His book has a number of admirable qualities. In times when open subscription to a social justice agenda runs the risk of ridicule, it is a brave book. It does not shy away from identifying the universities — specifically, the sandstones — as integral to any explanation of why Australian secondary education is inequitable. And both authors work in one: the University of Melbourne. The book also builds a compelling case for curriculum and structural reform. Through the careful analysis of issues such as retention and dropout rates, the relation between poverty and achievement, and between gender and achievement, it argues potently that our education system is disturbingly riven by persistent inequalities of opportunity.

What makes it a significant book, however, is its scholarship. Drawing extensively on statistical data, collected in a range of state and federally funded research projects carried out over the last decade, Undemocratic Schooling presents a systematic overview of who succeeds and who fails at school. To construct this picture of how mass secondary education and higher education in Australia are undemocratic in both opportunities and outcomes, the book asks a series of important questions and provides data to support the findings. It is, in the parlance, ‘evidence-based’.

This approach has been around for over a decade, but located mainly in the field of medicine. With philosophical origins in mid-19th century Paris, or even earlier, evidence-based medicine can be described as the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of patients. The argument is that good doctors use both clinical expertise and the best available external evidence from systematic research, and that neither is enough on its own.

More recently, the call for evidence-based approaches has moved beyond medicine to the social sciences, including education. In the USA, federal legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, has focused the attention of policy-makers, researchers and teachers on the nature and value of ‘scientific’ research in education. The Act requires federal grantees to use their funds on ‘evidence-based strategies’. Of course, this requirement has had a mixed reception, and rightly so, as it implies that there is only one proper way to do educational research, effectively trivialising all the advances of the past forty years in opening up new possibilities. One useful outcome, however, has been the stimulation of
debate about what constitutes rigorous research in education and what place science holds in the broader context of education scholarship.

Undemocratic Schooling represents the Rolls Royce of evidence-based education. The evidence and argumentation make it difficult to dispute the conclusions. Drawing on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist who died last year, and the detailed analyses of statistical records that they integrate with careful historical research, Teese and Polesel assert that inequality is constructed in and through education. It is a very important argument in a climate in which education systems and governments appear to be questioning the view of education as a public good and a public right. Increasingly, education is represented by politicians and others as a matter of individual investment. For Teese and Polesel, the challenge is to think how to reorganise and reconceptualise the secondary curriculum and to find ways to raise the status of study in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector as a positive alternative to the universities.

The book claims that higher retention rates at school have not led to a superior or more equitable education system. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds still face the most uncertain futures and the poorest chance of entry to tertiary study. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn that access to university is closely related to socio-economic status, with students from the wealthiest independent schools having up to a forty per cent greater chance of receiving a university offer than their counterparts in the poorest schools.

The book also underlines significant changes in students’ choice and the curriculum. Contrary to popular belief, traditional humanities subjects such as politics, history and economics are in decline — not the sciences. Further, while there will always be students for whom the university-determined curriculum is appropriate, there are also many students for whom it ensures disengagement, failure and inevitable withdrawal, thus alienating them from undertaking further studies in alternative systems such as TAFE.

But Teese and Polesel are not completely damning: some social progress has been made. Schools now enrol eighty per cent of the age group (Years 11 and 12), and one out of two early school leavers enters TAFE. Historical analysis shows that schools have improved social access to some of the most demanding areas of the curriculum. The Victorian government has taken steps to monitor student progress and to develop a coordinated approach across schools and TAFE to improve participation and to increase the range of opportunities. Quality learning, however, is uneven, with major inequalities in school completion, in participation in different areas of the curriculum, in achievement in different subjects and in transition to tertiary education, particularly university.

To help achieve quality and equity, Teese and Polesel suggest Australia needs a greater concentration of specialist teaching resources in disadvantaged communities to tackle the problems of low achievement and early departure. They also recommend a monitoring, evaluation and professional development cycle for the Victorian Certificate of Education that will focus on quality of achievement for different student groups.

The themes in Undemocratic Schooling are not new to Richard Teese. In the late 1970s and early 1980s he published a series of papers in which he argued that private schools in Victoria, particularly non-Catholic independent schools, have a specific social function — to convert social background into a lived class culture — a structure that sustains the middle class and inequality in education. In 2000 he published Academic Success and Social Power, which demonstrates the ways in which educational provision structures academic success and failure. Undemocratic Schooling is the latest addition to his impressive and important body of work. Let’s hope that the politicians heed Teese and Polesel’s arguments and retreat from promoting an education system that serves the advantaged at the expense of the disadvantaged.