

NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

Friday March 27th and Saturday March 28th, 2009

Session Five: United for the public good and the education of children

Conference Synopsis

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The national government has adopted an approach, unusual by Australian standards, of identifying an overarching theme which links and informs its social reform agenda. It has declared its commitment to building a more inclusive Australian society by using a combination of special measures and by ensuring that many of our day-to-day institutions operate in a more socially inclusive way. As I listened to today's presentations it struck me that this declared intention affords a useful lens through which to view, and draw connections between, many of the papers we have heard.

Let me take a moment to briefly summarise what is meant by social inclusion. A socially inclusive society is one where all individuals — irrespective of their background — have the opportunity and capability to participate in key activities in their community. To:

LEARN — participate in education and training and be encouraged to fulfil their potential **WORK** — participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including the provision of family and carer responsibilities

ENGAGE — connect with people, use local services and participate in local cultural, civic and recreational activities, and

HAVE A VOICE — influence decisions that affect them.

Social inclusion requires the right **RESOURCES** (skills and assets) and **OPPORTUNITIES** to be available, at the right time in people's lives - to allow them to build the **CAPABILITIES** that they need to participate in their community.

For me, the day's proceedings have been a reminder of the advantage of multiple perspectives for gaining insights into different aspects of school education and social inclusion. It wasn't that any single perspective revealed the ultimate truth of the matter; they each shed light on important factors that need to be understood in planning an improved education system. Let me start with Jim McMorrow's paper which focused on the *resources/ opportunities* component of the social inclusion schema. Jim's paper obliged me to conceptualise school education in *system* terms, with the cultivation of enhanced capabilities being either assisted or blocked by the available quality and quantity of the resources necessary for effective school education.

On the financial side Jim has told us two particularly important things: First, that in 2006 schools within the independent system had at their disposal an average of \$13,460 per student to cover the resources needed to educate their students. Second, Australian governments are funding the equivalent of the costs of teaching staff in all our schools. The first item of information immediately gives rise to the question of how adequate is the funding available within the government and catholic sectors when it is two-thirds the amount – the 'loot' in Michael Bachelard's terms - available per independent school student, But for as long as we remain focused on prices and not costs we will remain uncertain about the amount needed to cover necessary educational resources. Jim had more authoritative things to say about that but let me recall here that in my visits to 200 NSW public schools

I met many students who had definite views on this matter. They described their school as 'povo' on the basis of comparisons with independent schools and their judgement that the available funds failed to match the needs of their school.

I should also add that I witnessed creative teaching of a value beyond financial calculation. But an education system has to be built on more than the exceptional talents and motivation of individuals, if that system is to help develop the abilities of all of our children and young people. And that takes us to the heart of the problem — beyond the rivalry of different sectors (frequently described, as Marilyn Parker said, as constituting the politics of envy), to a more just and secure system that is consistent with a first principle of inclusive societies, namely, *all individuals - irrespective of their background — have the opportunity and capability to participate in key activities in their community*. In the present context that means funding that matches agreed national educational goals and objectives, the educational components incorporated within the landmark MCEETYA exercise a few years ago. It was a solid piece of work and had attractive policy features. First, it was grounded in clearly articulated principles and standards so that the resource requirements were measured against the performance required of students. Second, the intended distribution of resources was not organised on the basis of sectors and relative needs but on the absolute needs of schools to enable their students to achieve standard outcomes. The report's substantive findings and general approach should be the starting point of any review of the school finding regime.

Adam Rorris' paper focused on the material condition of schools as one of the resources influencing the educational outcomes of our children. This is an important factor. The physical infrastructure of our schools contributes positively (or negatively) to social inclusion: materially by supporting the teaching and learning opportunities; symbolically by affecting the confidence, motivation and self-image of students and staff. Believing that they could run a sub-four minute mile, supported by encouraging expectations that they could do so, had a major bearing on Roger Bannister and John Landy's attainment of that goal. In visiting schools I have been struck by the drag or 'wind resistance' caused in many instances by physically inadequate, ill-maintained and simply 'down-at-the-heels' schools.

These personal impressions were reinforced for me by Adam Rorris' comparisons showing how far we lag behind the UK and US in the per student investment in capital improvements in public schools. Those impressions have been doubly reinforced by Adam's data showing the merging of the scale of Australian private schools' investment in capital improvements with that of the UK state maintained and US public schools. This is the objective reality behind some public school students' perception of their 'povo' status.

I think the way forward is clear enough: the wherewithal to implement existing international design standards that support flexible, contemporary teaching practices that match student needs and prepare them for the challenges of present day society. State authorities are well acquainted with these standards but have rationed their use because of limited funds. The scale of the Commonwealth's planned investment in school infrastructure improvements is substantial. It will be important for teachers, parents and community representatives to mentor the implementation of best practice design standards making sure that they are adapted to some extent to meet local circumstances including community involvement and use.

Value emphasis

Geoffrey Robertson argued the importance of students gaining a type of value literacy embracing concepts like democracy, social justice, citizenship and the over-arching concept of human rights. An essential medium for such learning is the embodiment of concepts in individual lives and actions. To which I add that it is difficult to contemplate many of these values without visualising a face.

In addition to giving me some fresh ways of venting my spleen on people whose ideas I seriously don't like, and reminding me of the uniqueness of the platypus, Gerard Noonan's contribution primarily tackled the unsatisfactory nature of our school funding arrangements from a value perspective. His comments reminded me of Robert Merton's ascription of the acceptability of established social arrangements to the 'normative force of the actual' or the legitimacy that accrues over time. A shared view of arrangements as 'normal' is more likely to be sustained when people are ignorant of different arrangements that exist elsewhere. Gerard's point about Australians' unawareness of education funding arrangements in other comparable countries is true of a range of social expenditures. We seem to be in a time warp imagining ourselves as the social pioneers we once were.

My reaction to the papers by Lyndsay Connors and Trevor Cobbold was that they were linked by their common emphasis upon social values. Lyndsay's presentation rested squarely on our need to adhere to socially inclusive values and policies — remember "our children are equal and equally entitled to the conditions in schools most likely to enable them to participate fully and to achieve their personal best." Equity and inclusion were cited as the guiding principles. Those principles certainly converge on the necessity of students' access to quality teaching.

But the ubiquitous platypus bearing a substantial bill re-appeared in Lyndsay's address to remind us that governments provide the wherewithal to cover the salaries of teachers in both the government and non-government sectors. In Lyndsay's view, upholding the principles of social inclusion and social equity requires first, an adequate supply of high quality teachers, and second, their distribution in all schools "to implement the agreed curriculum for the particular students they serve." At this point her value emphasis seemed to articulate with Jim McMorrow's notion of 'assessed components of school education and what is required to meet them.' But to stay with the quality teacher theme, Lyndsay sees distortions in the equitable development and distribution of quality teachers — in teacher student ratios where the respective challenges warrant a reversal in favour of the public system; the privileged funding situation that enables the independent schools to lure demonstrably proficient teachers away from the public system; the allocation of raw novices to the most challenging public schools. Behind these concerns is a fear that in the absence of explicit, supportive policy, it is likely that the supply of quality teaching will be diverted away from where it is most needed.

Trevor Cobbold's value emphasis focused on the consequences of negating social inclusion and equity by granting ascendancy to the value of competition and the use of market-like mechanisms. First, he argued that on the available evidence you do not get the hoped-for benefit of a more evenly spread good educational performance. He summarised his position in this way: "Competition and choice do not lead to significant improvements in student achievement, but greater social segregation and inequality. Quasi-markets in education are not succeeding."

Then we reach a point of subtle difference in the accounts of Lyndsay and Trevor — at least differences of emphasis with respect to the significance of intended ameliorative measures. Lyndsay notes with some approval measures like the guarantee of early learning experiences in the year prior to formal schooling and related child care measures, and the National Education Agreement. That these measures are only ameliorative and not a fundamental solution does not deter many of us from welcoming them. But lest we become too accepting of their value Trevor pulls us up sharply with the reminder that there is a basic tension between a market-based education system and improving equity in education: they involve incompatible policies and equity always loses out.

What then do people of conscience who are critical of reliance on market-like mechanisms do in these circumstances? I believe that they accept the 'softening' measures as a pre-figuring of the more egalitarian, inclusive society they desire while remaining unrelenting in pressing the case for a more equitable system. They must tell governments that they are seeking inspiration from the wrong countries: since equity in education is a vital part, but only a part of wider socially inclusive arrangements, they would do better to look to the Nordic countries than America or England.

I found Chris Bonnor's presentation a tug-of-war between value analysis and empiricism. Ideas about how society should organise itself should be, but seldom are, critically examined in the light of available evidence. This is precisely (and commendably) what Chris has attempted to do in relation to an alleged benefit of the free market, namely, that "choice creates quality because consumers vote with their feet," thereby "placing pressure on low demand schools to improve and become more attractive." The rural evidence that Chris has cited is consistent with the hypothesis that the absence of choice (as in remote areas) has not suppressed school performance, at least at the higher levels. Where choice is more readily available in large non-metropolitan centres, the 'high' non-government schools have more high achieving senior students than in the 'high' government schools. Chris says that much evidence of superior school achievement really just reflects changing enrolment profiles. There is much general support for that contention but given the particular issue under consideration one is left hoping that another bit of evidence will be pursued. Remembering the criterion of high achievement used, one is obliged to ask: why was the achievement of the able students at the 'high' government school less than half that of the 'high' non-government school? I don't think we can simply suppose that those of talent had transferred to the 'high' non-government schools: that can only be established by empirical investigation.

To cut to the chase, I find myself in great sympathy with the view that the socio-economic differentiation of schools and the concentration of academic achievers have made the problem of lifting the skills of lower achievers more difficult, with negative individual, economic and societal consequences. Decades of studying our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods has convinced me that staying the distance at school is the single most important route out of social disadvantage. For me, the message of this day is that if our society is to become truly equitable we must move beyond periodic, welcomed concessional adjustments, to an education system based firmly on inclusive policies and funding that meet the needs of all of our children. And, after all, giving strong voice to that message is an indispensable part of an inclusive society.