

Producing the Over-Aged Child in South Australian Primary Schools

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By the mid-1940s in South Australia, three meanings of the term "retardation" were distinguishable in educational discourse: over-aged for grade, mentally sub-normal, and scholastically under-achieving.¹ The first and most contentious type of retardation was defined in reference to "educational ages" tied to elementary school grades, assuming the ability of "normal" children at a given age to undertake school work at a particular level of difficulty. The over-aged scholar was, as it turns out, the product of an administratively-imposed schema originating in colonial times but taking shape only after 1915 as age-grade fit became a key index of efficiency in the South Australian government school system.

David McCallum has studied state schooling as a form of social administration, emphasizing the influence of the "new" education disciplines, especially psychology, on the construction and management of individual differences.² Although McCallum concentrates on the production of modern forms of individuality and the allocation of "merit" in secondary schools, his main points apply to the production of "normal grade-aged," "backward," and "advanced" students in South Australian primary schools, and to the separate provision made for children "very far behind and now out of their age group." He concludes that unequal individuals were statistical artifacts, an effect of the social organization and administration of schooling.

Age-graded primary school organization and the resultant production of retarded scholars have parallels elsewhere in the Western world. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century changes in European primary school organization described by Philippe Ariès³ included the introduction of graded curriculum, the setting apart of younger children, and significant shifts in patterns of school attendance and experience. The South Australian history bears closer resemblance to that in America as recounted by Angus, Mirel and Vinovskis.⁴ Echoing

¹For a contemporary exposition of these distinctions, see A. C. Hitchcox, "Some Aspects of the Retardation Problem—I," *Education Gazette* (SA), 60: 696, July 15, 1944, 141.

²David McCallum, *The Social Production of Merit: Education, Psychology, and Politics in Australia 1900–1950* (London: Falmer Press, 1990).

³Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, transl R. Baldick. London: Jonathon Cape, 1973.

⁴David L. Angus, Jeffrey E. Mirel and Maris A. Vinovskis, "Historical development of age stratification in schooling," *Teachers College Record*, 90:2, Winter 1988, 213–36.

my findings, they note that pupil classification and promotion in graded schools were initially based on scholastic attainment, so that in the nineteenth century there was only a loose relationship between children's ages and their grade placement. It was "the problem of retardation" (the number of children older than "normal" grade-age) and its relationship to early school leaving, rather than the attention of progressive educators to children's individuality, that invited reform in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although there are no comparable studies for Britain, McKenzie, Lee, and Lee's work on retardation in New Zealand primary schools (for secondary education) provides further evidence that South Australia was not alone.⁵

STUDENT PROGRESS IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY EFFICIENT STATE SCHOOL

There was neither retardation nor acceleration in early colonial South Australia. Its small, casually organized private schools and often untrained teachers imparted rudimentary learning to a broad age-range of pupils. Student progress was an individual matter, and educational status derived from the page reached in the book used for each subject. It was from these pages that pupils proceeded after any break in their frequently erratic school careers.⁶ Schools that sought government aid under Ordinance No. 11 of 1847 assessed proficiency through publicly-conducted oral examinations held at least once a year, but no standard achievement before the examination date was specified.

In the wake of the 1847 Ordinance's failure to bolster schooling provision for the children of colonists, the Central Board of Education established under the 1851 Education Act incorporated into its model of "the good school" two essential ingredients of the formula later used to differentiate between "normal" and "retarded" children in the primary school: examinations and graded instruction. Licensed teachers were to arrange pupils in two to five classes in accordance with the graded lesson books of either the Irish National School Society or the British and Foreign School Society. The Board saw this as an important first step in instituting a uniform system of teaching,⁷ substituting whole class instruction of homogeneous ability groups for "inefficient" indivi-

⁵D. McKenzie, H. Lee and G. Lee, *Scholars or Dollars? Selected historical case studies of opportuniri, costs in New Zealand education* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1996), chapter 7.

⁶For some insights into early colonial schooling, see B. Hyams, L. Trethewey, B. Condon, M. Vick and D. Grundy, *Learning and Other Things. Sources for a Social History of Education in South Australia* (Adelaide: SA Government Printer, 1988), chapter 1.

⁷Central Board of Education, Minute no. 1024, 3 December 1853, PRO, GRG 50/1. See also "Regulations of the Central Board ... for the Observance of Licensed Teachers," *South Australian Government Gazette* (hereafter cited as *SAGGI*), 26 April 1860, 378.

dualized methods. Exam marks would provide a comparative measure both of students' academic progress (and thus their suitability for promotion) and of teachers' efficiency in bringing them up to a predetermined standard.

As Inspector of Schools William Wyatt revealed in his reports, neither suggestion nor financial incentive (the limits of the Board's influence) proved sufficient to secure these goals during the 1850s and 60s. Wyatt attacked irregular and unpunctual attendance, adding that:

It is only in the large schools [of which there were very few] ... that classification can at all be carried out; so that there is a great preponderance of individual teaching-which involves a serious loss of the children's time, with much additional labor to the master or mistress. ... Much difficulty arises in estimating the progress of pupils from the diversity of ages at which they first are sent to school; and it is barely possible to institute a comparison between the attainments of pupils belonging to different schools, as the first scholar in one may scarcely be on a par with the average of scholars in another.⁸

Under the aegis of a newly-constituted Board in 1874, Standards of Proficiency ordered the curriculum for the various grades into which an "exemplary" school was divided: those comprising the infant department, and Classes I to V in separate boys' and girls' departments.⁹ Compulsory attendance clauses in the 1875 Education Act, with regulations for "efficient" state schooling, gave shape to the system.

From 1876, the proficiency standards for model schools informed those of the Inspector's annual examination in state schools. Children in any one class should know the work of the class(es) below, in lock-step progression through the standards. Regulations issued by the Council of Education (which replaced the Board in 1875) stipulated further that classification of pupils into an appropriate grade on enrolment at school, and any promotions thereafter, were to be made according to their attainments.¹⁰

Superimposed on these achievement-based grade standards were two age standards. First came a ruling that children over seven must not remain in an infant department except with an inspector's permission. Irrespective of their ability, knowledge, or prior school experience, at seven years of age pupils had to be placed in Class I and prepared to take the exam for that standard on the next inspectorial visit. Children over seven were removed to boys' and girls' departments in large schools so organized. Another regulation was added in 1885: no child under seven could be promoted from the Junior Division. Second,

⁸Report of the Inspector of Schools, *SAGG*, 1853, 98-9.

⁹For details of model school Organisation and proficiency standards. see *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* (hereafter cited as *SAPP*), 2, no. 27, 1874, 7; "Regulations of City Model Schools," *SAGG*, April 9th, 1874, 589-90; *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, Appendix to Minutes of Evidence, 223-9.

¹⁰*SAGG*, *Gazette Extraordinary* No. 2, January 7, 1876, 37-45.

an average age was designated for each standard: six, eight, nine and a half, eleven, and twelve and a half years in the Junior Division and Class 1, II, III, and IV respectively. J. A. Hartley, President of the Education Council, used chronological age as an index of children's mental capacity in devising the attainment standards which formed the basis of graded school organization.¹¹ Age assumed increasing significance in pupil classification and promotion.

The 1875 legislation established age standards for school entry and leaving. All children between the ages of seven and thirteen were compelled to attend an "efficient" school for at least seventy days in each half year. Subsequent administrative policy set the commencing age at five but exempted children who were ill, lived too far from the nearest school, or had attained the Compulsory Standard (that of Class IV). Pupils' calendar ages on starting school and their grade level at leaving became central to the definition and the experience of retardation.

Under the administration of a reconstructed Education Department after 1878, retardation meant examination failure and repetition of the grade. Obtaining requisite marks depended upon regular attendance and compliance with a "hidden curriculum," not just mental ability.¹² From available evidence, lack of facility in "Correct English" and/or arithmetic was particularly responsible for children having to repeat a grade—just as proficiency in reading, modified by arithmetic, was the main basis of initial classification of pupils.

A system of payment-by-results, introduced to discipline teachers into the new order of things, encouraged retention of pupils in lower classes, with teachers taking full advantage of the regulation allowing them to withdraw from examination those whose attendance or length of enrolment prior to the Inspector's visit fell below a specified level.¹³ A certain amount of failure was built into the exam standards. It was never the Inspectorate's intention that every child

¹¹For Hartley's account of how the average ages were fixed and later deleted from the examination programme, see *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, Minutes of Evidence, 178–9.

¹²On class, gender, and urban/rural differences involved in these matters, see Pavla Miller, *Long Division. State Schooling in South Australian Society* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986), chapters 3 and 4; Ian Davey, "Patterns of Inequality: School attendance and social structure in the nineteenth century, Canada and Australia" in J. Hurt, ed., *Childhood, Youth and Education in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Great Britain: History of Education Society, 1981), 1–30; Kerry Wimshurst, "Formal schooling and social structure in a working class municipality: Hindmarsh in South Australia, 1895–1910," *ANZHEJ Journal*, 7:1, Autumn 1978, 1–15; L. Davey and K. Wimshurst, "Understanding irregular school attendance: beyond the rural-urban dichotomy" in R. K. Goodenow and W. E. Marsden, eds., *The City and Education in Four Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹³Statistics on examination attendance and promotions made compared to enrolments in each inspectorial district were published in the annual Education Report. See *SAPP*, no. 44 for each year.

make uniform progress through the elementary course. As Hartley, by then Inspector-General of Schools, commented in his 1880 Report :

Our standards are not supposed to be fixed in such a way that a teacher can go on year after year getting 95 to 98 per cent, and it must be manifest to any thinking man that if nearly all the children can pass the various standards at a year's interval the work must be arranged *according to the mental capacity of the dullest, or almost the dullest, children in the class*. We have rather aimed at fixing the different standards in such a way that the average boy or girl can pass with fair work and attendance and good instructions.¹⁴ [original emphasis]

These devices led to wide disparity in the ages of pupils in any one class, and a significant proportion of children leaving school without reaching the Compulsory Standard. The first effect was noticed in annual statistics from the time average ages were included in the examination programme. The second attracted attention when the state moved to extend its influence into the realm of secondary education.

The age range of pupils in attainment-grouped classes under the new system of classification and promotion is illustrated by Joseph March's experience at Red Hill Public School in 1877. He wrote:

Some big fellows of 16 and others in their early 20s know little more than the alphabet. The teacher divided us into four grades—the junior division, first, second and third classes. Three of us March brothers aged 13, 11 and 9 were placed in the 3rd class ... with pupils up to 23 years with beards almost rivalling that of the Head teacher.¹⁵

Ian Davey's quantitative analysis of the Hindmarsh Public School records details pupils' age in grade by sex and parent occupation group for the period 1884-1899, confirming the age range in individual classes as exceptionally large, particularly in the earlier grades. He notes that in 1884, for example, the average (educational) age was eight years for Class I. Sons and daughters of skilled workers ranged in age from five to eleven and six to eleven respectively, but the age range for labourers' sons and daughters was five to twelve and five to eleven. The ages of the boys and girls from these two groups in Class II, with its standard age of nine and a half years, ranged similarly widely: seven to twelve and eight to thirteen for the sons and daughters of skilled workers, seven to eleven and seven to twelve for those from labouring backgrounds. This contrasted with the age clustering of children from bourgeois families, whether male or female,

¹⁴Inspector-General's Report, *JAPP*, 3, no. 44, 1881, xii.

¹⁵A. March, *Pioneering Experiences of Joseph March and his Family, 1846-1880* (compiled 1949). Mortlock Library of South Australia, D2960(L).

in a three year range in both grades. Even in 1899, Davey notes, four- and five-year age ranges in one class remained common.¹⁶

Davey cites additional figures to demonstrate links between late entry into the school system, the high rate of geographical mobility, irregularity of attendance, and the incidence of examination failure at Hindmarsh (again by sex and parent occupation group), which he argues were responsible for the extent of deviation from bureaucratically-defined grade ages. In the years from 1884 to 1891, he calculated, only 46% of the sons of the bourgeoisie, 33% of the sons of skilled workers, and 21% of the sons of labourers in the school for three or more years were promoted annually. Equivalent figures for girls were 45%, 34%, and 14%. Moreover, in the same period, less than seven per cent of boys and girls under age thirteen passed the Class IV (Compulsory Certificate) examination before leaving school. Nor did success rates improve significantly in the years 1892-99: less than 10% of boys and under 12% of girls at Hindmarsh achieved the compulsory standard prior to their withdrawal from school. Again, though, the chances of examination success at the end of Class IV varied according to parent occupation group. Davey concludes:

The common experience of students was to repeat at least one grade and a yearly progression through the classes was rare ... the classes in no way could be considered age graded.¹⁷

In 1879 Inspectors Dewhirst and Burgan investigated discrepancies between actual and official grade-ages in each class for the public and provisional schools in their respective districts. They noted instances of an "excess of [average] age" up to 3 or more years above Departmental norms, most frequently in country schools. The inspectors inveighed against parental neglect of children's education in early life, improper classification by teachers, and evasion of the attendance law, so that

many new scholars, through the action of school visitors are brought into the schools, who, at eleven or twelve years of age could only be placed in the first or second classes.¹⁸

Apart from non-promotion, being over-age for a grade was a function of a late start to school accompanied by inadequate grounding in the basics before enrolment. Dewhirst and Burgan acknowledged the difficulty teachers had when confronted by incongruity in children's ages and attainments. In fact, pairing of the two standards, as provided for in 1876, was dropped from the examination

¹⁶See Ian Davey, "Patterns of Inequality: school attendance and social structure in the nineteenth century, Canada and Australia" in J. Hurt, ed., *Childhood, Youth and Education in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Great Britain: History of Education Society, 1981), tables 6 and 7, 26-7; 12-15 for details of the other statistics referred to.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸Inspectors' Reports, *SAPP*, 3, no. 35, 1879, 16. See also *SAPP*, 3, no. 44, 1880, 2, 21.

programme after 1878. As Hartley outlined to the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts in 1882:

When the first regulations were issued, in the year 1876, we fixed the average age for each class, and I think some intimation was given that at the next year's examination, if the children were not up to the standard of an average age, arrangements would be made to reduce the percentages. This was merely tentative. The idea was taken from the Victorian system [of payment-by-results, whereby one twelfth of the marks a class gained in the annual examination was deducted for each month by which the average age of that class exceeded the specified grade-age]. We never brought any such rule into force in our department, because our inspectors, on consideration, thought it was not a good rule. I believe teachers are able to work it in Victoria by getting a very sharp child in one class to balance a dull child, so that if the [official educational] age in a class is ten, one child of eight will allow another child of twelve to be in that class. ... [I]t is a perfectly fair way to manage it ... but the temptation is to push a sharp child a little too fast.¹⁹

Introducing an "age test" would be unwise, argued the Headmaster of Kapunda Model School, since

teachers might have very different pupils to deal with ... and there are some schools where they haven't much of a chance, simply because the children are not allowed to attend regularly. [A]ge is not the only factor in the calculation. The number in each class and the average attendance should also be considered.²⁰

The signatory "J.A.H." (a private teacher of long standing) opposed the notion that all children should be required at certain specified ages to pass certain examinations (implicit in the 1876 Regulations and resurrected by a newspaper correspondent in 1880):

[S]uch a regulation would simply be unworkable, especially in country districts. It is only since the compulsory clauses have come into operation that many parents realize the necessity of sending children to school. One consequence of this is that in some schools you will find boys of nine, ten, or upwards who have received little or no previous education, and consequently they will be far behind younger pupils in every branch of school knowledge. How would the age test operate then? I am arguing from facts within my own experience.... For the present I would suggest that, instead of a pupil being required to reach a certain standard at a certain age, he should be required to show a certain proficiency in

¹⁹Progress Report of the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts, Minutes of Evidence—J. A. Hartley, 6437–8, 6441, *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, 178. For proposed inclusion of an "age test" in the South Australian "plan for payment of a school," see Regulations made by the Council of Education under provisions of Act No. II of 1875, Regulation 81(3), *SAGG, Gazette Extraordinary*, No. 2, January 7, 1876, 41–2.

²⁰Progress Report of the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts, Minutes of Evidence—W. L. Neale, 5454–8, *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, 115.

proportion to the time he has been at school, due respect being had to the quality, not quantity, of attainments.²¹

Considerations of age continued to influence decisions about individual pupils' grade placement, otherwise determined by scholastic achievements, with mentions of non-promoted children "grown old in dullness" whose presence made teaching inefficient.²² On the other hand, pushing clever children made them liable for the labour force at an earlier age, "a very serious evil," wrote the Editor of *The Register*:

Pressure of this kind upon the minds of young people ... should be constantly deprecated. Tragic occurrences which can be distinctly traced to it—although they excite a large amount of public attention—are really only the most prominent results of a widely spread source of unhappiness.... The wisdom of maintaining the balance of mind and body is generally so far ignored that any abnormal natural conditions are studiously and sedulously intensified. What a satire it is to call such a system educational!²³

Towards the end of the century there was growing agreement that chronological age should balance attainment in regulating student progress. But restoration of age-grade norms was meaningless so long as policies governing school attendance, the commencing age, and dates of admission and examination, remained uncertain and flexible.

Regulations²⁴ governing the age of transition to "real studenthood" defined not only the junior scholar but also the retarded one. Henceforth, children kept back in an infant department (or the junior class in smaller public and provisional schools) were labelled "old" or "backward," like "compulsory entrants" placed in preparatory classes to learn their letters. Closer regulation of ages in Class I, achieved by delimiting age of stay in infant classes and by curbing the tendency towards accelerated promotion of "too young" pupils from these grades to "the big school," laid a basis for narrowing the age range in successive grades:

I thought the children should be compelled to [attend school] at five years instead of seven, for as they are compelled to be promoted to the 1st class at seven, they should be in the infant school at 5.²⁵

²¹"Compulsory Education. To the Editor," *The Adelaide Observer*, March 13, 1880, 448.

²²South Australian Teachers' Association, Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting held on 5 MaN. 1894, SA Institute of Teachers Minute Book 1890–1903, ANU Business and Labour Archives; Progress Report of the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts, Minutes of Evidence—J. A. Hartley, 6449, *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, 179; Final Report of the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts, Minutes of Evidence—Inspector Stanton, 7209, *SAPP*, 3, no. 27A, 1882, 22.

²³"Cramming clever students," *The Register*, October 23, 1897, 4.

²⁴Progress Report of the Commission on the Working of the Education Acts, Minutes of Evidence—J. A. Hartley, 6449, 6458, *SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, 179–80.

²⁵*SAPP*, 2, no. 27, 1882, Minutes of Evidence, 4722. See also Assistant Inspector's Report for 1881—Six infant departments, *SAPP*, 3, no. 44, 1882, 19.

Bureaucratic delimitation of the enrolment age to five years was formalized by the 1891 Education Amendment Act, and social practice gradually aligned itself to administrative policy. By 1900 the last components of graded school organization fundamental in "retardation" were in place. Children began school in a two- to three-year range and had mandatory promotion to the senior division at seven. A few tasks remained for the period 1905–1920: securing of full-time compulsory attendance, further standardization of school entry ages, arrangement of the curriculum to strictly annual stages, and regularization of times of the year for admission to school, examination, and promotion to the next class.

CONSTRUCTING AVERAGENESS, 1900S–1930S

The first few decades of the twentieth century witnessed a convergence of ideas promulgated by child psychologists, psychometricians, child accountants, and proponents of the "New Education" and "social efficiency." The Education Department's ongoing quest for school order and efficiency attracted attention to pupils who lagged behind their peers through the primary grades.²⁶ Local explanations of "averageness" variously referred to classroom and system-level inefficiencies, the bases of curriculum organization, and personal adjustment and social control. To these was added advocacy of scientific study, classification and measurement of the problem to better inform its management, and the wish to maximize mental and industrial potentials of the child population by matching educational provision to different capacities.²⁷

Inspector Martin reported in 1906 that teachers are often hampered in their work by pupils considerably older than others of the same class.... It appears that their size, as well as their age, make them very conspicuous. They are generally considered by teachers dull and backward, and in the larger schools are so often ridiculed, if not bullied, by the bright and normal children, that their school lives are not the most happy.²⁸

He pondered contributory social factors:

²⁶For summaries of the American school-efficiency movement based on age-grade statistics, and the "new psychology" as embodied by the (USA) National Association Child Study Department and the British Child Study Association, whose leads Australia followed, see Angus, Mirel and Vinovskis, "Historical development of age stratification in schooling," 220–5; Roslyn R. Gillespie, "The early development of the scientific movement in Australian education—child study," *ANZHEJ Journal*, 11, no. 2, (Spring 1982), 1–14. On SA Education Department policy and the "New Education," especially the predominance of Herbartian thought, see David J. Shield, "Psychological theory and its application to Departmental policy in South Australian schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," MEd thesis, Flinders University of South Australia, 1989.

²⁷On the last issue, see: "The Average Boy (by Homo)," *SA Teachers' Journal*, 3:3, 18

²⁸December 1917, 65. 28 Inspector Martin's Report for 1906, *SAPP*, 3, no. 44, 1907, 25.

Some have not been able to attend school regularly on account of illness; others have moved about from place to place so much that they have dropped behind in their lessons; some are of German nationality, and have not had the opportunity of learning the English language; some have not had the chance of attending school previously; and there are a few who need individual attention because of their peculiar disposition.

A decade later, another author described the backward child as typically coming to school past seven years of age because no longer able to dodge the truant officer, handicapped by poor mental ability, poor physique, and adverse home conditions, and tending towards irregular attendance. Wanting the schools to accommodate individual differences, he suggests:

There's a misfit somewhere..... [The curriculum] looks like an honest attempt to limit the scope, fix the standards, and carefully grade a six year's course for children of average ability. It's possibly just here that the trouble lies ... the course mapped out may prove for the backward child a painful struggle for the unattainable.²⁹

These "submerged" children started behind their classmates, were promoted to Class I only because of the age standard imposed at this point, and generally maintained their relative position throughout their school careers. Their "excessive demands" became a "drag on the class" and a "perpetual worry" in terms of the efficiency mark awarded to teachers. With "hardened and embittered," backward children fell "easy prey to the attractions of the streets."

Demand rose for special, indeed separate, treatment of children "too old" for their classes—not least to remove their influence on younger pupils. Backwardness was equated with mental and moral deficiency, delinquency, and crime.³⁰ The Medical Inspector argued strongly for intelligence tests to identify those "really mentally defective, not only retarded by illness, irregular attendance, or other similar causes."³¹

Anxiety about over-ageness in primary classrooms contributed to reform and expansion in the state education system. The 1915 Education Act extended the limits of compulsory schooling, requiring full-time attendance between six and fourteen. By 1921 a new set of age-grade norms was operational. A uniform procedure of age-based primary school entry, progress, and leaving developed.³² Pupils would gain Qualifying Certificates at twelve or thirteen years of age,

²⁹Anon., "The Backward Child," *SA Teachers' Journal*, 1, no. 2, (September 17, 1915), 5.

³⁰For examples of such links, see *SA* 3, no. 44, 1914, 29—Inspector Pavia; *SA* 2, no. 24, 1923, 37—Medical Inspector.

³¹Report of the Medical Inspector for 1915, *SAPP*, 3, no. 44, 1916, 37.

³²See "Notes for the guidance of teachers—Promotions," *Education Gazette* [hereafter cited as *EG* (SA)] 34, no. 387, (October 15, 1918), 169; "Circular to Teachers no. 13. Classification of pupils—adjustment in January 1921," *EG* (SA) 36, no. 411, (October 15, 1920), 197.

allowing them one or two years of post-primary instruction before they reached the new upper age limit of compulsory attendance.

Head teachers decided on promotion from 1905, and classroom teachers from 1917, although examination marks continued to measure children's suitability for promotion. Now, however, "judicious advancement" meant using proficiency in English as the major criterion—yet taking it into account if children were backward in other subject, promoting "bright" students at any time, and simultaneously heeding dire warnings that both over-rapid and withheld promotion might affect a pupil's whole future career. The official aim was this:

The Department is desirous that, while neither teacher nor pupil is in any degree hard pressed, yet the interests of the children shall be thoroughly safeguarded, and *their consistent progress ensured.* ³³ [emphasis added]

Ninety to ninety-five per cent of children in Grades II to VI should be promoted in large schools, whereas in smaller schools the percentage might vary. When promotions fell below 80%, the Inspector's report should comment.³⁴

Lastly, in 1915, the President of the Teachers' Association, Mr Bennett, suggested an "efficient and effective remedy" for the currently overloaded curriculum, which teachers regarded as "the burden of their school lives" and the cause of considerable strain on pupils:

either that some of the score of subjects be deleted, or that the teaching of these subjects be spread over a longer period.... [A]s regards the time, number of classes, and ages of the children:- Children under 5, Kindergarten; 5 to 6, Infants; 6 to 7, Lower Juniors; 7 to 8, Upper Juniors; 8 to 9, Class I; 9 to 10, Class II; 10 to 11, Class III; 11 to 12, Class IV; 12 to 13, Class V; 13 to 14, Class VI.³⁵

The Department gave notice in February 1916 that "a very real easement in practically all the grades" would be effected in 1917. Only with the next major revision to the primary course of instruction in 1920, was a standard age for each grade from I to VII specified. Henceforth a child aged eight years was expected to do Grade III work, and a child of twelve years to be commencing the work of Grade VII.³⁶

The combined instructions outlined above established chronological age as the main principle of graded schooling. Rigorous application over the next decade or so resulted in a decline of average grade-ages of pupils by approximately six months per grade, with the percentage of "normal" children corres-

³³ "Notes for the guidance of teachers—Promotions," op cit.

³⁴ Extracts from the Inspectors' Conference held in February 1933, PRO, GRG 18/2/928.

³⁵ Mr Bennett, Teachers' Association President, cited in debate on the Education Bill, *South Australian Parliamentary Debates*, House of Assembly, October 6, 1915, 1217.

³⁶ "Backward Children," Report of the Director of Education for 1921, *SAPP*, 2, no. 44, 1922, 21.

pondingly increased. School inspectors praised teachers for their conscientiousness and sound judgement, meanwhile recording cases of "unjustified" non-promotion. Their criticisms produced a rejoinder from contemporary social psychology:

It should be borne in mind that the backward child has need of social experience with pupils of his own age and this need should outweigh in importance his inability to acquire the material of instruction as readily as the normal child.³⁷
 ...The whole disposition and physical development of such children should be taken into account before leaving them in a class of younger children.³⁸

By 1927 Inspector Fairweather confidently reported that pupils' grade-ages as a rule coincided closely with those set in the Course of Instruction, making instances of over-ageness more noticeable than ever.

Phil Cashen's analysis of examination failure and concomitant grade repetition in South Australian primary schools during the period 1927–39 points to a symbiotic relationship between various forms of class-based school resistance and retardation in the now predominantly age-graded yet still attainment-oriented state system.³⁹ Rather than viewing the issues critically, the Education Department quantified the phenomenon of retarded school progress, seeking efficient means to deal with the problem. As the Director wrote,

[I]here are a number of backward children, probably amounting to 10 per cent of the whole, who are 2 or 3 years below the class appropriate to their age, and for whom no special provision is made. Our custom is to take cognizance of the average and bright child, and neglect the dull and backward.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the school survey movement in North America used age-grade studies, pressing for standardization of child accounting.⁴¹ From the research of Maxwell, Thorndike, Ayres and others, Australian administrators imported the criterion of pupils' year-by-year progress to measure system efficiency. In 1916 all schools were required to forward with their December examination results a Return of Promotions, including the name and reason for non-promotion of every child who had spent two years in one class. From 1921 the Department

³⁷Inspector Higginbottom, *EG (SA)*, 53, no. 613, (August 16, 1937), 201.

³⁸Inspector Pavia, *EG (SA)*, 37, no. 419, (June 15, 1921), 120.

³⁹J. Cashen, "Without sufficient excuse: A study of truancy in South Australian schools, 1927–1939" (Master of Education thesis, University of Adelaide, 1980).

⁴⁰"Report by W. T. McCoy, Director of Education, upon observations & inquiries made with regard to education during an official visit to Great Britain and other countries," *SAPP*, 2, no. 67, 1924, 31.

⁴¹For an overview of the child accounting movement in North America from 1900–1930s, see H. J. Otto and D. M. Estes, "Accelerated and retarded progress" in C. Harris, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Educational Research. Third edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 4–11; Joseph L. Tropea, "Bureaucratic order and special children: Urban schools, 1890s–1940s," *History of Education Quarterly*, 27, no. 1, (Spring 1987), 29–53; R. E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

conducted an annual age-grade census featured in the Minister of Education's parliamentary report.⁴²

The adoption of child accounting measures in South Australia showed the Department was tackling the problem of retardation. Five Opportunity (remedial) Classes were opened in 1925, growing to thirty-two by 1942, and Psychology Branch staff administered intelligence tests to identify children better managed by placement in a special school. Not only did this removal of certain pupils from mainstream classes make ordinary teaching more efficient from an official perspective, their numbers were counted separately in the annual age-grade tables, thus improving the statistical representation of over-all system efficiency. Indeed, age-grade statistics increasingly operated to simultaneously define, highlight, and resolve the problem of retardation.

First, a "normal grade-age" was delineated: in South Australia a two-year spread.⁴³ Second, from 1921 to 1942, bold type announced in annual reports the numbers in each category. Third, apart from omitting "special" children whose often considerable over-ageness would have seriously skewed the results, the statistics were manipulated by changing the 1943 census date from December to mid-year. It had become apparent from overseas comparisons that the ages of South Australian pupils in the various grades were unduly high. The changed census date artificially secured a sharp upturn in the number of normal grade-aged children system-wide, with a corresponding downturn in rates of retardation.

Statistical measurement of age-in-grade pervaded official thinking so deeply that one inspector proposed in 1939 the number of pupils receiving a double promotion in primary school should approximate that of those spending two years in one grade.⁴⁴ By this time other inspectors were beginning to express doubts about the effects of "social promotion."

I am firmly convinced that some facts must be known and if they are not known the child is not ready for the next step on the educational ladder. To think that

⁴²The preliminary survey was made on McCoy's recommendation following his investigation into special education provisions in England and Canada. For Constance Davey's work, see Education Inquiry Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Book 4, 926-47, PRO, GRG 18/172. For a summary of Dr. Malherbe's age-grade survey and NEF address, see the article "Retardation," *EG* (SA), 56, vol. 644, (March 15, 1940), 86-7. Hitchcox's comprehensive analysis was published in two parts. See *EG* (SA), 60, no. 696, 139-43 and 60, no. 697, 153-7.

⁴³For details of the annual tabulations of age-grade returns from schools, see A. C. Hitchcox, "Some Aspects of the Retardation Problem-I," *EG* (SA), 60, no. 696, 141.

⁴⁴Inspector Rofe, *EG* (SA), 55, no. 632, (March 15, 1939), 96.

the indolent or careless or unduly slow children are progressing by allowing them to advance a grade a year is to deceive ourselves.⁴⁵

These doubts increased in light of the growing influence of tests of individual differences, contestation of what constituted "normal" progress, and criticism of graded curriculum and of classroom organization.

SIDDY AND DARKY WERE "OPPOS":
CHILDREN TOO OLD FOR THEIR GRADE

Eileen B., of Hindmarsh School, began aged five and a half in 1905, "got through" each year, and proceeded to high school for several years before leaving at age fifteen, in accordance with the new Departmental ideal.⁴⁶ John K. (b. 1895), on the other hand, did not consider himself "a champion scholar."

No, it was pretty hard. ... I might have failed once or twice, and if you weren't good enough you had to sit another year in that class and they'd be making fun of you, some of them. ... And of course your mother or father who were talking too when you got home, they'd know if you failed or passed.⁴⁷

Jack M. (b. 1906) suffered nightmares with every exam yet consistently passed so as "not to have the stigma of failure," and recalled somewhat enviously:

Those that were considered larrikins. They did their own thing anyhow. ... They had the guts to say, well, fail or otherwise, I've done my best you can go to —.⁴⁸

Self-described as one of those, Les (b. 1902) elaborated upon the negative relationship working-class boys had with the school, their retarded progress, and early leaving:

I didn't cotton on—I wasn't too bright. Seemed to get stuck in the fourth grade. ... Me Dad wanted to keep me on until I was thirteen, but I hated school that much that he decided there was no good leaving him, you know. ... The teachers wasn't so hot in those days and if you was a bit of a rebel, which I think I always was, they used to get stuck into you. ... I see now the ability, not that I'm blowing my trumpet or anything, to learn how to do a job in no time. But as for school work, it didn't seem to sink in somehow. ... There was a lot of us that hated school so much that we didn't even try I don't think.⁴⁹

⁴⁵Inspector Paull, *EG* (SA), 60, no. 692, (March 15, 1944), 89.

⁴⁶Transcript of interview with Miss Eileen B. (b. July 26, 1899) by Susan Marsden, October 12, 1979, 7, 17, PRO, GRG 18/34/41—OH25/3.

⁴⁷Transcript of interview with Mr. John K. by S. Marsden, October 11, 1979, 20. *ibid* —OH25/5.

⁴⁸Transcript of interview with Mr. Jack M. by S. Marsden, November 18, 1979, 23. *ibid*—OH25/15.

⁴⁹Transcript of interview with Mr. Les by S. Marsden and R. Broomhill, December 10, 1979, 11–12. *ibid*—OH25/31.

In common with these last three interviewees, others thoroughly internalised the distinction between “all those tail-enders that got left behind” and the “brainstorms” or “real bright kids” regularly promoted. According to Mr. B., “[apart from] one poor chap, he was sub-normal, Artie C. we called him, there wasn’t too many, shall I say, dumb dills” at Hindmarsh.⁵⁰ Factors unrelated to individual ability or motivation were acknowledged by former pupils as responsible for grade repetition. For example, in Class V, Elma S. (b. 1896) “had an awful teacher and none of us passed,”⁵¹ a circumstance no longer countenanced by 1917:

It should be remembered that the failure to promote a fair percentage of the scholars in any school usually points to one of two facts - (1) that the teacher is unduly retarding the promotion of the children, or (2) that his teaching during the year has not been sufficiently satisfactory and effective to enable the children to satisfactorily pass the test.⁵²

Towards the end of 1920 the otherwise exemplary progress of Eric G. (b. 1910) was marred by a different set of circumstances:

I can remember when I was in Grade 6 they changed the system to what they called the Victorian system ... which cut out the eighth grade, and I stayed in Grade 6— that year they only promoted about ten [percent of children to the new Grade VII]. ... I’d had rheumatic fever and had been away from school for about two months and I didn’t make the top ten—so I did Grade 6 twice.⁵³

In Eric’s case, a single year’s non-promotion did not affect the newly-defined age-grade norms: given that he started school at five and commenced Grade VII work in his repeat year before being moved up, he was still only twelve on passing the Qualifying Certificate exam. Of far more concern to education officials were instances of retardation like George B., who remained at Brompton Primary School until the age of sixteen years “with some as old as me.”⁵⁴

The Departmental Research Officer calculated from 1943 age-grade statistics that over-ageness was more pronounced in outback regions than in the settled or metropolitan parts of the State. The differing rates and amount of retardation between town and country were ascribed to the demand for children’s seasonal labour. In city schools such as Hindmarsh, comments on “special cases” by head

⁵⁰Transcript of interview with Mr. B. (b. December 23, 1907) by S. Marsden, 1979, 15. *ibid*—OH25/33.

⁵¹Transcript of interview with Miss Elma S. by S. Marsden, September 27, 1979, 12. *ibid*—OH25/38.

⁵²“Promotions,” *EG* (SA), 33, no. 375, (October 16, 1917), 178.

⁵³Transcript of interview with Mr. Eric G. by S. Marsden and I. Davey, December 6, 1979, 22, *loc. cit*—OH25/27. See also “Circular to Teachers, No. 13. Classification of Pupils—adjustment in January 1921,” *EG* (SA), 36, no. 411, (October 15, 1920), 197–8.

⁵⁴Transcript of interview with Mr. George B. by S. Marsden, October 11, 1979, 7, *op cit*. —OH25/16.

teachers on the back of the annual age-grade return form after 1944 illustrate the range of pupils recorded as "much above the normal age." A sample for 1945-55:

Violet 9.6 Gr.II. Name sent in twice and form filled in for examination for O.C. [Opportunity Class]—child has not yet been examined.

Florence M. 8.6 Lower I. Excluded [from school] until this year on account of low mental age.

The nine year old in U2 is an Aboriginal child.

One nine year old in U2 is from a Victorian convent—a matter of sheer neglect.

The other, Marlene T.—rarely at school to have a chance of learning.

Ronald C. Date of birth 25.1.49 [10.8 in Lower II] was transferred from Morgan on 28 July. As over-age for the Infant School he is waiting for a vacancy in O.C.

LI. Luigi D. 7.1 Language troubles—New Australian.

UI. Robert H. 7.2 Child from an orphanage—low mentality;

Graham H. 7.2 Delicate—legs in irons a year or so ago [polio victim];

Aulenko J. 7.3 New Australian.

Gr.IV. Boy aged 12 – N.A. (Italian); Boy aged 13—from Special Class.

Gr.VI. Several N.A. in the "aged" groups.⁵⁵

Post-World War II immigration meant that by 1959 children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) accounted for a high proportion of retarded pupils. At Hindmarsh the Headmaster simply wrote: "The number of children in each class above normal age is in great measure due to the large number of migrant children attending this school."

Between 1956 and 1958 a New Australian Grade was formed to manage this influx:

Many fairly old children are placed in [this] grade in order to learn the language, and in the case of British migrants, to learn to spell. These children would normally have been in Grade III or higher.⁵⁶

As Festina Leste attested, appropriate classification of NESB pupils "having regard to age, attainment and potential" proved an extremely vexing question for principals and teachers alike, many themselves products of emergency short training courses.⁵⁷ Another article written from the perspective of the School Psychology Branch illustrates how in the 1950s and 60s "the migrant problem" highlighted the perennial tension between age and attainment standards in the graded primary school:

With the idea that youngsters from European countries should learn English easily, the Head had tried placing them in junior grades with younger children.

The new arrivals often reacted unfavourably to this, as did some English speaking

⁵⁵Hindmarsh School Annual Return: Ages and Grades of Pupils 1943-1960, PRO, GRG 18/34/25.

⁵⁶M. Mead (Inspector of Infant Schools), "Comment on report by Research Officer on time spent in Infant Departments," September 16, 1957, PRO, GRS 809/001/P—E.D. 1/4/5.

⁵⁷Festina Lente, "The Migrant and the School," *SA Teachers' Journal*, 6, no. 1, (February 1956), 25.

children who were placed in grades corresponding to their apparent level of attainment in a basic formal subject. Behaviour problems resulted, and were magnified in importance by the influence which these older, bigger children established among their classmates. Moreover, the progress of the pupils was commonly disappointing. They seemed to make little progress with the language, in some cases becoming surly and uncommunicative in school; or they tended to adjust themselves to the level of the grade they entered, promising to be established misfits long before they reached the end of compulsory schooling.

Also, other errors of placement became evident in due course, for some pupils learned English quickly and rose to high standards of achievement for their grade. It was difficult to accelerate their promotion for fear that they should miss important work.... After some discussion, the Head decided it would generally be best to place non-English speaking new pupils with their age group.⁵⁸

More even than the children of non-English speaking immigrants, Aboriginal children were over-represented in the "much above normal grade-age" category. Though neither separately shown in official statistics of the period, nor deemed worthy of bureaucratic attention, given their small numbers in state schools,⁵⁹ Aboriginal pupils were clustered in junior or remedial classes. Their often late start at school, irregular attendance, endemic health problems, and inability to respond to "whitefella education" meant that few continued beyond Grade V. Indeed, in the segregated and protected environs of the government-controlled Point Pearce and Point McLeay Aboriginal reserves schooling provision was limited to this level. The mismatch between white schooling and black children generally, and high rates of retarded progress and early leaving among the indigenous school population, were variously attributed to the effect of belonging to an inferior species, the pernicious influence of Aboriginal parents, genetically determined I.Q., and the inadequacies of Aboriginal home background. Citing McConnochie, Miller writes:

[O]nly rarely was the problem seen in terms of the education provided, the discriminatory nature of the white society, or the active resistance of Aboriginal communities to the cultural destruction implicit in many educational schemes.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ "An Educational Psychologist's Notebook," *SA Teachers' Journal*, 17, no. 4, (June 1966), 30.

⁵⁹ Note: Indigenous Australians did not gain full citizenship rights and were not counted in the census until after the referendum carried in 1967. In 1981 the number of Aborigines recorded in South Australia was 9,825, representing less than one per cent of the total population. During the first half of the twentieth century, no schools were established for Aborigines living in tradition-oriented communities (mainly in the remote North-West of the State), some Aboriginal children were educated on mission stations established in the Mid to Far North and on the West Coast, and the remainder attended state schools.

⁶⁰ Pavla Miller, *Long Division*, 322-3; K. R. McConnochie, "Aborigines and Australian education: historical perspectives" in J. Sherwood, ed., *Aboriginal Education: Issues and Innovations* (Perth: Creative Research, 1982), 20.

Statistics in the Minister of Education's annual reports show significant gender differences in retardation rates. The percentage of boys retarded by one or more years in Grades I to VII was consistently higher than that of girls, and in Opportunity Classes the number of male pupils was approximately double the number of females. My Hindmarsh case study reveals a similar configuration of opportunity class placements according to sex at the individual school level.

TABLE I
Number of boys and girls placed in Opportunity Classes at
Hindmarsh Primary School, 1928-75

Years	Boys	Girls	Total
1928-39	134	72	206
1940-49	121	86	207
1950-60	72	35	107
1968-75	58	14	72

Source of data: Hindmarsh School Opportunity Class Admission Registers (4 volumes), PRO, GRG 18/34/1.

Max Colwell's work on "The Oppos" at Hindmarsh during the 1930s amusingly points up the element of "larrikinism" commonly attributed only to boys, perhaps explaining the predominance of males among children transferred out of ordinary classes in the interests of orderly teaching. Siddy, the central character in Colwell's account, was consigned to singing songs, reciting nursery rhymes, and playing with building blocks in a special room at the end of the corridor because of his truancy, "inappropriate" choice of words, and persistent misbehaviour, rather than because he could not do subtraction sums, read properly, or spell well.⁶¹

Opportunity classes operated under the direct supervision of headmasters,⁶² thus reinforcing the social control function of opportunity classes.⁶³ The aim of these classes in South Australia was

to establish in the child a new attitude to his work by allowing him to proceed at his own rate and by giving him every means of gaining self-control.⁶⁴ [emphasis added]

⁶¹Max Colwell, *Half Days and Patched Pants* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1975), chapter 5.

⁶²"Circular to Teachers, no. 115. Opportunity Classes (reprinted for general information)," *EG* (SA), 55, no. 633, (April 15, 1939), 108.

⁶³Joseph L. Tropea, "Bureaucratic Order and Special Children: Urban Schools, 1890s-1940s," *History of Education Quarterly*, 27, no. 1, (Spring 1987), 29-53.

⁶⁴Constance M. Davey, "The Development of Psychological Work in the Education Department", *Guild Chronicle* [Official organ of the Women Teachers' Guild-SA], 6,

Giving this responsibility to Opportunity Class teachers in primary schools, assisted by the Psychologist, acquired importance in Depression years and in war time, when especially among older boys there was reportedly

an increase in truancy, in behaviour problems in the school such as the using of undesirable language, both direct stealing and pilfering, the begging for money and sexual misdemeanours.⁶⁵

Alongside the "Oppos," variously denoted as class nuisances, difficult, socially maladjusted, and backward in their school work, were those "educable mentally retarded" children whom Siddy described as "that stupid they wouldn't know the sun was up." In Colwell's anecdotes these included Darky, a physically handicapped Aboriginal boy. To these we must add children categorized as "educationally retarded": of normal intelligence but not working up to their mental level because of external circumstance or diagnosed weakness in a basic subject.⁶⁶

Several of the required psychological reports from the Hindmarsh files on pupils recommended for Opportunity Class placement illustrate reasons why a child in the educationally retarded category might be "very far behind and now too far out of his/her age group."⁶⁷ Commentary on Patricia S., aged eleven years two months in Grade III, focused on the effects of several changes in schooling:

Enrolled at Findon July 1963 on move from South Road, previously about 1 year in Dubbo, NSW. ... Hasn't had much of a chance. Anxious little girl, easily upset. Notably, two others of the seven children in the S. family were also listed as "Recommended for O.C.": Victor, aged ten years in Grade I, and James, aged nine in Grade II.

In similar vein, the report on Neil S. indicated:

School progress slow. Change of teachers upset emotional stability and work.

By contrast, Suzanne C.'s backwardness was attributed to:

Frequent absences from school for sickness; recent short time at Red Cross Home in Glenelg. Various bronchial difficulties, collapsed lung etc.

Social class differences in over-ageness are not readily ascertainable, although the Research Officer sought to trace links between retardation and poverty in 1944 by comparing rates among pupils receiving free books and those who were not at the same ages and according to grade. Following this analysis of all government primary schools, he examined the extent of retardation in the fifty larger (Class I to IV and Practicing) schools in the metropolitan area according to "the economic circumstances of the districts" they served. Hitchcox con-

⁶⁵Ibid, 9.

⁶⁶For a listing of Psychology Branch retarded pupil classifications with case study examples, see Miss Shirley Stewart (Assistant Psychologist), "Opportunity Classes," *EG* (SA), 63, no. 733, (August 15, 1947), 134-5.

⁶⁷Psychology Branch Reports 1962-65, Correspondence-Hindmarsh School Special and Opportunity Classes, PRO, GRG 18/34/37.

cluded that "children in poor circumstances go from bad to worse in their primary school careers."⁶⁸ With respect to metropolitan primary schools, he calculated a retardation rate of 16.9% in ten schools located in "well-to-do" areas (those with less than five percent of pupils receiving free books), compared with 32.9% in ten schools where up to 10% of children were on the free list, that is, in less affluent districts. From these statistics he argued:

[T]here are reasons for believing that there is a fairly strong connection between poverty and retardation. It is not established, however, nor is it claimed, that the connection is an invariable one. In some cases it is doubtless true that poverty causes pupils to live in homes which are lacking in the amenities which make for a sound attitude towards school work. Insufficiency of proper nourishment, lack of privacy for study, domestic upsets, squalid surroundings—all are harmful to a child's progress at school... On the other hand, it does not follow that comfortable economic conditions mean an absence of retardation. Every teacher knows that unsuccessful pupils do not all come from poor homes. But it does appear that comfortable homes and plenty of proper nourishment and a pleasant environment make it possible for children to keep up with their school work in many cases where otherwise they would be unsuccessful.

Both the School Psychologist and the Mistress of Infant Method at Rose Park noted in 1949 that in places such as Port Adelaide, "where the general educational background isn't very good," it was "to be expected that children stay longer in infant grades" and therefore likely to be over-age for the remainder of their primary schooling.⁶⁹ In Max Colwell's account of growing up in Hindmarsh during the 1930s Depression, half the "Oppos" came to school with no boots and socks and were allowed to go to the soup kitchen run by the church up the road in order to obtain a free bowl of soup and a hunk of bread for dinner.⁷⁰ My own analysis of this school's Opportunity Class enrolments according to parent occupation reveals that the majority of children's fathers were in the unskilled labourer and transport/communications worker categories, followed by those who, during the Depression, were unemployed or in receipt of a pension. Female household heads also figured prominently, especially in the 1930s and 40s when husbands were absent while looking for work outside the district, then later in war service. As Hindmarsh is a predominantly working-class suburb, substantia-

⁶⁸A. C. Hitchcox, "Some Aspects of the Retardation Problem— II", *EG* (SA), 60, no. 697, (August 15, 1944), 156.

⁶⁹L. S. Piddington, "Comment on report concerning children in Grades I and II at infant departments and at other schools," September 26, 1949; Miss M. Mead to Superintendent of Primary Education, "Reasons for suggested amendment to Circular 43—Promotion of children from the Infant Department," September 29, 1949, PRO, GRS 809/001/P, E.D. 179/1949 enclosed in 1/4/5.

⁷⁰M. Colwell, *op cit.*, 48–9.

tion of “the class factor” in over-ageness would require larger-scale quantitative analysis incorporating schools in middle-class areas.

CONCLUSION

The “over-aged child” was produced, not discovered, under a specific set of historical circumstances. The concept is meaningless without specific reference to the evolving bureaucratic ideal of efficient schooling in policy and practice from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, or without a consideration of Australian social structure in the period. By the mid-1930s, grade-age as a measure of student progress was firmly entrenched in the South Australian primary school system. Those pupils defined as “retarded” by statistical and other measures were central in the Education Department’s search for the Grail, a perfect age-grade fit.