

Schools as builders of social capacity

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Thank you for asking me to speak with you today.

My paper looks at three questions:

Is there a culture gap between parents and schools?

Are schools sensitive to parents' anxieties?

What does best practice in schools' responses?

Compulsory universal education of children was a contested and radical innovation in Western societies. It brought fundamental change in the relationship between the family and the state, and had far-reaching consequences for labour markets, gender roles, fertility rates and family structures.¹

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the change in the relationship between the family and the state. It causes us to reflect on the origins of what nowadays has the appearance of an artificial division between the social development of a child and the intellectual development of a child.

¹ See for example Pavla Miller and Ian Davey, *Family Formation, Schooling and the Patriarchal State*, in M. Theobald and R. Sellick (eds), *Family, School and State in Australian History*, 1990, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, pp 1-24. See also Clyde Chitty, *The Changing Role of the State in Education Provision*, in Roy Lowe (ed), *History of Education, Vol II*, 2000, London, RoutledgeFalmer, pp285-302.

Traditionally the family has been considered primarily responsible for the social development of the child, and the state – in the form of schools – has been considered primarily responsible for teaching the child work-related skills and academic knowledge. Educational historians have advanced many rationales for the state’s interest in doing so: the desire to provide for the needs of an industrialised economy, and to preserve the social order² are merely two, and this is not the place to debate their merits. The point is, the state did assert an interest in skill-training and the intellectual development of children for various reasons, and families had no choice but to comply.

The effect on families was tangible:

The compulsion to send children regularly to school, scrubbed and in clean clothes, was part of a process which eroded parents’ discretion about the use of their children’s time and labour.³

Over time, however, parents not only ceded to schools responsibility for this element in their children’s upbringing, but came to expect that schools would inculcate values and behavioural norms as well. Research we carried out across Australia in 1998⁴ revealed just how much parents have come to expect from schools. While this work was carried out among parents who sent their children to non-government schools, in our

² Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *The Origins of Mass Public Education*, in Roy Lowe (ed), *History of Education*, op.cit. pp 61-91.

³ Pavla Miller and Ian Davey, op. cit.

⁴ Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller, *What Parents Want From Their Children’s Education*, research conducted for the National Council of Independent Schools Association, June 1998.

experience their attitudes on this matter are shared by parents generally.

Parents expected the school to:

- nurture their child with care;
- allow their child to develop as well-rounded human beings;
- imbue their child with, and reinforce, the values and culture of the home;
- instil in their child self-discipline and respect for others;
- teach their child how to learn, and
- give their child enough skills and knowledge to allow them to build a future economically and socially.

Moreover, the accelerating advancement of knowledge has, if anything, widened the gap between what parents learnt and what their children learn at school. This has had the effect of discouraging parents from taking an active part in their children's skill-training and academic education beyond the middle primary years. This has been a constant in our research for at least the past decade.

A major consequence of these historical, social and educational developments has been the creation of a culture in which families and schools came to see themselves as parallel but largely disconnected institutions. The idea that families and schools should now see themselves as partners in the development of a child is a radical departure from this culture of separation. If the idea is to take root, cultural change is required by schools and families.

This in itself would be a big enough challenge, but it takes account only of one dimension -- what I call the traditional-roles dimension. There is, in

fact, another. I call it the social-change dimension. This brings me to my second question.

At this time, there is turbulence and uncertainty in Australian society.

We are living in a time of profound change – political, technological, economic and social. In Australia the forces of change were unleashed in the 1980s with the dismantling of what has been called the Australian Settlement. Kelly⁵ identified its five main elements: White Australia, Industry Protection, Wage Arbitration, State Paternalism, and Imperial Benevolence. While some of the pillars of the Settlement collapsed in the post-War period, industry protection, wage arbitration and state paternalism survived into the 1980s.

Over the same period, the public discourse has been laced with the language of neo-classical economics: competition, contestability, rational choice, the level playing field, market forces, deregulation. In Australia these were given effect through a series of policy shifts of historic magnitude: the floating of the dollar, the lowering or removal of tariff protection, the ending of centralised wage-fixing.

These changes were accompanied by a social rhetoric that asserted the primacy of individualism over societal interests more insistently than had been understood under the established norms of Australian political and social discussion.

⁵ Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty*, 1992, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, pp 1-2.

What we have discovered in our research are the social consequences of all this. And these consequences are far-reaching.

One major consequence is a rise in people's insecurity, and a decline in their level of trust in the institutions of society: Parliament, executive government, the judiciary, the media, the financial system, the Church. The sense of having been abandoned and of seeing people in power apparently looking after themselves at the expense of the common good, has engendered a pervasive cynicism.

This crosses socio-economic boundaries and seems to have little to do with how well-off people feel at any given moment. There is a stronger sentiment that however well-off I might be today, I could be worse off tomorrow.

Along with economic change there has also been profound social change. The world of young people today is very different from the world their parents occupied when they were young. While this was always so, the differences today are stark. If history was seen to have paused briefly in 1989 with the collapse of Soviet communism, it swiftly resumed its march in a dramatically new direction on September 11, 2001. In Australia, as in some other Western societies, notably the United States, the recent dominance of neo-conservative political values has re-opened old social debates, creating new doubts and uncertainties.

The ubiquitous drug culture, commercial pressures directed to young people, uncertainty about the future, the paradox of more apparent

choices facing young people making choice more difficult, the explosion in information: all these factors, and more, have an impact on young people and their parents.

Being a parent is never easy, but in these times it is perhaps especially hard.

These, then, are the anxieties that afflict many parents today. Are schools sensitive to them?

The short answer is, I believe based on our research that schools are becoming increasingly sensitised. But this question demands a slightly longer answer.

Our research also tells me that the high-tide of individualism has passed. It has left a legacy of materialism and disengagement, but more generally communities in Australia are seeking ways of rebuilding social capacity. By that I mean building structures and networks that enable people to congregate, become friends, provide support and create opportunities for one another.

It turns out Margaret Thatcher was seriously mistaken when she declared, “There is no such thing as society”. There is, and this need to rebuild social capacity is the measure of it.

But to whom do people turn when there seem to be so few places where the ideal of mutual support flourishes, where the common good takes

precedence over individual advancement, where there are common interests of such importance as to draw people together, and where this is locally available?

In many communities across Australia, the answer is the school. Schools have long been important centres of community life, but these unsettling currents in contemporary society appear to have made them more important still.

What draws people to them initially, of course, is the important common interest in the education of their children, but in many places this is only the starting point. The large economic and social changes I have already described have created wider needs.

The need now is for schools also to assist in rebuilding social capacity.

This presents schools with a big challenge. After all, schools are set up for the main purpose of educating children. How can they be expected to take on this bigger role as well?

Our research shows that some – perhaps many – are already doing so. Many were catalysed by a spontaneous need arising from the socially impoverishing effects of the economic changes I have outlined.

In country areas, for example, the traditional ranks of community leadership have thinned out as banks have closed, organisations like Telstra have been rationalised, country doctors have become less

numerous and other professionals have increasingly reduced their attendance to a day basis and no longer reside in a town. In this vacuum of leadership and resources, people are turning to the school. Typically the principal is widely known, respected, seen as impartial and is, above all, accessible.

The same is true in poor urban areas, though for different reasons. Here, lack of material resources often leads to social isolation and closes off many forms of professional assistance. In the user-pays era, this can create acute need.

We have seen how schools are adjusting – and something of the cost the adjustment is imposing -- in two recent research projects:

1. A study of principal-class workload in Victorian government schools in 2003;
2. A study of the Family-School Partnerships Program in 2005-06.

The study of principal-class workload

This was a substantial research project consisting of both qualitative and quantitative phases. The qualitative phase consisted of 10 focus groups across Victoria, five of principals and five of assistant principals. This was followed by a quantitative survey of 743 principals and assistant principals, in which all the hypotheses of the qualitative phase were validated.

We are not psychologists but it was plain, even to us, that a number of our respondents were extremely fragile.

It was noticeable that principals in country schools seemed especially susceptible to this fragility. In particular they appeared to carry a major burden of general community leadership. In ordinary day-to-day matters this did not affect them unduly. However, in matters relating to social or family upheaval, however, it was a different story.

A number of our principal and AP respondents spoke reflectively about the type of person who is attracted to teaching, saying that this type of person is usually destined to end up in “the caring professions” – nursing, social work, the Church, or teaching. They reflected that for such people commitment to the people in their care will usually take precedence over everything else – demands from outside the caring relationship, monetary reward and personal preferment.

We think there is a substantial point here, and it presents departments of education – not just in Victoria – with a complex challenge arising from the fact that on the whole principal-class people probably do fit this type. Their values are primarily those of the carer, not those of the manager or mere service-provider.

So it seemed to us there was an inherent tension between the type of person who is generally available for appointment to principal-class positions and the demands of the job. It may be summarised as carer-versus-manager tension. It was our observation that this tension was

unresolved and unresolvable within many of the people to whom we spoke, and was the source of much of the pressure they felt.

Yet many principals embodied what the community is reaching out for: someone to provide guidance, support, leadership, wisdom. And very many principals could not find it in their hearts to say no. They responded, often at considerable cost to themselves, demonstrating the values of humanity, decency and integrity which the present Prime Minister has seen fit to criticise schools for not inculcating in our young people.

The problem is, principals are not trained for this work, their systems don't seem to make much, if any, allowance for it, and it appears to go largely unacknowledged. At least that is how principals see it.

Therefore, this growing duality of the school role -- educator and social capacity-builder -- represents a major challenge to policy-makers in school education.

What policy responses might contribute to a solution?

Obviously high-level recognition and acceptance of the growing duality of the role of schools is a starting point. I don't know how wide or deep that recognition runs, and it probably differs from one jurisdiction to another, but it obviously is a threshold issue.

Alongside that, at least at the Commonwealth level, is the beginning of an appreciation that schools and communities can work together for the benefit of students, schools and their communities in ways that can have spin-offs for social capacity-building.

This brings me to my third question: what might best practice look like?

Central to this is the involvement of parents as real partners in their children's education and in the life of the school. So just as communities are looking to schools to assist in rebuilding social capacity, the idea of a genuine partnership between families and schools is beginning to take root in schools.

We saw this in a major research project we were asked to do last year.

Family-school partnerships

In May 2005 the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), in association with ACSSO and the Australian Parents Council, commissioned us to conduct research on the subject of family-school partnerships.

A draft framework of principles and strategies for building family-school partnerships had been developed at a series of roundtables involving the Department, the peak parent bodies and other stakeholders, and our task was to trial the draft framework in schools.

The eleven principles enshrined in the draft framework included, as principles 6 and 10:

Families and schools value the diversity of families and use this as a resource for building partnerships and communities.

And

Family-school partnerships strengthen the connections between schools and their communities, as schools learn about their families and community and strengthen their community.

ACSSO and the Australian Parents Council invited schools across Australia to volunteer to be part of the research. Each school had to devise a project to promote the development of family-school partnerships.

Sixty-one schools, government and non-government, from all parts of Australia were selected. We visited the 61 schools twice and saw at first hand what was being done. Much of what we saw was extraordinary.

The first extraordinary fact was that of the 61 schools, 24 designed projects directed at community capacity-building or family resilience-building.

The other extraordinary discoveries came out of the diverse and creative ways in which they set about this, sometimes in the most exiguous circumstances.

To illustrate this, I am going to describe two of the 12 case studies we chose to illustrate best practice.

CASE 1

Early Learning Centre and Parent and Community Centre

These were two separate but related initiatives.

The Early Learning Centre prepared children aged from birth to four years for school, and at the same time educated their parents in how to assist with the child's development.

The Parent and Community Centre was a social support centre for parents and anyone in the community who felt in need of it. The Centre consisted of a converted classroom which the school had furnished in a homely manner with settees, easy chairs, dining table, and computer.

There was a weekly meeting there. Free child care was provided in an adjoining room. A small one-way window allowed the parents to look in on their pre-schoolers while they were being cared for.

Background

This primary school of 280 students was located in a low socio-economic area of Hobart where unemployment was high and family dysfunction common. About half the students were on the local equivalent of the Education Maintenance Allowance and there was a high percentage of single parents.

Six years ago, two senior teachers initiated the two elements of the project. At the time the school was looking for ways of arresting a long-term decline in enrolments and of staving off the possibility of being merged with another school or closed. The current principal was new and almost one-third of the teaching staff had just been replaced. A cultural change was under way. Its main element was to re-connect the school with its community, from which it had become estranged.

When the two teachers proposed the idea of a parent centre, linked with the provision of pre-school education, the principal saw it as a means of giving effect to the cultural change he wished to bring about.

An experienced kindergarten teacher was enlisted to assist in setting up the Early Learning Centre.

The project acquired legitimacy among parents because it was responsive to their needs and because the school staff allowed the parents to take control of the parent centre as their confidence and capabilities grew.

Responsiveness to needs was crucial, and the needs were many. These parents needed somewhere to turn for advice about parenting and for “downloading” their emotional burdens among people who respected their confidences and did not judge them.

Friendships had been forged, and networks created that had gone beyond the confines of the school community, breaking down isolation, building up self-confidence, and allowing people to learn how to cope.

The benefits to the children's education appeared to be that the parents were more in touch with what was happening at school, felt integrated into the education of their children, felt empowered to communicate on an equal footing with teachers, and were fortified in being able to deal at home with the social circumstances that had a disruptive effect on the children.

CASE 2

Extending school and family partnerships through school-based projects

The project initiatives were essentially a continuation of existing projects:

1. **The fountain project:** A local artist has designed a water sculpture that represents the school values and beliefs. The parents and children are working together to complete the mosaic tiling around the fountain.
2. **Parent forum:** Each year level has a parent representative. These representatives encourage communication and school involvement among parents within that classroom. The parent representatives meet on a regular basis to achieve common goals for the school.
3. **Minor initiatives:** Recruitment and maintenance of Support-A-Reader Volunteers; permaculture garden; healthy eating plan for the school canteen menu.

Background

This primary school in regional Queensland had 411 students, and was situated in a semi-rural community with a population of about 1500 people. It was a low-medium socio-economic area where about half the students came from single-parent families.

The recently retired principal had spent much of his energy developing strong school-community relationships. A parent was employed as a community enhancement officer to improve communication between parents and the school.

The importance of this had been increased by the pressures of a large new housing development, which was turning this semi-rural village into a town. In the face of this social transformation, the school was anxious to bed down strong community ties to help preserve the unity that had been developed in recent years.

The appointment of a community enhancement officer was of critical importance here. The school was alive to the concerns in the community about the consequences of the incipient housing development which was going to transform their village, and was prepared to be the venue of community capacity-building, using a range of initiatives aimed at attracting the involvement of many people with different talents and interests.

There was a room available for parents and visitors. The sign outside the door said, "Parents' and visitors' meeting room. Please feel welcome to

use this room for Information Exchange, Discussions, Learning Workshops, Lunch breaks and Social Activities”. Tea and coffee are readily available.

So there are two examples of how schools in two States and two quite different social settings were contributing to building capacity in their local communities, while continuing to carry out their traditional educative role.

And they are examples of how parents will respond when they feel needed and are given the opportunity to do something beyond the traditional functions of fund-raising, working bees, staffing the canteen and the uniform shop.

In other research we have done, we have seen how schools help build resilience in students and families. We saw this in two evaluations of the Seasons for Growth program, and in an evaluation within the past year of the Families Matter program.

The Families Matter program, based on parents talking with parents about issues relating to resilience and coping among families and young people, has demonstrated the potential to meet a manifest need in the community arising from all the pressures we have been talking about. It is already beginning to deliver on this potential. The school is there, but it is not dominant. Parents can participate without having to ‘deal with’ the school as an institution or with the principal as principal.

Seasons for Growth is one of a range of programs designed to help young people cope with the fallout from family and social trauma, and build resilience – the capacity to recover from what are sometimes very severe events in their lives. In particular, Seasons for Growth is designed to help young people cope with the loss of a parent either through death or family breakdown. In fact it helps young people cope with a wider range of losses than this: the effective loss of a parent through prolonged debilitating illness, or a sense of loss of family arising from violence or sexual abuse.

You can see that schools do feel responsible to meet the needs of their families and communities in ways that go well beyond the confines of the classroom. The best of them find out what the real needs are and then respond to them.

There are two main bases for this sense of responsibility schools feel.

The first is grounded in common humanity.

The second is grounded in their mandate to educate. They see that fulfilling the mandate is impossible if students arrive at school hungry, or beaten up, or terrified, or distraught, or suffering from the effects of substance abuse, or burdened by family dysfunction.

It was fascinating to observe in the partnerships study that it is in areas of social disadvantage that some of the most successful and advanced partnerships work was being done, notably in some remote areas with significant proportions of Indigenous students. Where the imperative was

greatest, so the development of the new paradigm appeared to be most advanced.

And there is a growing element of parental reciprocation as well.

Through necessity, choice, self-centred enlightenment and for many other reasons parents are accepting the idea of dual responsibility with the school for the education of their children.

So the cultural gap I described at the start is being closed, gradually.

This conference asks the question: What are the schools we need?

It is a large and difficult question, but part of the answer is that we need schools that are able to fulfil the dual roles of educator and community capacity-builder.

This means new responsibilities for schools, with consequences for resourcing, accountability measures, and teacher and principal training.

It means recognition of a new role for parents as real partners in their children's education.

And it means recognising and acknowledging that the dual roles are already upon schools, and giving thanks for what so many are already doing in response.