power and prestige (Weber 2012) – is not a good thing and we'd all be better off without it. Indeed, some of us might like to think that one of the many good things about living in Australia is that we don't really have social classes down here; didn't we leave all that behind in Britain 200 years ago? Others more accurately realise that we too have such forms of social ranking, less obvious perhaps, but their effects are just as real and just as troublesome. Curiously though, whatever your opinion on the matter, social class is something we rarely talk about among ourselves.

> Class? There is no word or concept that is more off-limits in our boundless tell-all culture right now than class. As a society, we have rapidly progressed over several generations in developing a common language to talk about differences of gender, race, and sexual orientation … when it comes to class, it's as if we stumble and go speechless … of course class differences exist, and people talk about them, but often in code and euphemism. Our discourse on class is in arrested development compared to our conversations about the other ways we differ from one another. (Yeskel and Ladd 2005)

It's hard to say why social class is such a difficult, and often uncomfortable, subject. Social stratification, in all its forms, is a feature common to all societies and cultures – whether we admit it or not – and yet it's a topic that is widely regarded as failing the polite conversation test, alongside the traditional no-go areas of politics and religion. Most of us would be cautious about asking someone we had only just met what class they come from, just as we would about informing them of our own: 'Hi, I'm Gordon, and I'm upper-middle class'.

Interestingly, we can look at other cultures and societies and easily point to their various types of stratification, internal systems of ranking and forms of social differentiation, and we can develop assorted explanatory mechanisms as we go, accurate or otherwise. We can scratch our heads at the seeming unfairness of the Hindu caste system, one that categorises some citizens 'untouchable' from the moment of birth, and wonder why it is still tolerated when so many suffer through its existence. We can puzzle at the British obsession with social class and its covert boundaries shaped by accent, manners and education – less formal than a caste system perhaps, but just as pervasive. Arguably, most of us would find both these topics to be perfectly appropriate for after-dinner conversation, presumably as long as we're not in London or New Delhi.

So why can we talk about other countries' social class systems, and yet cringe at the thought of discussing our own? Campbell (2010) rightly points to a couple of factors at play here. First, given that social class correlates directly with access to resources, power and status, most of us would be justifiably wary of admitting we are at the bottom of the social pile (or alternatively, reluctant to whinge about it), just as good manners prohibit us from