

# Primary education

## Penal colony to Board of General Education 1826–1860

In 1826 the first primary school was conducted in the Moreton Bay settlement of NSW by Mrs Esther Roberts, a soldier's wife. Although her stipend of £10 was drawn from the funds of the colonial government, her school was actually administered by the Anglican Church because in those days it was generally believed that it was the duty of the Church to conduct schools. After a succession of teachers, mostly soldiers, the school was closed in 1842.

Almost all of the schools following this parochial school were short-lived. Many were private establishments in front parlours, with a few boarders and day students. Fees and pretensions to gentility were high; standards seem to have been low. In 1845 the first Roman Catholic school was opened by Michael Bourke, thus beginning a pattern of small, denominational schools which provided education of a sort for almost 20 years in Brisbane. Many children in the Moreton Bay District, however, went without any formal education.

In 1848 Governor Fitzroy appointed a Board of National Education to undertake the task of creating government schools similar to the National Schools in Ireland. This was a response to the problem of providing an efficient system of elementary education for a scattered population of different religious denominations, without seriously antagonising those denominations. As a compromise, the NSW National Schools offered secular subjects and non-denominational scripture lessons and allowed visiting clergy to provide religious instruction during school hours to the children of those parents who desired it. A Denominational Board, appointed a day after the National Board, did not exercise much supervisory power. Its major function was to distribute funds to the four existing systems of church schools.

The National Board established and administered schools where parents contributed a third of the total building costs and guaranteed an average attendance of at least 30 pupils. The parents also had to pay school fees which formed part of the teacher's salary paid by the Board. The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, grammar, geography, object lessons (including biography, nature studies and elementary mechanics), scripture lessons and, in the final year, mathematics (algebra and geometry) or Latin. The reading books were the Irish National Readers which had no Australian content.

## The Board of General Education 1860–1875

Queensland was declared a separate colony from NSW on 10 December 1859 and in the following year the Queensland Parliament faced the task of providing an education system for the new colony. The Education Act of 1860 provided a Board of General Education which combined the functions of the National and Denominational Boards of NSW. The new Board acquired from NSW four National schools—Warwick (opened in 1850), Drayton (opened in 1851), Brisbane Boys and Brisbane Girls (both opened in 1860)—and had the authority to establish and administer primary schools vested in the Board under similar conditions to those applied by the NSW National Board. The new Board also paid the salaries of teachers in non-vested schools, nearly all of which were established and administered by churches. By stipulating certain conditions for the payment of these salaries, the Board of General Education exercised close supervision over the non-vested schools.

The curriculum provided by vested schools was the same as that provided by the earlier National schools but clergy wishing to give religious instruction were expected to attend before or after school hours, a practice which made such instruction unpopular with many parents. In 1862 a new building, designated the Normal School was erected within the grounds of the Brisbane Boys and Brisbane Girls Primary Schools, and thereafter those schools were usually referred to as the Brisbane Normal Boys and the Brisbane Normal Girls Primary Schools. The most important function of the Normal School was that of a training centre where pupil–teachers could see the best and most efficient teaching methods in operation.

The pupil–teacher system was a cheap form of recruitment, though perhaps a little hard on the pupils and teachers involved. Children as young as 14 were enlisted as apprentices, working as class teachers during the school day and receiving their teacher training before and after school. Pupil–teachers at the Normal School were well trained, but only a fraction of the State's teacher needs could be met in this way. The training system was therefore modified to allow head teachers of other schools to train pupil–teachers, thus relieving the pressure on the Brisbane centre.

In 1869 the Board provided provisional schools. These represented one of the earliest efforts to tackle a perennial problem of Queensland education—how to provide basic education to a scattered population with a limited education

budget. Because they could be opened with as few as 15 children (reduced later to 12), provisional schools were a means of providing education in areas where the expense of a full State school was unjustified, or where the local people were unable to raise the necessary contributions towards a State school. The local people were responsible for providing a suitable building, and provisional school buildings were often of a very low standard. Moreover, teachers' salaries were low, and their standards of training correspondingly poor. As their name implies, provisional schools were intended as a temporary expedient which would eventually be replaced by standard State schools. Sometimes, when a locality prospered into a large, stable settlement, this happened; often, however, the provisional school withered away as population shifted, the gold played out or the railway moved further west.

Another significant advance came in 1870 when the payment of fees to National schools was abolished. There seems to have been little regularity in the amount or collection of fees which could be as high as one shilling per week per child. Although fees certainly augmented the meagre salaries of some teachers, their collection seems to have encouraged irregularity of attendance.

A new spirit was felt in Queensland by the 1870s, encouraging education and invigorating the State with a sense of democracy and national purpose. This spirit coincided with a wave of prosperity brought on by gold rushes and the start of the mineral boom. It was against this background that the *State Education Act of 1875* was introduced.

The Act provided a number of key initiatives in education:

- Primary education for children aged from 6 to 12 was to be compulsory. (This provision was not fully implemented until 1900.)
- Education was to be secular, i.e. under the control of the State. (In conformity with this policy, all assistance to non-vested schools was withdrawn in 1880. This provision occasioned considerable ill-feeling among Roman Catholics and some Anglicans.)
- Primary education was to be free.
- A Department of Public Instruction was established to administer the Act.

The architects of the Act were Charles Lilley and Samuel Griffith, two of the most astute leaders in the young colony.

## The Department of Public Instruction 1875–1957

Closer settlement in Queensland progressed rapidly in the 1880s and 1890s and, consequently, the number of schools rose from 231 in 1875 to 911 in 1900. This situation strained the colony's limited education budget and created problems of inadequate teacher supply and training, a proliferation of poorly designed and equipped provisional schools, and a perennial teacher housing problem in rural areas. These problems, however, should be kept in perspective: despite the difficulties, colonial educators achieved a remarkable feat in bring basic literacy to most Queensland children by 1900.

Though a number of highly qualified teachers were imported from Britain in the 1880s, the pupil–teacher system was the main method of recruiting and training teachers. Not until 1914, when a teacher training college was established in Brisbane, was it possible to upgrade the standard of teacher preparation beyond the level of the pupil–teacher system, which was phased out between 1923 to 1935. Moreover, the disproportionate number of provisional schools in the colonial period helped keep the overall standard of buildings and teaching down. In 1908 there were 640 of these essentially makeshift schools compared with only 461 State schools. A significant development came in 1909 when the minimum attendance required for a State school was reduced from 30 to 12. This led to the reclassification of large numbers of provisional schools as State schools, and meant that new districts applying for a school were more likely to be granted a State school. Consequently in 1909 there were 1059 State schools and only 79 provisional schools in Queensland.

The basis of the colonial curriculum was the '3Rs'. In addition, object lessons ('show and tell' lessons), drill and gymnastics, and vocal music were supposed to be taught, but in practice these relatively new subjects were often ignored or poorly taught. Geography, needlework, grammar, history and mechanics were also included in the curriculum at various levels. While some of these subjects were included for their practical usefulness, the main criterion for inclusion of subjects in the curriculum was not their practical value, but their value in disciplining ('sharpening') mental faculties such as 'memory' and 'reasoning'.

The influence of this mental discipline concept on the curriculum was receding by the 1890s. Such subjects as agriculture and domestic economy were introduced as part of object lessons, and the introduction of Arbor Day in 1890 also reflected a growing concern for the utility of the knowledge and values imparted in schools. By 1905, when important syllabus changes were made, the value of subjects was increasingly assessed in terms of their everyday usefulness, and 'learning by doing' was stressed. The child rather than the teacher, was becoming the centre of the learning process, at least in theory. These changes in the philosophy of education, combined with attempts to mould the content and methods of teaching to the peculiar geographic conditions of Queensland, were major influences on education for the next six decades.

A major consequence of these trends was the increasing emphasis on vocational subjects such as manual training and agriculture. This reflects not only the new educational ideas, but also the idea held by many educators that economic growth was essential to the progress and strength of the State. In 1905, for example, nature study was included in the curriculum. This subject included elements of agriculture, botany and biology. Then in 1910 a teacher of agriculture was appointed to travel among the schools. This teacher's work laid a basis for the project club system developed after 1923. In addition, in 1917 the Rural School concept was introduced at Nambour State School. In this new type of vocational school, boys were taught manual skills, elementary agriculture and farm management, while girls were taught home management and needlework skills. Rural Schools remained an important part of the education system till the 1960s.

Attempts to solve this problem of distance constituted another important trend in the new century. Distance had always been a major factor inhibiting the spread of schooling. To help overcome this problem, the Department implemented an itinerant teacher scheme between 1901 and 1932. Itinerant teachers travelled over the lonely outback to bring books and a few hours of schooling to the children of isolated settlers and pastoral workers, but few of these teachers were able to visit families more than three times a year. With the improvement of postal facilities, the Department gradually replaced the

work of the itinerant teacher by the more efficient services of the Primary Correspondence School, founded in 1922. This school reached its peak during World War II, when it was serving both isolated children and those whose schools had been closed in the national emergency. In another attempt to overcome the problem of distance, travelling domestic science and manual training railway cars were introduced in 1923 and 1925 respectively. These were in operation until 1967.

Increasing emphasis on school services in the 1900s reflected a concern for the 'whole child'. After 1907 attempts were made to combat the widespread western Queensland problem of ophthalmia (blight) and in 1911 a Medical Branch of the Department, staffed by travelling doctors, dentists and ophthalmologists was created. In later years, railcars were fitted out for use by these people.

One of the major influences in this period was the external Scholarship examination. This was initially designed to provide an opportunity for secondary education for a limited number of academically gifted students. Subsequently, the provision of scholarships was widened to include the majority of those who sat for the examination. By the 1950s many educationists felt that this Scholarship examination was hampering necessary educational reforms.

The period of the Great Depression imposed financial strains on primary education. As part of a general austerity drive, building programs were retarded and teachers' salaries were cut. World War II, which followed immediately on the heels of the depression, then created staff shortages. Unfortunately, there was to be no 'back to normalcy' for education after 1945. Once the effects of the post-war baby boom began to be felt in the 1950s, classroom crowding and staff shortages remained endemic.

## The Department of Education 1957–1982

Until 1963, the endpoint of primary education in Queensland was the Scholarship examination, which selected students for entry into a secondary school. Particularly from the 1930s, this examination came under increasing criticism. Many educators believed that because some teachers treated Scholarship passes as their main goal, the examination unduly restricted the

content and methods of primary education. Others felt that the examination limited the opportunities of many children to receive a secondary education. In the late 1850s and early 1960s increasingly rapid social change encouraged the Department to free schools from the bonds of the Scholarship examination, and the Government's plan, after 1957, to make secondary education freely available to all children was an added reason for abolishing the examination.

The abolition of the Scholarship examination in 1963, and the passage of the State Education Act 1964 which replaced the 1875 Act and its amendments, marked the beginning of a new age in primary education. An extensive revision of the syllabuses was carried out, with new syllabuses introduced in mathematics (developed in 1966–68 and again in 1974–76), science (1966 and 1975–76), language arts (1974–75), social studies (1870–71), art (1972), health and physical education (1972) and music (1974).

These programs reflected the new spirit in primary education. They gave the teacher a statement of the general aims of education, a statement of subject aims, and a basic syllabus structure, but did not, as in the past, force schools into a uniform mould. Within the guidelines provided by the programs, teachers were permitted greater flexibility in planning learning experiences for their pupils.

This greater freedom created a need for the extension of support, supervision and evaluation mechanisms, and the development of these mechanisms was a major trend in the 1970s. Thus in-service education facilities were greatly extended. Among other initiatives, a Co-ordinator of In-Service Education was appointed (1973); teachers centres were established (1973); full-time release programs were begun (1975); and the Bardon Professional Development Centre was opened in Brisbane (1977). Other support facilities and personnel introduced included a variety of specialist teachers, including advisory teachers (1970), teacher-librarians (1970–71) and resource teachers (1975), teacher aides (1973) appointed as a means of relieving teachers of some non-teaching duties, expanded and decentralised guidance facilities, and expanded media facilities, including new media forms such as videotapes. From the 1960s district inspectors provided further support for the classroom teacher, placing a greater emphasis on advice and support. Finally, the reorganisation of the planning and services functions of Head Office increased the Department's effectiveness in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of programs,

and developing new programs (e.g. religious education) and resources (e.g. studies of local school environments).

A major development, particularly after 1973, has been the injection of increasing amounts of Commonwealth money into specific areas of State education. This has assisted the development of library facilities which have superseded standard, State-issued textbooks. Commonwealth funds have also allowed greater attention to disadvantaged groups, including Aborigines, migrants and the geographically isolated, thus giving support to the State policy of equality of educational opportunity. Furthermore, Commonwealth funds have made a major contribution to the school-based innovations program developed after 1973.

Other trends during the 1970s which influenced the education system were the increasing community interest in education and the concern for accountability to the community. In combination with the great diversity of values in modern society, these trends have created debate over such issues as the role of the 3 Rs in education, the standards of education, and the proposed introduction of human relationships and religious education courses in schools. Such debates prompted the appointment in 1978 of a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate the education system. The recommendations of this committee are still under consideration.

Innovations in teaching methods have brought accompanying changes in primary school architecture. The official opening of Petrie Terrace State School in 1970 introduced a new era of modern school buildings incorporating open area teaching spaces and the extensive use of carpeting and sound-proofing.