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Transition education (Transed, in the jargon) is rapidly becoming institutionalised, a trend that will no doubt be hastened by the Federal government's policy on education funding—heavy cutbacks in the area of the public sector, but cash available for the establishment of Transed programs.

In the late seventies schools faced the problem of what to do with increasing numbers of secondary students who, faced with certain unemployment, returned to school following the completion of Year 10. For many of these the academic work of the senior curriculum was unsuited.

Schools responded by devising activities that were not academic, but which would meaningfully fill out school hours until employment was found, or the students otherwise decided to leave.

But more was to come. As part of the 'back to basics' hysteria, and hand in hand with ruthless attitudes relating to the award of the dole to young unemployed people, the Fraser government claimed the reason school leavers could not find jobs was that they were unemployable; not that the economy was sick or that employers were at fault (and certainly not the admission that the Liberal government had chosen to make structural unemployment a cornerstone of its economic program), but that schools were not doing their jobs.

Schools responded again. This time with the concept of Transition education, a process by which students who were not consumed by employers (allegedly because they were unemployable), were allegedly changed into marketable products more suitable for consumption. Schools as the fast food bar for industry.

Originally Transed programs applied to those students referred to above, and the term 'at risk' was used to identify them; that is those students who were at some risk in the transition from school to work, with unemployment (through their own unemployability) being the rock upon which they founndered.

It should be noted that 'at risk' was never adequately defined. An amorphous trendy term, like many that slip in and out of contemporary education practice, it seemed to begin by accepting as valid the political claim that students were leaving school at the end of Year 10 unskilled in basic literacy and numeracy.

Initially Transed programs were set up as experimental affairs on shoe string budgets. A handful of students involved in work experience, mock job interviews, learning to make a job application, finding out how to find job opportunities, driver training etc. Holding all this together were basic literacy and numeracy courses, with maybe a leisure activity (gardening, pottery, leatherwork etc) thrown in.

The idea snowballed. The political rhetoric continued. The myth of public schools not doing their job properly escalated. As in the 1950s schools were blamed for anything and everything—youth unemployment, truancy, violence, pinball fever, drugs, teenage sex, vandalism... the 'Blackboard Jungle' syndrome all over again.

In this environment Transed underwent a rethink. Many of those who had involved themselves in the initial stages were sensitive, dedicated teachers. They rejected the social band-aid
concept of Transed, and saw through the political rhetoric of Fraser and his cronies—backbenchers like former multimedia personality, now a pickle slurper, Michael Baume. But they were also dissatisfied with the current school situation and were attracted by the idea of doing something different.

And why not? For many sensitive and dedicated state school teachers, their professional future is bleak. Career advancement is limited. There are too many people with lists, and not enough places for them to go to. The ‘stud book’ is crammed with people with very little chance for promotion in the foreseeable future—a future that gives little hint of long-term relief courtesy of a national declining birth rate. Frustration is understandable. A system built on the twin pillars of hierarchy and promotion that is unable to promote its members up into that hierarchy must produce instead cynicism, frustration, and boredom. And something I call career menopause.

Career menopause occurs in teachers who, in the prime of life, say 15-20 years before the due date of retirement, have advanced as far as they can realistically hope to go in the education hierarchy. Faced with relentless repetition of the same tasks year after year, they seek to alleviate their feelings of professional alienation by taking long-service leave, applying for transfers, or accepting the challenge of experiment with education innovation.

During the 1970s, as part of the Whitlam era in Federal politics, it tended to become accepted that innovation in education was desirable and commendable. So we got teachers all over the nation experimenting with all manner of things, like setting up field study centres, publishing books of poetry written by kids, setting up school radio stations, creating open classrooms and reading corners etc.

In a sense this was a one-dimensional approach to innovation. Teachers tried to make school life richer in learning experiences as part of, or on top of, the traditional curriculum.

A second dimension was very much of the late 70s by educational bureaucrats. Teachers were given the nod and turned lose to experiment on children with curriculum changes.

“School based curriculums” was the trendy term. Okay in theory perhaps, but what happens when (a) most teachers have little theoretical or practical background in curriculum design and construction, and (b) few teachers have a grounding in educational philosophy (yet a curriculum has to be based on a sound philosophy of education)?

The answer is simple; the children suffer, and in the long term society suffers.

It amazes me that the same society which demands six rigorous years of tertiary education for technicians who work on the human body (i.e. medical practitioners), regards in the realm of curriculum development—where one is working and dealing with the human mind and emotions—few weeks of inservice, or a couple of weekend university extension courses, as adequate.

In an educational climate where professional dissatisfaction was rife, and innovation was ‘good’, Transed widened its scope and slipped into Year 10. It became defined by some as “education for life” generally.

A shift in emphasis had taken place. No longer exclusively preparing students for the transition from school to work, subtly accepting the claim that school work was too academic, as well as the claim that schools were failing to educate kids, the new definition of Transed was politically defused. It was no longer a Fraser concoction. In its new guise it was a respectable bandwagon for even a Labour government like Wran’s to jump on. And in the Sun Herald (21 June 1981) N.S.W. Education Minister Paul Landa publicly announced that he was making his leap for it. After all, that is where Fraser’s money is.

So Pandora’s box has been opened, and the age of the Mickey Mouse course begins. Mickey Mouse courses refers to school based courses which allegedly seek to make school life more “relevant” to the lives of the students. What this usually means is that academic content is abandoned, as is the concept of subject discipline; and anything you happen to be “expert” in deserves, apparently, a place in the curriculum. The rot of course started years ago when social studies was elevated to the status of a science.

As one exponent said to me, “We’ll let the children decide what they want to learn”. I replied, “Yes, that’s what happened in China during the Cultural Revolution. Look at the mess that resulted”. The point went over his head. Mao didn’t live long enough to regret. Not so the Gang of Four.

So we get the ridiculous, and the more ridiculous. In one Transed program I am acquainted with, the students have to decide whether to do the Transed course or not, during Year 9. Throw Piaget out the window; by this time young adolescents are meant to clearly know where their expertise lies—either transenders or academics. The planning on paper looked okay to the local regional bureaucrats. However reality was otherwise. So, for example, the kids were meant to be doing basic automotive engineering. But the school had no workshop or shelter for the junk cars it had rounded up. They were left to rust on a down-town lot, and the kids did nothing for half a year. A home maintenance course was taught to the alleged non-academic transenders who, it was argued, would have trouble finding employment. Presumably they would have time on the dole to look after their houses. It didn’t seem to occur to the course developers that unemployed people were highly unlikely to be in a position to afford houses upon which to exercise their skills. And so on...

It’s a bloody crying shame. Yet another case of impulse curriculum designing; a fad mixed with a splash of empire building, given life by political experience and speech writer rhetoric.