

The Bassett Oration: Towards 2010: Australian education in an international context

Colin Power

This occasion provides an opportunity for me to pay a personal tribute to a colleague and mentor whose wisdom, humanity and commitment to education inspired all of us who were fortunate enough to work with him. From 1967 to 1977, I was a Lecturer in Education at the University of Queensland, and Bill Bassett was my boss. Bill was an ever-present source of knowledge and of sound advice to young lecturers like me. He gently managed to instil in us an understanding that 'each one is different.' He insisted that educational policy, curricula, pedagogy and assessment must serve the needs of all, unlocking the treasure within each student and teacher—a concept that eventually became the central theme of one of the most influential reports produced by UNESCO (1996). One of the fathers of the College, Bill Bassett played a key role in its development in Queensland. It is fitting therefore that the Queensland Chapter should pay tribute to his contributions to the College and to education in Australia at its most important annual public event.

But not all governments, not all educational reforms, and not all education systems treat each one as different. Even in the most advanced nations, we still have a long way to go to meet the educational needs of all throughout their lives.

As Deputy Director General (DDG) in charge of Education in UNESCO, I was responsible for the implementation of UN normative instruments relating to education, such as the Conventions on Discrimination in Education, the Rights of the Child, the Status of Teachers, and the Recognition of Degrees and Diplomas. As such, I struggled against autocratic regimes, political ideologists and arrogant materialists who ignore the needs and fundamental rights (including the right to education) of those who are 'different,' and who suppress those critical of their policies and actions. At the same time, I had difficulties in convincing powerful global organizations like the IMF and World Bank that when it comes to nations and their education systems, each one is different. Indeed, imposing the same 'solutions' and reform packages has generally ended up doing more harm than good.

While each education system is unique, we do face a great many common challenges. Governments everywhere are seeking to meet the challenge of reforming education so as to prepare the nation and its citizens for life in the global knowledge economy and to face new threats to our security and well-being. Rather than providing a blueprint for reform, UNESCO sought to provide a framework for national dialogue and debate in order to facilitate the process of educational renewal.

In Australia and Queensland, the education and training reforms underway are placing considerable emphasis on a set of agreed values and goals for education, new basics and 'smart state' strategies. How appropriate are these for the future? How well are our schools, colleges and universities performing? By whose standards? And what needs to be done to help our education system meet its goals? This address will seek to place Australian and Queensland educational reforms in an international context, and to assess their appropriateness in educating for tomorrow's world.

Education for Tomorrow: an International Perspective

Over the past 14 years, UNESCO, The Commonwealth Secretariat and OECD have undertaken many studies and worked hard at helping their Member States to focus on the challenges facing education in the 21st Century. The emerging consensus is reflected in *Learning: The Treasure Within*, the report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century chaired by Jacques Delors (UNESCO, 1996).

The Delors Report stresses the need in the 21st Century for a broad, humanistic approach to education throughout life, based on four pillars (learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be). The aim is to enable 'each of us, without exception, to develop all of our talents to the full and to realise our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal aims.'

In Australia, there is also general agreement about the basic purposes of education. The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century. For example, 'compulsory schooling must empower all with 'the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society' (MCEETYA, 1999).

The Declaration sets out eight key learning areas for the compulsory years, and insists that the outcomes of schooling be free from 'the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability.' Our schools are also expected to contribute to understanding of 'the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures' and 'cultural and linguistic diversity.'

Documents setting out the vision and goals of State Education Departments have much in common with the Delors Report and the National Statement. For example, those from Queensland (2002, 2003) are about 'creating 21st Century jobs,' 'learning to live with complexity, uncertainty and diversity,' and preparing young people to be 'active and reflective Australian citizens.'

As so often has been the case, our dreams become reality only if governments, employers, parents, teachers and students are prepared to make the heavy investments in time, effort and resources necessary to provide a quality education for all throughout life. It is to that issue I now turn.

Essential learnings: Thinking

The development of understanding and thinking capacity is intended to infuse all aspects of what is learnt in school and beyond. Our individual and collective future will increasingly depend on our capacity to solve problems, to innovate, and to think critically and creatively. Thus countries like Singapore want to create 'Thinking Schools: Learning Nation.'

Promoting the development of thinking from 'cradle to the grave', from 'sperm to worm', remains a real challenge. As the research on productive pedagogies in Queensland confirmed, our schools are good at transmitting knowledge, but not so skilled in facilitating thinking.

Our schools and universities do try, and many have experimented with the use of skill-based methodologies such as those developed by de Bono. But opinions are divided between those

who see thinking skills generic and transferable, and those who believe that expertise in problem-solving is never content free.

Communicating: Back to the basics

In thinking about education for tomorrow, it is vital to get the foundations right. Most basic of all is communicating. The importance of literacy was driven home to me during International Literacy Year and the Education for All campaign. There is no doubt that for girls and women becoming literate is the key to empowerment, to a better life. Even in developed countries, the power of literacy is evident in 'terms of reduced poverty, unemployment, crime, suicide and social welfare, and improved physical and mental health and child-rearing' (OECD 1997 p. 57).

Compared with other developed countries, our schools do a good job in teaching the basic skills. The average performance of 15 year-old Australian students on the reading, mathematics and scientific literacy scales in the PISA tests (OECD, 2001) is well above the OECD average, and exceeded only marginally by Japan, Korea and Finland.

What is striking is that Australian schools perform well, despite having a much higher proportion of ESL (17%), migrant (12%) and first-generation (11 %) students than other OECD countries. In Australia, neither a child's birthplace nor that of his or her parents seem to have a marked influence on the level achieved.

But no education system is perfect. All schools and education systems have their share of less successful students. In Australia, some 12% of Australian 15 year-old students and 17% of adults perform at or below level 1 on the PISA tests. They lack the basic skills needed to participate in the knowledge society, and are at very much at risk of economic and social exclusion (OECD, 2001).

The measures set out in 'Learning Together' (such as early intervention and training 'reading recovery teachers') are important elements of a comprehensive strategy aimed at combating the problem of illiteracy.

Australia has been a pioneer in undertaking the educational reforms needed to take advantage of the opportunities created by the rapid advances made in communication technology. As a 'Smart State,' Tasmania sees 'information literacy' as a key component of the 'New Basics.' OECD and UNESCO data show that we are near the top of the international league in terms of our use of computers in schools and computer literacy, ranking just behind the USA and Canada and well ahead other developed countries.

It is imperative that Tasmania continues its efforts to ensure that all learners and teachers can take advantage of the opportunities provided by communication technology, and that they develop the critical capacity to use new technologies wisely (Tasmania, 2002).

If one believes that education is about nurturing the human spirit, the development of the talents of our children through the Arts is an important part of unlocking the treasure within. As the 'Essential Learnings' document argues, the Arts provide powerful means of capturing and conveying individual and collective experience.

Social Responsibility

For 12 years in UNESCO, I worked with many newly established countries and those recovering from violent conflicts to build or rebuild their education systems. Whether it was Bosnia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Rwanda, Palestine or South Africa, the first priority was that of building national unity and a culture of peace.

Australia also recognizes that education is 'crucial for nation building, promoting an informed awareness and critical understanding of our heritage, national identity, societal values and mutual interdependence' (MCEETYA, 2000).

The Australian 'Discovering Democracy Project' is a good example of the efforts being made to promote social responsibility and learning to live together. The Project includes a wealth of practical materials about the development of democratic principles, institutions and legal frameworks in the USA, UK and our own society. I must acknowledge the leadership given by the Commonwealth to promoting cooperation, research, development and training as part of this Project.

Recently, the ACER (Mellor, 2002) published a report on Australian students' knowledge and beliefs regarding citizenship and democracy. The study found that only half of Australian 14 year-olds have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy, and that they have a low level of support for civic engagement compared with their international peers. Less than one quarter of our teachers have had initial training in this area, and most want more opportunities for professional development.

A vital pedagogical pillar in learning social responsibility is the non-violent resolution of conflicts. We need to begin early to teach our children that violence is unacceptable in our schools and community. For example, bullying is a serious problem, about 10% of students being bullied at least once a week. Most schools know they have a problem, but only about half have an anti-bullying policy and suitable programs.

All Australians need to learn about their rights and responsibilities as Australian citizens. But we must also take the next step. If I do have a criticism of 'Discovering Democracy' it is that it too much about Australia and too little about democracy at the international level, a vital issue in our shrinking global village. We need to help students to understand their rights and responsibilities as world citizens. We need to include in the curriculum a study of the role played by the UN and NGOs in creating a better world. That role needs to be strengthened, not undermined as it has been by the US, UK and Australian leadership. The UN is the only democratic, and legitimate way to deal with global issues. Today, as in previous times in human history, unilateral actions undertaken by powerful nations in pursuit of their vested interests are compounding rather than reducing threats to our security and sustainable development.

We also need to help our students to understand the causes of conflict, terrorism and war. Exemplary programs (Deutsh, 2001) encourage the development of conflict resolution skills, critical thinking and problem solving, and include such themes as racism, understanding and respecting other cultures, participation in responsible political action, and world citizenship. UNESCO's Associated Schools Project and APNIEVE programs provide practical examples of what can and needs to be done.

World Futures

For the past 30 years or so, there has been a strong environmental education movement within education. Initially, the emphasis was on teaching only about the biological and physical aspects of the environment, but progressively the social, economic and cultural dimensions of development have been added. Today, education for sustainable development is an integral part of most education programs, including Tasmania's 'Essential Learnings'.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to ensure that our students develop the scientific and technical knowledge, thinking skills and cultural sensitivities needed for them to observe, analyse and relate to the natural and constructed world, to understand the relationships between local and world systems, to design and evaluate technological solutions, and to create sustainable futures. To do so, teachers need appropriate training, curricula, strategies and teaching materials. Professional educators have worked hard in this area, with a good example being the multimedia teacher education program 'Teaching and learning for a sustainable future' (Fien, 2002).

But how effective are we in achieving the goals of education for sustainable development, for creating world futures? Fien, Yencken and Sykes (2003) recently surveyed students from 10 Asia-Pacific countries. They found fairly high levels of awareness, class discussion and understanding for many environmental issues and concepts. For Australia, the results suggest our students have moved 'a long way towards understanding the significance of global environmental degradation,' but that there are blind spots in their thinking about world futures that need to be addressed.

Personal Futures

'Young people need to be provided with educational experiences that enable them to deal successfully with current and future change with optimism and resilience' (Essential Learnings, p. 24). Personal futures is about building identity, maintaining well-being and relationships, acting ethically and creating and pursuing goals. It is about 'learning to be and learning to care'.

An important element in learning to care is values education (UNESCO-APNIEVE, 2002). Education is an inner voyage, an ongoing process of critical exploration, identification, clarification and integration of values into consistent behaviours and action. The valuing process must be embedded in learning activities across the curriculum and through the daily events and life of the school. It acknowledges that to build a culture of peace, one must primarily and simultaneously seek peace within oneself. Given that, the understanding and compassion required for all the roles we must fulfill as members of a community, can develop.

During the 1990s, I set up a programme with EuroDisney in which we worked with children from all corners of the globe to promote a culture of caring in our schools. One of the most exciting events was the 2000 Millennium Dreamers symposium at DisneyWorld, Florida. Attended by 6000 children and their teachers from 90 countries and entitled *The Power of One*, the symposium set out to demonstrate that any child, any teacher, any principal can make a difference.

Let me give two examples: Jesus Mahoroeno is a 15 year old from the Xavantes tribe in Brazil. He produced a CD ROM on his tribe's heritage, and is working to build understanding between his people and the rest of the community. Jozica Zupancic is 12 and comes from Slovenia. She

convinced her family to take in Kosovo refugees, and then rallied her school friends to do the same. There were 2,000 such stories of kids who learned to care by caring. Why can't your school, college or university have its own millennium dreamers program?

The Changing Role of Government

For most of the 20th Century, there has been a broad agreement about the basic social purposes of education in Australia and the responsibilities of government. Australian governments assumed responsibility for establishing, funding and maintaining a strong, equitable, public education system. In return, our public schools have contributed much to building a productive and cohesive democracy.

To do their job well, educational institutions and teachers need the support—moral and financial—of the communities they serve. The research of Hedges et al. (1994) confirms that, other things being equal, the quality and outcomes of schooling are dependent on the experience and quality of your teachers, as well as the availability of appropriate materials and support services (as reflected in per pupil expenditure).

While at best a proxy measure, the real commitment of governments to improving equity and quality is reflected in their investments in education, judged in terms both of their level and the way in which funds are deployed. Using OECD data, McGaw (2000) reported that Australia ranks 20th out of 28 OECD countries in terms of its public expenditure on education. Our standing improves somewhat when converted into purchasing power parity, but even then we still fall well below the OECD average. If Australia and Tasmania want a world class education system, we do need to invest more than 5.5% of our GNP in our children's future, as well as investing more wisely.

Growing Inequity and Polarisation

At the international level, the application of the market policies and 'cures' promoted by the New Right, the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s and 90s were a disaster for public education, health, the environment and even economic development. UNESCO-ILO studies (Samoff, 1994) showed that the pressure to adhere to a 'predominantly financial agenda for education' created 'serious problems of inequity' discriminating against girls and those living in poverty to a point that is 'morally unacceptable.' The gaps in education in per-pupil expenditure on basic education between developed and developing countries have widened alarmingly—from 87:1 in 1980 to 187:1 in 1997.

In Australia as well, there has been a fundamental shift in Federal thinking with respect to its responsibilities. Federal policy, regardless of party, has been strongly influenced by free-market theories with their emphasis on privatisation, competition and choice. The focus on the individual is now constructed not as a citizen, but as a consumer.

Even worse, education is no longer an inalienable human right. The way in which asylum seekers are being treated in Australia contravenes the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on Discrimination in Education.

Australia always prided itself as a nation built on the ideals of equity and justice. But whereas we were once one of the most equitable of nations, the gaps between rich and poor Australians have rapidly widened. Australia is now one of the least equitable of the OECD nations. There

has been a sharp rise in wealth of the top 10% of Australians, while the percentage of children living in poverty jumped from 10% in 1982 to 15% in 1998. We are now the third highest among the OECD countries in terms of children living in jobless households.

A recent ACER (2003) report shows that the achievement levels of 14-year old Australian students have remained pretty stable since 1975. However, the achievement gap has widened between schools with high concentrations of students from professional homes and schools serving the masses.

The share of Commonwealth assistance provided for government schools has been halved since the 1970s (from about 60% to 30%), while the share for non-government schools has almost doubled. The 1999 Commonwealth funding model was supposed to correct inequities suffered by low-income schools and families. But the largest increases in funding have ended up going to some of Australia's wealthiest private schools. In constant dollar terms, per pupil expenditure on public education has fallen in all states.

In reviewing research in New Zealand, the UK and the US, Whitty (1997) concluded that going further in the direction of marketisation is 'unlikely to yield major overall improvements in the quality of education and will almost certainly have damaging equity effects.' A recent study of privatisation in six countries (Befield & Levin, 2003) also lays bare the myth that privately managed education is more efficient and results in better performance.

Australia has gone much further than other OECD countries in the direction of privatisation, adding weight to the argument that the Australian education system has become increasingly inequitable and undemocratic (Teese & Polesel, 2003). Let me hasten to add that not all schools and higher education institutions should be run by the government. I believe that our democracy needs schools like the Friends School, Montessori and IBO schools, and church schools committed to serving the needs of the poor. But I have seen the longer-term consequences of under-investment in public education. I have also had to deal with the disasters created by divided education systems in places like Algeria, Bosnia, Haiti, Northern Ireland and South Africa. I am convinced that the more we divide our schools into those catering for elites and those serving the masses, the more fragmented, unequal, polarised and unstable our society will become. And the more we cut back our investment in public education, the further behind our nation will fall in the knowledge society of the future.

The Delors Report challenges policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities to ensure that 'education is a public good that should be available to all.' Governments must renew their commitment to serving the common good through education, while avoiding the shortcomings of the bureaucratic systems of the past.

Conclusion

While at UNESCO I met with quite a few Presidents and Prime Ministers. Inevitably, we discussed what a nation needs to do to avoid being marginalised by the forces of globalisation.

Over the past twenty years, some nations suddenly blossomed, some fell further behind, and the rest remained sleepy backwaters. The leaders of the backwaters made plenty of promises but did little. They were not willing to sacrifice now to secure a better future. Those falling behind

had cut public education budgets, had an unequal and polarised education system, and increasing levels of conflict.

Those that blossomed have invested heavily in the education, training and expertise of all citizens, devoting around 7% of their GNP to education. Their schools and teachers set high standards for themselves and met them. They encouraged critical reflection and debate. They made sure that what needs to be done, is done.

There is a moral to this story. The real challenge is to do things differently in our governments, schools and universities. We need to think beyond the short-term and the expedient. We need to think globally. We need to invest in educating for tomorrow. We need to renew our commitment to equity. The vision is there. But do you have the will to turn the dream of a world-class education system into reality?

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Professor Colin Power
Formerly Deputy Director for Education
UNESCO, Paris