

Theme 2: Changing the schools—a view from the field

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Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation... Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself—its world view; its basic values; its social and political structures; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world... We are currently living through such a transformation. (Drucker 1993 in Caldwell 2006)

Recent world events as evidenced in the many translations of the global financial crisis, including one reference that suggested ‘China now holds the world’s cheque book and America the overdrawn credit card’.

So, if this is the picture for our world, one in sharp transformation, then you would no doubt have shared with me some excitement and anticipation when we heard from our future PM about an ‘Education Revolution’.

Back in January 2007, Mr Rudd opened the *New Directions* paper:

Productivity was driven by the industrial revolution in the 19th century and the technological revolution in the 20th century. In the 21st century, a human capital revolution will drive productivity growth. That’s why Labor is now calling for an education revolution in Australia.

This was, I believed at the time, an opportunity too good to be true. An opportunity to change schools from that which David Hargreaves describes as ‘...a curious mix of the factory, the asylum and the prison’ to something more suited to the twenty-first century rather than one founded in an industrial age.

Let’s have a quick look at how this Education Revolution was presented to the ‘net’ generations....

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du-hOKsAKc8>

So, in terms of the impact upon the young Australians with whom we are concerned each and every day how should we rate that ‘promise’?

Before making comment on that, I’d like to make a little digression at this point...

Last year, in my speech to the graduating class at my college here in Canberra, I reflected on an article I had read in *The Australian* (May 05, 2007) in which ABC Radio National presenter Phillip Adams had posed the question.....

Does a pivotal moment make a speech great—or does the great speech make the moment, pivotal?

In the article Phillip recalled an invitation he had made to listeners of ABC Radio to nominate their greatest speech and it is in this regard that I ask you to consider how ‘great the speech’ or ‘pivotal the moment’, was Kevin’s ‘education revolution promise’?

Phillip provided a ‘top 10’ for his little phone-in quiz and you will have already guessed some of them perhaps:

At tenth: Queen Elizabeth the First rallying of the troops at Tilbury on August 8, 1588 as the Spanish Armada approached:

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.

Ninth: Gough Whitlam’s dismissal speech, Parliament House steps, November 11, 1975.

Eighth: Henry V’s St Crispin Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare’s Henry V: ‘We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...’

Seventh: Earl Spencer’s funeral oration for his sister, Princess Diana, September 6, 1997.

Sixth: John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, January 20, 1961: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.’

Fifth: Lincoln’s Gettysburg address during the American Civil War, November 19, 1863: ‘Four score and seven years ago...’

Fourth: Churchill’s ‘We shall fight on the beaches’, June 4, 1940, to the House of Commons.

Three: Paul Keating’s Redfern address, about reconciliation, December 10, 1992.

At two, surprisingly, was Jesus’s *Sermon on the Mount*, circa AD 27.

But of course, the Oscar went to...

Martin Luther King and ‘I have a dream’, August 28, 1963, in Washington DC.

Dr King inspired... he challenged people to share his dream.... he was positive about the future.

So back to how Kevin’s might rate I again ask?

‘A great speech making a moment pivotal’ or ‘a pivotal moment making a speech great’? Did the federal government take a pivotal moment in our lives and make a short speech into a great one?

One commentator, international education consultant and former dean of education at Melbourne University Brian Caldwell suggests (*The Australian* Nov 9 2009):

The education revolution announced by Kevin Rudd almost two years ago is drifting off course, having failed to adopt key strategies critical to improving schools, including giving principals greater autonomy, improving teacher education and introducing different models for running schools as in the US and Britain.

...the education revolution is heading for failure and risked giving Australia one of the most centralised and bureaucratically run systems in the world.

We've hardly loaded our rifles for four of the key strategies that our research tells us will help create success for all students. Top-performing nations are leaving us behind.

In the report card on the education revolution, Professor Caldwell said the areas that required more action were school governance, which scored only one out of 10; school autonomy and giving principals the power to select their own staff; two marks, ridding the system of obsolete ideology, two marks; a lack of program diversity, three marks; and improving teacher education to build the intellectual capital of the profession, four marks.

"These are the things making a real difference in highly disadvantaged settings. They're significant levers where schools can be imaginative and creative, break the mould to do something different in the settings that are the most intractable," he said.

For me, 'the Education Revolution we had to have' (some words heard in this place before I think) is, at this stage, somewhat disappointing. From my vantage point in a government college for students in Years 11 & 12, I offer these thoughts.

Yes, I appreciate the significant financial support for my college under the 'Digital Education Revolution'—the DER—as this investment allowed me to redirect some school-based funding to a very important initiative that I will expand upon shortly in a short story. It was, being the fatalist that I am, an opportunity to 'take from the rich and give to the poor'.

Yes, I appreciated the \$200k that the Building the Education Revolution—the BER—added to our collective pocket despite the fact the BER was all about stimulating the building and construction industry and hence, the economy. One wonders would the same money have been spent in this way if the GFC didn't happen?

Perhaps I am being a little sceptical in relation to some aspects of the DER and the BER, but there are many of us in the public education system who share such scepticism...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYEdamYLYIk>

An apology to my colleagues in the private sector, but it is always good to laugh at oneself, isn't it?

In terms of the National Partnerships, I am only a little critical of the Education Revolution. My criticism is mostly around some of the restrictions tied to the implementation plans and some of the ways of working that have been negotiated in these times of 'cooperative federalism'.

For example, the use of ‘facilitation’ and ‘rewards payments’ after ‘targets are met’ insists on external accountability playing a major role—yet the mechanisms for paying rewards do not seem to guarantee the money reaches education portfolios in state treasuries, let alone the teachers who ensure the targets get hit.

However, I cannot criticise the investment of large amounts of money in improving literacy and numeracy learning. That this money is being spent wisely in many jurisdictions for specialist and expert teachers is to be celebrated. Using collaborative intelligence and creativity can only result in long-term improvement in my view. I am happy about this, despite my college not getting any direct funding benefit.

The Low SES National Partnership is also to be applauded. Extra resources for the most disadvantaged are essential.

Having ‘Teacher Quality’ as a focal point for another National Partnership is valued by the profession but we have to wait and see if the strategies here will deliver on the promises as I don’t believe the National Partnership puts enough money into the profession directly.

This is where the rewards money should end-up – with the teachers!

And Indigenous Education imperatives in all National Partnerships are also crucial for ‘closing the gap’.

Interestingly ‘closing the gap’ is language which that well-respected educationalist Andy Hargreaves cites as part of his ‘Third Way’. Hargreaves describes these ‘ways’ as three distinct periods of travel through education reform since his commencement in primary school in the early 1960s.

By the way (excuse the pun), the notion of ‘targets’ and ‘system testing’ and are also part of the vocabulary of Andy’s ‘Third Way’ and perhaps best left there as we enter a world more fitted to his notion of a ‘Fourth Way’. More on this later.

And what about my comments on the ‘Transparency Agenda’?

These have been reported just recently so suffice to say, I would just offer some counsel to our political leaders and ask that they reflect on the advice of Ben Levin where he suggests evidence is crucial but it needs to be of the right sort and in the right amount to effect improvement for students:

High-quality evidence on how well students are doing is crucial, but it is misguided to think that more assessment or more punishment for poor results, will alone lead to better outcomes, either for students or for schools and educators.

Or as Richard Elmore professes about accountability and where it best sits... not necessarily in external, one-size-fits-all national testing:

... no amount of external accountability can succeed in the absence of internal-to-the-school accountability

... external accountability alone, delivers pro-forma compliance...

...and spawn practices that prop up short-term test scores and the search for improvements...

And while I am giving free advice, here's some counsel for my bureaucratic colleagues. Perhaps heed the advice of Michael Fullan when he suggests that student achievement data is about informing the teaching and learning experience, not for comparing schools in the name of parent choice. He says

...schools (& teachers) that use student achievement data to inform and mark progress not only become more comfortable with transparent information, they seek it. When turnaround strategies are non-pejorative, focusing instead on partnerships and capacity-building, the entire climate changes. Moral commitment flourishes, knowledge flows, and educators want data that show how they are doing and what they have to work on to get better.

Enough of giving free, and what I am sure will be highly-treasured, advice.

What do I think might be worthwhile?

Well, perhaps I should firstly confess my bias. The easiest way to do this is to again quote someone... in this instance, Andy Hargreaves, since he says things I agree with but in a little more cogent manner.

Remember I mentioned his 'Ways' of doing education.... well he wrote for the William Walker Oration this year:

At the latter years of this age, [the First Way – around 1960-70s] the structural changes of state and economy catalysed a cultural revolution, of which the dramatic changes in primary education were a part. Social movements such as anti-war protests and women's liberation provided avenues for historically marginalised groups to push their freedoms. At the same time, the first generation of economically independent adolescents invented and indulged in the free-wheeling culture of rock and roll, along with the anti-establishment humour of Monty Python and Laugh-In.

As an adolescent and a young educator, I was a product of those times. Is that why I remain a bit of a radical?

The ACT education system was also a product of those times and it had the characteristics of

... a rebellious and creative spirit of the times...in the form of experimentation, innovation, free-schooling, de-schooling and more child-centred teaching in primary and middle schools. Teachers ... had great autonomy. They enjoyed high levels of passive trust... Creativity, innovation and concentration on the whole-child and his/her interests defined the educational emphasis in schools, rather than obsessions with testing and isolated basics. (Hargreaves 2009)

Oh for those times.

Perhaps over the passage of the ‘Second Way’ and the ‘Third Way’ (to continue stealing from Hargreaves) the ACT system—once so creative and innovative that it was recognised nationally—lost its way and became, dare I say it, ‘conservative’.

Interestingly, one of the key architects of the ACT system, Hedley Beare has reflected over several recent years

...from what we know already about the twenty-first century, it is clear that the traditional school has no chance of surviving in it, at least not in the developed economies.
(2003)

Clearly, business as usual is not a survival option. ...schools cannot afford to be complacent as they are responsible for educating the next generation of the world's citizens. (2007)

So what about my story and how it fits into the impact of the ‘Education revolution’?

Well, the creation of a national curriculum does not hold much hope for innovation and creativity in the way of curriculum design, implementation, pedagogy and assessment. Not if the somewhat traditional approach that I perceive to be the trademark of the work thus far. Who knows, maybe I am seeing only a glass half empty and that the top-up to make the glass full will change my view.

But two features of the work of my colleagues in our college that give me ongoing hope that the imposition of a somewhat subdued and ill-directed education revolution will not bedevil the imaginative and resourceful ways of teachers in our profession...

Teachers in our newly-created Maths/Science/IT Academy have been on a journey to reshape the teaching of maths, science and IT in senior secondary settings. They have adopted an authentic, multidisciplinary approach, called ‘The Fertile Question’, to engage students in collective thought and action around their learning and making-meaning-of, these usually separate disciplines. The students are surprised by the approach but end up loving this way of learning. They develop some meta-cognition of their approach to learning; they complete ‘K-W-L’s’; they even reflect in learning journals—in senior mathematics? The effect on school culture, professional revitalisation, and student performance and achievement has been nothing short of miraculous both within that academy and across the college.

The second approach that a few dedicated colleagues are exploring is the Big Picture approach. This approach aims to connect people with learning, especially around their passions. It also aims to connect people with each other, with mentors and with like-minded individuals and groups. It aims to re-engage the disaffected and to give purpose to education for anyone who desires a different way of doing school. The journey at our college started with 6 students and two teachers and now we are struggling to cope with the deluge of interested students. Word-of-mouth is a powerful advert.

The education revolution must encourage this type of passion, this type of commitment and this type of concern for the children and young people in our world today.

It seems pretty clear to me, that things can no longer be the same.

Hargreaves suggests his 'Fourth Way' is defined by inspiration, innovation, social justice and sustainability. Surely these are characteristics of a real education revolution?

Anyway, we can all sit back and take some advice from Michael Fullan, a friend and peer of Hargreaves, when he suggests...

The good news is that, because all else has failed over the past two decades of intensive reform efforts, this is a time of radical experimentation.

Thank you.

Michael Hall